Explore Wilde’s use of food and eating in ‘The Importance of Being Earnest.’ You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors.

Oscar Wilde presents food and eating as consistent throughout the play and although the action itself seems innocent, it’s used to highlight the hypocrisy, superficiality and rigid structure of upper class Victorians. Wilde also presents food and eating in a comical way in order to further satirise upper class behaviour and attitudes in life.

Wilde presents food and eating as a trivial thing that allows Gwendolen and Cecily to express their anger and frustration at each other. Wilde uses the stage direction [‘Superciliously’] to describe the patronising tone used by Gwendolen in order to express her dislike for sugar because it is ‘not fashionable anymore’ to which Cecily responds with putting ‘[four lumps of sugar’] into her cup. Wilde uses the tea and sugar as a symbol of Gwendolen and Cecily’s anger at each other, as the sugar is not something Gwendolen wanted yet by giving it to her, Cecily is expressing her ‘anger.’ The women’s use of food to reflect their emotions is Wilde presenting the extent to which the upper class will go to, to uphold their appearance and therefore highlights the superficiality of the upper class Victorians.

Wilde uses food and eating to reflect the rigid structure of upper class etiquettes where even the most basic acts, such as eating have strict rules and regulations especially when around servants. Wilde uses stage directions to convey Gwendolen and Cecily’s change of attitude during the tea party when ‘[Merriman, followed by the footman’] enter which ‘[exercises restraining influence, under which both girls chafe.’] The use of the adjective ‘restraining’ conveys the extent of control which both women feel overcome by, due to [‘the presence of the servants,’] and this therefore reflects the façade that upper class Victorians put on around lower class Victorians. Wilde’s demonstration of the façade may be his way of expressing how he as an upper class gay person was not allowed to express his sexuality due to the strict nature of the society he came from and so was forced to act like someone he did not necessarily want to be. Similarly, although Cecily gives Gwendolen ‘four lumps of sugar’ in her tea after she expressed her dislike for it, both girls still for appearance purposes restrict themselves from presenting their frustration at the scene until [‘Merriman… goes out with the footmen,’] at which Gwendolen [‘rises in indignation.] The use of the adjective ‘indignation’ portrays the extent of anger and annoyance Gwendolen feels due to Cecily’s acts of bitterness towards her. Wilde’s use of the servants and food emphasises the façade and superficiality of upper class Victorians who were forced to follow a strict nature which demand respect in order to keep their reputation rather than express how they truly felt.

Furthermore Wilde uses food and eating to highlight the trait of hypocrisy present in upper-class Victorians. Wilde portrays this trait in Algy at the beginning of the play where he tells Jacks ‘don’t touch the cucumber sandwiches’ as they are ‘specially for Aunt Augusta,’ but then the stage direction [‘takes one and eats it’] conveys how Algy imposes rules on others which he doesn’t follow himself highlight the double standard upper-class Victorian society. Additionally Wilde’s portrayal of Algy as immediately breaking his own rules is satirising upper-class Victorians by presenting them as lacking self-control for even a short amount of time and additionally highlights how upper-class Victorians were openly hypocritical yet saw no saw fault in it.

Wilde uses food and eating as a source of comedy to satirise the trivial nature of upper-class Victorians. This is shown through the importance given to food by Algernon who regards the ‘cucumber sandwiches’ as the ‘science of life.’ The association of the ‘sandwiches’ to ‘life’ would be comedic for the audience as it would create a disillusioned image of upper-class Victorians as not recognising what’s actually important and instead seeing mere ‘cucumber sandwiches’ as something that needs high recognition. Furthermore Algy presents the importance of food when he says he hates ‘people who are not serious about meals.’ Wilde throughout the play presents Algy as not serious about anything and so the high esteem Algy shows for food is comedic because it is so absurd.

Wilde uses food and eating to present the distinctions between classes in Victorian society. Wilde presents the importance of ‘cucumber sandwiches’ which are ‘specially ordered for Aunt Augusta,’ who is of upper-class status compared to the ‘bread and butter’ which is more associated with middle-class status. Wilde’s presentation of food as creating distinctions between classes shows the strict and rigid structure of society in the Victorian times where even the basics of life such as food were used to represent a person’s status in society and so by presenting this in the play, it would highlight the absurdity of Victorian society to the audience.

In conclusion Wilde’s use of food and eating highlights problems of Victorian society especially upper-class Victorians who are superficial, hypocritical and put on a façade and this demonstrates the rigid nature during the Victorian era where even food is a symbol of class distinctions. Wilde uses comedy to satirise these traits in the upper-class Victorians through the character Algernon and this would convey the absurd nature of Victorian society.