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You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

EMMA PARKER

While literature is suffused with scenes of men eating, there is a conspicuous absence of images of women engaged in the same activity. Margaret Atwood displays a sensitive awareness of how images of women eating have been suppressed and erased. She remarks, "I think I first connected literature with eating when I was twelve and reading Ivanhoe: there was Rebecca, shut up romantically in a tower, but what did she have to eat?" (*CanLit* Introduction). Atwood probes the prohibitions on the public display of female appetite and the social taboos which surround women and food in terms of the politics of eating. For her, eating is unequivocally political. Atwood defines "politics" as "who is entitled to do what to whom with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what" (*Second* 394). Women are rarely depicted eating in literature because, as Atwood's comment implies, consumption embodies coded expressions of power.

Atwood displays a profound preoccupation with eating in her writing; she has even edited a cook book. In her novels eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating. Eating is not the only, or the most predominant, metaphor for power; indeed, images of consumption seem so ordinary as to be insignificant. Nevertheless, they reappear persistently throughout the novels and, examined in totality, assume a potent significance. The domestic, the feminine, the inconsequential is, Atwood suggests, highly important. While *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* have been analyzed extensively in terms of food, particularly in terms of feminist theories of eating disorders, critics have failed to note the significance of the food theme in the rest of Atwood's fiction. An analysis of the politics of eating in all the novels provides a new way of reading Atwood and a new understanding of women's relationship to food.

All Atwood's heroines initially appear as victims, and they demonstrate their powerlessness through their relationship with food. In *The Edible Woman*, as Marion's wedding approaches and she subconsciously feels herself being absorbed by Peter, she stops eating. As she loses her identity and autonomy, so she loses her ability to eat. Her non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness. Significantly, Peter's power is demonstrated by his ability to directly control what Marion eats. He chooses her order in the restaurant, and this is the moment from which Marion can no longer tolerate food. Duncan recognizes Marion's food refusal as a form of protest before she understands it herself. He tells her, "You're probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system; though it isn't considered orthodox to begin with the digestive system. But why not?" (192). When Marion finally realizes what is happening to her, she bakes Peter a cake in the shape of a woman and offers it to him to symbolize how he has tried to consume her. Immediately after she ends her relationship with Peter, she regains her sense of selfhood and her ability to eat.

In *Surfacing* the narrator's sense of victimization by the father of her aborted child is symbolized by the way she imagines he controlled what she ate during her pregnancy. Anna's appetite is also controlled and repressed. She is a stereotypical woman who possesses all the traditionally feminine characteristics imposed by the process of socialization, and "isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out" (159). The killing of the heron, in particular, highlights the relationship between eating and power. The way that killing is linked to eating and slavery suggests that eating, like killing and enslavement, is an expression of power:

> Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices. (110)

The narrator, Atwood suggests, faces similar choices. Her rejection of, and return to, society is reflected by what she eats. When she rejects culture and retreats into the wilderness to become a "natural" woman, she gives up eating processed food. Such food is contaminated in the same way that society is contaminated by patriarchal ideology. Both are unnatural, constructed, man-made, and both threaten to poison her. Instead, the narrator eats only the raw food that nature provides. However, as she runs out of food, she realizes she cannot live without physical sustenance just as she cannot live outside society. She must engage with life. Her return to the cabin to eat the food there signals her first step toward a tentative reintegration into society.

Food and control lie at the heart of *Lady Oracle*. The first part of the novel focuses on the power struggle between Joan and her mother, and this struggle centers on food. Joan's mother attempts to deny her daughter any sense of autonomy and tries to control her life and identity. She makes her diet and tries to assert her authority physically by reducing her daughter in size. Joan challenges her mother and takes control of her own life through eating. She retaliates against enforced diets by eating more and more:

> I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body. (69)

Eating empowers Joan, and she eventually vanquishes her mother. Although Joan decides to lose weight when Aunt Lou dies leaving her two thousand dollars on the condition that she do so, she capitulates only because the money will enable her to leave home. Money is a more powerful substitute for food. However, once slim, Joan remains powerless, because she remains trapped in a victim mentality. Like all Atwoodian heroines, she colludes in her victimization by accepting her subordinated status. The absence of power in her life is mirrored by her lack of control around food. Cooking and shopping are activities with which she has little success. Joan lives as she cooks and shops—chaotically. Significantly, she hides her automatic writing (writing over which she has no control) in a folder marked "Recipes." Nevertheless, the moments when Joan does attempt to exert control over her life are always accompanied by acts of eating. Just as she empowers herself through food in relation to her mother, her attempt to take control of her life in Italy is accompanied by an act of eating: "I sat at the white table with my hot cup, adding another white ring to the varnish, eating a package of rusks and trying to organize my life" (25).

In *Life Before Man*, the relationship between eating and power is demonstrated by the three principal characters. Elizabeth is obsessed with being in control. She is confident of her own identity, independent and autonomous. Her power is symbolized by her hearty eating. However, power based upon the subjection of others (Chris and Nate) is precarious and dangerous. Chris's suicide has already indicated the unbalanced and unwholesome nature of a relationship not based on parity and mutuality. Elizabeth demonstrates that tyranny over others is eventually turned in upon oneself when there is nobody left to dominate and destroy. Her power indeed proves elusive and transient. She eventually loses control of the relationship between Nate and Lesje, which she has been attempting to manipulate to her own ends, and her marriage breaks down completely. Nate moves in with Lesje and he and Elizabeth discuss a divorce. Ultimately, Elizabeth's powerlessness is marked by the absence of food. The penultimate line of the novel reveals "There's nothing in the house for dinner" (317).

Nate's subordinate position in his relationship with Elizabeth is epitomized by the fact that he does all the cooking. He even feels an impulse to nourish Elizabeth's lover, Chris. When Chris begs Nate to persuade Elizabeth to get a divorce and move in with him, "Nate wants to give Chris something, some food, what?" (235). However, while Nate is powerless in relation to Elizabeth, he likes to dominate his girlfriends. When he asks Lesje to lunch, she orders "the cheapest thing on the menu, a grilled cheese sandwich and a glass of milk. She listens, eating in small bites, concealing her teeth" (62). Whereas Lesje feels self-conscious eating, Nate voraciously devours his sandwich: "He bites into a piece of turkey, chews; gravy traces his chin" (64). His choice of meat compared to Lesje's choice of cheese subtly suggests his predatory nature. This image is compounded by the way he sits looking at her picking a bread roll to pieces. Nate also insists on paying for the meal. The power he subconsciously reveals in his eating practice is reflected by his financial power. When Nate moves in with Lesje, his domination is signaled by his control over what she eats:

> At least she's eating better since Nate moved in. Nate is making her eat better. He brought some cooking pots with him and he usually cooks dinner; then he supervises while she eats. (238)

Lesje is powerless in her relationships with both William and Nate. This is conveyed by the fact that she eats very little and frequently refuses food. She often misses lunch or just has a cup of coffee, and when she does eat she only has sandwiches or bran muffins (usually stale). Whenever food is on offer, "she herself doesn't feel like eating right now" (142). This is epitomized in the dinner-party scene. Elizabeth invites Lesje to dinner because she suspects she is having an affair with Nate. She dominates the evening and deliberately tries to intimidate Lesje, who is so uncomfortable that she is unable to eat anything.

The significance of food in sexual politics is illustrated by the fact that most meetings in the novel take place over meals. The pervasive image of rotting food and the pervading aura of rancid decay it emanates powerfully evoke a sense of the unhealthiness of relationships based on the pursuit of power. The leftover *boeuf Bourguinon* destined for the garbage can symbolizes the decayed condition of Elizabeth and Nate's marriage, and when Chris, reluctant to accept the termination of his affair with Elizabeth, confronts Nate, he smells of "faintly rotting meat" (234).

Rennie, in *Bodily Harm*, is another of Atwood's powerless heroines. Rennie is controlled by her boyfriend, Jake, who tries to change her to fit his ideal. He moves into her apartment, decorates it, hangs pictures of naked women over the bed, makes Rennie wear erotic clothes. He physically exerts his authority through sadomasochistic sex. Jake's power is reflected by food.[1] He controls what they eat just as he controls everything else in the relationship. When he leaves, Rennie realizes, "From now on she would have to decide what to eat. Jake decided before: even when it was her turn to cook he decided" (235).

While the scenes set in Toronto highlight the correlation between food and domestic power, Rennie's experiences in the Caribbean highlight the relationship between food and political power. Just like Jake at home, on the island those with power control the food. When Minnow tries to persuade Rennie to write an article on the political situation there, she is reluctant and tells him she only writes about "lifestyles," "what people wear, what they eat, where they go on vacation." He responds that this is exactly what he wants her to write about, confirming that the personal is political. Similarly, when one of Minnow's friends quizzes Rennie about her job, she tells him, "I just do food," to which he replies, "What could be more important?" (190). The idea that food is political is borne out by Minnow's tale about the ham. When Canada donated a thousand tins of ham to the island's refugees, the food was diverted so that it never reached the people who needed it but instead turned up at an Independence Day banquet "for the leading citizen only" (29). Guns in the novel also emphasize the connection between food and power. When Lora asks Rennie to collect a package from the airport, she tells her it contains food and medicine for her sick grandmother when it actually contains guns. "Food" becomes a suitable synonym for "gun," since both represent power. Paul, who carries his gun "like a lunch pail" (255), offers the novel's most succinct comment on the relationship between eating and power:

> 'There's only people with power and people without power. Sometimes they change places, that's all!'
>
> 'Which are you?' says Rennie.
>
> 'I eat well, so I must have power,' says Paul grinning. (240–41)

In prison, where Rennie and Lora have nothing to eat, this relationship is explicit. Rennie subconsciously associates food with freedom. She starts to fantasize about eating and her mouth waters as she repeats the names of different foods to herself.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Gilead is a society in which women are denied any form of power. One of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food. The handmaids have no choice about what they eat and are permitted to consume only that which the authorities consider will enhance their health and fertility. Caffeine, alcohol, and cigarettes are forbidden and sugar is rationed. Their meals are brought to them in their rooms and they eat alone. By controlling what they eat, the Gilead regime gains direct control over the handmaids' bodies. The connection between food and control is exemplified at the Red Centre, where women are prepared for their role as handmaids. They are indoctrinated with ideological justification of the government's aims and methods as they take their meals. Eating is accompanied by biblical exegesis. In addition, Offred suspects that the food is drugged.

> *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Billah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high-school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar. . . . For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a disc, the voice was a man's. (99)

Like Rennie in prison, Offred associates food with freedom. One of her memories of the pre-Gilead period is of being able to eat what she liked. Her reluctance to eat the food she is given suggests that she subconsciously realizes she is being controlled by what she eats. Her physical rejection of the food symbolizes her mental and emotional rejection of the tyrannical regime she lives under. As she recites the obligatory Lord's Prayer, she thinks, "I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that. It isn't the main problem. The problem is getting it down without choking on it" (204).

Recognizing that food is a form of power, Offred attempts to assimilate this power for herself. From her shopping expeditions she learns that oranges, which are rare and which Rita desires, are available. However, she chooses to withhold this information and subsequently denies Rita the oranges. Later, at a time that suits her, she decides to reveal the news about the fruit and "hold[s] out this idea to her like an offering" (57). Food gives Offred the power to resist and deny. Similarly, when Moira is tortured to the extent that she can no longer walk, Offred and some other handmaids steal packets of sugar for her. They realize that the sugar itself is useless but because it is an illicit substance it becomes symbolic of rebellion. The sugar represents potential power. The subversive power of food is also symbolized by Offred's butter. Instead of eating the butter she receives with her meal, she saves it and later uses it as a moisturizer, which is an illicit luxury. The food which is intended to control becomes a means of subverting that control. When Serena Joy gives Offred a cigarette, she contemplates eating it. The cigarette, like food, represents power as Offred realizes she could use it to burn the house down, and her desire to eat it thus corresponds with her desire for power. Ironically, when Rita grudgingly allows Offred a match for the cigarette, she tells her, "Don't care if you eat it, or what" (219). The subversive potential of food is similarly recognized in Offred's dreams of receiving a message from Luke. These fantasies focus on food. She wonders whether the note will appear, "under my plate, on the dinner tray? Slipped into my hand as I reach the tokens across the counter in All Flesh?" (116).

The Scrabble scene perhaps best exemplifies how food functions as a metaphor for power. When the Commander instructs Offred to visit him in his study at night, she expects him to ask her to perform some perverted sexual act. What he wants, however, is to play Scrabble. The game is "forbidden," "dangerous," "indecent," "something he can't do with his wife," and hence "desirable" (149). It is a particularly subversive activity for Offred because it centers on words, and reading and writing are illegal for women. Starved of any degree of control in her own life, Offred wants to absorb the power that Scrabble represents. This generates a desire to eat the letters. The control of words and food, both forms of power denied to women, are united in the image of Offred eating the Scrabble letters:

> What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would

> like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, lightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (149)

Like the other novels, *Cat's Eye* is centered on a power struggle. Here, however, Atwood focuses on the relationship between girls. Cordelia is Elaine's best friend. She is also her tormentor. With her accomplices, Grace and Carol, Cordelia tortures Elaine into believing she is "nothing" and sets her on a cruel program of reform. Elaine's powerlessness and her struggle to overcome the psychological hold her tormentors have on her is traced by her relationship to food. The relationship between eating and power is epitomized by Elaine's father. Whenever he appears in the novel he is eating voraciously and, as he eats, he speaks with authority on the subjects of science, philosophy, ecology, and culture. Elaine internalizes the association between eating and power that she sees operating in the world around her. She dreads going to school, where she cannot escape Cordelia, and in the mornings is unable to eat her breakfast. She identifies with her father's associate, Mr. Banerji, because, as a foreigner, he too feels alien and isolated. Like Elaine's, his powerlessness is reflected by his non-eating and the way he bites his hands. At the Christmas dinner he shuffles his food around his plate and leaves most of it. Elaine relates this sense of powerlessness specifically to food: "He's afraid of us. He has no idea what we will do next, what impossibilities we will expect of him, what we will make him eat" (130). However, correspondingly, Elaine's power is also reflected by her eating. Her encounter with the Virgin Mary in the ravine induces a sense of protection which enables Elaine to defy Cordelia's control. Her act of defiance is accompanied by an act of eating. Leaving the house for school, Elaine ignores her friends and walks on alone. They follow her along the street insulting and criticizing her:

> I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice. (193)

Henceforth, the balance of power begins to change between Elaine and Cordelia. The scene in which Elaine threatens to eat Cordelia contributes to this. Playing in a graveyard at dusk, Elaine teases her friend that she is a vampire and will suck her blood out. While Cordelia maintains a façade of disbelief, she is unnerved by the possibility this may be true. From this point on, the positions of power the two girls have assumed are irrevocably altered.

For all Atwoodian heroines the search for selfhood is symbolized by the search for something satisfying to eat. Initially, although Marion eats, she eats poorly. She lives on snack food, frozen meals, and TV dinners. Marion is hungry throughout *The Edible Woman* but cannot find anything to satiate her. Whatever she eats makes her sick. In *Surfacing* the narrator's search for physical sustenance in the natural world becomes symbolic of her lack of spiritual sustenance in the social world. At the end of *Lady Oracle* Joan has nothing to eat except some biscuits which are "hard as plaster and tasted of shelf" and "some cooked pasta, drying out already, and a yellowing bunch of parsley" (311). She has failed to escape her old life and her old self, and the absence of proper, nourishing food indicates that, at the end of the novel, Joan is still trapped in the role of victim. In *Bodily Harm* Rennie seems to spend the entire novel searching for something decent to eat. All her food is awful. In hospital the food is "unbelievable. Green Jello salad and a choice of peas or peas" (35); on the plane the butter is rancid and the beef leaves a taste of rotting flesh in her mouth; in the hotel there is no choice and all the food is unappetizing and unnourishing. There is no fresh fruit or yogurt, the milk is tinned, the orange juice powdered, and the food is either uncooked, burned, or stale. In prison, the guards put salt in the tea. Throughout *Cat's Eye* Elaine never eats substantial or nutritious food. The sections of the novel set in modern-day Toronto trace her search for something to eat. When she wakes up in Jon's flat she finds the kitchen devoid of food. She decides she needs "to go shopping and get some decent food, organize. . . . I will buy oranges, yogurt without jam. I will have a positive attitude, take care of myself, I'll feed myself enzymes and friendly bacteria" (111). Her intention to eat health food signals her desire for a positive sense of self. Nevertheless, she is never able to provide herself with the food she knows she needs. She wanders around Toronto moving from one location of food to another without eating. She goes shopping in Simpson's Food Hall but does not buy anything because she feels intimidated by the luxurious nature of the items. She eats leftovers and eggs mashed up in teacups. She eats "haphazardly now, snack[s] on junk food and take-outs without worrying about balanced meals" (330). Because of her poor self-image, she is unable to nourish herself. She abuses herself with a poor diet. When she arrives at the gallery or the opening of her exhibition nobody is there because they have gone out to eat. Elaine stands alone and unnourished. After the party, Charna invites her to dinner but she declines. By the close of the novel Elaine has not rediscovered Cordelia and so has not been able to redefine her relationship with her old tormentor by breaking the strong bond between victim and persecutor. It is possible to interpret the scene in which Elaine returns to the ravine and conjures up a vision of Cordelia as a child as the point of reconciliation, the point at which Elaine finally forgives her old foe and the interdependent positions of victim and victor are transcended. However, the moment of epiphany is equivocal, and at the end of the novel Elaine is still eating mashed-up eggs in teacups.

All the heroines interpret the world in terms of food and negotiate their way through life using food. For women, eating and non-eating articulate that which is ideologically unspeakable. Food functions as a muted form of female self-expression but, more than that, it also becomes a medium of experience. Food imagery saturates the novels and becomes the dominant metaphor the heroines use to describe people, landscape, and emotion. As Sally Cline has pointed out, women appropriate food as a language because traditionally they have always been associated with food (3). In addition, food is one of the few resources available to women. As a consumer surveyor, Marion is constantly submerged in a food environment, and the other heroines have the major responsibility for cooking and shopping. Women control food, Cline insists, because they cannot control their lives (1). Given the patriarchal nature of language and its inability to accommodate female experience, it is unsurprising that women choose an alternative, non-verbal form of communication. The failure of language, the inadequacy of words as a mode of communication, is a recurrent theme in Atwood's work.

The significance of the politics of eating in Atwood's fiction is endorsed by images of orality. Extraordinary emphasis is placed on the mouth. Traditionally, as Rosalind Coward has shown, the mouth has been a site of vulnerability for women (Part II). In *Bodily Harm* Jake penetrates and polices Rennie's mouth as with every other area of her life and body: "You have a dirty mouth, Jake said. It needs to be washed out with a tongue" (117). The power of the male mouth compared to the exploited nature of the female mouth is illustrated by Rennie's memory of being followed by Mexican men making sucking noises. In *Lady Oracle* the way in which Joan's mother always draws a bigger mouth around her own with lipstick mirrors her desire for power in the same way as her attempt to control what goes into her daughter's mouth. While Atwood demonstrates how women have been controlled through their mouths, she also presents the female mouth as a locus of potential strength. The mouth itself, like its uses, is a potential source of power. In *Cat's Eye*, before she meets Cordelia, Elaine feels comfortable with her mouth. She and her brother "practise burping at will, or we put our mouths against the inside of our arms and blow to make farting noises, or we fill our mouths with water and see how far we can spit" (68). However, when she is bullied by Cordelia, Elaine starts to develop a problem with her mouth. Her emotional distress is expressed physically through her mouth via sickness. But just as her powerlessness is expressed through her mouth, so too is her rebellion. As the balance of power between the two girls changes, Elaine develops a "mean mouth":

> I have a mean mouth.
>
> I have such a mean mouth that I become known for it. I don't use it unless provoked, but then I open my mean mouth and short, devastating comments come out of it. . . . The person I used my mean mouth on the most was Cordelia. (234–35)

That the mouth is a locus of power is also suggested by Elaine's attitude to her own mouth. In later life she worries that she is becoming senile because she notices that she has started to walk around with her mouth slightly open. Her worries about losing control of her mouth mask her real concern with losing control of herself altogether. When Elaine imagines being old, she sees the loss of control of her mouth as one of the main indignities to be endured. She finds unbearable the thought of "shedding hair and drooling, while some younger stranger spoons mushed food into my mouth" (413).

The mouth also becomes an emotional center for Atwood's women. All the heroines constantly experience their feelings in their mouths and their stomachs. These places become the site of ingestion of both food and feelings. When the narrator of *Surfacing* dives into the water to search for the drawings and finds her father's dead body, she returns to the surface in shock, "fear gushing out of my mouth in silver, panic closing my throat, the scream kept in and choking me" (136), and when Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, sees Aunt Lydia at the Salvagings, "hatred fills my mouth like spit" (286). In *Lady Oracle* Joan wonders "with a sinking of the stomach" whether Arthur likes her (168), and when she meets Marlene, one of her former Brownie tormentors, she says, "I suddenly felt sick to my stomach" (228). When her mother warns her about bad men in the ravine, she feels "doomed, and my oatmeal porridge would twist itself into a lump and sink to the bottom of my stomach" (53). The stomach has a special significance for Joan, as her enigmatic first sexual encounter also centers on this part of her body (98). In *Life Before Man*, when Auntie Muriel inconveniently arrives at Elizabeth's house while she is in bed with William, "she feels her wind go, as if someone has rammed her in the solar plexus, and clutches the stomach of her dressing gown" (215). Lesje, too, experiences her emotions in her stomach. Upset by Nate's procrastination about leaving Elizabeth, she feels "his absence is evidence, it's empirical. It has hardened now to stone, a small tight lump she carries everywhere with her in the pit of her stomach" (208). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, as Offred watches a funeral procession for a miscarried child, she notes that "Ofglen feels what I do, a pain like a stab, in the belly" (54). When she hears that Janine's baby is a "shredder," she feels "an illness, in the pit of my stomach. Not an illness, an emptiness" (226). In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine feels sick every morning as she waits for her friends to call for her. Her "stomach feels dull and heavy, as if it's full of earth" (136) and when Grace accuses Elaine of not praying in church her "stomach goes cold" (181).

Teeth are another intrinsic symbol in Atwood's work. Ainsley's anecdote about the woman who tries to murder her husband by short-circuiting his electric toothbrush is humorous but simultaneously signals the power dynamic inherent in teeth. After all, you cannot eat much without teeth. Several of the heroines place particular emphasis on cleaning their teeth. Rennie is obsessive about oral hygiene, and Joan adamantly refuses to have her teeth removed in order to fake her death, as Sam suggests, by sprinkling them on a vat of lime. At Jezebel's, when the Commander takes Offred to a private bedroom, she knows he expects to have sex with her so she procrastinates in the bathroom. At this point, she desperately wishes she could clean her teeth. Just as the heroines experience a sense of unease around their mouths, so do many of them feel anxious about their teeth. Images of dentistry are particularly prominent and the images always convey a sense of fear and pain.

Teeth also reveal much about character. The teeth of predatory male characters are given specific emphasis. In *The Edible Woman* Peter has "teeth gritting" moods (65) and when he takes the photograph of Marion at the party, "his mouth opened in a snarl of teeth" (244). Len Slank's articulation of his philosophy about women, "You've got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out" (66), is accompanied by a dazzling display of teeth. In *Bodily Harm* Jake has particularly prominent canines and Paul constantly clenches his teeth. Jake, Arthur, and Joe all grind their teeth as they make love. Consummation slides easily into consumption; sexual and physical appetites converge. Conversely, all the characters that the protagonists like have nice teeth.

While the powerful display their power through their teeth, the powerless are toothless. In *Bodily Harm* the deaf and dumb beggar who chases Rennie wishing to shake her hand has a "gaping jack-o'-lantern mouth" which is "collapsing" because most of his teeth are missing (75). After being brutally beaten up by the police, he has no teeth left at all. Angela Carter argues that, symbolically, this is the condition in which women live:

> As a woman, my symbolic value is primarily that of a myth of patience and receptivity, a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled. (5)

Oral communication is another major theme in Atwood's work. Speaking, like eating, is a source of power. Diet and discourse converge in the mouth. Traditionally, women have been suppressed by being denied a voice just as their appetites have been repressed. When Joe tries to rape the narrator in *Surfacing* she tells him to stop, but he prevents her from speaking with his "teeth against my lips, censoring me" (141). Trapped in the powerless role of victim, the narrator finds oral communication difficult: "I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem" (70). In the same way that her identify is molded by a patriarchal image of womanhood, she also finds that her speech is not her own. When Joe proposes, her response is clichéd and insincere: "The words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding, everything in order, a spool" (81). When Joe asks her if she loves him, she cannot find the words to answer. Because she is powerless, she is speechless. Worrying that she is turning senile, she repeats her name to reassure herself of her own existence. She finds it harder and harder to communicate through verbal language because "the English words seemed imported, foreign" (144). She rejects language as a failed and inadequate form of communication. She also sees language as superfluous, and resolves never to teach her new baby any words. However, when the narrator returns to society she reverts to speech, realizing that "For us it's necessary, the intercession of words" (186). As she rejects her role of victim and assumes a position of responsibility, she regains access to language and acquires the power of speech.

In *Lady Oracle* Joan is acutely aware of the power of words. Her memories of being bullied at school teach her that words are "not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious subterranean war" (57). Her persistent state of powerlessness at the end of the novel is symbolized linguistically by the fact that she does not speak Italian. She feels "deaf and dumb" (133) and in the butcher's shop she is helpless because "I didn't know the words" (312). In *Life Before Man*, after lunching with Lesje, Nate cannot remember anything Lesje said and wonders if she said anything at all. His domination and her powerlessness are indicated by her silence or, rather, his perception of her voice as insignificant and its erasure through his memory. In *Bodily Harm* the homeless, penniless, and victimized beggar is dumb. Rennie, in prison, thinks she will be all right as long as she keeps talking. In *Cat's Eye*, when Elaine is depressed she finds it an effort to speak and her powerlessness is symbolized by her inability to talk about her victimization. "Even to myself I am mute," she thinks (117). Later, Josef manipulates Elaine by controlling her speech: "He has taken to demanding speech of me; or else he puts his hand over my mouth. I close my eyes and feel him as a source of power, nebulous and shifting" (316). Significantly, Offred's tale is an oral one.

The throat, the tract that connects mouth and stomach, is another important symbol in Atwood's work. As the vampire tradition illustrates, the throat has always been a particularly vulnerable site for women. Relationships between men and women in Atwood's novels are vampiric. The male characters live like parasites sucking the life, strength, and energy out of their female partners. In *Bodily Harm* the intruder who leaves a coiled rope on Rennie's bed makes himself a cup of Ovaltine before he departs. The Ovaltine acts as a substitute for her body. Jake, Arthur, and Joe not only grind their teeth when making love but like to bite women on the neck.[2]

Strangulation is a recurring motif. In *Surfacing* the protagonist's sense of social unease manifests itself in the feeling that she is being strangled—"Again the strangling feeling, paralysis of the throat" (13)—and when she rejects society and retreats into nature she feels "at once the fear leaving me like a hand lifting from my throat" (169). Psychic strangulation results in a sense of physical strangulation.[3] The image is chillingly appropriate, since the throat is often the site of physical subjection for women. At a time when strangulation is the most common method by which women are murdered,[4] Atwood's presentation of the throat as a site of vulnerability is poignant. Joan's costume gothics create a threatening atmosphere which focuses on her heroine's neck. Redmond closes his hands around Charlotte's throat on several occasions, sometimes in an act of lust, sometimes in an act of rage. The two become indistinguishable. As often in Atwood, sex is murderous, and murder is supremely erotic. This connection is explicit in *Bodily Harm* and *Life Before Man*, when Jake almost kills Rennie, and William almost kills Lesje, while making love by placing an arm across the partner's windpipe so she stops breathing. Similarly, Nate experiences an intense desire to strangle Lesje. The young girl who is found dead in the ravine in *Cat's Eye* has been strangled. Strangulation seems particularly apt as a method of male domination, since by stopping the life-giving flow between brain and body it physically enforces the ideological dichotomy between mind and body which forms the basis of the hierarchical system of gender polarity which informs the whole of Western metaphysics and culture.

While Atwood explores the power dynamic of eating and non-eating, she simultaneously confronts the relationship between consumer and consumed. In her fiction, the powerful not only eat, they eat the powerless. Atwood's work is saturated with images of the body as food. She deconstructs the traditional metaphor of woman as food and explores the effects of symbolic cannibalism as a sanctioned cultural system. The appropriateness of the metaphor is endorsed by the present cult of cannibalism in the cinema. Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *Delicatessen* all suggest that cannibalism is currently a particularly pertinent metaphor.

In all the novels Atwood illustrates how symbolic cannibalism has become an institutionalized way of life and how the behavior this generates is perceived and socially endorsed as normal human behavior. The presentation of cannibalism as the governing social ethos exposes the disturbing underside of a violent relationship between the sexes that is only thinly disguised as civilization. The second epigraph of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a quotation from Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, hints at this. The epigraph itself reveals little, but points the reader to Swift's text, in which he sardonically suggests a solution to Ireland's problems of famine, overpopulation, unemployment, and poverty with the proposal that they export the children of the poor to the English as a gourmet delicacy. Atwood, like Swift, uses cannibalism for caustic political comment.

The cannibalistic nature of the relationship between women and men in Atwood's fiction is closely correlated with anthropological studies of cannibalism. Although it is a controversial question whether ritual cannibalism has ever actually existed or is merely a racist myth, many anthropologists base their studies on symbolic cannibalistic rituals. The focus on the symbolic makes such studies particularly pertinent to an analysis of Atwood. Peggy Reeves Sanday sees ritual cannibalism as a sophisticated means of regulating social and psychological categories in society, a way of maintaining the social balance of power. For her, cannibalism is about power and control. It is an act of domination motivated by subject/object polarities in which the person eaten is seen as the social "other." Her words strongly evoke Simone de Beauvoir,[5] and this resonance strengthens the correlation between Sanday's social study of cannibalism and Atwood's fiction. Woman is the "other," and hence the eaten. Quintessentially, for both Atwood and Sanday,

> Cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for nongustatory messages—messages having to do with the maintenance, regeneration, and, in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order. (Sanday 3–4)

Symbolic cannibalism is obviously a primary theme in *The Edible Woman,* but it is a phenomenon that Atwood also pursues relentlessly in her other novels. The narrator of *Surfacing,* noticing explicit sexual graffiti on the wall of a cave, realizes that men and women hunt each other like prey and metaphorically consume each other just as hunters once devoured animals. In the West, hunting is no longer necessary and has been superseded by the hunting of human enemies: "You draw on the wall what's important to you, what you're hunting. They had enough food, no need to draw tinned peas and Argentine corned beef" (114). What disturbs her particularly is the realization that the way animals are treated, killed, and consumed is no different from the way people treat each other. Recalling her dissection classes at school, she realizes, "anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practised on them first" (115).

The cannibalistic nature of relationships in *Life Before Man* is epitomized by the lifeboat game played at Elizabeth's dinner party. Everyone is stranded in a lifeboat which has a limited supply of food, so someone has to be thrown overboard. To avoid this fate, each person has to justify his or her existence. Nate gives up and jumps overboard voluntarily, but Elizabeth, who threatens to drag others in if she is ejected, thinks the losers should not be thrown overboard but kept and eaten by the others. The strongest sustain themselves by eating the weakest. The monstrous nature of relationships based on this ethic is exemplified by Lesje's dinosaur fantasies. The voracity of the dinosaurs' appetite is strikingly similar to the more covert cannibalistic tendencies expressed by men and women. Knowledge of the dinosaur's extinction creates a subtle sense of foreboding for the human race when men and women treat each other as meat in a fight for survival. The most disturbing image of women as food is created by Atwood's parallel between the way dead flesh is devoured by insects in the museum and the way women's bodies are devoured by the male gaze in society:

> In mammology, where the bones are real, they don't use dental picks. They have a freezer full of dead carcasses, camels, mooses, bats, and when they're ready to assemble the skeleton they strip most of the meat off and put the bones into the Bug Room, where carnivorous insects eat the shreds of flesh remaining. The Bug Room smells of rotting meat. Outside the door, several pictures of naked women are Scotch-taped to filing cabinets. (220)

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred recalls her mother telling her that Hitler put the Jews in "ovens." She does not understand that they were gassed and thinks they were cooked and eaten, which, she decides later in life, "in a way I suppose they had been" (155). By referring to the atrocities committed against the Jews, Atwood explicitly links eating with politics and symbolic cannibalism with megalomania and tyranny. In *Cat's Eye* Elaine learns that the historical identification of women with food is socially endorsed and celebrated through art. In her art-history course, she notices the constant re-emergence of certain themes and images:

> plates of fruit and cuts of meat, with or without lobsters. Lobsters are a favourite, because of the colour.
>
> Naked women.
>
> There is considerable overlap. . . . The naked women are presented in the same manner as the plates of meat and dead lobsters, with the same attention to the play of candlelight on the skin, the same lusciousness, the same sensuous and richly rendered detail, the same painterly delight in tactility. (*Richly rendered,* I write, *Painterly delight in tactility.*) They appear served up. (326)

Throughout the novels women are constantly seen, and are taught to see themselves, as food. While this constitutes an unequivocal symbol of powerlessness, Atwood illustrates how women can use their bodies as objects of resistance against the system of oppression designed to control those bodies. Offred's persistent presentation of herself as food is a sign of her powerlessness, but she also uses the image of her body as food in a subversive manner. Conscious of the sexual frustration of the Guardians, as she passes them she sways her hips as if "teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach." This gives her a slight sense of power over those who have power over her. "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (32). Even as she capitulates to the image of herself as food and the control this represents, she finds a way of subverting that control. What is a form of control and degradation becomes a form of power. Offred never overtly challenges the system that subordinates her by refusing the status of food, but she tacitly subverts it by using its own instrument of power against it. Her complicity is a survival tactic. She never glorifies her position of powerlessness, but explores alternative forms of power within, but not recognized by, the status quo.

While Atwood shows it is possible to subvert systems of oppression from within, she indirectly urges women to transcend such systems altogether. The images of women as food always convey a negative condition—unhappy, unwell, uncomfortable, or dead. Through such imagery Atwood demonstrates the debilitating effect this metaphor has on women's lives. The association of the food metaphor with such negative states subtly highlights how imperative it is for women to transcend this traditional association and forge a new, more positive relationship with food. Such a sentiment echoes Dworkin's insistence that "Woman must serve herself instead of serving herself up like a turkey or duck, garnished, stuffed, sharpened knife ready for ritual carving" (70).

While powerlessness is primarily symbolized by non-eating, the body, that which food fuels, becomes a secondary site of powerlessness. The body politic is superimposed on the physical body. Because the body becomes a site of subjection for women, Atwoodian heroines experience a strong sense of unease about the body. This is reflected in the astonishing number of images of incomplete and mutilated bodies. In addition, because the female protagonists feel corporeally oppressed, they attempt to dissociate themselves from their bodies. They try to distance the experience of victimization and protect some aspect of their selfhood by psychically removing themselves from their bodies. Subsequently, all Atwood's heroines feel alienated from their physical selves and are unable to represent their own bodies. Marion does not realize she is crying until she feels the tears on her hand. She also dreams she is disappearing and imagines her body is dissolving in the bath. The narrator of *Surfacing* sees herself as only half a person and imagines the other half of her body locked away elsewhere. Elizabeth floats above her body as she lies on the bed. Rennie watches herself from the outside as someone else would watch her. During "The Ceremony" where she is forced to have sex with the Commander (and Serena Joy), Offred pretends not to be present: "One detaches oneself. One describes" (106). Elaine learns to step out of her body by fainting in order to escape persecution by Cordelia. Such a phenomenon endorses

John Berger's assertion that women are taught to survey themselves as objects of vision.[6]

Eating expresses the ineffable. By writing about women and food, Atwood exposes one of the most subtle and subconscious ways in which power operates. Such articulation of the ideologies and mythologies which subordinate women implicitly suggests how to overcome them. Although, ostensibly, Atwood offers no alternative to the repressive social system she exposes, by highlighting the devastating effects of such a system, she brings into focus the need and means to transcend it. As Atwood illustrates how consumption embodies coded expressions of power which have served to subordinate women, she subtly urges women to reclaim the right to eat and to proudly re-inhabit their own bodies. Woman have been driven away from their bodies as violently as they have been driven away from food. Atwood shows them a path back to both. By demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world.

NOTES

[1] Interestingly, the Marquis de Sade was a renowned glutton who used food as a means of manipulating and hurting women. On one occasion Sade fed prostitutes in a Marseilles brothel aniseed balls impregnated with a substance to make them break wind for his amusement. The sweets poisoned the women and made them feel so ill they thought they were going to die.

[2] The recent revival of the vampire motif, as in Francis Ford Coppola's film version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, suggests that the vampire is still a very contemporary icon and confirms that Atwood's use of the metaphor is particularly pertinent.

[3] Interestingly, many of Freud's patients, in particular Dora, and Breuer's patient, Anna O., reported a sensation of choking and the inability to swallow. Both also stopped speaking.

[4] In Great Britain, Home Office statistics show that thirty percent of women murdered between 1983 and 1990 were strangled compared to only seven percent of men. Proportionately, more women are strangled than killed any other way. In 1990, forty-three percent of female victims in Great Britain were murdered by a spouse or lover compared to nine percent of male victims.

[5] "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (deBeauvoir 16).

[6] "*Men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 47).

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