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Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969), food serves a crucial function in the novel's engagement with the feminist and postcolonial paradigms fundamental to Atwood's writing. In her introduction to the novel, Atwood describes how early inspiration for the novel came from pondering the seemingly consumable figures of the bride and groom frequently placed on top of wedding cakes.

ELLEN MCWILLIAMS

Margaret Atwood's Canadian Hunger Artist: Postcolonial Appetites in *The Edible Woman*

In Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969), food serves a crucial function in the novel's engagement with the feminist and postcolonial paradigms fundamental to Atwood's writing. In her introduction to the novel, Atwood describes how early inspiration for the novel came from pondering the seemingly consumable figures of the bride and groom frequently placed on top of wedding cakes. This image first features in her unpublished novel, *Up in the Air so Blue* (1964): 'She walked past the next few stores; then there was a confectionary shop with a cardboard and plaster-of-Paris wedding-cake in the window. She stopped to examine the miniature bride and groom perched on the top tier beneath a flowery paper archway' (Atwood Collection 16:3:48–49). The cannibalistic overtones of this interest in food and symbolism in Atwood's work are more fully realised in *The Edible Woman* where food takes on a new resonance in the feminist and postcolonial discourses of her fiction. The processes of formation and transformation that the protagonist undergoes in the novel are at every turn intertwined with consumption and consumerism as her relationship with food, and in particular her increasingly diminished appetite, serves as an indicator of the unstable state of her self-image and subjectivity.

Food is recognised as an all-important metaphor for the main character's identity crisis. Much like Kafka's Hunger Artist in his short story of the same name, Marian MacAlpin's refusal of food is an act of resistance, in this case a protest against the limitations of 'the options for a young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the early sixties' (1969 Intro.). While the feminist elements of the novel are most vividly expressed in the representation of food in the text, and have been the focus of most of the critical attention paid to the novel since its publication, the references to Canada in *The Edible Woman* serve as an important reminder that the power relations explored are relevant to the forging of a national as well as female identity; the novel presents a recipe for self-preservation in national as well as individual terms and lays the foundation for the more developed exploration of the precariousness of Canadian identity, and survival as a key symbol of Canadian culture, in later novels, most famously *Surfacing* (1972). The novel marks a crucial moment in Atwood's development as a feminist and postcolonial thinker; a key aspect of the text, to which

critics have not paid due attention in previous discussions, is that the corollary between feminist and postcolonial narratives, which is so striking in Atwood's later work, is also evident in *The Edible Woman*. In discussions of Canadian-American relations, Atwood shows an acute awareness of how Canada's cultural sovereignty is perennially threatened by its more powerful southern neighbour. In her fiction, this is often expressed through a feminisation of Canada — one that does not reduce the women in her fiction to national emblems, but rather explores the points of contact between feminist and nationalist politics. This feminisation of the national is most profoundly expressed in *Surfacing*, but also in *The Robber Bride* (1993), and in short story collections such as *Wilderness Tips* (1991). In Atwood's literary imagination, the experience of being female resonates powerfully with the experience of being colonised, and the complexities of Canada's postcolonial identity are frequently written onto the lives of women in Atwood's work. This is well-documented in criticism on *Surfacing*, but it is also important to the way in which later novels such as *The Robber Bride* revisit Canada's colonial past through women-centred narratives, texts in which growing up female and Canadian is given unparalleled attention. This longstanding interest in the interaction of feminist and nationalist identity in her work is inevitably informed by Atwood's commitment to Canadian cultural nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. In the preface to *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), a book that represents the cultural and literary renaissance that characterised this period, Atwood identifies a number of victim positions evident in Canadian literature and goes on to examine these diverse manifestations and variations of victimhood in detail. She classifies a wide range of works as portraying different victim positions, from denial through to the creative defiance of victimhood, and ultimately returns to the conclusion that: 'The central symbol for Canada — and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature — is undoubtedly *Survival, la Survivance*' (1972 32). This politically-charged interest in survival might also be seen as a significant subtext in *The Edible Woman*. Toronto may seem to be a rather anonymous backdrop to the novel, but there are a number of subtle but revealing references to Canada that shed new light on Marian MacAlpin as one of Atwood's earliest survivor figures.

The main character of *The Edible Woman*, Marian MacAlpin, works for a market research firm and, in spite of her misgivings, accepts her boyfriend's proposal of marriage. Once the engagement is made public, she loses her appetite, as her body refuses each of the food groups in turn. Towards the end of the novel, she rejects her fiancé, Peter, and reclaims her autonomy by baking him a cake in the shape of a woman — a miniature version of herself. The first 'survivor' to appear in Atwood's fiction is, then, faced with a fundamental threat to her existence as a basic requirement for living is taken from her. Although it might not seem to relate to the survival theme as readily as those novels that

are more explicitly about Canada and Canadian national identity, *The Edible Woman* engages implicitly with one of Atwood's most influential contributions to criticism on Canadian literature and culture.

The symbolic significance of food is fully realised in the later stages of the novel, but what is often overlooked is that it is, in fact, an important source of imagery from the outset; although it is not until the second part of the novel that Marian's relationship with food emerges as a metaphor for her withering autonomy, references to food recur throughout the first part in a number of different contexts. The details of Marian's appetite and choice of meals are relayed in full and she often refers to the healthy demands of her appetite: 'I was hungry again. I had been eating in bits and pieces all day and I had been counting on something nourishing and substantial' (27). Descriptions of pregnancy early on in the novel draw on a range of plant and animal imagery, and various vegetables and fruits are evoked in a caricature of the pregnant female body. The character of Clara is likened to 'a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber' (32) and 'a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a water melon' (31), while her new-born baby in its nursery cot is introduced as one of many indistinguishable 'red shrivelled prunes' (132). Further to this, Clara manages to break every rule of culinary etiquette as laid down by *Joy of Cooking* (the recipe book and conduct manual from which the epigraph of the novel is taken), as her chaotic attempt to host a dinner party in Chapter 4 bears a striking resemblance to the Mad Hatter's tea party reconstructed later in the narrative. Also, in the first part of the novel, food is the medium through which the actual and social architecture of the research company for which Marion works is portrayed. The office fan 'revolves in the centre of the ceiling, stirring the air around like a spoon in soup' (17) and, perhaps most significantly, the office hierarchy at Seymour Surveys is described as being like 'an ice-cream sandwich' (19). There are a number of additional uses of food as a metaphor for social relations in these chapters in earlier drafts of the novel. For example, according to one early draft, a comparison of what survey interviewees recruited by the company are prepared to accept as consumers and what they might rightfully demand bears the same relationship to that which 'a cellowrapped pack of processed cheese has to a chunk of lovingly-mellowed cheddar' (Atwood Collection 18:20:14), though this and other references are edited out in the final manuscript. It is almost as if Atwood is sensitive to the risk of over-playing the use of food imagery early on and detracting from the impact of the food-inspired drama that unfolds in the later sections of the novel.

The diagnosis of Marian's eating disorder as 'a repudiation of an exploitative consumer culture' (Rigney 33) is representative of the approach taken by those who view the novel as an exposé of female objectification. Margaret Atwood's suggestion that 'Marian's difficulty is that she comes to identify with the objects the society is consuming, especially food. And because she's making that identification and seeing herself as the consumed rather than the consumer, she

stops eating' (1990 28) would seem to validate this line of thinking. Furthermore, in the first full draft of the novel (held in the Atwood Collection), the character of Duncan draws exactly the same conclusion in relation to Marian's plight, though this is also edited out in the published version:

'I know it isn't just Peter. I start feeling smothered by things and then I'm afraid of dissolving, but then at other times I seem to be afraid of something opposite, getting stuck, not being able to move. But most of all it's this food thing.' She felt a pang of hunger as she spoke. 'I'm afraid of eating, most of the time I seem to have lost my appetite completely, but I'm afraid of not eating too.' Funny, she thought, how detached I'm being. 'You're a mess, all right,' Duncan said pleasantly. 'They tell me that these days it's fashionable to regard the fear of doing something as very close to the fear of having it done to you, I wonder what that means, if anything?'

(Atwood Collection 18:32:257–58)

Again, the decision to tone down Duncan's frank assessment of Marian's eating disorder ensures that the novel does not provide too emphatic a diagnosis of the character and allows for the ambiguous ending so characteristic of Atwood's early novels. This ambiguity is itself a reflection of Atwood's suspicion of absolutist ideologies, whether in relation to feminism or discourses of national identity. Atwood's work does not offer any easy solutions to the dilemmas encountered in her explorations of Canadian identity and the Canadian postcolonial mentality. In contrast to the theme of survival, Atwood identifies the primary unifying symbol of American literature as 'The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded [...] a line that is always expanding, taking in or 'conquering' ever-fresh virgin territory' (1972 31). Her choice of survival as the primary symbol of Canadian literature resonates with the experiences of many of her main characters, who are more concerned with endurance against the odds than with victory. In contrast to the equation of consumption and conquest with success and achievement, figured here as being the central preoccupation of 'The Frontier', there are many moments in Atwood's work where she resists this assumption by making the apparently marginalised victim position the preferred and, indeed, more interesting position. This applies to *The Edible Woman* in the way that Marian's inability to eat ultimately comes to mark a positive moment of change and transformation, even if the promise of change is not fully realised at the end of the novel.

The character's revulsion towards food develops in distinct phases, as the different food groups seem to take on a life of their own. The same phenomenon, and further evidence of Atwood's long-term concern with the politics of eating, is first introduced in an unpublished short story, 'Oyster Stew', written in the early 1960s. Interestingly, in this story the relationship with food is reversed as the female character relishes every bite, while her male counterpart looks on, appalled by her appetite:

He forced himself to look away, to pick up his knife and fork. He jabbed at an oyster and fished it to the surface. It was huge, pale pink, with round blunted ends and involuted ruffles. Where did these mute things grow? Who knew.... Some people ate them while they were still alive. The idea that the oyster might still be alive. ... he watched it as it quivered at the end of his fork, and realised that his hands were shaking, had been shaking for some time. (Atwood Collection 40:2:6)

This revulsion is rewritten and extended in Marian's loss of appetite as, working her way through the food groups, she is unable to override her body's refusal to eat: 'She was becoming more and more irritated by her body's decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, and accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled' (177–78). In spite of the fact that 'she had been brought up to eat whatever was on the plate' (204), both in terms of food and female socialisation, her body systematically refuses food as a gesture of protest.

In introductory notes on 'Power Politics', found amongst drafts of a preface to her collection of poetry of the same name, Atwood concludes:

Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it; it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air. We notice it only when there is a break in the current, a conflict, when the balance of power is upset. The rest of the time things flow smoothly, each in its appointed place in the power structure, and we along with them.

(Atwood Collection 56:9)

This comes close to being an endorsement of a Foucauldian view of power relations, and Marian's loss of appetite or refusal to eat represents exactly one such 'break in the current' identified by Atwood — a political act of resistance. In Atwood's early writing this anxiety about power politics is visible in the Canadian nationalist as well as the feminist elements of her work; this is a preoccupation that is most explicitly propounded in her second novel *Surfacing* (1972), and sustained in different forms throughout her writing career. In her early work, it is driven by a need to explicate what she sees as Canada's victim status. Later novels, *The Robber Bride* in particular, move on from this and cast a cool revisionist eye on her earlier nationalism, so that the crucial paradigms of *Survival* are rewritten to interrogate the motif of Canadian victimhood. Nevertheless, even though the mature Atwood is capable of effectively writing back to her earlier work, what is maintained throughout her career is an interest in the impact of national and historical discourses of power on the day-to-day life of the individual.

Marian MacAlpin's identification with food is closely linked to the more general theme of consumerism in the novel. In her work as a market researcher, managing research surveys in towns and cities dotted across the map of Canada that hangs on the wall of the Seymour Surveys office, she is accomplice to, as well as victim of, the mass consumerism that she later identifies as defining her relationship with her fiancé, Peter. The character's relationship with food and her struggle towards self-determination is, then, played out against a determinedly Canadian backdrop as are, it might be argued, Atwood's nascent concerns about the survival of the

country's cultural autonomy. Indeed, there are moments in Atwood's writing where the Canadian fear of consumption by the cultural hegemony of the United States is expressed in terms that find particular sympathy with the food imagery in *The Edible Woman*. In an article entitled 'Nationalism, Limbo and the Canadian Club', written in 1971, Atwood's metaphor for American-Canadian relations contains the same ingredients as those central to *The Edible Woman*:

'They' had been taught that they were the centre of the universe, a huge, healthy apple pie, with other countries and cultures sprinkled round the outside, like raisins. 'We' on the other hand had been taught that we were one of the raisins, in fact, *the* raisin, and that the other parts of the universe were invariably larger and more interesting than we were. A distortion of the truth in both cases, let us hope. (87–88)

This gives a new inflection to the idea of being as 'American as Apple Pie', as the cosy domestic image is reconfigured in a damning critique of the power politics of the United States in relation to the rest of the world.

Sarah Sceats applies Foucault's theory of power (in particular the idea that power is exercised discreetly in everyday social processes) in identifying the complex politics underlying food and eating and its representation in literature: 'feeding is established psychologically as the locus of love, aggression, pleasure, anxiety, frustration and desire for control. Precisely, in other words, the ingredients of power relations' (118). Atwood shows a similarly keen awareness of the politics of food as the earliest expression of subjectivity: 'Eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk' (1988 53). Atwood's metaphorical use of food goes beyond the dramatic conceit of the 'edible woman'. It is, for example, no accident that one of the products being researched by Seymour Surveys in the novel is 'Moose Beer', which is suggestive of the Canadian tourist-industry clichés of which Atwood is aware and contests throughout her fictional oeuvre. One of Atwood's primary concerns as a writer in the late 1960s and 1970s was to develop a more meaningful narrative of Canadian national identity in order to ensure the future of Canadian literature. The mapping of Canada by Seymour Surveys is also revealing in the way that tensions between different regional identities are exposed in the attitudes of the company's Toronto-based employees. A disconcertingly comic example of this can be seen in the discussion of a planned survey of laxative products in Quebec: "I guess people are just more constipated there. Don't they eat a lot of potatoes?" [...] "It can't only be the potatoes," Ainsley pronounced. "It must be their collective guilt-complex. Or maybe the strain of the language problem; they must be horribly repressed" (23). Thus, the motif of consumerism in the novel shows that the commercial and marital marketplace have much in common, and, at the same time, effectively draws attention to distinctively Canadian political pressure points.

In her introduction to 'The CanLit Food Book', Atwood comments on the prevalence of cannibalism — metaphorical and actual — in Canadian literature

(55); with this in mind, it seems all the more important to place *The Edible Woman* in the context of this broader tradition of Canadian writing. Even though the novel is interested in the effect of consumer culture on its female protagonist, the nationalist concerns more fully expressed in Atwood's later writing, most directly and extensively in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), can be identified as an important subtext.

Sceats observes that the interpretation of the significance of food and eating patterns and rituals and the ways in which they are invested with social, political, and psychological meaning is most relevant to reading twentieth-century women's writing: 'Because of the close cultural association between women and food, or because of feminism's politicisation of the domestic, or because of the advance of material culture, the work of women writers in the latter half of the twentieth century is particularly fruitful for an examination of the relations between power and food' (117). The exposition of such power relations is most striking when played out in the denial or refusal of food. Atwood's novel is one of the most dramatic contemporary examples of this exposition, both in the main character's refusal to eat and in the ironic 'politicisation of the domestic' involved in her decision to bake a cake as a sacrificial effigy of herself.

In *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment*, Maud Ellmann charts the history of hunger and starvation in a range of national, political, and historical contexts from a broad base of psychoanalytical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives. She draws on a number of literary examples to complement the arguments that she makes about food as an ideological weapon or, alternatively, as a medium through which political protest may be registered. For Ellmann, there is an important political difference between the hunger-striker and the anorexic. Marian MacAlpin's refusal of food has been casually described as both a feminist hunger-strike and an eating disorder, but it is necessary to identify more closely the nature of her refusal of food within these parameters for the purpose of better understanding its motivation and effect. Ellmann usefully engages with what theorists currently posit about anorexia:

is it anorectic women who are really hunger strikers in disguise, and who are starving to defy the patriarchal values that confine their sex as rigidly as walls of stone or bars of iron? Since women succumb to anorexia more commonly than men, many feminists interpret the disorder as a symptom of the discontents of womankind. Anorexia, they argue, has now replaced hysteria as the illness that expresses women's rage against the circumscription of their lives. A self-defeating protest, since it is women who become the victims of their own revolt. (Ellmann 2)

With Ellmann's definition in mind, the representation of Marian MacAlpin's crisis seems to convey effectively the political protest of the hunger-strike without realising its self-defeating effects. As far as the psychology and social statement of the hunger strike and anorexia are concerned, Marian's case defies a number of the key motives and symptoms in either case. For Ellmann, the suffering inflicted

upon the body is, in the case of the hunger-striker, a declaration of protest: ‘The starving body is itself a text, the living dossier of its discontents, for the injustices of power are encoded in the savage hieroglyphics of its sufferings’ (Ellmann 16–17). In the case of the anorexic, this is deemed to be counterproductive: ‘Instead of freedom and liberation we find obsession, and in it the underlying quest for identity and development is drowned’ (Chernin 22). Yet, it is crucial to note that Marian does not endure genuine physical suffering as a result of her protest — the implications of the metaphor are never fully realised. In spite of her early panic: ‘I hope it’s not permanent; I’ll starve to death!’ (152), it emerges later in the narrative ‘that she hadn’t really lost much weight’ (221).

Similarly, Marian does not easily fit the psychological profile of an anorexic, for whom, ‘Self-starvation is above all a performance.... Anorectics are “starving for attention” they are *making a spectacle of themselves*, in every sense’ (Ellmann 17). Far from declaring her reasons for refusing food (as in the case of the hunger-striker), or drawing attention to the spectacle of her starvation (like the anorexic), Marian tries desperately to hide her eating disorder, especially at the various dinner parties that take place in the later stages of the novel.

The edible woman in the shape of a cake is the symbolic punch-line in Atwood’s food metaphor in the novel, representing Marian’s exposure of the threat posed by Peter to her autonomy and her reclamation of agency. However, this result is also complicated by Peter’s refusal to eat the cake in the shape of a woman. It is Marian who cannibalises the edible woman, helped rather ominously by Duncan, the solipsistic misfit whom she befriends when carrying out door-to-door market research surveys. For Sceats, this is the main complication of the ending of the novel: ‘Marian has learned assertiveness, that sexual politics means “eat or be eaten”, but although it has the desired effects of frightening Peter away and returning Marian’s appetite, it does not address the conundrum of how she can live without either being consumed or becoming a predator’ (2000 99).

This concern with the predatory nature of gender politics — something that is vividly illustrated by Marian’s fiancé being repeatedly imagined as a hunter in the novel — marks another point of contact between Atwood’s early feminism and the Canadian wilderness. The untamed aspects of gender politics and of the Canadian landscape were, I would argue, crucial and interlinked dimensions of Atwood’s literary imagination, even before the appearance of *Surfacing*. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood’s interest in survival as a Canadian theme is already being explored in the unexpected context of modern urban Toronto. In the tradition of hunger and starvation in literature, Marian is ultimately compatible with Kafka’s original hunger artist. His plaintive explanation of a life devoted to the spectacle of starvation is simply, ‘weil ich nicht die Speise finden konnte, die mir schmeckt’ (257) [because I could never find the food I wanted to eat]. It is ultimately upon the same premise that food functions as such a vivid and complex metaphor in *The Edible Woman*, marking a new departure in the feminist impetus of Atwood’s

work, but also sowing the seeds of Atwood's preoccupation with the relationship between feminist and nationalist discourses of power.

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Puff Paste or Pâte Feuilletée

INGREDIENTS

¼ lb. sweet butter
 ¼ lb. all-purpose flour
 2 – 2 ½ oz. ice water
 (1 teaspoon lemon juice)
 ¼ teaspoon salt

METHOD

It is best to use flour that has a high gluten content, to develop real elasticity — and this is hard to come by. We do succeed, however, with all-purpose flour by using the procedure we describe. To be ‘puffy’ the paste must be chilled, well-kneaded, and handled in such a way as to trap air, and finally baked in a hot, thoroughly preheated oven. Then the air inside the dough expands with almost explosive effect. The surface on which you work — preferably marble — the tools, the ingredients and your fingers should be chilled throughout the operation, as it is necessary to hold the fat, which is in very high proportion to the flour, in constant suspension. (From *The Joy of Cooking* [1931].)

* * * * *

The epigraph to *The Edible Woman* is an extract from a recipe for puff pastry taken from *The Joy of Cooking* (1931). Its inclusion firmly places the novel within the broader social and historical discourses of food and domesticity. *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker might be seen as the Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* for 1930s America. It contains chapters on formal and informal entertainment and related etiquette. Recommendations made go beyond the successful execution of a recipe and extend to the conduct of the hostess, who at times seems to have much in common with the Mistress of Mrs Beeton’s Victorian middle-class home. In a description of how to deal with cooking for ‘eminent and distinguished persons’, the book advises: ‘Like the rest of us they shrink from ostentation; and nothing is more disconcerting to a guest than the impression that his coming is causing a household commotion. Confine all noticeable efforts for his comfort and refreshment to the period that precedes his arrival. Satisfy yourself that you have anticipated every possible emergency — the howling child, the last-minute search for cuff links, your husband’s exuberance, your helper’s ineptness, your own qualms. Then relax and enjoy your guests’ (15). This sheds further light on Marian McAlpin’s troubled relationship with food: a 1930s American household classic, *The Joy of Cooking* symbolises the life that lay in store for young married women in Canada in the late 1950s and 1960s and it represents a recipe for living that the character that Atwood’s character simply cannot stomach.