

# Oscar wilde: the importance of masking unpleasant emotions through food



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In Oscar Wilde's, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, satire is used to emphasize the triviality and absurdity of certain conventions within Victorian society. The play's main characters epitomize Victorian high society; thus, the criticism that arises from Wilde's exaggeration extends further than the play itself. Specifically, Wilde exaggerates the consumption of food, a seemingly normal non-event. However, Wilde presents such a typically mundane event as an emotionally moving experience. Each time food is introduced into a scene, a character is also feeling an emotion that is unconventional for the time.

During the 19th century, it was considered impolite for members of the upper levels of society to reveal conflicting and personal feelings. In public, any kind of overbearing emotion needed to be suppressed in order to maintain proper decorum. Responding to these societal rules, Wilde uses the Victorians' exaggeration of their food intake to represent the emotions that they are unable to show. By using food to mask and stifle unpleasant sentiments like lust, aggression, and stress, Wilde conveys the Victorian Era's aversion towards public displays of such emotions.

Discussing one's feelings of lust and sexual desire defied the doctrinal rules of polite conversation which were of utmost importance to Victorian society; Wilde represents these emotions and their repression by disguising them with a large appetite. In the play, there are many barriers between the men and the women they love. Jack, in particular, is madly in love with Gwendolyn and plans to marry her. However, issues such as Gwendolyn's domineering mother and Jack's alternate identity stand in the way of the couple's union. Without an official marriage, the two are unable to consummate their love, <https://assignbuster.com/oscar-wilde-the-importance-of-masking-unpleasant-emotions-through-food/>

ultimately leaving Jack riddled with sexual desire. Prior to his proposal to Gwendolyn, Jack confesses his plan to Algernon; one can only imagine the lust Jack is feeling towards his possible wife. At this point, Jack's relationship with Gwendolyn has not surpassed flirting, leaving him sexually frustrated. As a member of high society, Jack cannot outright tell Algernon of his desires, as they would be perceived as less than respectable. Instead, Jack directs his frustration towards the provided food and seeks to sustain his appetite. After being denied the cucumber sandwiches, Algernon suggests that Jack eat some of "the bread and butter [that] is for Gwendolyn" (3). Jack then proceeds to eat in a ravenous manner that causes Algernon to comment, "you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all" (3). Algernon claims that Jack is "behav[ing] as if [he] were married to [Gwendolyn] already", ultimately implying that Jack's eager consumption of the bread mirrors a husband's willingness to pursue sexual relations with a wife (3). Thus, Jack's appetite to eat the bread and butter is a manifestation of his sexual desire for Gwendolyn; the rapidness of its consumption correlates with the lustful feelings that arise from the conversation.

Wilde further mocks the Victorian convention that prohibits individuals of the upper class from openly discussing lust by applying this frustration to the simple act of eating. During this time, members of the upper class were expected to maintain in public a kind disposition, despite any angry sentiments an individual may be feeling. To accurately reflect the era's conventions, Wilde stifles the characters' aggression through redirecting it towards food. In Act II, Gwendolyn's arrival at Jack's country house creates conflicts that incite aggression. Upon introduction, Gwendolyn takes a

fondness to Cecily, causing her to even say, “ we are going to be great friends” (32). However, after a misunderstanding that causes Gwendolyn and Cecily to believe that “ Earnest” had proposed to them both, the two quickly develop antipathy towards one another. Earlier in the play, each girl had claimed to be deeply in love with her own “ Earnest”; therefore, the thought of someone threatening that love understandably incites some aggression. Despite their anger, they are unable to openly express their feelings, as doing so was not acceptable in society. Instead, the two sit down for tea and subtly direct their anger towards one another’s food. Cecily, compelled as a hostess, offers Gwendolyn sugar for her tea and a choice of cake or bread and butter. Gwendolyn, unable to directly criticize her hostess as a person, resorts to insulting Cecily’s preference, stating that, “ sugar is not fashionable anymore [... and] cake is rarely seen at the best houses” (38). In retaliation, Cecily puts four sugar lumps into Gwendolyn’s tea and cuts her a slice of cake; society does not permit a direct reply from Cecily, so she resorts to directing her anger towards the food.

Wilde further emphasizes the consumption of food to illustrate the feelings of stress that members of high society were required to subdue. The play’s elaborate plot provides many conflicts, causing each character to undergo a large amount of stress. The end of Act II is particularly stressful, as deceit is discovered and relationships are damaged. After Gwendolyn and Cecily discover Jack and Algernon’s true identities, they storm back to the house. Jack and Algernon are left dejected by their true loves, and uncertain if there will be an opportunity to amend the situation. Though Jack is initially outwardly conflicted about the circumstances, he soon becomes distracted

by Algernon's ingestion of muffins. Algernon rejects the sentiment of stress by claiming that he "can't eat muffins in an agitated manner": though this is said humorously, it illustrates his tendency to deemphasize important sentiments such as stress and emphasize trivial acts like eating. Because society discourages them from expressing feelings of stress, Algernon resorts to "eating [, as it] is the only thing that consoles [him]" (41). Wilde then dedicates a large portion of dialogue between the two to emphasizing greediness in regards to food. Rather than discussing the situation at hand and their mutual stress, they focus their attention upon the distribution of food. They refer to each other's intake as "greedy" and seek to convince the other to eat teacake instead (41). Both men desire the muffins and want them as their own, calling to mind their feelings toward the name Earnest. However, the barriers of society prevent them from directly discussing the more prevalent, but stressful issue; thus, the two are left redirecting their stress onto the muffins instead.

By covering the characters' emotions with exaggerated attention to and interaction with food, Wilde illustrates the farcical extent that the upper class went to in order to preserve a pleasant image. Members of high society were obsessed with maintaining an image of perfection according to which one only practiced proper behavior in public. Any sentiments able to cause tension were deemed unpleasant and unrespectable. However unpleasant these feelings may be, it is human nature to regard them as serious, as every person has experienced them. Due to the serious nature of these feelings, applying them towards food and eating, rather trivial matters relative to an individual's emotional well-being, appears quite comical to the

reader. Wilde illuminates the ridiculousness in relating the expression of one's emotions to being improper and mocks the practice; by doing so, he conveys his disapproval of the importance placed on maintaining a pleasant front. Wilde's use of food as a mask illustrates how confining and stifling it was to be among the upper class in the Victorian era.