

Research Article

Rethinking Moral Paradigms: A Postmodern Deconstructive Reading of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Abstract

This study examines the destabilization of Victorian moral certainties in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* through a postmodern deconstructive lens. It explores how both playwrights, writing within the constraints of Victorian society, anticipate postmodern concerns by challenging dominant ideologies of morality, identity, and social structure. Emerging during a period marked by rigid social hierarchies, strict gender expectations, and an intense emphasis on public respectability, both plays expose the contradictions embedded within Victorian moral discourse. The study is situated within broader debates on literature and ideology, particularly the relationship between social performance, moral authority, and the instability of meaning in literary texts. The central hypothesis is that these texts deconstruct moral absolutes by exposing their contradictions and performative nature, a position consistent with Jacques Derrida's assertion that meaning is never fixed but always deferred (*Of Grammatology* 158). Drawing primarily on Derrida's theory of deconstruction, and supported by Michel Foucault's critique of power and discourse as well as Jean Baudrillard's insights into bourgeois simulation, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis method. Through close reading, comparative literary analysis, and critical interpretation of selected scenes and character constructions, the research investigates how the plays of the authors undermine claims to moral stability and social authenticity. The study demonstrates how Shaw interrogates capitalist and patriarchal structures through the commodification of women's labour, while Wilde satirizes the superficiality, hypocrisy, and self-fashioning that underpin middle-class respectability. The analysis shows that both plays undermine essentialist notions of truth, virtue, and identity, revealing moral norms as unstable constructs rather than universal absolutes. By and large, the research concludes that these late Victorian dramas not only critique the ideological foundations of their own society but also anticipate central postmodern concerns regarding fragmentation, performativity, and the indeterminacy of meaning. Through their dramatic strategies, Shaw and Wilde expose morality as a socially constructed and deeply contested concept rather than a fixed ethical reality.

Keywords

Deconstruction, Victorian Morality, Performativity, Discourse, Simulation, Power, Bourgeois Ideology

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Received: 25 April 2026; Accepted: 9 May 2026; Published: 26 May 2026



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1. Introduction

Victorian Britain is often remembered for its strict socio-cultural norms, moral rigidity and its culture of performed respectability. The dominant ethical paradigm of this period was based on a set of widely repeated conventional assumptions and beliefs that made the society inflexible, artificial and deeply hypocritical. As Karl Marx observes, “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” [31], suggesting that Victorian morality functioned as an ideological construct rather than an objective ethical system.

Recent scholarship reinforces this ideological reading. Alex Callinicos argues that moral systems are inseparable from structures of power and economic relations, emphasizing that ideological formations “naturalize historically specific social relations” [10]. This insight strengthens the argument that Victorian morality was not universal but historically constructed. Current studies in Victorian cultural history further support this position, emphasizing that moral discourse functioned as a mechanism for regulating class and gender relations rather than expressing universal ethical truths [40]. On a similar note, Peter Barry notes that postmodern criticism foregrounds the instability of meaning and the constructed nature of truth, aligning with the interpretive approach adopted in this study. Barry further observes that, postmodern criticism emphasizes the instability of textual meaning and challenges the notion of a single, authoritative interpretation [5].

The society which saw decorum as inviolable, morality as stable, and gender roles as anchored in biological and religious truth was exposed by Victorian drama which revealed how tenuous these assumptions were. The contradictions of these values were theatricalized and satirized by dramatists like Shaw and Wilde. Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* interrogate Victorian moral codes in distinct yet complementary ways. As Alan Sinfield argues, literature is a site “where ideology is both produced and contested” [38] making these plays ideal for examining moral instability.

It is from this background that George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde can be seen as two dramatic iconoclasts who contest the weak and questionable principles and assumptions of the Victorian society. The former’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and the latter’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* represent two of the most significant dramatic interrogations of Victorian moral code and ethical ideology. While Shaw offers a direct critique of capitalist hypocrisy and patriarchal exploitation, Wilde offers an apparently “light” comedy that turns out to be a devastating satire of bourgeois morality, identity, and social legitimacy. Although neither playwright belonged to a postmodern period, both works lend themselves to postmodern analysis because they reveal morality and identity not as essential truths but as unstable constructs sustained through language, performance, and social regulation. This aligns with Jonathan Culler’s claim that texts generate meanings that ex-

ceed fixed interpretation [11]. Similarly, contemporary literary criticism emphasizes that literary texts function as sites where ideological meanings are constructed, contested, and reinterpreted through shifting theoretical frameworks [41].

Based mainly on Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction and supported by Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse and power and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, the article argues that Shaw and Wilde destabilize moral assumptions by exposing the contradictions that underlie them. The plays demonstrate that Victorian morality is not a coherent system of ethics but an ideological veneer that obscures the structural economic and social violence underpinning the Victorian society. Such tensions reflect the broader cultural anxieties and ideological transformations associated with fin-de-siècle Britain [27]. In doing so, the plays call for an alternative understanding of morality rooted in context rather than dogmatic universals.

2. Theoretical and Textual Deconstruction of Victorian Morality

2.1. Theoretical Proposition

As mentioned above, the paper is anchored in a composite theoretical framework that draws mainly on Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, while being further enriched by Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse and power, as well as Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulation. Through this triangulated perspective, the article interrogates the instability of moral assumptions in the selected texts, arguing that both Shaw and Wilde systematically destabilize dominant ethical constructs by exposing the contradictions and superficiality that characterize them.

Derrida’s deconstruction challenges the assumption of stable meaning. As he asserts, “there is nothing outside the text” [14], indicating that moral concepts are produced through language rather than grounded in universal truth. To further expand Derrida’s view, Judith Butler argues that identity itself is performative, produced through repeated social acts rather than rooted in essence [9]. This directly reinforces the argument that moral identity in both Shaw and Wilde is constructed rather than innate. Without simply destroying meaning, the theory reveals how meaning is produced through difference and contradiction. As Culler further suggests, literary meaning emerges through interpretive structures rather than fixed authorial intention, making textual meaning inherently unstable [12]. Moral categories often rely on binary oppositions that appear stable but are internally unstable. When a text exposes the contradictions within these binaries, it reveals the fragility of moral absolutes. Simon Malpas emphasizes this point when he states that postmodern theory “questions the grounds upon which truth claims are made” [30], supporting

the idea that Victorian moral categories lack stable foundations.

Derrida's claim that meaning is always deferred has been further developed in contemporary theory. Derek Attridge argues that deconstruction is not merely a method of destabilization but an ethical engagement with the limits of interpretation, where meaning remains open and responsive rather than fixed [4]. This reinforces the reading of morality in Shaw and Wilde as something negotiated rather than given.

Foucault's theory further deepens this understanding. In *Discipline and Punish*, he states that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies" [18], demonstrating how morality functions as a mechanism of control. His claim that "power is everywhere" [19], underscores the pervasive influence of moral discourse which regulates sexuality, class boundaries, gender roles, and public reputation. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, moral condemnation becomes a tool for protecting capitalist exploitation. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, moral seriousness becomes a social instrument for policing identity and marriage.

Recent extensions of Foucault's theory further illuminate this dynamic. Mitchell Dean's concept of governmentality demonstrates how power operates through subtle forms of regulation embedded in everyday practices and moral expectations, shaping subjects who internalize normative behaviour [13]. This is particularly relevant in both plays, where individuals appear to regulate themselves according to socially constructed moral codes.

Baudrillard extends this critique by arguing that modern society operates through simulation: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" [6]. This insight is crucial for understanding Wilde's world of performative respectability. Respectability becomes a sign-system where people are judged not by moral reality but by their performance of moral appearance. Similarly, Gagnier argues that Wilde's society is shaped by marketplace values in which identity and social worth become performative commodities [20]. This situation is evident in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where characters live within a world of surfaces where names, titles, and manners matter more than truth. Shaw's play, though more realist, also exposes simulation when it postulates that the respectable economy depends on hidden exploitation. Together, these perspectives reveal morality as constructed, unstable, and deeply embedded in systems of power and representation.

In recent cultural theory, this notion of simulation has been expanded where postmodern identity is understood as performative and mediated through systems of representation rather than grounded in stable reality [37]. Wilde's dramatic universe exemplifies this condition, as identity is produced through linguistic and social performance.

2.2. Capitalist Morality and Patriarchy in Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* exposes prostitution as a

structural outcome of capitalism. As Raymond Williams argues, "Shaw's drama is an exposure of the moral system as a function of the economic system" [44]. The play brings to discussion the fact that in a capitalist society, dignified labour is often inaccessible, forcing women to trade their bodies to achieve financial independence. At the heart of the play is the revelation that Mrs. Warren's "profession" is not an individual moral failure but a structural product of capitalism. The profession is therefore, not a moral failure but an economic necessity. This aligns with Elaine Showalter's claim that "the fallen woman is not a moral category but a social construction" [35]. Shaw's dramatic critique is grounded in the text itself, where Mrs. Warren's personal history reveals the systemic economic coercion behind prostitution [36].

In order to drive this point home, Shaw presents capitalism as the root cause of prostitution, portraying it as an immoral system that forces poor women to sell their bodies to survive. According to the play, the Victorian society as an enabling environment for prostitution. It argues that the typical Victorian woman is forced to choose between two evils; prostitution or poverty. In the face of this capitalist dilemma, Mrs. Warren chooses prostitution in order to fund her comfort. By doing so, Shaw forces the audience to confront the uncomfortable truth that prostitution is an inherent part of the moral economy of the Victorian society. Mrs. Warren's choice reveals the hidden part of a society that depends on the exploitation of women's bodies, particularly poor women, while maintaining a moral narrative that blames those women.

Mrs. Warren's defence of her choice when confronted by her daughter is not only thought-provoking but political. She insists that her choices were constrained by economic realities like low wages, limited employment, and social indifference. For her, prostitution is a means of economic survival and she chooses it over starving or dying.

The play presents capitalism as the root cause of prostitution, portraying it as an immoral system that forces poor women to sell their bodies to survive. This reflects Federici's argument that capitalist modernity historically depended on the control and commodification of women's bodies and labour [17]. It therefore criticizes the Victorian society for enabling exploitation, arguing that "respectable" comfort is funded by the "dirty" money of prostitution, making the entire middle class complicit. Shaw subverts the idea that prostitution is a result of individual immorality, proving it is instead an economic necessity forced upon women by a capitalist structure. In this way, Shaw deconstructs the moral binary of "pure woman" versus "fallen woman." The play reveals that the category "fallen" is socially constructed to protect male privilege and capitalist profit. It suggests that in a capitalist society, dignified labour is often inaccessible, forcing women to trade their bodies to achieve financial independence. To buttress this point, Vivian Mercier observes that Shaw's plays focus on "the conditions that make morality possible or impossible" [29], reinforcing the argument that morality is structurally determined. Shaw thus dismantles the binary between

“pure” and “fallen,” revealing morality as ideological rather than absolute.

Shaw’s critique of capitalism has been revisited in recent feminist and socio-economic criticism. A contemporary study notes that Shaw’s work reflects “social, economic and gender-based disparities” and dramatizes the structural forces shaping women’s lives [1]. This aligns with Imelda Whelehan’s argument that modern feminist criticism reads Victorian texts as exposing “the socio-economic construction of female identity” [42]. Moreover, Terry Eagleton argues that literature reveals how ideology operates through everyday life, noting that ideology “is not simply a set of doctrines but the lived experience of social relations” [15]. This insight reinforces Shaw’s exposure of morality as lived contradiction rather than abstract principle.

Contemporary criticism has revisited Shaw’s treatment of prostitution within broader discussions of gender and economic inequality. Margaret D. Stetz argues that Shaw’s play exposes the “systemic normalization of sexual exploitation within respectable society,” revealing how moral condemnation obscures economic complicity [39].

2.2.1. Shaw’s “New Woman” and the Collapse of Moral Certainty

Vivie, Mrs. Warren’s daughter, represents a new educated woman who initially believes in rational moral judgment. Her dilemma begins when she discovers that moral categories do not align with reality. She is confronted with a society that condemns her mother yet, produces and benefits from her mother’s business. Vivie’s response is complex. She rejects her mother’s continued participation in the business not because she embraces Victorian moral condemnation but because she refuses the hypocrisy and exploitation that the business now represents. This creates a powerful deconstructive moment because morality is no longer seen as “sin” but seen as complicity, power, and economic violence.

In *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Vivie Warren emerges as a pivotal figure through whom Shaw questions the fragility and contingency of Victorian moral codes. Initially presented as rational, disciplined, and morally self-assured, Vivie appears to embody a modern ideal grounded in logic and personal integrity. However, her confrontation with the truth about her mother’s profession exposes the fragility of that certainty, revealing morality not as a reliable universal standard but as something shaped by economic necessity, social constraint, and power. Vivie’s moral crisis reflects the instability of ethical frameworks. Her realization that morality is shaped by economic realities aligns with Marx’s critique of ideology [31]. Equally, her disillusionment also reflects Foucault’s insight that morality is a disciplinary construct rather than a neutral system [18].

Vivie’s moral framework is rooted in clarity and independence. Educated and mathematically inclined, she rejects sentimentality and prides herself on common sense and objective reasoning. This rational disposition aligns her, at first, with a

belief in clear distinctions between right and wrong. Yet this confidence is destabilized when Vivie learns that her mother’s wealth derives from prostitution. The revelation shocks her and forces her to re-examine the very criteria by which she judges moral behaviour. Her initial instinct is to condemn, reflecting the ingrained moral absolutism of Victorian society. But, as her mother explains the limited economic choices available to women in the society, Vivie recognizes that moral judgment cannot be separated from material realities.

This uncomfortable truth marks the beginning of the collapse of Vivie’s moral certainty. The binary opposition between virtue and vice becomes untenable when viewed against the backdrop of systemic inequality. Shaw uses Vivie’s intellectual honesty to push this realization further. Unlike characters who retreat into denial, Vivie acknowledges the structural forces that shape individual actions. Yet this acknowledgment does not lead to moral certainty or easy reconciliation. Instead, it produces tension. Vivie comes to terms with her mother’s choices, but she cannot fully accept them without compromising her own principles. The result is a fractured moral position that resists both absolute judgment and complete acceptance.

Shaw deepens this crisis by situating Vivie within a broader social hypocrisy. The same society that condemns her mother quietly depends on and profits from the very system it denounces. Respectable men, institutions, and economic structures are implicated in sustaining exploitation while maintaining a façade of moral superiority. Vivie’s disillusionment, therefore, extends beyond her personal relationship with her mother to encompass Victorian moral ideology as a whole. What once appeared as a coherent system of values is revealed to be performative and contradictory, upheld by selfish capitalist tendencies rather than genuine ethical consistency.

Vivie’s response to this collapse is not to reconstruct a new moral system but to withdraw into autonomy. She chooses financial independence and emotional detachment over complicity or compromise. This decision reveals Shaw’s position that in a society where morality is entangled with power and economic necessity, the possibility of moral certainty is profoundly undermined. Vivie’s journey thus exemplifies the transition from moral absolutism to critical awareness, exposing the limits of rigid ethical frameworks in the face of complex social realities. Her withdrawal into autonomy illustrates the collapse of moral certainty, confirming Mercier’s claim that Shaw interrogates the conditions underlying moral judgment [29].

This reading aligns with recent scholarship that interprets Shaw’s work as a critique of intersecting systems of power, including class and gender. Gareth Griffith notes that Shaw’s drama “foregrounds the structural conditions that render moral judgment inadequate in the face of economic coercion” [21].

2.2.2. Patriarchal Authority and Moral Hypocrisy

Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* represents a brilliant exposition of how the patriarchal authority and moral hypocrisy

are tightly interwoven, forming the play's critique of moral hypocrisy. While condemning individual immorality, Shaw exposes how respectable Victorian society depends on double standards that are both gendered and institutional. The play exposes how morality reinforces patriarchal power. Marx's assertion about ruling ideas [31], explains how moral standards serve dominant interest.

The male characters are seen as embodiments of Victorian moral contradiction. Because they participate in systems of exploitation while speaking the language of morality. Shaw reveals that morality functions as discourse because men use moral language to control women while exempting themselves from scrutiny. The "respectable" male is often the most morally compromised because his respectability is a disguise for privilege. Thus, Shaw's play dismantles the myth of moral coherence. It demonstrates that Victorian morality is less a system of ethics than a mechanism for stabilizing power relations. Recent scholarship on Shaw further emphasizes that his drama systematically exposes interrelated contradictions underlying Victorian social and moral institutions [23].

Patriarchal authority in the play operates less as overt tyranny and more as a *system of control disguised as respectability*. Men dominate both the economic structure and the moral language used to judge women. Women are expected to embody purity, dependency, and domestic virtue, yet they are denied the economic means to sustain those ideals. Elaine Showalter's argument in *A Literature of Their Own* about the constructed nature of female morality [35] further highlights how gendered moral categories sustain inequality.

Mrs. Warren's life is the clearest indictment of this system. Her decision to enter prostitution is not framed as moral deviance but as a rational response to limited economic options in a patriarchal economy. Shaw deliberately complicates the audience's instinct to condemn her by showing that the "respectable" alternatives available to women are often forms of dependency or exploitation. In this sense, patriarchal authority is not just personal domination by men like Sir George Crofts, but a structural arrangement that restricts women's autonomy while demanding their moral compliance.

Vivie Warren represents a contrasting model that is educated, financially independent, and intellectually rational. Yet even she cannot fully escape patriarchal expectations. Her mother's past becomes a moral burden that society uses to question Vivie's legitimacy, illustrating how patriarchal systems transmit stigma across generations of women regardless of their personal choices.

The moral hypocrisy in the play is most visible in how characters selectively apply ethical standards depending on gender, class, and respectability. Men like Crofts embody this contradiction because he participates in the very system of prostitution while condemning it publicly. His offer to Vivie is particularly revealing and it exposes how moral language is often a cover for sexual and economic power.

Similarly, the upper-middle-class world that Vivie briefly

inhabits depends on denying the material conditions that sustain its comfort. The wealth generated by Mrs. Warren's profession is socially consumed but morally disowned. Shaw highlights this contradiction and emphasizes the idea that society benefits from vice while insisting on the illusion of virtue. In the play, even religious and legal institutions, though less directly dramatized, are implicated in this hypocrisy. They uphold ideals of female purity while failing to provide women with viable economic alternatives, thereby ensuring that "immorality" becomes a structural outcome rather than an individual failure.

What becomes very clear in Shaw's text is that patriarchal authority and moral hypocrisy are not separate flaws but mutually reinforcing systems. Patriarchy requires moral double standards to maintain its legitimacy. In doing so, it must define women like Mrs. Warren as immoral in order to preserve the illusion that respectable society is ethically pure. At the same time, this moral framework depends on women's economic vulnerability, which patriarchy itself produces. Vivie's final rejection of her mother can also be read through this lens. While she appears morally upright, her decision is shaped by the same rigid moral framework that punishes Mrs. Warren. Shaw leaves the audience unsettled and one notices that even the most independent characters remain partially bound by the moral categories constructed by patriarchal society. Thus, morality operates as discourse, reinforcing Foucault's notion of power embedded in social systems [19].

Mrs. Warren's Profession dismantles the comforting separation between "respectable" morality and economic exploitation. Through its depiction of patriarchal authority and moral hypocrisy, the play argues that Victorian moral standards are not neutral ethical truths but social tools that regulate women's bodies, labour, and choices while concealing the complicity of the society that enforces them.

2.3. The Semiotics of Respectability: Naming, Performance, and the Illusion of Moral Identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* operates as a sophisticated deconstructive critique of Victorian moral identity by displacing morality from the domain of ethical value to that of language, performance, and signification, reinforcing the idea that theatre functions as a system of signs through which social meaning is produced and decoded [3]. While the play presents itself as a light comedy of manners, its underlying structure reveals a radically destabilized moral universe in which identity is neither essential nor stable but constructed through linguistic conventions and social performance. In contrast to Shaw's exposure of the material foundations of moral hypocrisy, Wilde interrogates the semiotic mechanisms through which morality is produced, circulated, and sustained. [43]

At the centre of this deconstructive project is the concept of naming, particularly the obsessive significance attached to the

name “Ernest.” Within the play’s social logic, the name does not only designate identity but produces it. Gwendolen’s insistence that she can only love a man named Ernest exemplifies the reduction of moral value to linguistic form. “Earnestness,” traditionally associated with sincerity, integrity, and moral seriousness, is deprived of its ethical content and reconstituted as a signifier detached from any stable referent. This reflects a fundamentally poststructuralist condition in which meaning is not inherent but generated through systems of difference and repetition. The name “Ernest” functions as a floating signifier and its value lies not in what it represents but in how it is socially perceived and circulated.

Through this linguistic slippage, Wilde performs a Derridean deconstruction of the binary opposition between truth and falsehood. Jack and Algernon’s deceptions (Bunburying and the creation of Ernest) do more than challenge the idea of truth. They suggest that social reality itself is built on deliberately maintained illusions. The distinction between authentic identity and performed identity collapses because all identity within the play is already mediated by performance. Jack is not “truly” Ernest, yet he becomes socially validated as such once the narrative accommodates the fiction. Truth, therefore, is not an origin but an effect produced retroactively through social recognition and narrative coherence. This semiotic instability aligns with recent scholarship on Wilde’s aesthetics. Helena Michie argues that identity in Wilde’s work is “produced through performance rather than rooted in essential being,” emphasizing the theatrical construction of selfhood [32].

This instability is further reinforced through the play’s engagement with what can be understood, in Baudrillardian terms, as simulation. The world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not one in which reality is merely masked by appearances but a hyperreal space in which appearances constitute reality. Social legitimacy is not grounded in ethical behaviour but in the successful performance of respectability. Manners, etiquette, dress, and language function as sign-systems that replace moral substance. Characters do not strive to be virtuous; they strive to appear so within a codified system of signs. In this sense, Victorian morality is exposed as something maintained through repetition and social agreement rather than grounded in any real ethical truth.

Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Honest* also anticipates what contemporary theorists describe as a hyperreal social condition, in which distinctions between authenticity and performance collapse. As Hans Bertens observes, postmodern culture is characterized by “the erosion of stable reference points and the proliferation of signs detached from origin” [7].

Lady Bracknell emerges as a central Figure in this semiotic regime, embodying the regulatory function of moral discourse. Her authority does not derive from moral insight but from her role as a gatekeeper of social legitimacy. Her interrogation of Jack is particularly revealing as she is less concerned with his character or ethical disposition than with his origins, lineage, and conformity to social expectations. The famous “handbag” revelation becomes a crisis not because it implies wrongdoing

but because it disrupts the narrative coherence required for respectable identity. Here, Foucault’s conception of discourse as a mechanism of power is highly pertinent. Lady Bracknell polices the boundaries of acceptable identity through language, determining who may marry, belong, and be recognized as legitimate. Morality, in this context, operates as a disciplinary discourse that regulates social inclusion rather than ethical conduct. This regulatory function of discourse can be further understood through modern interpretations of power, which emphasize the role of social institutions in shaping acceptable identities. Sara Mills notes that discourse operates by defining the boundaries of what can be said, thought, and recognized as legitimate [33].

Marriage itself, often idealized as a moral and emotional union, is similarly deconstructed. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it functions as a performative institution governed by social codes rather than personal authenticity. The criteria for marriage (name, status, wealth, and lineage) reveal it to be a mechanism for reproducing class structures rather than an expression of love or moral commitment. Gwendolen and Cecily’s romantic ideals are themselves mediated by language and fantasy, further underscoring the extent to which even intimate emotions are shaped by discursive constructs. The institution of marriage thus becomes a site where the illusion of moral order is theatrically enacted and socially validated. Wilde’s play destabilizes morality through language. As Richard Ellmann notes, “Wilde sees life as a work of art” [16], emphasizing the performative nature of identity.

Interestingly, Wilde’s use of wit and paradox is not merely decorative but constitutive of his deconstructive method. Epigrams such as “The truth is rarely pure and never simple” do not only entertain but also articulate the philosophical core of the play. Such statements destabilize the possibility of fixed meaning, exposing the contradictions embedded within seemingly stable moral propositions. Language, rather than clarifying truth, becomes the very medium through which truth is complicated, deferred, and ultimately rendered indeterminate.

Through these strategies, *The Importance of Being Earnest* dismantles the coherence of Victorian moral identity by revealing its dependence on linguistic convention, social performance, and symbolic recognition. Identity is no longer anchored in essence but in the ability to navigate and manipulate systems of signs. Morality, stripped of its metaphysical grounding, emerges as a contingent and performative construct sustained by discourse and repetition. Wilde’s play thus anticipates a distinctly postmodern condition in which the boundaries between truth and fiction, authenticity and performance, collapse, leaving in their place a pluralistic and unstable field of meaning.

3. Result

Although Shaw’s *Mrs Warren’s Profession* and Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* differ markedly in tone, form, and dramaturgical strategy, they converge in their systematic

destabilization of Victorian moral ideology. Rather than treating one as more “serious” and the other as merely satirical, a postmodern deconstructive reading reveals that both playwrights engage in equally rigorous critiques of moral absolutism, albeit through distinct yet complementary modes. Shaw demonstrates this materially, while Wilde does so linguistically, aligning with Culler’s notion of unstable meaning [11].

At the level of moral discourse, both plays expose the instability of ethical categories that Victorian society presents as natural and universal. Shaw interrogates morality by revealing its entanglement with economic structures and patriarchal power. In *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, moral condemnation is shown to function as an ideological tool that obscures the exploitative conditions of capitalism while preserving the illusion of social virtue. Wilde, by contrast, destabilizes moral discourse at the level of language and representation. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, morality is emptied of ethical substance and reconstituted as a system of signs, where sincerity, respectability, and “earnestness” are performed rather than embodied. In both cases, morality is not an intrinsic truth but a constructed discourse shaped by context and power.

A similar convergence emerges in the author’s treatment of identity as performative rather than essential. Shaw demonstrates that identities such as the “respectable woman” or the “fallen woman” are not natural categories but products of socio-economic conditions and ideological labeling. Mrs. Warren’s stigmatized identity is revealed to be structurally produced by the very system that condemns her. Wilde extends this destabilization into the realm of language and performance, where identity becomes fluid, interchangeable, and contingent upon social recognition. As Killeen notes, Wilde consistently destabilizes Victorian assumptions about sincerity, morality, and identity through wit and theatrical performance [25]. Jack and Algernon’s fabricated identities do not merely deceive; they reveal that all social identities are, to some extent, constructed performances sustained through repetition and acceptance. Thus, both playwrights undermine the essentialist notion of a stable, coherent self.

From a Foucauldian perspective, both texts illustrate how morality operates as a mechanism of regulation and control, though in different registers. In Shaw, moral discourse is embedded in institutional and economic systems that discipline bodies and constrain choices, particularly for women. The regulation is material, visible in limited labour opportunities and gendered expectations. In Wilde, regulation is more subtle but equally pervasive, functioning through social rituals, etiquette, and conversational norms. Figures like Lady Bracknell enforce boundaries of legitimacy not through overt coercion but through discursive authority, determining who qualifies as respectable within the symbolic order. In both plays, morality serves to maintain social hierarchy, whether through economic exclusion or social classification [18].

The plays also converge in their anticipation of Baudrillardian simulation, though again through different emphases. Shaw reveals a society in which respectable morality

is sustained by concealed economic exploitation, suggesting a disfunction between moral appearance and material reality. Wilde, however, pushes this logic further into the realm of hyperreality, where the distinction between appearance and reality collapses entirely. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, social life operates within a closed system of signs where appearance does not mask reality but replaces it. Respectability, identity, and even truth become simulations validated not by authenticity but by successful performance. Together, the plays chart a movement from concealed contradiction (Shaw) to full semiotic instability (Wilde) [6].

Another significant point of convergence lies in the deconstruction of social institutions, particularly marriage. Shaw critiques marriage implicitly by exposing the economic and moral conditions that render women dependent and vulnerable within patriarchal structures. Wilde, more overtly, transforms marriage into a theatrical performance governed by arbitrary social codes such as name, lineage, and status. In both cases, marriage is stripped of its idealized moral and emotional significance and revealed as a mechanism for maintaining social order and reproducing class and gender hierarchies.

By and large, Shaw and Wilde contribute to the collapse of moral certainty by demonstrating that Victorian ethical systems are internally contradictory and externally contingent. Shaw’s realism foregrounds the material contradictions that undermine moral authority, while Wilde’s comedy exposes the linguistic and performative contradictions that render moral categories unstable. While Shaw’s play reveals that morality cannot be separated from economic and structural conditions, Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveals that it cannot be separated from language and representation. These approaches are not hierarchical but complementary and together, they offer a more comprehensive deconstruction of moral absolutism.

In this sense, Shaw and Wilde jointly anticipate a postmodern ethical landscape characterized by pluralism, relativism, and skepticism toward universal truths. Their plays do not simply critique Victorian morality but they they dismantle the very foundations upon which claims to moral universality are built. By exposing morality as a construct sustained through power, discourse, and performance, both playwrights open up a space for rethinking ethics beyond rigid binaries and toward a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of human behaviour.

4. Discussion

Postmodern thought challenges grand narratives and universal stories that claim to explain morality, identity, and truth. Victorian morality functions as such a narrative because it claims universality, stability, and legitimacy. Shaw and Wilde undermine this narrative by exposing its contradictions. Victorian morality operates precisely as such a grand narrative and presents itself as natural, divinely sanctioned, and universally applicable, grounded in binaries such as virtue/vice, pu-

urity/corruption, and truth/deception. What Shaw and Wilde accomplish, albeit from within a pre-postmodern period, is a profound destabilization of this moral meta-narrative by revealing its internal contradictions, exclusions, and reliance on performative coherence rather than ethical substance. This collapse of grand narratives has been widely discussed in contemporary theory. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that postmodern culture reflects a shift toward fragmentation and multiplicity, where universal explanations are replaced by competing and localized perspectives [8].

Their plays suggest that morality is contextual, plural, and shaped by power. While Shaw's work reveals the economic base of moral discourse, Wilde's reveals the semiotic base. Both anticipate postmodern critiques by showing that moral certainty is not a stable foundation but a constructed fiction. This does not mean the plays promote nihilism. Rather, they call for ethical thinking that acknowledges complexity. Shaw suggests that morality must address economic justice while Wilde postulates that morality must confront the artificiality of social norms.

In Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, the collapse of the grand moral narrative is achieved through the exposure of its material underpinnings. Victorian morality claims to uphold purity and virtue, yet Shaw demonstrates that these ideals are sustained by an economic system that necessitates and profits from exploitation. The moral condemnation of prostitution, when juxtaposed with the economic conditions that produce it, reveals a fundamental inconsistency which exposes the fact that morality is not as an impartial ethical system but a selective discourse that masks structural violence. This aligns with a postmodern relativist position in which moral judgments are not absolute but contingent upon socio-economic contexts and power relations. Also, the collapse of Victorian morality anticipates postmodern thought. Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" directly applies to both plays [28].

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, on the other hand, dismantles the grand narrative of morality at the level of language, signs, and social performance. Unlike Shaw who exposes the economic instability of moral discourse, Wilde exposes its semiotic instability. The play operates within a world where identity is fluid, names are detachable from essence, and truth is subordinate to social convenience. The obsessive valuation of the name "Ernest" exemplifies the arbitrariness of moral signifiers: virtue is no longer an ethical quality but a linguistic effect. This reflects a postmodern condition in which meaning is decentered and endlessly deferred, and where the distinction between authenticity and performance collapses. In such a system, morality cannot function as a stable referent because it is embedded within a network of signs that derive meaning only through social consensus and repetition.

Both plays, therefore, lean towards a pluralistic ethical landscape in which no single moral framework can claim dominance. Instead of a unified moral truth, what emerges is

a multiplicity of competing perspectives shaped by class, gender, economic position, and social performance. Shaw's pluralism is grounded in material realities while Wilde's pluralism is grounded in discursive play, where identity and morality are negotiated through language and social ritual. In both cases, morality is questioned and revealed as relational rather than absolute.

This shift also signals a move toward relativism and the plays suggest that moral values are historically and culturally contingent, produced within specific systems of power and meaning. The Victorian insistence on fixed moral categories is shown to be unreliable because those categories cannot account for the complexities of lived experience. Vivie's moral crisis in Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Jack's identity paradox in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* both illustrate the insufficiency of rigid ethical frameworks when confronted with contradictory realities. Recent theoretical work further supports this shift toward pluralism. Similarly, Stuart Sim argues that postmodern philosophy rejects universal epistemological foundations in favour of contingent and multiple truths. Sim further notes that postmodernism "rejects the possibility of a single authoritative truth, emphasizing instead the coexistence of multiple, often conflicting interpretations" [37].

Vivie's moral crisis can also be understood through contemporary feminist thought, which emphasizes the lived experience of navigating oppressive systems. Sara Ahmed suggests that feminist awareness often emerges through moments of disorientation, when inherited moral frameworks fail to account for lived realities [2]. Vivie's realization reflects precisely such a moment of ethical rupture.

Importantly, the collapse of grand narratives in these plays does not result in nihilism but in a reconfiguration of ethical inquiry. Rather than abandoning morality, Shaw and Wilde interrogate its foundations. Moi's reconsideration of ordinary language philosophy similarly suggests that meaning and ethical understanding emerge contextually through human interaction rather than abstract universals [34]. Shaw implicitly calls for a morality grounded in economic justice and structural awareness, where ethical evaluation must consider material conditions rather than abstract ideals. Wilde, in contrast, invites a critical awareness of the artificiality of social norms, encouraging an ethics that recognizes the performative nature of identity and the instability of moral language. In both cases, ethical thought becomes self-reflexive, aware of its own limitations. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism "questions the very possibility of meaning" [22], reinforcing the instability of moral truth.

From a theatrical perspective, this instability is also reflected in evolving dramatic forms. Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of post dramatic theatre highlights how modern and postmodern drama move away from unified meaning toward fragmentation and interpretive openness [26] a tendency already anticipated in the structural and thematic strategies of both Shaw and Wilde.

It is important to note that the postmodern resonance of these works lies in their ability to anticipate a world in which certainty is replaced by ambiguity, unity by multiplicity, and essence by performance. By exposing Victorian morality as a constructed and contradictory system, Shaw and Wilde contribute to the broader intellectual movement that questions the possibility of universal truths. In addition to criticizing a historical moral order, the plays under study they open up a space for reimagining ethics as dynamic, plural, and responsive to the complexities of human experience.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* destabilize Victorian moral paradigms through a deconstructive postmodern reading. Shaw exposes how capitalist and patriarchal structures commodify women's labour while sustaining a hypocritical moral discourse that blames the exploited rather than the system. Wilde satirizes bourgeois respectability by revealing identity, truth, and morality as performances governed by social signs rather than ethical substance. Their works anticipate postmodern skepticism toward universal truth, aligning with Fredric Jameson's view of fragmented meaning in late capitalism [24]. It is therefore evident that Shaw and Wilde dismantle Victorian moral paradigms by exposing their contradictions. Shaw reveals morality as tied to economic exploitation [44], while Wilde exposes it as linguistic performance [43].

Using Derrida's deconstruction, supported by Foucault's discourse and Baudrillard's simulation, the analysis shows that both plays undermine moral absolutes by exposing contradictions within hegemonic ethical structures. Shaw and Wilde invite a multifaceted understanding of morality, challenging the coherence and legitimacy of Victorian moral ideology and revealing its dependence on power, performance, and contradiction. Together, they anticipate postmodern skepticism toward universal truth, confirming Lyotard's critique of grand narratives [28]. The two plays invite a pluralistic ethical framework, where morality is understood not as fixed truth but as a dynamic construct shaped by discourse, power, and performance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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