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Dinner Parties and Power Games in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon says that he “hate[s] people who are not serious about meals” (260). This statement may be regarded as a direct echo of Wilde’s famous unabashed words, “I can’t stand people who do not take food seriously”, a remark which formulated the writer’s fondness for food and culinary activities. Wilde’s extravagant lifestyle earned him the reputation of being “a connoisseur of food and wine, din[ing] in the best and most fashionable places” (Redman 165). It is interesting to note that Wilde’s expensive tastes in food and drink proved an inspiration to quite a number of restaurants in England, Europe and the United States, with several establishments¹ offering Oscar Wilde

¹ “The Oscar Wilde Bar” at Hotel Café Royal in London, “The Oscar Wilde Irish Pub” in Berlin, “Wilde Bar and Restaurant” in Chicago, “The Wilde Thistle” in Los Angeles to name a few.

themed menus and decors, and thus explicitly evincing the correlation between Wilde and food. As Redman stated, Wilde “delighted in good food and if a meal was well-cooked he would send for the chef to congratulate him” (165). Wilde’s sophisticated culinary interests were also affirmed by Lord Alfred Douglas who in his book *Oscar Wilde and Myself* referred to their “Lucullian feasts” (69) held at high quality London West End restaurants such as “Café Royal” and “the Savoy” (68), restaurants which still exist today and are still renowned for their high rankings on fine-dining. With respect to his culinary experiences with Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas stated the following:

Wilde was an expensive sort of friend, particularly after he began to consider himself a gourmet and a man of the great world. He gave fairly expensive entertainments, and although a chop and a pint of bitter beer at some respectable inn would always have done for me, I never professed to be insensible to the charms of good cooking. (69)

Regarding the “charms of good cooking” which he joyfully shared with Wilde, Lord Douglas particularly reminisces the “delicious ortolans”, “foie gras from Strasbourg” with “Perrier Jouet”, “topped off with fifty-year-old brandy” (69).

Wilde’s refined culinary appetite had also found a resonating reflection in many of his works, where a considerable body of references to food or food-related activities may be found. In his novel *The Picture Dorian Gray* (1891), for instance, Wilde’s protagonist enjoys indulging himself extravagantly in fine continental cuisine in London. Wilde’s short story collection for children as well as for adults, entitled *A House of Pomegranates* (1881) also contains much culinary imagery with regard to his characters’ experience of various foods. However, the food imagery tends to have a more striking effect in Wilde’s dramatic works, and particularly in his later plays *A Woman of No Importance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Perhaps, the culinary images in these plays might be attributed to Wilde’s growing interest in fine cuisine, an interest which he spared no expense to satisfy. On another level, it could be argued that culinary images tend to be represented more effectively in dramatic works due to the visual aspects of drama – food may be a device by which various sorts of actions are animated, and thus may contribute significantly to the overall effect of the performance. This said, in these two plays culinary images and activities function not only as a medium to reinforce power relations in private and public

spheres, but also as a witty element that elevates the farcical quality of the selected plays. Even though *A Woman of No Importance* tends to depict food related images on a more limited scale compared with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it can be argued that in both plays culinary imagery represents a potent element contributing to Wilde's critique of the Victorian "upper class affluence" (Gillespie 80-81) with its preoccupation with surface appearances, a way of living which he found superficial.

Yet being born into an aristocratic family, Wilde himself was familiar with and immersed in this social environment. His father, Sir William R. Wilde, was a famous eye surgeon, and his mother Lady Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee Wilde was both a poet and noted defender of the cause of Irish nationalism. Her "fierce Irish nationalist poems were published in the Irish weekly newspaper, *The Nation*, under the pseudonym 'Speranza'"² which means hope in Italian, and these works are now considered a significant contribution to the growing sense of nationalism in Ireland during that period. Both parents were socially active, and Wilde was included in his mother's social gatherings whilst still a child, where he honed his wit from an early age, a quality which would later allow him to "sparkle at dinner parties" (Belford 134). Drawing on his familial background, it might be argued that his experience of these gatherings foreshadowed his later literary engagement with dinner parties.

Opening at the Theatre Royal in London in 1893, *A Woman of No Importance* met with a lukewarm critical reception, being described variously as "the least successful on stage" (Powell 55), "overweighted with dialogue" (Nelson 57), and "the weakest of the plays [which] Wilde wrote in the 1890s" (Ellmann 357). However, the increasing popularity of this play³ is indicative of a revived interest in this work. With its assumed thematic semblance to its predecessor *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), particularly in relation to the construction of a woman from an underprivileged social stratum with a secret past (in this case, Mrs Arbuthnot "the humble and self-sacrificing mother" (Eltis 96) who is abandoned by an upper class man with whom she has had a baby), the play deals with "hollowness of the conventional morality which treats the profligate seducer with infinitely more indulgence than the victim of his arts" (Nelson 48-49). However, through a portrayal of a strong, determined and unyielding

² See "Jane Francesca, Lady Wilde."

http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svPeople?person_id=wildja

³ The play has been performed many times in London theatres since its opening, and is yet scheduled to be performed in autumn 2015 in The London Theatre.

female protagonist whose character belies the derogatory implications that the title seems to ascribe to her, the play offers a far more pronounced critique of gender inequality – or, as Wilde put it, “the monstrous injustice of the social code of morality” (Pearson *The Life* 251)– prevalent in the late Victorian social landscape than that portrayed in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*.

Composed of four acts with the action situated largely indoors, *A Woman of No Importance* is classified as one of the “three society comedies” (Raby 143) written by Wilde. With its “ironical and cynical [engagement with] English high life” (Nelson 101), the comic effect emerges through the sophisticated interplay of the dialogues between various characters who are themselves somewhat exaggerated in their manners, and the dinner or tea parties form a highly suitable backdrop for Wilde to construct these dialogic exchanges. As Sarah Sceats has argued, “writers use feeding, feasting, cooking and starving for more than simple mimetic effect” (“Eating” 118). Drawing upon this observation, it could be stated that culinary images bear numerous implications with regard to the dynamics of society and interpersonal relations. That is to say, food may function as a way to critique the idiosyncrasies of a culture, or as a medium through which power relations are surfaced.

Culinary activities, as Sceats has further pointed out, are often interpreted “as the locus of love, aggression, pleasure, anxiety, frustration and desire for control. In other words, the ingredients of power relations” (“Eating” 118). In fact, what Sceats suggests here is that both consumption and repression of food could be studied within the frame of power relations on the basis of private and public interactions. For instance, in early infancy, the mother’s milk is a human being’s first and foremost elixir of life, and from a psychoanalytic perspective it is a baby’s first interaction with its mother, an experience which translates into the primordial experience of joy or resentment towards the mother. In this respect, the mother is the person “who gratifies or frustrates as she offers or withholds the satisfactions of the breast as the source of food and comfort” (Waugh 64), an idea which has found a stimulating psychoanalytic ground in feminist literary criticism⁴.

In addition to this, food also serves the function of increasing endorphins (i.e. the brain’s ‘feel-good chemicals’) bringing a sense of peace and comfort to the consumer. Culinary activities such as

⁴ Particularly in *l’écriture féminine* which has further explored maternal functions of the female body within a poststructuralist critical frame.

comfort eating, and compulsive eating in particular, might be motivated by this desire to experience a euphoria induced by the consumption to excess of certain foods, an experience which could also be explored as a subversive reaction against personal discontentment. In the light of these various implications of culinary activities, it can clearly be stated that food “constitutes a practical and symbolic discourse” (Magid xi). In other words, while food can “symbolize bodily and sexual experience”, it may also “signif[y] language and voice, a symbolism drawing on the dual association of the mouth with both eating and speaking” (Heller and Moran 2). In fact, it is this duality that tends to be forefronted in Wilde’s selected plays: on the one hand it is the mouth by means of which hunger is satisfied culminating in a peaceful mood of contentment, whilst, it is also the mouth that utters the most unpleasant, hurtful remarks as a strategy to rise above others. In this regard, the power dynamics are often conveyed through the “eating words” (Gilbert xv) of the characters, a performance which allows for an exploration of social and personal relations.

From a cultural perspective, food and drinks most often accompany moments of shared joy, distress, and sadness, functioning as a symbolic medium to show sympathy, gratitude, love, anger, frustration, etc. Yet, food operates at a position of conflict, since, as Gilbert states “we love our dinners but don’t want to become dishes on the cosmic menu. [...] We savor festive meals, yet resolve to renounce gluttony” (xvi). Thus, it is these complex enunciations of food that prompts a critical exploration of various implications of culinary activities. For instance, food has been viewed as an indicator of social class, or one’s identity as to one’s personal and political affiliations, an outlook arguably encapsulated in the ambiguous popular phrase “you are what you eat”. On a broader level, as Farb and Armelagos have argued, “to know what, where, how, when, and with whom people eat is the character of their society” (211). Politically, food may function as a medium through which the ruling class exercises power over the subordinate as in the cases of the Corn Laws in Britain during the early and mid-19th century, and the circumstances surrounding the Great Famine of 1845. Although it was nearly 50 years since the Great Famine when this play was written, the lingering resentment of the English aristocracy’s indifference to the sufferings of the poor arguably remained an issue that rested in the collective conscious. Furthermore, as Pearson has stated, the Great Famine was a topic that might have been talked about in the household of Oscar Wilde, since Wilde’s father William “conducted a statistical survey of the diseases that were afflicting the Irish population after years of the Great Famine” (“Life and Wit” 6). Interestingly, Oscar Wilde’s mother

Jane “met William Wilde during a political rally related to the lack of food, notably the effects of famine on the Irish peasantry” (“Life and Wit” 9). It could be argued that the fact that Oscar Wilde was born into a highly politicized household might have awakened in him a political insight into the relations between food and power, a relation which Wilde critically engages with in his works in his construction of dinner and tea parties.

Although there is no physical appearance of food in *A Woman of No Importance*, there are several references to dinner and tea parties in the play, references through which Wilde voices his witty criticisms of the upper crust’s way of living in his social landscape. The first reference to food takes place in Act I when Lord George Illingworth, the man who abandoned Mrs Arbuthnot and their baby, disdainfully voices his opinion about the English country gentlemen, stating “The English country gentlemen galloping after a fox – the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable” (106). It is significant to note here that Lord Illingworth succeeded to the title of lord after the death of his older brother Arthur who was “killed in the hunting field” (123). Given this, Lord Illingworth’s condescending attitude towards the English country gentlemen who, according to him, are preoccupied with futile endeavours, is a remark that displays Wilde’s satirical take on the “decadent aristocrats” (Powell 63) in the House of Lords in that period whom, as Lord Illingworth states, “are never in touch with public opinion. That makes us a civilized body” (106). Here, Lord Illingworth’s reference to hunting, and the culinary imagery evoked by the word “uneatable” tends to indicate two viewpoints: on a political level, the analogy implies the power relations prevalent between the two political chambers, whilst on a personal level, it hints at Lord Illingworth’s ferocious ambition and appetite for power. Thus, throughout the play Wilde juxtaposes Lord Illingworth’s preoccupation with surface values with the Puritanical ideals of Hester Worsley, a young American woman visiting Lady Hunstanton. Unlike the other characters in the play, Hester is not interested in “London dinner-parties” (110) which she finds rather superficial. However, Lord Illingworth adores these activities which he calls “simple pleasures” (112), and as the first act is about to close, Lord Illingworth is depicted flirting with Mrs Allonby as they get ready for tea, saying “The Book of Life begins with a man and woman in a garden” (112). Here, Lord Illingworth alludes to the Biblical tale of the fall from Eden, with Mrs Allonby assuming the role of Eve, and the forbidden fruit, in this case, is the afternoon tea.

English afternoon tea is a Victorian tradition that came into being in 1840 with the initiative of Anna Maria Stanhope, the

seventh Duchess of Bedford (1788-1861), and consisted mainly of “tea and sandwiches”⁵, designed to bridge the gap between the two main meals of that period – breakfast and dinner. As Sceats has stated, food and eating “are inseparable from both physical and psychic appetites and power relations” (“Eating” 118). Here, Wilde’s reference to afternoon tea tends to point to these two appetites: afternoon tea obviously indicates the satisfaction of hunger, and thus of physical appetite; but also gestures towards the satisfaction of sexual desires, an unconscious disposition which seems to lurk beneath Lord Illingworth’s playful allure - as Sceats has argued, “what underlies insatiability of appetite [...] is an impetus towards incorporation” (*Food* 38). Here, the notion of incorporation not only implies a desire to be a member of a corporate body, but also suggests an inclination to form an indistinguishable whole, invoking a libidinal instinct towards the desired object over whose body power could be exercised to attain a sense of satisfaction.

The correlation between food and power relations is another theme that emerges during the course of the play. In Act II, an act which is largely centred around the dialogue of five women (Mrs Allonby, Lady Stutfield, Lady Hunstanton, Lady Caroline, Hester), we see the characters partaking of after-dinner coffee whilst voicing their opposing ideas about the social codes regarding relationships. For Lady Caroline, playful bachelors should be compelled to marry the girl they are seeing within twelve months, but Lady Stutfield questions the validity of Lady Caroline’s idea, and as she refuses to drink coffee, a conduct which corresponds to her objection to Lady Stutfield’s view, she states that one should also think about those who are “in love with someone [...] tied to another” (113). Mrs Allonby fervently states that “all men are married women’s property” (113) whilst women “do not belong to anyone” (114), a statement which, arguably, represents Wilde’s liberating outlook on women. In this long dialogue about relationships, Mrs Allonby points out that her husband Ernest- a name which Wilde later fully develops into a parodic character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* – “had never loved anyone before in the whole course of his life” (115), a situation which troubles Mrs Allonby since she would rather be “a man’s last romance” (115). As the women continue to converse, Hester speaks her mind on the matter with an outsider’s perspective, stating:

You rich people you don’t know how you are living.
How could you know? You shut out from your society
the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and

⁵ See <http://www.afternoontea.co.uk/information/history-of-afternoon-tea/>

the poor. [...] Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish. (119)

Here, through Hester, Wilde seems to voice his insight into the hypocritical tendencies of the Victorian morality regarding not only gender issues⁶ as to “the unequal division of suffering between men and women” (Powell 67), but also class distinctions, an idea which is further highlighted as the play proceeds, particularly through the construction of Lord Illingworth who is represented as a man of shallow character, steeped in surface appearances and values. During his earlier conversations with his son Gerald (who at this point does not know that Lord Illingworth is his father), it is clear that Gerald looks up to Lord Illingworth as a “successful” and “fashionable man” (141), a man whom he is excited at the prospect of working for. Lord Illingworth, in turn, points out to his protégé that “to get into the best society, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people” (132). As he engages in giving useful advice to his prospective secretary, he utters his most notable remark, a remark that has become a cultural landmark: “a man who can dominate a London dinner-table can dominate the world” (132). In fact, this statement explicitly articulates the significance of culinary affairs in power relations, since in these gatherings food becomes a medium through which a socially ambitious individual may strive to put himself or herself in the best possible light in order to have a respectable place in his/her society. Viewed in this context, Lord Illingworth with all his wealth and dandy looks has an admired status in his society, yet he fails to exercise the same level of power on Mrs Arbuthnot who refuses to marry him despite her son’s persistence. Thus, the last act of the play, situated again in a familiar garden setting, offers a reversal of the ending of Act I, replacing Lord Illingworth’s derogatory remark – “a woman of no importance” with Mrs Arbuthnot’s allusion to Lord Illingworth as “a man of no importance” (157).

First performed at St. James Theatre in London in 1895, and considered Wilde’s “most successful play” (Raby 161), *The Importance of Being Earnest* is another play where culinary references function as a way of enunciating power relations, but this time with a distinctly farcical edge, with the consumption of food serving as a vehicle for Wilde to wittily explore various interpersonal relations – in

⁶ Wilde’s feminism has been found controversial: on the one hand, he is regarded as a writer who has sympathy for women’s issues, whilst on the other, he is criticized for the misogynistic implications in his works. See Margaret Diane Stetz’s essay “Oscar Wilde and Feminist Criticism” in *Palgrave Studies in Oscar Wilde Studies*. Ed. Frederick S. Roden. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 224-245.

fact, the play had initially come out with a subtitle “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People” (Nelson 142). Composed of three acts, it is a play of mistaken identities based on dualities, and the brilliant pun is facilitated by the word “earnest”: Jack is located mainly in the country with his cousin Cecily, but he has created an imaginary brother called “Ernest” as a gateway to the tempting life in the city, the irony, of course, lying in the circumstance of his assuming the identity of his imaginary brother Ernest when he is at his least earnest. The counterpart of Jack is Algernon, who is located in the city with his cousin Gwendolen. Like Jack, Algernon has invented a character – a sickly friend called Bunbury – whom he uses as an excuse to escape to the country. Thus, the comedy arises from the complications that emerge due to the double identity of these characters. With this farcical comedy, Wilde created “a bright bubble of nonsense which mocked every principle, law, and custom, of the society he lived in” (Eltis 171). The culinary images in the play add a further comic dimension as they are introduced at particularly critical moments, undermining the serious tone of the characters, prioritizing sensual desires, and thus “dramatiz[ing] the individual’s rejection of custom and authority” (Powell 78).

It is significant to note that the food imagery appears early in the play – in fact the first act of the play opens with afternoon tea on the table, with Algernon overindulging himself on “cucumber sandwiches” (253) which are cut for his aunt Lady Bracknell who has a good appetite for this particular kind of sandwich, a tendency which is revealed during Lady Bracknell’s visit to her nephew, stating that she would like to have a cup of tea and a “nice cucumber sandwich” (260). But when Algernon realises that there is no sandwich left to serve to his aunt since he has eaten up all of them, Lady Bracknell responds calmly and rather indifferently saying, she “had some crumpets with Lady Harbury” who, as Lady Bracknell further indicates seems to be “living entirely for pleasure” (261). From Lady Bracknell’s attitude, some associations of food with wealth and satisfaction could be inferred. That is to say, Lady Bracknell’s mention of her visit to Lady Harbury where she had some crumpets, is immediately followed by her statement about Lady Harbury’s way of living which is, to Lady Bracknell, solely motivated by pleasure. Here, the notion of pleasure could be attributed to the idea of consumption and the sense of satisfaction it entails both physically and psychologically for Lady Harbury obviously has got the financial power to satisfy her culinary affairs.

In a similar fashion, Lady Bracknell’s passion for cucumber sandwiches could be interpreted in relation to the issue of class: due

to its “little nutritional value” and its incapacity to fully satisfy hunger, cucumbers, which found a marketable place only in the late 1800s, did not appeal to the working classes who “preferred not to waste energy on something with so little protein”. However, “putting them in a sandwich (which is a very much British invention) became popular among the upper classes as a pre-dinner snack”⁷, thus for the upper classes, cucumber sandwiches “served as a sign of one’s status.”⁸

Viewed in this context, Lady Bracknell’s fondness for cucumber sandwiches reaffirms her affiliation with the pretentious and superficial upper class, a correlation which Jack also touches upon when he inquires into the presence of cucumber sandwiches on the table, asking: “Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young?” (254)—statements which further bring forth the farcical connection between this dish and social class. Besides, the whole scene tends to portray the dynamics of power embedded in interpersonal encounters. For instance, while Algernon takes the liberty of helping himself to all of the cucumber sandwiches that had been “specially ordered for his aunt” (255), he does not let Jack touch them, and furthermore says to his aunt unabashedly that there were no cucumbers in the market “not even for ready money” (261). In so doing, Algernon not only satisfies his craving for food, but also enjoys his exertion of power over Jack and his aunt. In fact, Algernon’s insatiable appetite for food, combined with his tendency to escape from his aunt into restaurants, could be interpreted as a manifestation of his unruly and playful disposition which prompts him to indulge in fine dining with Jack when he is in the city. Interestingly, here Wilde refers to “Willis’s” (258) Rooms, “a fashionable restaurant” (then located at King’s Street in St. James’s), a place where Wilde and Lord Douglas often dined (359), and also a place which is frequented by Algernon in the play, serving as a getaway from his aunt’s meddling nature.

The dynamics of power is also made manifest in the relationship between Gwendolen and Cecily in Act II. Cecily in this act uses food as a way of exerting her power during the verbal fight that she holds with Gwendolen over Ernest whom, due to a misunderstanding, appears to be the man that both women are attracted to. This scene begins with Gwendolen paying a visit to

⁷ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/9494932/As-cool-as-a-cucumber-sandwich.html>

⁸ See <http://1890swriters.blogspot.com.tr/2013/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-cucumber-sandwich.html>

Jack's country house with the prospect of seeing him. Since Jack went to see the Rectory, it is Jack's ward Cecily who welcomes Gwendolen. Early in their conversation Cecily states that Mr Worthington is her "guardian" (287). Concerned to hear about Cecily's relation with Mr Worthington, Gwendolen declares that she is frustrated to see a young woman such as Cecily being looked after by Mr Worthington, since even though Mr "Ernest" Worthington is, as Gwendolen puts it, "the very soul of truth and honour" (287) (a statement which increases the comic effect as it later turns out that both Ernests were ironically truthful in their deception, since both Jack and Algernon were christened Ernest and they are in fact brothers), she is of the opinion that "even men of the most possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the physical charms of others" (287). Hearing the name "Ernest", Cecily, defensively, points out that it is Mr Worthington's elder brother who is her guardian, and Gwendolen, confused, replies that she did not know that Ernest had a younger brother. Here, the reader/viewer realises the essence of the complication: that is Algernon introduced himself to Cecily as Ernest, Jack's invented brother in the city, whilst Jack was Ernest in the city, and he assumed his persona when he saw Gwendolen. Oblivious of this situation, Cecily and Gwendolen are certain in their own ways that they are both engaged to be married to Ernest, and they start to argue about which one of them is to marry Ernest, since Ernest, to the best of their knowledge, seems to have proposed to them both – Gwendolen first, and then to Cecily.

The comic effect produced by this misunderstanding is heightened as both Cecily and Gwendolen continue to preserve their 'ladyship', and it is at this point when the ceremonious afternoon tea turns into a battleground, for both women begin to drop "the shallow mask of manners" (288), leading to another instance where food is rendered a comic function of intensifying the power dynamic. In this scene Cecily asks Gwendolen if she would like to have some tea, and Gwendolen "with elaborate politeness" (289) thanks her, but they can hardly keep up with the pretense, and respond to this ironic façade of manners in their own ways – Gwendolen, moving aside, calls Cecily "detestable girl" (289), and Cecily serves just the opposite of what Gwendolen likes for her afternoon tea. The exchange between the two is significant in terms of highlighting the role of food in the exercise of power:

Cecily (*sweetly*): Sugar?

Gwendolen (*superciliously*): No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. (*Cecily looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup*)

Cecily (*severely*): Cake or bread and butter?

Gwendolen: (*in a bored manner*) Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

Cecily (*cuts a very large slice of cake and puts it on the tray*)

(289-90)

This dialogue between Gwendolen and Cecily indicates the ways in which food can be situated in the realm of hatred. Here, while Cecily strives to reinforce her power through the use of food, Gwendolen turns this episode into a class issue by displaying a condescending attitude to Cecily's country life.

The role of food in the assertion of power is also made manifest in the dialogue between Algernon and Jack following the revelation that they were both christened Ernest. During the course of their argument, Jack picks up the muffin dish, and this incident infuriates Algernon who is very partial to muffins, and responds to this stating: "Jack, you are at muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. (Takes them) I told you I was particularly fond of muffins" (294). Not pleased with Algernon's outburst of anger, Jack asks him to leave, but Algernon, rather arrogantly, states that he is not leaving since he "ha[s] not quite finished his tea [...] and there is still one muffin left" (294), a disposition which might be attributed to his sense of power over Jack based on his seemingly higher social status. Here, the use of food obviously creates a comic effect since the act closes with Algernon continuing eating, yet the food also functions as a way of suppressing discontentment. Both characters tend to take refuge in food, but for Algernon in particular, the act of eating seems to eradicate his feelings of discontentment.

Thus, Algernon's "gustatory business" (Powell 78) increasingly produces a comic effect in the play, and particularly in Act II, since it is in this act where Algernon's desire to appease his appetite is distinctively brought to the fore. In this act, Algernon nonchalantly eats muffins while explaining to Jack the improbability of Jack's wished for union with Gwendolen. As Algernon sits "calmly eating muffins" (293), a conduct which seems to trivialise the seriousness of Jack's situation, Jack calls Algernon "perfectly heartless" (293), and Algernon responds to this accusation 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. (293)

Here, Algernon's constant consumption of food may be attributed to his way of suppressing his anxiety, since as the play reaches its climax, complications arising from Jack and Algernon's duplicitous use of invented characters lead to further complications concerning their relationships with Gwendolen and Cecily respectively. Thus, Algernon takes refuge in comfort eating, overindulging himself in muffins which he seems to consume excessively, and the act closes with Algernon, in Jack's words, "devour[ing] every single muffin" (300). There is yet another reference to muffins in the last act of the play when Gwendolen and Cecily converse about their loved ones and their invented personas. Gwendolen is pleased that Jack and Algernon did not follow them into the house, and Cecily responds to this by stating in a somewhat ambivalently absurd manner, "they have been eating muffins" (295), an activity which Cecily regards as a manifestation of "repentance" (295). Compared with the earlier implications of food in the play, where food served mainly as a medium through which power relations are exposed, the satisfaction that comes from the consumption of "muffins" in this act emerges as an accompaniment to the feeling of contentment in the aftermath of resolution of conflicts. Yet, it also indicates the ways in which the earlier power-related implications of muffins have been trivialized, a disposition which also tends to fit the contextual inferences of the plot with regard to upper-class Victorian mannerisms.

To conclude, as these two plays display, Wilde depicted culinary activities in the selected works not only as a satisfaction of physical appetite, but also as a complex construct situated at the heart of power relations in various different social, economic and private contexts. Whilst the references to food seem to imply a criticism of the upper class and a way of exerting power over one another in both plays, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses food imagery also as a medium to heighten the sense of farce embedded in his play. His constant reference to cucumber sandwiches as a metaphor for the superficiality of the late Victorian upper class has found life outside of the play, and even today the cucumber sandwich eating upper class "dandy" seems to exist as a recognizable stereotype within British culture.

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