The Importance Of Earnest As A Parody Of The Social Conventions About Marriage

In 1895, Oscar Wilde published his trivial play called “The Importance of Being Earnest”. The well-known play hints at Wilde’s hatred for the bourgeois by mocking them through food consumption. The play reveals this by showing multiple clips where food consumption is being used to expose the characters emotions such as aggression, selfishness, and greed accompanied by humour. Oscar Wilde takes advantage of humour and characterization by using food consumption to criticize the foolishness of the upper classes in the Victorian era.

In the first acts of the play Wilde uses the characterization and humour to reveal Algernon as a greedy and hypocritical individual. This is shown in the play, “The Importance of Being Earnest”, when Jack tries to eat a cucumber sandwich and Algernon stops him by stating, “Please don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. [takes one and eats it.]” (Wilde, pg.1735). This quote shows that Algernon is a greedy and hypocritical individual as he is proving himself to be selfish by not sharing the cucumber sandwiches and continuing to eat them even though he told jack that he could not eat them. Thus, making him a hypocritical and selfish person through food consumption.

Algernon’s characterization plays a key role in Wilde’s play since he represents the stereotypical male in the Victorian era. As the males in the 18th century consumed the most and were by far the most hypocritical of the sex’s due to the males making rules that they themselves did not have to follow. Such as the cucumber sandwich scene presented above. Thus, allowing Wilde to successfully mock the upper-classes foolishness using excessive devouring of food accompanied by humour. Wilde proves the bourgeoise's to be corrupted not only by their foolish actions throughout the scenes but, through their names as well. For example, Algernon’s nickname in the play is Algy. The name Algy reveals to be ironic as it refers to algae the bacteria that grows over rocks (consuming the rock itself) near rivers. This is a perfect example of characterization that mock’s the upper classes because Wilde is conveying that the upper classes are so consumed with material goods such as food that they begin to become foolish through their absurd snobby actions of greediness and hypocrisy.

In act two, Wilde once again proves the upper classes actions to be blinded by foolishness through the absurd actions between Cecily and Gwendolen when they first meet. In the play, “The importance of being Earnest”, the scene begins when Gwendolen arrives in the country unexpectedly and is introduced to Cecily. The two women begin to talk and become confused about who “Earnest” is marrying. Once this occurs, Cecily and Gwendolen begin to become overwhelmed with emotions and decide to serve food that will later reveal their emotions. Cecily offers Gwendolen some tea and she accepts it. However, when Gwendolen accepts the jester of tea, she begins to become aroused with an intense emotion of dislike towards Cecily as she uses the words, 'Detestable girl!” (Wilde, pg. 1763). Cecily in return asks Gwendolen if she wants sugar with her tea, Gwendolen then states, “[superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [CECILY. looks angerly at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.]” (Wilde, pg. 1763). After this, Cecily also becomes aroused with intense emotions and decides to the go against Gwendolen's request yet again, when Cecily asks Gwendolen if she prefers cake or bread and butter. Gwendolen reply's in a synarchy way and

says, “[in a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.” (Wilde, pg. 1763). So, Cecily decides to give Gwendolen a rather large slice of cake, going against her request.

The scene presented above shows Wilde’s use of food consumption and characterization to mock the upper classes because the ladies are both becoming enraged with anger and the attempt to stay lady like in the process. This is shown when Cecily is denying Gwendolen’s requests for unsweetened tea and bread with butter and when Gwendoline shows replies to Cecily with rude remarks about the country. The stereotypical characterization is shown here through anger and the ladies attempt to preserve their lady like qualities by trying to maintain their emotions and desire to become overwhelmed with anger like a man would. Not only does this scene prove that the acts shown by both women mock the upper classes in the Victorian Era through allowing stereotypes to affect their actions but, is also humorous because the women care more about fulfilling their upper-class role by maintaining their properness through suppressing their emotions. This relates to the article, “Alice The Oldest Story in the World”, by David Day, where he states, “mushroom in hand, Alice finally has some control over her physical condition, but she has not yet learned how to use it to her advantage. She still sees her identity tied to physical being: her name, or her species, or the size of her body.” (Day, pg.7). This connects to the Cecily and Gwendolen in the scene above because they too hold an immense amount of control over their physical condition. This physical condition being how they present their emotions to one another, but fail to figure out how to use their actions to their advantage. This failure to use their actions to their advantage occur due to their limitations that the “identity” or role expectations that the upper-classes feel they need to fulfil to live stable lives. Thus, relating to Alice when she struggles to use her physical condition to her advantage because she is perplexed with her identity which consists of labels (name, species, and size). Thus, connecting the two passages through a lack of judgment both share due to their expectations and labels that consume them.

Later in act two, Wilde presents us with another scene involving food consumption and use of characterization with Jack and Algy. The scene immerges when Gwendolen and Cecily figure out that both men (Jack and Algy) have been lying about their names being Earnest. The women (Gwendolen and Cecily) then walk away by going inside the house to talk; exiting the scene. This leaves Jack and Algy sitting at the table where the food was located. After this, the men begin to discuss the situation they are in while Algy begins to do what he does best. Which is to consume things such as the muffins on the table in attempts to suppress his emotions. However, this triggers Jack as he does not understand how Algy can sit there so calmly and eat muffins. Meanwhile they have lost their women are in a sticky situation. Algernon then states, “Well, I can’t eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them.” (Wilde, pg. 1766). Wilde uses this quote to mock the upper-classes in the Victorian era through the characterization of Algy when he explains that he cannot eat muffins in a flustered (or “agitated”) manner because he will get the cuffs on his shirt dirty. This implies that Algy is not bothered by the women calling off the marriage because he is filled with egocentrism, and is once again showing his selfishness since he is eating all the muffins and couldn't care less about Jack’s relationship with Gwendolen. After this, the two men begin to fight over the muffins while Algy tries to get Jack to eat the tea cake since Algy does not like tea cake. This argument over muffins and lack of true feelings that Algy possesses proves Wilde’s argument that the upper-classes in the Victorian era were foolish because they lacked a good sense of judgment in the scene presented above by presenting the two men in a child’s manner rather

than being logical and fixing the situation like adults.

Not only does the scene presented above with Algy and Jack demonstrate the bourgeoise's foolishness in the Victorian era but, it also shows Wilde’s use of humour through the word “Earnest”. Wilde also stresses the significance of the word through the title that labelled “The Importance of Being Earnest”, by using the word “Earnest 'to symbolize what the Bourgeoise/upper-classes in the Victorian era lacked. Which was the characteristic of being Ernest. This term makes the play humorous since the upper-classes are hypocritical and become confused with what it means to be Ernest. For example, when both women fawn over the idea of what the name Ernest means but, do not actually care to become Ernest because they both end up staying with the two men Jack and Algy when they are the most unresent people. The term Ernest means being honest and sincere but, the upper-classes in the Victorian era prove to lack Ernest qualities as they seem to be masked by foolishness through hypocrisy when engulfing the various foods in the play. Thus, allowing Wilde to take advantage of humour and characterization through the clever use of food consumption to criticize the foolishness of the upper classes in his various scenes throughout the play.

When considering the information presented above, one must wonder where Wilde’s hatred for the upper classes in the Victorian era came from. In the article, “Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900)”, by Thomas Wright, he explains how Wilde grew up, and was shaped into the man he was in the Victorian era. Wright argues that when Wilde was a kid, he devoted himself to literature by exploring his father’s large eclectic library which allowed him to become an excelled and skilled reader. This would later help him to explore writing as a career. Wilde also inherited an important trait from his mother, Jane Fresca, that showed in his later works. These traits were being dissatisfied with the everyday world with a specific hatred for the bourgeois. Wilde’s Mom showed strong traits of dissatisfaction with her own identity and began to constantly lie about her age and ancestry (Wright, pg. 2). These traits were clearly rubbed off on Wilde and show in his play, “The Importance of being Earnest”, as we see various characters lie about their names and ancestry. We see these traits in the characters Jack and Algernon when they lie about their names being Earnest and when Jack lies about having a brother named Earnest. These characters in Wilde’s play allow him to convey a deeper meaning of the word Ernest and how being honest or sincere with oneself in the play allows them to become blinded with foolishness; which Wilde uses to mock the upper-classes with.

Some may argue that Wilde’s use of food consumption in his play, “The Importance of Being Earnest” is an ordinary routine when thinking about the role that food plays in our daily lives such as, during stressful times, holidays, and parties. When considering the norms of food consumption people tend to argue that Wilde does not aim to criticize the Victorian era, but is instead aiming to display the importance that food has on the bourgeoisie. But this is false information. Even in present day America we are blinded by the upper-classes foolishness. These problems are primarily due to ignorance as American’s are misled by industry’s which is like the bourgeoisie since they are misled by foolishness that Wilde mocks through the excessive amount of food presented in his play, “The Importance of Being Earnest”. Wilde tries to highlight the absurdity of foolishness that the upper-classes show through the clever use of food consumption to mock them. As a result, Wilde is successful in doing so by using humour with mockery to highlight the unorthodox emotions that the upper classes are unable to show due to role expectations. These role expectations include what are expected of males and females in the bourgeoisie. In the article, “Stereotypes, Gender roles, and Gendermandering”, by Jeff Johnson, he states, “sexual stereotypes defining femininity, masculinity, and gender

roles in social contexts were well established during the '50s, the heyday of Inge's career. In fact, after the disruption of the war years, fixed gender typing was not only desirable, it was required in order to seed the idealism associated with the postwar recovery in America, and the illusion of the well-made family was perpetuated as a necessary condition of social stability at every level of society." (Johnson, pg. 2). This quote proves that the Victorian era was vastly shaped and corrupted by stereotyping and gender roles, because they allowed the people to develop certain desires and expectations to acquire their role as a true bourgeois. Allowing their desires to soon corrupt the individual with foolishness that Wilde used to criticize the Victorian era.

When analyzing the information presented above it is clear that Oscar Wilde was an intelligent man who believed that the upper-classes in the Victorian era were hypocritical. Wilde found the upper-classes hypocritical because they took on the role of Ernest people and fawned over the meaning and importance of the word but, never acting on what it meant to be earnest. In conclusion, the play, "The Importance of being Earnest", by Oscar Wilde, demonstrates Wilde's use of exaggerated food consumption to expose the foolishness of the upper-classes through characterization, humour, and role expectations that the upper-classes present or neglect to present in the 18th century. improper emotions were lust, selfishness, greed, etc. which Wilde accompanied with humour. As a result, Wilde was successful in exposing the foolishness with the use of the bourgeoise's hypocrisy in the Victorian era.

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