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**Abstract:** *The Victorian society was influenced by strict social conventions and strict lines of class structure that stressed on moral restraint, and proper conduct. But, behind this well-polished social structure, there was gross contradiction in the form of hypocrisy and moral duplicity by the individuals. In such a society, mundane practices, especially those of food preference and eating behaviors had a social connotation and were used to articulate a position in the class, ethical principles and individual identity. Food was not only food but a cultural marker indicating not only traditional ways of life, preferences, and status. In The Importance of Being Earnest, Oscar Wilde employs food and eating scenes to show these suppressed social tensions. Instead of being merely domestic items, food and consumption habits reveal psychology of the characters, their aesthetic sense, morality and the consciousness of their classes. This paper explores food as an element of identity in the play, by addressing the ways in which consumption and eating habits demonstrate the norms of life, moods, and social attitudes, as well as noted the hypocrisy and hypocrisy of the Victorian society.*

**Introduction**

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) by Oscar Wilde is mostly the satire of moral hypocrisy and duality of the Victorian society. The play itself focuses on such characters as Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, who lives under false identities in various social environments to get rid of strict moral, accuses and social demands. Such conscious development of the two lives is representative of the larger Victorian need to keep the respectability of public life and the desire of the private life apart. In this context, food becomes a prominent but neglected factor that demonstrates the hypocrisy in the social behavior of the Victorians.

Eating and dining within the dramatic world of Wilde is not a neutral or a household process, but, on the contrary, it is a social process, active in terms of its pleasure, tactical playing and performance. Food is the location at which there is the indulgence and desire reflects the ethical hypocrisy of the community.

Food preferences, consumption behavior and response of the characters towards consumption gradually reveal their hypocrisy, self-indulgence and aestheticism.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) in terms of the reflections of M. F. K. Fisher about food, hunger, pleasure, and sensuality, especially in *The Art of Eating* and *The Gastronomical Me*, provides a rather different approach to the discussion of the relationship between desire, social performance and identity and food and consumption. The close connection between food, desire and emotional experience as highlighted by Fisher gives a critical guideline to how culinary practices in the play by Wilde contribute not just to physical appetite but also to psychological and even social cravings. The study addresses the topic of how food acts as an identity indicator to demonstrate the personality traits of the characters, lifestyles, living standards, wealth, taste, and their emotional conditions. Thus, it also identifies the greater hypocrisy and moral inconsistency of Victorian society as it is indicated in the ordinary consumption.

### Literature Review

Although *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) has been heavily criticized, the use of food and eating habits as a form of culture has not been a well-explored side of the play. Fenge (2016) provides an insight into the issue of food consumption as a measure of social relations and statuses in Victorian society. Nevertheless, their arguments are focused to a large extent on the relationship between food and power, and aesthetic and life aspects of food consumption remain uncharted. Shabir (2020) has discussed the Victorian morality and hypocrisy in the Wilde play and reasons as to why Wilde employed satire to expose false pretension in the society. Likewise, Hasan et al. (2022) address the issue of seriousness and triviality inversion in the life of Victorians, which, as usual, is one of the central themes of the play, however, they do not turn directly to food as an unobtrusive, nevertheless, significant signifier of identity.

Food in the play by Wilde does not merely signify the status of the classes. It functions as a mean of self-expression and emotional conditions, implying more intricacies of the relations of the characters to themselves and others. Atayurt Fenge (2016) considers the function of food in developing social power relations, stating that culinary habits correspond to psychological and bodily hunger of people. The observation is similar to the discussion at large by Counihan (2008) who contends that food is a reflection and the product of social organization, and offers useful information on how the consumption of food reflects both individual and collective identities. Victorian fascination with food and its symbolic application has been long recorded, and it is only natural that recent research by Daly and Forman (2008) ventures into the topic of food as a commodity and symbolic artifact in Victorian domestic life.

The eating habits in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) is a comment on both the social values as well as an individual identity. To illustrate, the fact that Algernon indulges in cucumber sandwiches and afternoon tea brings up the aristocratic idleness of the upper society. Marks (2023) goes into detail with the emergence of afternoon tea as an elite tradition, implying that the food eaten during those events is implicitly connected to a concept of wealth and status. The application of food in these scenes is especially important in determining the class differences as we can see in the example of the food such as cucumbers serving as a symbol of not only money but also of the social barriers that characters such as the Algernon exist under.

Other than the social Cues, food is also used as a means of expressing emotional and psychological conditions. The emotional role of food in the play is evidenced by the fact that the relationship between Jack and Gwendolen revolves around food, which in the form of bread and butter is used as the means of establishing an emotional bond (Wilde, 2019). The manipulative nature of food as a way to fulfill the

desires and to avoid unpleasant situations that Algernon uses is also reflective of his nature. Food according to Raviv (2010) is not only concerned with physical sustenance but rather the means of artistic and emotional expression.

The beauty of the food in the play by Wilde is also an indicator of the culture and philosophical support of the Victorian era. Raviv (2010) stated that there is aesthetic meaning attached to food consumption whereby taste was regarded as a continuation of personal identity. This pleasure of food, including that of afternoon tea, is directly related to Wilde as he goes on to examine more generally the issue of social performance and the value of appearances in the Victorian social world. Equally, the international foodstuff exchange that moved around in the Victorian era, as discussed by Daly and Forman (2008), highlights how the food practice was used as a symbol of cultural or imperialism.

Finally, food in the work of Wilde is a symbol with many dimensions. It is a statement of class, wealth, emotional attachment, and personal identity at the same time criticizing the moral contradictions of the Victorian society. The characters in the wilde also rely on food as a method of sustenance and a method of enacting and expressing their needs, social status, and emotions.

### Discussion

Food functions as a symbolic medium to express sympathy, gratitude, love, or frustration. Thus, food becomes a vehicle to connect with others. However, literary authors use food in the text which not only symbolizes cultural issues of acceptance, resistance, and preservation of culture but also address the issues of memory, emotions, history, relationships, consumption, and power as well. Fenge observes that "food has been viewed as an indicator of social class, or one's identity as to one's personal and political affiliations..." (Fenge 85). Food symbols in literature have the ability to reflect the social organization as Carol M. Counihan explains that "food is a product and mirror of the organization of society on the broadest and most intimate levels" (Counihan 6). Thus, we get to know about a character's mindset and social and financial status through the food they consume.

Considering this explanation of the relationship of food and literary text, many such incidents are observed in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) by Oscar Wilde where food and eating habits tell us about the character's personality and the overall mind set of the Victorian society. Thomas says that "the stomach was an organ of intellect in the nineteenth century. The period proliferated "discourses of diet," as philosophers, authors, and statesmen sought to describe and re-imagine culture through the gut." (73). Gastronomy was a literary genre established in an era that forged a new relationship between eating and reading as cookbooks emerged in commercial form for the first time and became best-sellers; realist novelists lingered over the dining table, attentive to the food their characters did and did not eat. The study of food and drink in the Victorian period can be categorized as having a number of intertwined strands, such as: "food as commodity, a significant aspect of the economic life of the period; the social history of food as part of Victorian domestic life, the burgeoning popularity of which may be judged by the number of cookbook studies produced in the past decade; restaurants and dining out..." (Daly and Forman 365). The already done work on this topic includes food symbolizing excess, or overindulgence. For instance, Algernon cannot stop eating cucumber sandwiches, or muffins when they are put in front of him. This suggests that the appetite of Algernon is just as excessive as his eccentric, flamboyant self. Food has also been utilized as a swap for sexual indulgences. But there has been no in-depth analysis of the specific types of food consumed and what and how does food eating habits of the characters depict the traits of their personality which will be discussed in detail in this research.

Thus, talking about the different forms of food and beverages consumed, they can be listed as: tea,

champagne, cucumber sandwiches, crumpets, sherry, sugar, cake, bread, butter, and muffins. For this research, categorically, the study of food and literature can be divided into:

#### **Food as a signifier of class and wealth**

By first looking into the play, the very beginning gives away the exaggerated appearance of Algernon's room described as "luxuriously and artistically furnished" (Wilde 2). The importance of food in the play is observed as in the description of the very first scene of the first act, when Lane, a servant is serving afternoon tea. (2) Tea has also been mentioned at several other instances in the play. When we look into the historical context of tea, we come to know that the concept of afternoon tea has come to us through the 7th Duchess of Bedford. Because of needing very little encouragement to find an occasion to squeeze in another cup of tea as well as a piece of cake, the upper classes ate it all up and thus, the fashionable custom soon spread across Britain. (Marks). This definition of the afternoon tea makes it evident that this custom was for the upper-class aristocrats. While looking at the cups and cucumber sandwiches, Jack questions Algernon on "such reckless extravagance" (Wilde 4). This suggests that this afternoon tea and sandwiches were not considered a regular meal but perhaps a luxury which apparently Algernon could afford both for himself and his guests. Lane as an excuse for his master's greed, eating up all the sandwiches says that there were no cucumbers available not even for "ready money". This again gives us the impression that cucumbers were either expensive or considered a luxury; thus, we get to know about the good financial status of Algernon as his servant was ready to offer ready money for the cucumbers. (12). Thus, the type of food consumed here elaborates on the living standard and economic status of Algernon.

Margaret Beetham in her text *Book of Household* has shared her views on the "place" and boundaries that are created because of food. These boundaries are between the "mistress dining and cooking, between savagery and civilization - even the boundaries of middle-class identity by giving instructions presumably lacked the middle-class upbringings that would have rendered such lessons unnecessary". (368) One of such incidents is observed in the play when Algernon asks Lane (his servant): "... is marriage so demoralizing as that?" to which Lane replies in telling Algernon his experience about marriage. Algernon is least interested and says: "I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane." (Wilde 3). Thus, here Algernon makes the class boundaries quite obvious. Thus, food becomes a symbol to represent the economic status of Algernon and also portrays his treatment with others because of this financial status.

#### **Food as a reflection of emotional bonds**

Algernon offers Jack bread and butter and says: "Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter are for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter." Jack is apparently satisfied with this offer and says: "And very good bread and butter it is too." (Wilde 5). The reason why he was content with bread and butter was because he was content with Gwendolen and expressed his liking towards her. Jack here has associated an emotional connection with the food he consumes because he has emotional attachment with the person who likes the same kind of food. Algernon here, however, has exploited Jack's feelings of being attached to Gwendolen by making him eat bread and butter and distracting him from the conversation of cucumber sandwiches.

While serving tea, Cecily asks Gwendolen if she wants sugar, to which she replies with: "No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable anymore." To which Cecily responds by taking up the tongs and putting four lumps of sugar into the cup. (51). Here, we observe that Cecily is expressing her emotional frustrations by physical means of using food as a retaliation strategy. On another instance, when once again Cecily asks Gwendolen of her choice between cake and bread and butter, Gwendolen says: "Bread and butter,

please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.” Cecily thus, does the opposite, as she cuts a large piece of cake and puts in the tray and asks for it to be served to Gwendolen. (51). Here both Cecily and Gwendolen are using food to taunt and hurt each other. Where Gwendolen is mean to Cecily for the choice and variety of food on her table, Cecily is equally evil and uses food to humiliate Gwendolen. Hence, food here has been used as a vehicle to express emotional frustration.

#### **Food as a symbol of aesthetic values and modes of living**

Raviv talks about how the type of food is helpful in expressing the aesthetic standards of a person. He says that: “Since taste is one of the five senses, it also implies the necessity of a first-hand experience (direct contact) for making an aesthetic judgment.” (Raviv 13). Both the notion of the subjectivity of artistic experience and the need for direct contact play an important role in evaluating food-performances. The concept of taste, as analyzed by Korsmeyer, “emphasizes the significant contribution that a discussion of food and performance may offer to the wider debate on the nature of art and the art experience.”. Thus, food becomes a means to satiate more than hunger.

Consuming afternoon tea with snacks was a Victorian custom. When we look into the political ongoing of the time, we get to know that at time, there was “The great expansion of empire and the acceleration of global trade mean that during the Victorian period, foodstuffs (and, consequently, consumption patterns) were circulating to, from, and between the colonies and the extra-colonial worlds in ways they never had before”. (Daly and Forman 364). During that time tea became one of the world's most heavily traded commodities. Algernon consuming tea himself and serving it to others as well tell us about how he wanted to keep up with the society's customs and traditions and be one with them because he considers them in high regard.

Algernon is reminded of cucumber sandwiches when he is thinking about the science of life. (Wilde 2). Here, we observe that Algernon is treating food with profound seriousness. He then takes two of the cucumber sandwiches and eats them. At this point it appears as if he has eaten the sandwiches absentmindedly because he is quite aware of the fact that these sandwiches are specially prepared for Lady Bracknell. (2). But nonetheless, he has a carefree attitude towards it and focuses more enjoying the sandwiches. Putting life and science on the same pedestal suggests that Algernon is connecting the two. We observe that Algernon consumes food mindlessly and with greed. Such is his opinion about life too. He wants to enjoy it to the fullest and make the most out of it, inconsiderate to the ways in which he achieves this goal.

#### **Dietary habits as a mirror of one's personality**

By looking into the character's food choices and eating habits and analyzing the gastronomy, we also get to know about their personality. The word gastronomy might sound peculiar for most people and even amongst 'culinarians'. It is an “understanding of various social, cultures, historical components, literature, philosophy, economic status, religion and others, in which food is the core subject.” (Zahari 66). This emphasizes the fact that food is not merely sustenance but a reflection of identity, social position, and personal values that helps to decode the deeper traits of the characters.

When Algernon asks Jack what has brought him to town, while replying he makes a comment on Algernon and says: “... Eating as usual, I see, Algy!” (Wilde 3) and even while speaking to Jack, Algernon does not stop eating the sandwiches as observed in the narration: “[Goes over and takes sandwich.]” (4). This suggests that Algernon is habitual eater who eats whenever he feels like (which is quite often) and does not comply to the customary habits of eating meals.

When Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich, Algernon interferes and says “Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.” While saying this to Jack, he takes

one and eats it, to which Jack responds: "Well, you have been eating them all the time.". In this particular dialogue, it is observed that Algernon is quite particular about the food he is having and refuses to share the food even though it was not even prepared for him to begin with. On this perspective, his outlook on life can be observed. Algernon is always in search of his own happiness and would not mind taking something away from a person if it makes him happy i.e., stealing lady Bracknell's happiness (cucumber sandwiches) because he enjoys eating them.

Algernon eats all the cucumber sandwiches and when his aunt shows up, he picks up the empty plate in horror and asks Lane why there are no cucumber sandwiches when he had ordered them especially for Lady Bracknell. To this, poor Lane replies that there were no cucumbers in the market even though he went down twice. Algernon here portrays a hypocrite attitude towards his aunt. He scolds Lane for not making any cucumber sandwiches when in fact he was the one who eat them all. Lane must be accustomed to his master's ill habits which is why he immediately covered for him by saying that there were no cucumbers in the market. When Cecily and Gwendolen have a misunderstanding, thinking they both are engaged to the same man, named Earnest, they exchange mean and sarcastic vocabulary with each other. At this point, while talking to herself Gwendolen, says: "Detestable girl! But I require tea!" (50). This suggests the importance of tea or the importance of food in the Victorian society. Even after a bitter encounter, all Gwendolen can think about is food. That's the only reason keeping her there even after the unpleasant quarrel.

On another instance, Algernon and Jack while having a conversation in an apparently tensed state when Cecily and Gwendolen find out the truth of their real identity and having a disagreement over Algernon not giving his consent to Jack to marry Gwendolen, mindlessly starts to eat muffins. Jack is dissatisfied with Algernon's inappropriate behaviour, given the situation and remarks: "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless.". Here, Algernon is using food as a coping mechanism and as an excuse to not be forced into dealing this unfavourable situation and wants to delay it by eating food. Algernon in reply to this says that he cannot eat muffins in an agitated manner. He says that: "The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them." Jack, still annoyed with him says that: "... I say it's perfectly heartless you are eating muffins at all, under the circumstances.". Here, it appears as if Algernon is not agitated by the grave situation at all and is only focused on eating food but then he reaffirms the above argument by saying: "When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as anyone who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins." (55). This highlights how his attachment to food serves both as a source of comfort and as a deliberate distraction from confronting the seriousness of his circumstances.

### Conclusion

A critical analysis of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) clearly shows that food is symbolic and used to show the economic positions of the characters, emotional moods, aestheticism, and personal temperaments. Mention of afternoon tea, cucumber sandwiches, and cakes indicate privilege of social classes and status inequality, whereas the luxurious ways of Algernon bring out aristocratic idleness and wastiness of the high society.

Food can also be used as a tool of emotional expression and sub-conflict. The sugar and cake joke of Cecily and Gwendolen show how food patterns express attachment, competition and frustration in socially restricted relationships. In the same way, the play highlights the importance of food in terms of

aesthetics and luxury, as rituals such as afternoon tea show that Victorians are obsessed with taste, style and appearance. Lastly, moral character is revealed in the eating habits. The hypocrisy, selfishness and avoidance of the Victorian respectability can be seen in the way Algernon treats moments of stressfulness, indulging him to the utmost and showing no signs of sincerity. Thus, by food, Wilde does not just refer to the comic detail but the satirical perspective on the performative morality and social aspirations of his society.

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