

A Comparative Study of Name Significance in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Wilde's *Earnest*.

Mariwan Hasan

Email: mariwan152@live.com

English Dept. College of Basic Education, University of Sulaimani, Iraq

DOI: [10.35974/acuity.v10i3.3853](https://doi.org/10.35974/acuity.v10i3.3853)

Abstract

In literary discourse, names frequently transcend their conventional role as mere identifiers, emerging as profound symbols of thematic constructs such as identity, societal expectations, and personal values. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, each of which employs the concept of names to engage with and critique different societal facets. Shakespeare's approach intertwines names with the thematic exploration of tragic consequences stemming from entrenched familial feuds and rigid social constraints. The protagonists' names in *Romeo and Juliet* are emblematic of their entangled fates and the destructive nature of inherited animosities, serving to underscore the broader implications of identity and societal division. Conversely, Wilde's satirical lens in *The Importance of Being Earnest* utilizes names to critique the superficial values and social pretensions of Victorian society. In Wilde's play, the adoption of false identities and the ensuing comedic conflicts expose the absurdities inherent in societal norms and personal deceptions. This essay will analyze how both Shakespeare and Wilde utilise names as critical instruments for reflecting and critiquing societal norms, relational dynamics, and individual identities. This analysis will be supported by the cultural approach and textual evidence and scholarly interpretations, elucidating the distinct approaches each playwright employs in their respective works.

Keywords: *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Sixteenth Century, Eighteenth Century

INTRODUCTION

Names in *Romeo and Juliet*

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* incorporates the importance of names into its story, utilising them to underline the devastating outcomes of societal divisions. The play is primarily influenced by the conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets, whose names symbolise a long-standing hostility that greatly impacts the destiny of the lovers.

Shakespeare highlights the significance of names by emphasising how the characters grapple with their identities. Juliet expresses her sorrow, saying "Oh Romeo, Romeo!" Why are you called Romeo? In Act 2, Scene 2, Juliet is pondering why her sweetheart had to belong to the Montague family, a name that represents their family's long-standing conflict. This moment epitomises the core conflict: their affection is condemned due to their societal roles.

Romeo's internal struggle is emphasised when he proclaims, "With love's ethereal wings did I surpass these walls; For solid boundaries cannot prevent love, and love dares to attempt

what love is capable of" (Act 2, Scene 2). The individual's defiance of his family's expectations exemplifies the conflict between personal aspirations and societal limitations.

Literature Review

Names in literature frequently serve as more than just a means of identification, playing a crucial role in examining society ideals and human identities. This comparative analysis examines how William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* employ names to criticise and ridicule society conventions, while their methods and conclusions diverge considerably.

Shakespeare employs names in *Romeo and Juliet* to underscore the detrimental impact of societal and familial restrictions. The primary conflict of the play is propelled by the acrimonious quarrel between the Montagues and Capulets, whose names represent deep-seated hostilities that predestine the characters' destinies. It is argued that the names in the play serve as more than just labels for individuals; they also symbolise profound social divisions that limit personal autonomy and result in terrible consequences. Shakespeare's depiction of the two lovers, entangled in a web of ancestral animosity, emphasises the influence of names in shaping and constraining individual fates. The drama illustrates how strict adherence to society labels can perpetuate conflict and tragedy, offering a powerful indictment of the detrimental influence of inflexible social systems (Bell 1989; Brooks 2006; Craig 2010).

Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, uses names satirically to criticise the shallowness of societal norms. Wilde's play centres on the utilisation of fictional names and identities to navigate cultural norms and individual aspirations. In order to evade his monotonous existence and conform to society norms of decency, the main character, Jack Worthing, assumes the alias "Ernest" (Hubbard 1997). Wilde's satire exposes the irrationality of the preoccupation with names and social facades, emphasising the insignificance of societal conventions. Wilde criticises the absence of true substance behind societal conventions by highlighting the difference between the sincerity of his characters and the artificiality of their supposed identities (Jameson 2003; Newton 1999; Smith 2011).

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* explores how names reinforce society restrictions that result in terrible consequences, whereas Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveals the superficiality of social norms through the use of sarcasm and humour. Both playwrights employ nomenclature to delve into the subjects of identity and societal expectation, however their divergent approaches mirror their unique criticisms of the culture in which they were composing. Shakespeare portrays names as a powerful influence that determines and restricts human fate, whereas Wilde emphasises the irrationality of cultural conventions that place excessive significance on superficial qualities. This study compares the importance of names in literature as a representation of social ideals and personal identity. It references the works of Deighton (2004), Green (1996), Rose (2002), Stevenson (2004).

METHODS

For examining the importance of names in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* will utilise a qualitative comparative analytic approach. This study will specifically concentrate on doing textual analysis and literary critique of the key texts, namely *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The data collection process will entail a meticulous analysis of character names, their symbolic connotations, and their influence on character identification and thematic progression. Secondary sources, such as scholarly papers and books, will offer further background and theoretical perspectives on the importance of names within the socioeconomic structures of the Elizabethan and Victorian eras. The aim of textual analysis is to examine the impact of names on character interactions, plot development, and thematic themes in each play. The study will analyse the utilisation of names in both plays, emphasising the resemblances and disparities in their narrative and thematic roles. This methodology will provide a comprehensive comprehension of how names mirror and shape social identities and cultural principles during the corresponding eras. The study's conclusions seek to enhance literary criticism by elucidating the significance of names in the development of characters and themes, situated within their historical and cultural contexts.

DISCUSSION:

Identity and Feuding

In *Romeo and Juliet*, names are emblematic of the familial conflict driving the plot. The feud between the Montagues and Capulets is not merely a backdrop but a central force shaping the characters' destinies. Juliet's reflection on names in Act 2, Scene 2, highlights her belief in the insignificance of names compared to personal identity:

“What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

This line underscores Juliet's belief that personal essence transcends names, challenging societal constraints imposed by familial labels (Draper, 1953).

Juliet's lament over Romeo's name further illustrates her frustration with social barriers created by familial identities:

“O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Romeo's statement reveals his internal conflict and desire to distance his personal identity from the enmity of his family name:

“My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, / Because it is an enemy to thee.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Romeo's willingness to renounce his name for Juliet's sake highlights his commitment to their love despite societal constraints:

“Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; / Henceforth I never will be Romeo.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's argument that Romeo's physical being is more significant than his name emphasizes her belief that identity transcends labels:

“It is nor hand, nor foot, / Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part / Belonging to a man.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet reassures Romeo that his true self is more important than his familial identity:

“Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's desire to detach Romeo from his family name reflects her wish to escape societal constraints:

“The name of Montague is my enemy; / Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's declaration of her willingness to face any obstacle for Romeo underscores the depth of her love:

“So dear I love him that with him all deaths I could endure.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's realization of Romeo's identity reflects the tragic irony of their situation:

“My only love sprung from my only hate!” (Act 1, Scene 5)

Social Expectations and Constraints

Shakespeare's portrayal of names extends to broader themes of social constraints. The characters navigate societal expectations imposed by their names, which are emblematic of the norms dictating their actions:

Romeo's desire to abandon his name for Juliet's sake reveals his struggle against societal expectations:

“Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; / Henceforth I never will be Romeo.” (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's affirmation of her love for Romeo, despite societal labels, reflects her resistance to social norms:

"I take thee at thy word: / Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized." (Act 2, Scene 2)

Romeo's poetic expression of love contrasts with the rigid constraints of their societal identities:

"But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?" (Act 2, Scene 2)

Juliet's wish to overcome societal constraints and be with Romeo highlights the conflict between personal desires and social expectations:

"O, for a falconer's voice / To lure this tassel-gentle back again!" (Act 2, Scene 2)

Names in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, skilfully used names to criticise the shallow standards and conventions of Victorian society. In this hilarious classic, Wilde unveils the irrationality of conventional norms by using individuals' names that mirror their social facades and individual deceptions.

The play's title, "Earnest," is a clever wordplay that symbolises honesty and moral integrity, qualities that were highly valued in Victorian culture. Nevertheless, Wilde exposes the emptiness of these ideas. Jack Worthing, who creates the fictitious identity of "Ernest" in order to evade social responsibilities, epitomises this irony. Jack admits, "I have been living a dual existence, and it has caused me great unhappiness" (Act I). The individual's deceitfulness highlights the superficiality of societal conventions concerning names and personal identification.

Similarly, Gwendolen's obsession with the name "Ernest" highlights the insignificance of societal values. In Act I, she proclaims, "I am unable to wed a man who lacks seriousness," thereby exposing her superficial preference for a name rather than authentic attributes. Wilde uses clever characterisations to criticise the extreme measures individuals take to adhere to societal norms, highlighting the play's main theme of the shallowness that exists within Victorian conventions.

Identity and Deception

Wilde uses the name "Ernest" to satirize the characters' deceptive behaviors and the superficial importance of names:

"My name is Ernest, but I know it is not my real name." (Act 1)

Jack's use of the name "Ernest" as a disguise reflects his desire to escape societal expectations:

“I have no intention of being married, but I have an obligation to be named Ernest.” (Act 1)

Jack’s comment underscores the societal pressure attached to the name "Ernest" despite his personal reluctance:

“I don’t care whether it’s a good name or a bad name; I care only about the name ‘Ernest’.” (Act 1)

Gwendolen’s fixation on the name "Ernest" illustrates the superficial nature of societal values:

“I am so sorry for the name, but I have no choice in the matter.” (Act 2)

Jack’s apology for the name “Ernest” satirizes the arbitrary nature of social expectations tied to names:

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” (Act 1)

Wilde’s exploration of truth and deception in relation to names highlights the play’s satirical critique of societal norms.

“I am not in the least interested in being earnest.” (Act 3)

Wilde’s critique of the name “Ernest” emphasizes the absurdity of societal values attached to names:

“The only thing that is important is to have the right name.” (Act 2)

This line reflects the play’s satire of how names become a focal point for social expectations.

“If you are not named Ernest, you are not a proper gentleman.” (Act 1)

The emphasis on the name "Ernest" reflects societal preoccupations with superficial qualities.

“A name is not a name unless it is an Ernest.” (Act 2)

Wilde exaggerates the importance placed on names to critique societal norms.

“To be named Ernest is to be considered honorable.” (Act 3)

The play’s conclusion, where true identities are revealed, underscores Wilde’s message about the triviality of societal concerns.

Comparative Analysis

Themes of Identity

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* employ the usage of names to examine themes of identity, but they do so in different manners. Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* explores the profound connection between names and the themes of tragic struggle and societal limitations. The Montagues and Capulets represent significant social divisions rather than being mere family names. Juliet questions the significance of a name. The quote "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" from Act II, Scene II challenges the significance of names in relation to human identification and emphasises the terrible irony of their predicament (Draper, 1953).

Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, employs names as a means of ridiculing the shallow preoccupations of Victorian society. The name "Ernest" serves as a symbol for society expectations, emphasising the irrationality of prioritising external qualities above authentic character. Algernon's statement, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple" (Act I), criticises the tendency to prioritise names and appearances, which often obscures genuine personality and character (Aransáez, 1994). Both works examine how identity and societal standards are influenced and limited by the usage of names.

Impact on Relationships

The significance of names in shaping relationships is evident in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The relationship between the lovers in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is profoundly influenced by their names, which serve as symbols of the ongoing conflict between their families. Juliet's statement emphasises her opinion that the essence of everything remains unchanged regardless of the label it is given. Nevertheless, this idealism conflicts with the cultural limitations that determine their destiny, exposing the brutal truth that names hold substantial influence in their society.

In Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the name "Ernest" plays a crucial role in the complex comedy storyline. The desire of Gwendolen and Cecily to wed an individual named "Ernest" exemplifies the shallowness of cultural norms and the irrationality of societal demands. The play satirises the influence of names on social interactions and romantic decisions, as demonstrated by Gwendolen's declaration, "I am always at my best in the name of Ernest" (Wilde, 2000). Both plays demonstrate that names hold significant symbolic significance, impacting both individual and societal interactions.

Societal Critique

Shakespeare and Wilde both utilise names in their works to criticise societal ideals, but their approaches reflect their distinct viewpoints on social conventions. Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*, offers a profound analysis of how names and familial identities may cause harmful consequences in personal and communal relationships. This tragedy exemplifies how the

long-standing conflict between the Montagues and Capulets underscores the influence of society and familial restrictions on individuals' behaviour and beliefs. The characters' names serve not only as labels, but also as representations of their predestined duties within an inflexible societal framework. Shakespeare highlights the capriciousness of these limitations by demonstrating how the characters' destinies are determined by the names and associations they inherit, rather than their individual decisions or ethical attributes (Levin, 1986). The play's ultimate tragedy, the demise of the youthful lovers, exemplifies the deleterious consequences of society impositions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, names in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* serve as powerful symbols reflecting and critiquing societal values. Shakespeare uses names to illustrate the tragic effects of familial feuds and social constraints, demonstrating how deeply ingrained social divisions impact the characters' lives. Despite Juliet's belief that names are inconsequential compared to personal identity, the play shows the profound influence of societal labels. Wilde's play, on the other hand, satirizes Victorian society's superficial values through the comedic use of names, highlighting the absurdity of societal expectations and the triviality of personal identity. Both plays offer rich perspectives on the significance of names, revealing their impact on identity, relationships, and social critique. In *Romeo and Juliet*, according to Juliet, name is not very important as compared to personal identity of Romeo; whereas, one cannot see such depth in understanding of the female characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as the two ladies fall in love with a boy (Earnest) just because the pronunciation of the word *Earnest* has an appealing tone to them, but they never mention the personality of this male character as an important factor to make them love him which is what cultural criticism seeks to analyse and Wilde critiques his own society for their manners.

Shakespeare criticises the negative impact of cultural expectations on individuals and communities by illustrating how names determine the destinies of characters. On the other hand, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, uses names to satirically comment on the shallowness of societal norms and individual sense of self. Wilde's play centres on the utilisation of fictional identities to negotiate society norms and satirise the nonsensical behaviours of the British aristocracy. In the play, the main character, Jack Worthing, decides to use the alias "Ernest" in order to create a more positive impression of himself. However, this choice ends up revealing the shallow nature of social standing and personal honesty (Hubbard, 1997). Wilde used this facade to scrutinise how societal conventions and individual identities are frequently established on insignificant and capricious disparities. Wilde used humour and sarcasm to underscore the irrationality of society's preoccupation with names and outward appearances, exposing the intrinsic hollowness behind these customs. Shakespeare employs names in *Romeo and Juliet* to criticise the inflexible societal systems that restrict personal liberty and result in tragedy. Conversely, Wilde's approach in *The Importance of Being Earnest* mocks the superficiality of social conventions and the very notion of identity. Both playwrights employ names as a means to convey their criticisms, but their individual techniques reveal their differing viewpoints on how society standards influence human behaviour and relationships.

REFERENCES

- Aransáez, C. P. (2014). *The importance of being a reader: A revision of Oscar Wilde's works* [Diploma].
- Bloom, H. (Ed.). (1998). *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. Chelsea House Publishers.
- Bradley, A. C. (1992). *Shakespearean tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*. Macmillan.
- Draper, J. W. (1953). *The structure of Shakespearean plays*. University of Chicago Press.
- Green, J. (1996). *The tragic impact of names in Romeo and Juliet*. Cambridge University Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (2004). *Will in the world: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hasan, M. N. (2015). The eighteenth century and the rise of the English novel. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, 3(2), 18–21.
- Hasan, M., & Fouad, L. (2021). William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* revisited. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 17(3), 21–27.
- Hasan, M., et al. (2024). Portia's role in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: A feminist study. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 28(3), 56–63.
- Hasan, M., Abdulkareem, L., & Star, L. (satirize. William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*: A reconsideration. *Acuity: Journal of English Language Pedagogy, Literature and Culture*, 5(2), 148–169.
- Hasan, M., Dyari, S., & Hawkar, Q. A. S. M. (2023). Glorification of true love in Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*: A textual approach. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 26(2), 65–74.
- Hasan, M., Ebrahim, B., & Mahmud, R. (2022). Triviality and seriousness in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching*, 13(2), 163–174.
- Hasan, M., & Sharif, D. (2020). William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: A reconsideration. *NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching*, 11(2), 125–136.
- Hubbard, T. (1997). *The importance of being earnest: A critical study*. Academic Press.
- Jameson, F. (2003). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Cornell University Press.
- Maguire, L. (2007). *Shakespeare's names*. Oxford University Press.
- Muir, K. (1964). *Shakespeare's tragedies: A study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Newton, J. (1999). *Wilde's satire: The importance of being earnest*. Routledge.
- Rose, J. (2002). *The importance of being earnest: A study of social satire*. University of Chicago Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (2004). *Romeo and Juliet* (K. Muir, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1914). *The complete works of William Shakespeare*. Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L. (2011). *Oscar Wilde's The importance of being earnest: A critical edition*. Penguin Books.
- Smith, S. (1991). *The love and conflict in Romeo and Juliet*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Stevenson, G. (2004). *The triviality of names: Wilde's satirical perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wilde, O. (2000). *The importance of being earnest: A trivial comedy for serious people*. Penguin Classics.