

Université de Montréal

Writing the Meal:  
Dinner in Early Twentieth-Century Fiction by Women

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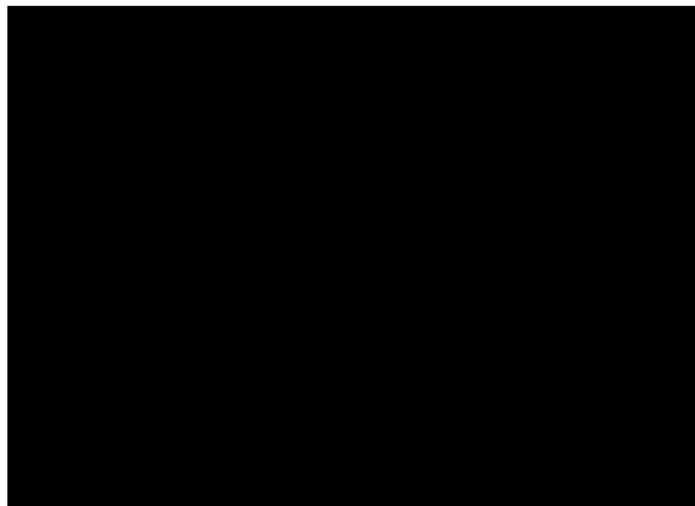
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### Abstract

This study explores the relationship between women and food in fiction by women writers at the turn of the century. The importance of meals in works by Edith Wharton, Katherine Mansfield, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, and others reflects a general concern with women's domestic role in the light of social and cultural changes. In most cultures, women are in charge of food; it is key for this study that the meal and the text are delivered and controlled by the same gender.

Meals can be examined from a number of perspectives: historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological and religious. Food, meals, and the customs surrounding them are, in themselves, important texts of a culture and convey several levels of meaning, both to those within a social or family group and to outsiders. Food is at the basis of myths, and defines sociability, structures time, and reflects economic power. Food customs determine the limits, structure, and hierarchy of the group. Such links between food and culture can form a foundation for understanding both the role of food in literature and the historical and cultural contexts that give birth to particular literary texts.

A strong impetus to rationalize and regiment domestic life and to organize and codify instruction in domestic skills was one response to social change in the early twentieth century. Women reformers, recognizing the social importance of food, attempted to cure social ills by improving and, ultimately, standardizing the Anglo-American kitchen. Texts on cooking and entertaining depicted an idealized view of "modern" life. In general, experts steered their readers away from tradition toward

consumerism, and away from pleasure toward efficiency.

Another response to change is seen in the conservative manners and rituals surrounding meals in Edith Wharton's novels. The detailed set of manners in *The Age of Innocence* reflects a deeply-entrenched social code meant to consolidate the upper-class society of New York, to control aberrant behaviour and to keep out newly-wealthy people clamouring to enter. Women are in charge of both meals and the larger world of ritual and custom expressed through meals; Wharton herself exercises this power as the writer of the novel. Dinners are given not for pleasure, but to make powerful statements to individuals and/or to the society at large. *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* focus on women who are dinner guests rather than hostesses. On the margins of society, they are either on their way in or on their way out. The genteel who lack money must conform absolutely or face ostracism. Wealthy outsiders, on the other hand, are eventually accepted by society, but at the same time help to destroy it.

The social change which Wharton's work traces is well established in the works of Katherine Mansfield, where food and dining are often linked to the modern predicaments and modernist themes of homelessness, rootlessness, alienation, and isolation. The solitary meal is one response to the highly structured, mannered, ritualized dinner and the traditional domestic role of women. The fact that food is constantly present in Mansfield's stories does not necessarily indicate nourishment, but rather a pervasive anxiety. In much of her work, food is not associated with pleasure, sociability and intimacy, but rather with loneliness and unfulfilled desire.



The failure of the dinner table is frequently linked with a failure of communication. For women alone, in couples and within the family, an alienation from eating reflects a larger sense of social and personal alienation, even despair.

Although anxiety about meals is particularly acute in Mansfield's work, her stories also demonstrate the profound importance of the meal at various stages of women's lives. For both Mansfield and Woolf, the dining room may be part of an architectural metaphor that structures the work: the dining room is the hub of the fictional house and the dinner at the centre of the fictional world. If, for some characters, the roles of hostess and homemaker are powerless, even oppressive, there is also a possibility of power in women's domestic work. In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf notes the burden of the traditional role inherited by twentieth-century women, but also shows its inherent creativity. She celebrates the party and the dinner as the forging of community, the transformation of disparate elements into a temporary whole.

Not only can organizing a dinner or a party be a creative activity in itself, it can be both a metaphor for art and a source of inspiration for the woman artist or writer. In a number of texts, including Chopin's *The Awakening*, Mansfield's New Zealand stories, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the woman artist struggles with, but may also be inspired by the domestic context. *The Awakening*, structured around a series of meals, shows the difficulty of being both an artist and a wife, but in other works, the transformation of everyday domestic experience into art can create a particularly potent language. The piece of fiction itself may be presented as an

invitation to dine, as if the book is a meal offered by the writer. Despite what the common view of household drudgery might suggest, Woolf's work, especially, affirms that serving the meal is a female activity, but in a radically new way. A form of communication, of expression, the dinner proposes a new artistic language, and is posited as a crucial component of female art.

## Résumé de synthèse

L'importance des repas dans les ouvrages d'Edith Wharton, Katherine Mansfield, Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf et plusieurs autres écrivaines du début du siècle reflète une préoccupation générale relativement au rôle domestique des femmes, à la lumière des changements sociaux et culturels. Dans la plupart des cultures, les femmes s'occupent de la cuisine, et dans la présente étude, le repas et le texte sont servis et contrôlés par le même sexe.

Les repas peuvent être étudiés sous différentes perspectives: historique, anthropologique, sociologique, psychologique et religieuse. La nourriture et les repas, comme les coutumes qui les entourent, sont en soi d'importants textes de culture, qui communiquent plusieurs niveaux de sens, tant aux membres d'un groupe social ou familial qu'aux étrangers. La nourriture est à la base de plusieurs mythes, et les repas définissent la sociabilité, structurent le temps et reflètent le pouvoir économique. Les coutumes alimentaires déterminent les limites, la structure et la hiérarchie du groupe. De tels liens entre les aliments et la culture peuvent servir de fondement pour comprendre le rôle des repas dans la littérature, de même que les contextes historiques et culturels qui donnent naissance à certains textes littéraires particuliers.

L'une des réactions au changement social, au début du vingtième siècle, a été de rationaliser et de réglementer la vie domestique en plus d'organiser et de codifier l'instruction en matière de compétences domestiques. Reconnaisant l'importance de la nourriture au plan social, les réformatrices ont tenté de remédier aux maux sociaux en améliorant, et finalement en standardisant, la cuisine anglo-américaine. Les textes

portant sur la cuisine et les réceptions brossaient un tableau idéalisé de la vie moderne. En général, les experts éloignaient leurs lectrices de la tradition et du plaisir pour les diriger vers le consumérisme et l'efficacité.

Une autre réaction au changement se manifeste dans les manières et les rituels traditionnels qui entourent les repas dans les romans d'Edith Wharton. Les manières décrites en détail dans *The Age of Innocence* reflètent un code social profondément ancré, conçu pour consolider la société aristocratique de New York, contrôler tout comportement aberrant et empêcher l'entrée des nouveaux riches. Les femmes sont responsables des repas ainsi que de tous les rituels et coutumes qui s'expriment à travers les repas; Wharton elle-même exerce ce pouvoir, à titre d'auteure du roman. On donne des dîners non pour le plaisir mais pour produire une forte impression sur certaines personnes, sur la société en général, ou sur les deux à la fois. *The House of Mirth* et *The Custom of the Country* portent sur des femmes en marge de la société qui sont des invitées plutôt que des hôtes. Les femmes distinguées mais sans argent doivent se conformer complètement ou risquer d'être mises au ban de la société. Par contre, les filles des parents nouveaux-riches finissent par être acceptées dans la société, mais en même temps contribuent à la détruire.

Le changement social que dépeint l'oeuvre de Wharton est bien établi dans les ouvrages de Katherine Mansfield, où les repas sont souvent liés aux situations difficiles propres au monde moderne ainsi qu'aux thèmes modernistes comme l'aliénation et l'isolement. Le repas pris en solitaire est une des réactions au dîner très structuré, maniéré et ritualisé de même qu'au rôle traditionnel des femmes dans la

maison. L'omniprésence de la nourriture dans les récits de Mansfield n'est pas nécessairement un signe d'alimentation, mais plutôt d'anxiété envahissante. Dans la majeure partie de son oeuvre, la nourriture n'est pas associée au plaisir, à la sociabilité et à l'intimité, mais bien à la solitude, au désir insatisfait et à un manque de communication. Pour les femmes seules, en couple et au sein de la famille, un délaissement des rituels du repas reflète une aliénation sociale et personnelle plus globale, et même le désespoir.

Bien que l'anxiété face aux repas soit particulièrement vive dans l'oeuvre de Mansfield, ses nouvelles démontrent également la profonde importance qu'ont les repas à différentes étapes de la vie des femmes. Pour Mansfield comme pour Woolf, la salle à manger pourrait faire partie intégrante d'une métaphore architecturale qui structure l'ouvrage: la salle à manger est le pivot de la maison fictive et le dîner est au centre du monde imaginaire. Si, pour certains personnages, les rôles d'hôtesse et de femme d'intérieur sont synonymes d'impuissance et même d'oppression, le travail domestique des femmes présente également une possibilité de pouvoir. Dans *Mrs. Dalloway* et dans *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf constate le fardeau du rôle traditionnel hérité par les femmes du vingtième siècle, mais elle montre aussi la créativité qui s'y rattache. Elle célèbre la fête et le dîner comme étant des outils qui servent à inventer la communauté et à transformer des éléments disparates en un tout provisoire.

L'organisation d'un dîner ou d'une fête peut être une activité créative en soi, mais elle peut aussi être une métaphore pour l'art et une source d'inspiration pour la femme artiste ou l'écrivaine. Dans un grand nombre de textes, la femme artiste est

aux prises avec le contexte domestique, mais il arrive aussi qu'elle s'en inspire. *The Awakening*, dont l'intrigue est structurée autour d'une série de repas, montre à quel point il est difficile d'être à la fois femme et artiste, mais dans d'autres ouvrages, la transformation de l'expérience domestique quotidienne en art crée un langage particulièrement puissant. Le roman lui-même pourrait être présenté comme une invitation à dîner, comme si le livre était un repas offert par l'écrivaine. Malgré ce que peuvent laisser supposer les idées courantes au sujet de l'esclavage qu'entraîne le travail domestique, l'oeuvre de Woolf en particulier affirme que le service des repas est une activité de femme, mais dans un sens radicalement nouveau. Forme de communication et d'expression, le dîner propose un nouveau langage artistique, et il est présenté comme une composante cruciale de l'art féminin.

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**Dédicace**

to Matthew

**Introduction**

**A Time to Eat**

### A TIME TO EAT

A pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised  
and educated and resumed and articulate separation.  
This is not tardy.<sup>1</sup>

This study explores the role of dinners in fiction by selected early twentieth-century women writers. Although some male writers of the period also describe dinners, our emphasis will be on women as providers and servers of both meals and works of fiction. We will be less concerned with the symbolism of particular items of literary food than with the meal as a ritual and a social occasion. The meals discussed range from two people sharing simple food to formal dinners and parties. In exploring the role such social events play in the work of fiction, we will use the hypothesis that the dinner or dinner party setting is crucial not only in defining the characters, their world, and their relationship to that world, but also in structuring the novel or the story.

Of course, on a very basic level, it makes sense that food should be important in literature. If literature bears any strong relationship to human life, then eating will necessarily be part of it. The most basic component of existence, food is as fundamental to humanity as to any other living organism. And more so, perhaps: “. . . food and eating afford us a remarkable arena in which to watch how the human species invests a basic activity with social meaning – indeed, with so much meaning that the activity itself can almost be lost sight of” (Mintz, *Tasting Food* 7). Works of

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<sup>1</sup>Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 23.

fiction have a relationship to the everyday; whether a writer attempts to reflect accurately the social world of ordinary life or to deliberately distort or ignore it, she is confronting it in one way or another. But the portrayal of food plays a more important role than merely reproducing reality; meals are potent conveyers of larger social and economic realities, both within the text itself and in the larger historical context in which the work of art was produced. Moreover, because food is important to us socially, emotionally, psychologically and erotically, it suggests a rich potential for various levels of meaning. Some of the rules, rituals and associations that surround the act of eating may repress or negate its physical nature, but may also enhance the meaning of the meal, giving it a transcendent, even mythic quality that is as important as its nourishment value.

Since the Greek *symposium*, the dinner or banquet has been an occasion for speech, and, since Plato, it has been portrayed in literature as such. In fiction, a gathering of people around the dinner table allows the plot to develop as confrontations occur and connections are forged. Whether in the setting of an intimate dinner or a large party, eating together means that important issues are discussed, revelations made, intimacies exchanged, seductions attempted, and so forth. A fictional dinner may serve to elucidate or disclose the individual relationships of the people attending the dinner or party, but it can also do more than that. For instance, through the yearly ritual of Christmas dinner, James Joyce's "The Dead" freely explores the entire range of social connotations that a dinner party brings to the fore: from the individual relationships of marriage, kinship and

friendship to the larger political and cultural context of Ireland as a whole.

Dinners can also structure the novel. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, dinners mark the progress of Edna Pontellier's awakening, culminating in the extravagant "coming out" party which she gives to mark her changed life and ending with a dinner that she orders but never intends to eat. In the cases of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the whole novel turns on dinner: that is, the entire action of the novel leads up to a dinner party in one instance, and, in the other, the recounting of the heroine's story arises from two people eating dinner together. In a larger sense, viewed as a banquet served by the writer to the reader, the novel itself becomes not only the occasion of speech, but also the actual act of story-telling.

In fact, meals occupy a prominent and varied place in twentieth-century fiction; indeed, some recent novels are organized almost entirely around food. For example, in Günter Grass's *The Flounder*, food is used to recount the saga of human culture and history, in the context of largely good-humoured gender wars; in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, food chronicles and mythologizes family history; in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, food is alternately a measure of personal worth and a vehicle for social criticism; in Uwe Timm's *The Invention of Curried Sausage*, the apparently simple search for a recipe opens out into a narrative about personal history during World War II. Obviously, in much literature, food is also associated with the erotic. Moreover, the importance of food is not limited to print media. Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* opens at a celebratory restaurant dinner and ends around a kitchen table. Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* uses the

banquet as a vehicle to celebrate women in history, providing a different dish for every woman. There are so many films based on the sensuality of food and the potent social and mythic connotations of meals and of preparing meals that it is impossible to do justice to their importance here. Bunuel's 1973 film *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie* plays with the frustrations of failed dinners and satirizes the social conventions of entertaining. In the 1980's and 90's alone, *My Dinner with André*; *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*; *Babette's Feast*; *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*; *The Big Night*; and *Like Water for Chocolate* are only a few of many possible examples of films which focus on food.

However, what is most important for this study is the fact that in most cultures – and certainly in the period under discussion – dinner is in one way or another a woman's affair. The failure or success of the meal is her responsibility. The dinner can be an expression of creativity or a mere chore – often a combination of both. The woman's abilities as a hostess may mean social, political or financial success; a dinner, then, might lead to the rise or fall of the family fortunes. A woman may be judged as a woman based on her dinners; the way she handles her roles both as a provider of nourishment and as a social convener may be viewed either by herself or by others as indicative of her womanhood, her femininity. As the cook or the supervisor of servants, she creates the domestic community of the table, and, in so doing, holds the family together. As a hostess, a woman is in a position to endorse social customs, social values; in giving a dinner party, she may wield a formidable amount of power in her social set.

But not always. The dinners discussed here may involve either an active, powerful and perhaps creative role for women or a passive, largely powerless one. The woman is the cook, the organizer and/or the server of the meal, but the implications of these roles may vary greatly with the context. When a woman is a guest, more may be expected of her than merely to share a meal and dinner table conversation; her own enjoyment of the food and the company is frequently secondary to larger social demands. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when traditional forms of domesticity and domestic models were no longer necessarily taken for granted, actual choices about this part of life may have been more possible, for some women, than in previous periods. Yet, at the same time, culture is strong and habits die hard. In the context of the meal, our study explores the contradictions between, on the one hand, the apparent loosening of old constraints signaled by modernity and, on the other, factors such as tradition, custom, ritual, social definitions and pressures, poverty, fear, and repression – all of which inhibited possibilities for personal liberation. In the literature of the early twentieth century, and especially in that literature written by women, individual perspectives on and interactions with food can signify a more general attitude toward society: whether alienation, insecurity, rebellion, challenge, passivity or complacency.

Overall, the complex sets of roles and rules that define women as hostesses, cooks and guests emerge in the texts studied as indications of twentieth-century social change, cultural fragmentation and personal anxiety. Some women characters reject or are excluded by these roles and their accompanying ideology, but a new way



of living is difficult to achieve and has a cost; women who react against the *status quo* are in a certain sense still ruled by it. Nevertheless, in some fiction, the serving of food is linked – both metaphorically and literally – to women’s creative potential. As women writers emerge from the kitchen or dining room at the beginning of the century, their domestic experience may in fact supply them with a voice, and thus a creative bridge to their art. Indeed, if, as some argue, cooking is the primary creative experience of humankind, the literature of the twentieth century is enriched by writers who have lived that experience, either themselves or through their foremothers. In the literature discussed here, we see that, for once, the meal and the text are delivered and controlled by the same gender.

The first chapter of our study explores the fundamental connections between dining and culture, as well as the links between food and language, which may also have a profound resonance for literature. In the relationship of food to dining can be found the basis or the essence of culture, just as in the transformation of speech to text, literature emerges. From the perspective of anthropology and history, the first part of Chapter 1 sets the groundwork for a reading of literary texts by exploring the notion of food itself as a text. In the second part of that chapter, we look at popular trends in food and dining in the turn-of-the-century period, and at the production of non-literary texts about food and dining that reflect those trends. We will argue that this period of social change led to an anxiety about areas of domestic life that had formerly been accepted as a given, an unease expressed on the level of popular culture and popular media by the proliferation of cookbooks and other manuals for

housekeeping and entertaining.

Chapter 2 looks at the social ritual of fictional meals, with an emphasis on the manners and custom which delineate ritual and define society. For the characters in a novel, manners and customs may present a way of understanding – and perhaps of distorting – social context and everyday experience; for the reader, they can provide an important way of reading the novel. The chapter will focus particularly on meals and mealtime ritual in the changing world of early twentieth-century New York society. In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton, writing in the 1920's, views retrospectively the highly-mannered existence of late nineteenth-century upper-class New York, the conventions of which were subtly, perhaps, but firmly upheld – largely, if not exclusively – by women. The rituals and rules surrounding dinner and, by extension, social life in general, form a textual overlay of society and social life which is most clearly expressed in this novel, but is also crucial in other novels to be discussed.

A woman can be the guest at a dinner as well as the hostess. Chapter 3 is about those who find themselves outside or on the margins of the traditional social world. In the role of guests, the female protagonists in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* pose often unconscious but inherently critical questions about social life and about the society they belong to or wish to enter. Through their domestic and social struggles, these sometimes unsympathetic characters represent a challenge to the accepted world of the novel and demonstrate that this world is on the cusp of change.

Chapter 4 looks at the alienated, solitary diner as one manifestation of the modern reaction to the highly structured, mannered, ritualized dinner and the traditional domestic role of women. For many of Katherine Mansfield's heroines, however, the apparent relaxation of nineteenth-century social structures just means loneliness, even if it is a loneliness embraced resolutely. The sometimes oppressive tradition is replaced by a vacuum which may appear to offer the possibility of freedom. However, this seems to be a freedom ultimately without direction or content, which is finally desired only for its own sake. Hunger becomes the standard condition; basic needs may be fulfilled, but, in much of Mansfield's work, desire gnaws both at the text, and, body and soul, at the characters.

Just as we discussed the society hostess earlier in this study, in Chapter 5 we look at the woman's place in the family home. Tracing an architectural metaphor through Mansfield's "Bliss" and some of her New Zealand stories, as well as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, the chapter focusses on the traditional female role within the family, and on the woman who lives some version of that role within the structure of the house and the framework of domesticity. Some women are trapped and rendered powerless by these roles, to the point of denying their own needs and desires. However, returning to one of the fundamental notions of Chapter 1 – that cooking is not only essentially human, but essentially creative – Chapter 5 also discusses the ways in which women's traditional position as cook and/or organizer of dinner is depicted positively by Mansfield and Woolf and, in some cases, even honoured, although not without authorial misgivings.

Women's role as organizers and servers of meals, then, can be celebrated, albeit with reservations, because of its inherently creative quality. In fact, as we note in Chapter 6, a number of modernist women writers use a dinner or dinners as a structuring device for an entire work of fiction, presenting the story or novel as if it were a meal offered to the reader. As well, a number of works of fiction demonstrate profound links between dinner and the woman artist. If *The Awakening*, structured around a series of meals, shows the difficulty of being both an artist and a traditional wife, other works suggest a more positive correlation between the two. Building on the positive aspects of the traditional role presented in Chapter 5, this chapter analyzes fictional attempts to adapt the creativity inherent in that role for the woman of the twentieth century and for the artist. Focussing on Woolf and other writers, we revisit in Chapter 6 the connections between language and food introduced in Chapter 1, arguing that, while the traditional role is impossible for women in the twentieth century, the server of dinner at least may serve as a model and an inspiration for the artist and, that, as well, the meal itself, through its presentation in the novel, is actually transformed into a work of art.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Around the Table**

### I. *Hors d'Oeuvres*: Food, Culture, and Language

Food and the customs surrounding food are important texts of a culture, with many inherent levels of significance and signification. In most cultures, the transformation of food into meals has been largely women's business: planning, preparing, presenting, serving, cleaning up; in general working with the raw ingredients that they themselves may quite possibly have purchased, gathered, planted, and/or harvested as well. The customs and rituals surrounding all of these activities have also been protected, maintained, and realized by women, even though, in many cultures, the larger religious signification of food has historically been the provenance of men – rabbis, priests, shamans – who oversee the women's work. Yet sometimes food has been treated as if it were a rather abstract notion having little or no relationship to someone's labour. This approach has changed in recent years, with more specific study of actual details of food customs and their manifestation in daily habits. Still, in the following review of different approaches to food and food customs, we must bear in mind that it is through human *work* that foodstuffs are transformed into something meaningful, indeed of fundamental and enormous significance to entire cultures and social systems. And that work is basically women's.

Since food is important to us in so many different ways, the study of it can be approached from a variety of perspectives. Food and the customs surrounding food are crucial not only biologically and psychologically, but also in establishing the identity of a culture and in defining social relationships. "One could say that an entire 'world' (social environment) is present in and signified by food" (Barthes 170). The

choice of food, the preparation of food, the taboos and rituals surrounding food – all are terribly important as part of cultural definition. Food both facilitates and defines social intercourse, social intimacy. Moreover, it mediates between social groups and accentuates as well as symbolizes the differences between groups. Food is frequently a component of rituals and may in fact lead to the creation of rituals. Food and food customs are thus intimately intertwined with religion: from a certain perspective it is ironic that the satisfaction of the most physical of needs, constituting humankind's closest connection with the rest of nature, also creates, becomes a metaphor for, and fulfils spiritual needs. A prime example is, of course, the powerful Christian symbol of the Eucharist. The central mystery of the Eucharist is that food, the manifestation of human mortality, should not only represent, but confer immortality on the consumer.

The first part of this chapter examines the importance of meals from the perspectives of history, anthropology, and sociology. These various approaches to the links between food and culture form a foundation for understanding the role of food in literature and in the historical and cultural contexts that give birth to literary texts such as those which will be examined in later chapters. Norbert Elias's view of history and sociology as processes insists that social mores and customs are not universal and static, but are rather reflections and manifestations of the complex of forces at work in a society at any given time. This approach can be useful to our literary work. Applied to literature, Elias's perspective suggests that dining customs in fiction are significant not only in terms of the world created in the novel but also as representations of the world in which the writer is writing and by which her work is

influenced. In this conjunction between the real and the fictional worlds, we can perhaps find an important access to the text.

For all cultures, food has been the conveyer of meaning, both to those within the group and to outsiders. In this sense, food itself can be treated as a text: communicating its context, as well as its specific meaning, it gives us a reading of more than itself. As Roland Barthes notes, “[Food] is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (167). Thus, food items or food substances can never be viewed as isolated from the larger social and cultural network in which they are situated. To an anthropologist, the food system includes domestic space and organization, food-related artifacts, sources of fuel, technologies, kinship relationships, gender roles, sexual and/or marital customs, economic values, class, exchange systems, even war and peace – in short, food signifies a good deal more than just available diet. The questions of what is eaten, by whom, when and under what circumstances, as well as how and by whom it is prepared and served, are at the same time determined by culture and a manifestation of culture. Historians have demonstrated that, in a given period, food issues – for instance the political economy of food production and distribution, or the demographic impact of a certain sort of food – may be crucial to an understanding of other aspects of history. For example, Sidney Mintz, in *Sweetness and Power*, demonstrates not only the interrelationship of sugar with European history, but its significant, even pre-eminent impact on



economics, politics, and historical movements. It is in this sense, then, that food can be considered a text: more than just signifying itself, it represents the larger domestic life, which is, in turn, indicative of many aspects of culture and of history.

It is not our purpose here to present a detailed literature review of sociological and anthropological texts.<sup>1</sup> However, we will note that as the study of food and “foodways” has become, in recent years, a major topic of interest in the social sciences, a substantial corpus of work in the sociology and anthropology of food has emerged. Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo note that, although “[f]ood and eating have not until very recently generally merited a ‘sociology of’ to themselves,” their status has changed because “the choice of food as a focus makes possible a very wide range of intellectual connections” (118). However, food is of interest not only because it can be approached in so many different ways but because it resonates in so many parts of our lives. Food is a crucial component of what anthropologist Christopher Tilley calls “material culture.” While not, strictly speaking, an artifact in an archaeological sense – that is, it is perishable, rather than enduring – food defines a culture, leaving its stamp on articles made and used by a people, and determining intangibles such as customs, social hierarchies, economic systems, forms and divisions of labour. Thus, the customs surrounding food are indeed enduring: the practices or habits of serving food are major components in what creates a continuous culture

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<sup>1</sup>This has been done by others. Roy Wood (3), in his own critical summary of recent work on food and anthropology, cites in particular Murcott’s “Sociological and social anthropological approaches to food and eating” (*World Review of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 55. (1988): 1-40), and Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo (1992).

over a number of generations. Food and food habits, then, are perhaps unique from an anthropological perspective: developed and sustained at the intersection of “biological needs and cultural values” (Beardsworth and Keil 42),<sup>2</sup> they play a major role not only in defining, but in creating a culture.

Claude Levi-Strauss is generally “regarded as the principal author of contemporary interest in food and eating” (Wood 8). In his theory of the early stages of societies, the moment of cooking becomes the civilizing moment. Levi-Strauss’s notion of the raw and the cooked posits that one – perhaps *the* – major distinction between the animal and the human is the ability to transform foodstuffs into a meal. Raw food can be eaten by animals; the preparation of food is key to the formation of human society. In this sense, food defines not only a particular culture, but humanity as a whole, because its preparation denotes civilization, the profound characteristic of the human species. What is particularly significant for Levi-Strauss is the double opposition

entre cru et cuit d’une part, entre frais et corrompu de l’autre. L’axe qui unit le cru et le cuit est caractéristique de la culture, celui qui unit le frais et le pourri, de la nature, puisque la cuisson accomplit la transformation culturelle du cru, comme la putréfaction en est la transformation naturelle. (152)

Food, in Levi-Strauss’s theory, is basic to the mythology of most cultures. Particularly important are myths on the origins of the cooking fire and the discovery of various

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<sup>2</sup>These two notions of culture and biology represent a methodological controversy in anthropology: whether to base one’s work in cultural theory or material reality. Like Beardsworth and Keil, Wood attempts to reconcile the two approaches.

foods, because they recount a version of the moment when civilization and culture begin. Thus the roots of storytelling, art, and religion are linked to cooking. We might posit that cooking and artistic representation are linked in another way, too, for they may both be acts of conservation.

Moreover, for Levi-Strauss, the raw and the cooked are two of the dynamic opposites<sup>3</sup> – like life and death, male and female, sky and earth – that he sees as fundamental to human perceptions and systems of thought:

[...] des catégories empiriques, telles que celles du cru et de cuit, de frais et de pourri, de mouillé et de brûlé, etc., définissables avec précision par la seule observation ethnographique et chaque fois en se plaçant au point de vue d'une culture particulière, peuvent [...] servir d'outils conceptuels pour dégager des notions abstraites et les enchaîner en propositions. (9)

Dinner, then, civilizes, categorizes and hierarchizes the raw. Through this process of ordering and transforming the world, cooking can be viewed as the basis of thought. In Louis Marin's terms, "all cookery involves a theological, ideological, political, and economic operation by the means of which a nonsignified edible foodstuff is transformed into a sign/body that is eaten" (121). In other words, cooking food, serving meals and ritualizing the basic biological process which, in itself, would have no meaning beyond mere physical necessity, are key to many aspects of culture; in that they *create* meaning, these activities are fundamental to thought and to

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<sup>3</sup>It should be noted here that Levi-Strauss's emphasis on the notion of dualism has been criticized by a number of anthropologists as simplistic and over-generalized. The dynamic tension of opposites can be, nevertheless, a useful way of talking about the important transformations involved in cooking.

language.<sup>4</sup>

If, arguably, the preparation of food defines humanity, so, on a smaller scale, food habits define both individual and group characteristics. Sidney W. Mintz postulates that this is something we all know intuitively:

Our awareness that food and eating are foci of habit, taste, and deep feeling must be as old as those occasions in the history of our species when human beings first saw other humans eating unfamiliar foods. Like languages and all other socially acquired group habits, food systems dramatically demonstrate the infraspecific variability of humankind. (*Sweetness* 3)

Food is obviously important to the individual: it allows us to live; physically, it makes all other activity possible. In her 1932 book *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*, anthropologist Audrey Richards points out “that the need to eat is the most basic need we human beings know, far exceeding in importance and urgency the sexual ‘drive’” (paraphrased by Mintz, *Tasting Food* 35). To use Maslow’s categories, food is the most basic need; until it is satisfied, no further interaction with the world, let alone a sense of self-actualization or fulfilment, is possible (ch. 4). Even in the case of

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<sup>4</sup>Later writers, influenced by Levi-Strauss, have made similar points about food and civilization, but see the connection as symbolic rather than causal. For example, Anne Murcott argues:

Metaphorically, the transformation of ‘natural’ food-stuffs into the ‘cultural’ products of the table parallels other general processes whereby the material world is worked on and incorporated into the human domain. It thus can stand for the many different ways in which the world of culture – of meanings, values and human work – is created and sustained in the face of an alien, non-human universe (the jungle, the desert, ‘the world’). At the same time, food furnishes a direct link – metonymically – between the cultural and the biological: ingested and processed, it thus spans the two spheres. (11)

deliberate fasting, the individual is still oriented to food. The conscious effort *not* to eat, to resist the natural impulse of the organism, may become another kind of obsession with food. Human beings are clearly more complicated than animals in this regard: if hunger is a biological urge, appetite is a psychological and social construct (Mennell 21). In the human being, need becomes desire; hunger – the manifestation of a need – becomes the desire for food, which is more than merely an urge to satisfy hunger. It seems obvious that eating is pleasurable, but we shall see in our discussion of literature that this pleasure in eating is frequently denied, repressed or diverted by the individual, the society, or both. Dinner organizes, perhaps defers, and sometimes satisfies desire, but always within rules.

For babies, of course, eating means being nurtured as well as satisfying desire, an association that has profound psycho-sexual effects throughout life. But eating also establishes a connection with the world; it is the link to the social universe, first through the mother, then through other family members and the larger social group. It has been pointed out that we always have a nostalgia for childhood food; the first food often remains the favourite (Pasquier). Food preferences may emerge early and form part of our fundamental personality: “What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others” (Mintz, *Sweetness* 4). Food, then, is important in establishing and maintaining the individual not only as a biological entity, but as a social entity as well: it allows the individual entry into the group. If food has “affective significance,” it is also “a means

for validating existing social relations” (Mintz, *Sweetness* 5). Anthropologists have noted the tremendous importance given by a society to the inculcation of food habits as demarcations between groups: “Food choices and eating habits reveal distinctions of age, sex, status, culture, and even occupation. These distinctions are immensely important adornments on an inescapable necessity” (Mintz, *Sweetness* 3).

Distinctions between what is edible and what is not are cultural decisions: “. . . many of the substances which human beings do not eat are items which are perfectly edible from a biological standpoint” (Harris 13). Conversely, in some cultures, potentially poisonous substances are eaten. The choice of what is acceptable to eat plays a major role in defining the culture – whether of a nation, a tribe, a class, or a family. Thus one of the first things that the child learns is what is eaten in the group(s) to which he or she belongs. Accepting these strictures as absolute is a formative experience in childhood, both in terms of the development of the individual and of that individual’s membership in the group. Indeed what is *not* eaten is considered non-food, and these distinctions may be impossible to break, even under extreme duress later in life; in fact, people may starve to death because they cannot bring themselves to eat food that they find repugnant. Even in the cases of nations or groups that are contiguous, either geographically or culturally or both, the “otherness” of the neighbour is expressed in terms of food.<sup>5</sup> Farb and Armelagos point

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<sup>5</sup>Some European examples are well-known: the British calling the Germans “krauts” and the French “frogs” (Mennell, Murcott, van Otterloo 117). Similarly, the Cree called the Inuit “Esquimaux” or “meat-eaters” (Farb and Armelagos 97).

out that in *Macbeth* the strangeness of the three witches is underlined by what they have simmering in their cauldron (165). But food is not only used by outsiders to define a group; it is also a key part of a group's self-definition. And more than the choice of food itself is important. The rites, rituals and taboos surrounding the harvesting or slaughtering, and the preparation, serving and eating of food are particularly significant parts of this self-definition (Simoons). Societies which practice cannibalism – the biggest food taboo for our society and for many others – have very diverse but particularly strong taboos about food. These involve questions of who may or must become food, how they are to be killed, how eaten, and by whom (Farb and Armelagos 135-44; Harris ch. 10; Visser 8-17). People assert and confirm their civilized state by respecting their culture's taboos. The importance attached to doing so may indicate our unconscious awareness of the fragility of civilization.

Children, then, learn more at the table than merely what is good to eat. For one thing, they learn the manners that are acceptable in their group: "Mealtimes are occasions when social groups are normally together and therefore provide opportunities for the uninitiated – particularly the young – to observe what is acceptable in terms of food-related behaviour" (Wood 48). For example,

[c]hildren today are admonished not to snatch whatever they want from the table, and not to scratch themselves or touch their noses, ears, eyes, or other parts of their bodies at table. The child is instructed not to speak or drink with a full mouth, or to sprawl on the table, and so on. (Elias 141)

Thus Kezia, in Katherine Mansfield's "At the Bay," is chided for playing with her porridge. But more than a code of table manners is learned at the table: "Mealtimes

offer children opportunities to observe the roles played by adults – roles of cook and server, roles of main consumer, the role of ‘washer-up’” (Wood 48). Surrounding Kezia at the breakfast table are various family dynamics and unexamined assumptions: values about tidiness and about being grown-up; views on the proper place and behaviour of children; competition among siblings to be seen as “the good girl.” Among the adults, Aunt Beryl, the single woman in the domestic circle, is trying to make her presence felt, Stanley, the breadwinner, is issuing orders, and all the women in the family are waiting on and deferring to him as he heads off to work.

More widely yet, the way in which the ritual of eating is enacted extends beyond the dinner itself to reflect the mores and customs of the larger society and of sub-groups within that society; it encompasses the history of the culture within which it is situated. Thus Norbert Elias sees our system of manners as symptomatic and descriptive of the civilization that has evolved more or less steadily and consistently over the centuries in the post-Roman West, despite relatively minor variations determined by factors such as date, place, ethnicity, class, and gender. This system of manners is generally assumed and rigorously enforced. “Each society’s culture is transmitted to children through eating with the family, a setting in which individual personalities develop, kinship obligations emerge, and the customs of the group are reinforced.” (Farb and Armelagos 5). In the opening pages of *To the Lighthouse*, it is at a family dinner-table scene that Virginia Woolf describes the imposition of traditional gender roles on the Ramsay daughters. Mrs. Ramsay wants her daughters to become, like herself, good mothers, wives and hostesses. Their inchoate questioning of these



roles encompasses a resistance to all the values of their class and of England:

. . . Prue, Nancy, Rose . . . sport[ed] with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers; in Paris, perhaps; a wilder life; not always taking care of some man or other; for there was in all their minds a mute questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire, of ringed fingers and lace. . . (14).

It is interesting that the word “brewed,” used to describe their rebellion, still maintains a food connection – and a very English one, at that. Food generates even the expression of resistance to its rituals.

The act of eating *together*, then, is clearly a large component of any discussion of the social meaning of food: “We use eating as a medium for social relationships: satisfaction of the most individual of needs becomes a means of creating community” (Visser ix).<sup>6</sup> Although in some societies people do not traditionally eat together (Farb and Armelagos 81), ordinarily they do. Thus the choice of dining companions is crucial; the coming together to share a meal both represents and creates larger personal and social ties:

Sharing food is held to signify “togetherness,” an equivalence among a group that defines and reaffirms insiders as socially similar. Feasts cement agreements, treaties and alliances; reconciliations, patching up quarrels, or at least agreeing to differ are sealed in a shared meal – visiting heads of state continually entertain one another at banquets. (Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 115)

Being barred from the table is a punishment – like being banished or exiled. Beyond

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<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that some of Frank Lloyd Wright’s dining room furniture designed in the early 1900’s – high-backed chairs and a table with built-in lights at the corners – was specifically meant to give diners a feeling of enclosure around the table.

its functions in the family, the dinner distinguishes between the known and the foreign, the friend and the enemy; in its adherence to traditions, the dinner links the living and the dead (Chaline 254). Murdering a dinner guest is one of the most horrifying of crimes, because it breaches conventions of civility which are almost universal.

Sharing a meal also lends a certain intensity to personal relationships and interaction. Alain Lemenorel says, “Le repas, c’est la rencontre, la communication, l’échange, le partage, voire la confrontation des passions[...]” (363). However, he notes a very significant change in the twentieth century: “Le mangeur social fait place au mangeur individuel, et le commensal au grignoteur isolé [...] la table perd sa fonction sociale. Le taylorisme alimentaire tue la commensalité.” Because of the increased incidence of the solitary diner – like those in Katherine Mansfield’s stories whom we will discuss in Chapter 4 – the family meal takes on a new importance in the twentieth century. No longer merely assumed or habitual, as in, let us say, the novels of Balzac or Dickens, it becomes even more significant by virtue of its potential or actual absence. Thus in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, for instance, the drunken uncle’s arriving late for dinner in “Araby,” the dinner shared by transient strangers in “The Boarding House,” the grocery money drunk away at the pub in “Eveline,” the solitary restaurant dinner in “A Painful Case” – all these dinners *manqués* give more value to the celebration of family, friends and tradition in “The Dead,” the final story of the collection.

In addition to structuring the social milieu and the individual’s position in

that milieu, the consumption of food structures time. Marin points out that in Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty" the cooking process stops as time does:

Thus, "with a single stroke of her magic wand," [the good fairy] puts to sleep "everything that was in the castle . . . right down to the spits over the fire which were stuffed, to the point of overflowing, with partridges and pheasant. Even the fire dozed off." . . . The whole process of cooking is literally suspended. The dishes being prepared . . . and the courses in the processes of being cooked . . . are all suspended in a time that is fixed and immobile from then on: the culinary processes are brought to a standstill, and the culinary activities that transform wild meats into edible roasts "doze off" into the permanence of a single, monotonous, and interminable moment. (136)

Perrault's emphasis on the suspension of cooking not only underlines the integral connection of this activity to human life, but also defines it as a marker of time. If time is, in one sense, a subjective construct which reflects the human life span, meals are one way in which human beings organize and give meaning to time. This function of meals to mark the passage of time is, of course, used very frequently as a structuring device in fiction as well.

Indeed, eating is important to both the individual and the group in its very repetitive dailiness. Patterns of drinking and eating organize our time and distinguish the different functions of the day, the week, the year (Gusfield 73), as well as marking significant turning points in our lives. As something recurring, even ritualistic, within a small group or a family circle, the meal provides a structure in our lives.

Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" describes in meticulous detail Nick Adams' making coffee and heating up the contents of cans. This simple version of cooking a meal is – along with pitching a tent and fishing – part of Adams' attempt to ground

himself in a series of small everyday activities and thereby to return to some kind of normal reality after the war.

Changes in meal patterns are disruptive. Wood argues that “[t]he patterning of food . . . performs a regulatory function, encouraging family stability” (52).

Sociologists have pointed out that even when people eat alone, they may try to retain a structure and a uniformity in their meals, in terms of the menu as well as the schedule and the ritual. Certainly, foods recently introduced to mainstream England and North America have changed contemporary tastes, but, once accepted as a staple, an “ethnic” cuisine, like curry in England, Mexican dishes in the United States, and Chinese food in both countries, is brought into the existing pattern of fast-food and take-out meals. In restaurants, the invariability of both the menu and the structure of the meal has been noted frequently (Douglas; Murcott; Wood). McDonald’s is certainly aware that many people want a stable menu and familiar surroundings. The corporation’s mass-produced food and identical restaurants – coded “M” – are the key to its profits. As well, even expensive restaurants demonstrate an appreciable degree of standardization in menu, décor, and presentation of food.

Larger political, economic and class structures are also manifested in food habits and elucidated by a reading of food. For example, rank or status is regularly expressed through the dining rituals of a society. The traditional banquet is

la mise en scène du repas hiérarchique, où chacun a la part et la place qui conviennent à son rang, [et qui] exprime, le plus souvent de façon spectaculaire, les structures hiérarchiques et les relations de pouvoir,

en même temps qu'elle est ostention des richesses. (Thelamon 12)

Such meals are events which, through time-honoured ritual, reinforce rank and hence the structure of society. Whatever the particular form the banquet takes, it is a serious matter when such rituals are violated. In *Macbeth*, for instance, the breaking of the banquet ritual is a key point in the disintegration of Macbeth's personality and in his political downfall. Macbeth astonishes his guests at the table not only by apparently seeing and speaking to a ghost, but also by behaving as neither a host nor a king should (Jeanneret 47). His wife's dismissing the group quickly and without regard to rank – "At once, good night./Stand not upon the order of your going,/But go at once" (III.iv.118-20) – accentuates the seriousness of the Macbeths' breaches of the custom and hierarchy through which the world of the play defines civilized human nature. Moreover, the play suggests that, without a sound basis in custom, the kingdom is unstable and in danger of collapse.

It can, in fact, be argued that rank is a creation of food. Oswyn Murray, in a study of the symposium throughout history, cites Engels' notion of an agricultural surplus as a keystone of culture: "In order to survive, a society must produce a sufficiency; in order to create a culture, it must produce a surplus" (3). This surplus may be used to create a social structure comprising a hierarchy of classes, including non-productive classes, and a culture which includes rituals such as banquets:

The modes of commensality, the distribution of food and drink publicly or to groups of retainers, sacrifice, and the potlatch are some of the ways in which society is structured through the use of its surplus. Often these uses have direct and obvious functional justifications, in terms of the creation and maintenance of groups

essential to the survival of society, for military, political, or religious reasons. (4)

However, Murray notes that, although ritual may fit nicely into the structure of the society, beyond economic rationales, “any attempt to explain social systems in purely functional terms is bound to fail. . . . Man . . . delights in complicating his environment, in establishing a ritual order for its own sake” (4). A surplus gives room for signs not tied to necessity; ultimately, however, these signs themselves come to be considered essential demarcators within the class system. As we will see, Edith Wharton’s novels provide a particularly good example of this. In Wharton’s New York, lavish dinners, carefully orchestrated to indicate hierarchy, and supported by certain “correct” accompaniments – beautiful and stylish dresses, elegant possessions, homes decorated in a certain taste – become a mark of membership in a certain social group, and a test of would-be newcomers to that group.

Read as a text, food itself elucidates economic relations in other ways as well. As sociologist Mary Douglas observes, “It is disingenuous to pretend that food is not one of the media of social exclusion” (*Food in the Social Order* 36). Food is part of a larger economic system. Although the influence of economics seems to be mediated by taboos, customs, and tastes, these may themselves be based on economic factors. Some economic pressures are expressed at the family level: for example, sociologists and historians have noted that, at the dinner table, scarce food is often given first to the wage-earner(s), usually men. However, family dynamics and individual table habits are influenced, if not controlled, by much larger forces, often international

economic and political forces which drive and direct custom and taste. For instance, Mintz documents how the British taste for tea and for sugar, as well as the cultural importance of these products, was created, determined and maintained by the slave trade, by the plantation system in the Caribbean, by Britain's international political role, and by the evolving factory system in England. Conversely, of course, the British market in turn helped to maintain these larger systems in place.

However, even though the historian may recognize the link between the particular dinner table and such larger influences, the individual consumer may not be fully aware of the reasons for the prevailing taste, preference or choice of food, nor the hostess of the potent cultural and historical connotations of the food habits and customs to which she adheres. From their perspective, certain dishes are prepared, served and eaten in a certain way because that is just how things are done. Certainly, strong symbolic meanings are embedded in the individual associations, popular history and social custom surrounding meals, and economic factors may underlie some of these. In Marin's terms, "power" inheres in the meal as a sign (xvii), and the meaning of this sign may be or may once have been imposed by distant forces. In the words of anthropologist Eric Wolf, "Meanings are not imprinted into things by nature; they are developed and imposed by human beings. . . . The ability to bestow meanings – to "name" things, acts and ideas – is a source of power" (qtd. in Mintz, *Tasting Food* 30). Mintz adds that those who ultimately determine the meaning of food are "the purveyors of the foods, the givers of employment, the servants of the state who exercised the power that made the foods available" (31). Obviously, the

ascendancy of advertising in the twentieth century lends a new dimension to the notion of a distant wielder of power determining individual food habits. We will return to this point later.

Finally – and perhaps underlying the notion of food as a text which reflects and represents culture – food is a particularly significant textual marker because it is, itself, in its essence, closely related to language. To return to Levi-Strauss's point, the use of symbolic language and the ritualization of eating are, arguably, the two most important distinguishing features of humanity. As such, they are by definition cultural markers; as we have seen, the specific nature of both the language and the food habits of any given cultural group is crucial in establishing the identity of members of that group. It is obvious, but nevertheless important, to point out that what Marin calls the "ambivalent" (36) mouth is the primary organ associated with both speaking – thus with words – and with food. This connection is so basic that it is assumed, and goes largely unnoticed, except, perhaps, by young children. Marin argues that table manners are so important precisely because of the potential ambiguity arising from the conjunction of these two functions (36). As well, it is perhaps because both speaking and eating are oral activities that dinner may be particularly constituted as an occasion for speech: in contemporary life, the format of various standard meals – for instance, the family dinner, the dinner date, the business lunch, the political fundraising dinner – is, in each case, set up<sup>8</sup> to include some kind of speaking. The word "speech" denotes both the ability to speak and the formal public address which is often a way of creating or celebrating community. If we speak during and after a



meal, we are first giving thanks for food – in a sense giving back the food as an offering – and second, demonstrating that food has been successfully transformed into a celebration of community: in other words, that it produces culture.

If it is largely the close relationship of food and language that lends food the cultural resonance discussed in this chapter, Louis Marin would go even further with this line of thought. Coming at the question from a different point than Levi-Strauss, he also argues a close correlation, if not quite a cause-and-effect relationship, between eating and language: that eating inherently – not only through the stimulation of the dinner table – induces or even creates thought. The transformation of raw food into dinner both parallels and *permits* the transformation of lived experience into language. Marin straddles the distinction between the metaphoric and the actual link between food and language; in doing so, he almost conflates the two and dissolves the line between the metaphoric and the literal. Using the archetype of the Eucharist and the sacramental statement, “This is my body,” he proposes that, in the transformation of biological need into desire and of bread into a body, the word is born. Moreover, this transformation involves not only and perhaps not primarily a mortal body, but the body politic and the deity as well: both “a real socio-historical body and a mystical, divine body” (xix). The faithful, coming together as a social group, really do ingest God, simply because a few words have been spoken. The signification and thus the reality of the food is changed: “What is eaten at the end of the formula is not the edible thing of the beginning; what is eaten is both a sign and a body, a body as sign and a sign as body” (121). In this case, the need to

satisfy desire demands the intervention of a transformatory statement; mere nourishment transcends itself by the use of words.

Thus “the relationship between the body and discourse” (Marin 218) is a complex but potent one. The combination of words and food is transformatory, magical: things are *bound to happen* at dinner, in literature, as in life. The transformation of reality through the use of words is repeated in theatre, story-telling, and other forms of representation. In *To the Lighthouse*, the dinner which, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is so central to the novel, is preceded by a long sequence in which Mrs. Ramsay reads a story to her son. There is a double identification with food here: the story, “The Fisherman and his Wife,” is about finding and preparing food; moreover, the fact that this story is read to the child by his mother, the source of food, links nurturing with language. James is both physically soothed and imaginatively inspired by the sound of his mother’s voice, and at the same time, we are both reassured and stimulated by Woolf’s, as she tells us the novel, and as our own sense of reality gives way to the one that she is evoking for us.

In summary, the basic physical necessity and the sensual pleasure of eating give meals and mealtime rituals a fundamental importance in all cultures. Although eating is, at its basic level, the satisfaction of a biological need, dining is much more than that. Marin argues that, at least symbolically, dinner is linked not only to words, but to the desire for the divine: “This desire operates on the borders between Logos – the word and utterance – and Eros – pleasure and love – between a need for preservation, which is satisfied by food, and a desire realized through the pleasures

offered by a dish or a meal” (Marin xix). Moreover, as Barthes says, food has a dual nature: “People may very well continue to believe that food is an immediate reality (necessity or pleasure), but this does not prevent it from carrying a system of communication: it would not be the first thing that people continue to experience as a simple function at the very moment when they constitute it into a sign” (Barthes 168). Thus, in a complex of ways, food and the systems surrounding it make up an important text, one by which we – consciously or unconsciously – live our lives, and one that the writer can use to evoke the dynamics of the fictional world.

The view of domestic work that we will propose in our discussion of literary texts resonates with the kind of historical, social, psychological, religious and linguistic issues raised here. Insights into these larger issues are not an overlay on, but rather emanate from the central notion of dinner. To use a literary metaphor, we can see food as the content or the raw material of a book; the process of preparing and serving the meal corresponds to the literary or artistic treatment. Because of the historical association of women and food, the women writers we will look at in the coming chapters are in a particularly good place to live this metaphor.

## II. The Angel in the Kitchen or A White Sauce in Every Pot

In the early twentieth century, the focus on meals in the writing of women reflects a general concern with domesticity in the light of changing cultural values. Thus, before turning to our analysis of dining in early twentieth-century fiction, we will look at the changing perceptions of food, meals, and the structures and systems surrounding them in the general culture of the early twentieth-century period: current popular attitudes which, if not necessarily a direct influence on writers, formed part of the context or background of literary production. Within any period, of course, food habits are interpreted on the most everyday level by texts *about* food: texts such as recipe books, cookbooks, manuals on entertaining, which mediate the crucial transition between food and dining, between “the ‘what’ of food and the ‘how’ of cooking” (Marin 127). Because of the cultural resonance of food, these texts can be read for an understanding of more general concerns as well: “[c]ookbooks. . . . have often gone beyond the mere presentation of instructions for preparing dishes; they have also consistently reflected historic foodways, general customs, and ways of thinking” (Williams 18).

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, and increasing in the first two decades of the twentieth century, there was a strong impetus not only to rationalize and regiment domestic life, but also to codify and organize instruction about domestic skills into school curricula, adult courses, books and features in popular magazines. This process can be read as part of a response to the social change occurring at the

turn of the century. Women may have turned to the experts in schools and mass publications in an attempt to understand and control, at least on an individual level, the changes happening around them. Texts about food would normally be classified as non-fiction; novels as fiction. Yet, at the start of the twentieth century, much literature may have reflected life as it was actually experienced, while cookbooks and other manuals for the housewife and the hostess may have demonstrated a view of life as it could only be fantasized.

Marin postulates that cooking is like speaking and writing: “. . . the art of cooking is structured like language and obeys the same structural and functional constraints” (118). But Marin neglects to ask who is speaking. That cooking has been the language of women is perhaps self-evident, yet oddly understated. It is for this reason, perhaps, that women’s domestic experience became a point of some importance to Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and other twentieth-century women writers.<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that the early part of the twentieth century was a period of great social change. If food is the purview of women, then social change would be felt, expressed, and interpreted by women in the realm of the kitchen: in changing roles and expectations, changing formats for serving dinner, and so forth. Because women are in charge of providing food, it is obvious that women would be both the writers and the readers of cookbooks. And it would have been

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<sup>7</sup>Hermione Lee points out that, after the death of their mother, Woolf’s half-sister Stella Duckworth and, after Stella’s marriage, her sister Vanessa were in charge of supervising the basement kitchen. Thus Woolf would have understood from personal experience that, even in her class, serving meals was women’s work.

deemed both appropriate and permissible for women to write about food: Dorothy Parker notwithstanding, it has been a cliché throughout the twentieth century that women journalists begin their careers in the society or food pages of a newspaper. Thus, cookbooks, etiquette books, and other domestic and social manuals were acceptable for women to write. As the authors of cookbooks, women were, literally, both servers and writers of food.

In terms of food and dining habits, the early twentieth century set in motion trends that have continued until the present. We have noted already, for instance, the decline of the family meal and the growing trend toward eating alone. There may have been a number of reasons for this change: single people leading a solitary life, unattached to an extended family; changes in the structure of the work day; travel; and, in response to these other factors, the increasing numbers of restaurants and cafés, and the acceptability, even for women, of eating out. In the immediate pre- and post-World War I period, the structure of the family was changing, as was the role of women. The technological revolution in the home, with labour-saving devices ever more readily available, had a huge impact. The rise of advertising was creating a new kind of consumer culture. And overall, of course, the first world war had an enormous effect on the way people viewed the world and their place in it. This effect was felt in every area of life. As E.J. Hobsbawm says in *The Age of Empire*, it is not only that we see 1914 as a break in history; it was felt to be so at the time as well.

Women's role was also evolving from the earlier years of the Victorian era, when rapid technological and economic development progressed hand in hand with

the evolving notion of the “angel in the house.” During the nineteenth century, with much domestic production moving from the home to the factory, women’s work came to be viewed as marginal to the economic order. Even in families whose livelihood remained the same, the role of women may have changed. Jane Rendall traces the history of women who were actively involved in running the family business in the late eighteenth century, but whose nineteenth-century daughters and daughters-in-law were not (49-50). Even in the middle class, the assumption that “the male worker should aim to support his wife and family was beginning to undermine, in aspiration if not in practice, the older pattern of the family economy to which all members contributed” (Rendall 57). At the same time, “the sentimental value of home expanded proportionately” (Shapiro 13).

Nevertheless, by the late nineteenth century, there were a fair number of women who were literate and of a class which permitted them enough leisure time to become involved in activities outside the home. Many women expanded their role as moral guardian of the home into the wider world by taking part in various radical or reform movements: in mid-century, the abolitionist movement in the United States; later the suffrage movement in both England and the United States, as well as the temperance movement and various causes that championed the rights of the poor. “Philanthropy could be seen as an extension of the domestic world and therefore an activity permitted to women” (Rendall 47). The impetus was almost evangelical. Thus, in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay takes food to the poor and concerns herself about efficiency and sanitation in the dairy industry. Her activities are somewhat

more limited than those of her model, Julia Stephen, who, by all accounts, exhausted herself nursing the sick, but the fact that her interests are food-oriented identifies them as an extension of her role at home.

Linked to work with the poor in both Great Britain and the United States, as well as in continental Europe, was an attempt to reform the home and the level of housekeeping and cooking. To this end, cooking schools were established in the United States, first in the 1870's in New York and Boston, and then in other cities throughout the country. The immediate aim was to raise the level of nutrition among the poor and working classes. It was believed that nutritious meals were not only conducive to improved health, but were the antidote to everything from labour unions to crime, drunkenness and general immorality (Shapiro). As Mennell notes, "[t]he broad impulse to reform, however altruistic its conscious motivation, reflected the closer interdependence of social classes in the emerging urban-industrial societies" (230). In other words, since girls from these target classes also worked as cooks and servants in the houses of the wealthy and middle classes, improved cooking skills would naturally help them to find and keep work, and would also ultimately increase the number of trained cooks and raise the quality of meals in the homes of the reformers. The opportunity at the school to use more and different utensils and a more varied supply of ingredients than was available in their own homes also introduced working-class students to middle-class standards (Mennell 231) and aspirations, and presumably gave them both a critical perspective on their mother's housekeeping and a greater desire to climb the social ladder themselves.



In addition, as the twentieth century began, women and girls of the reformers' own social class increasingly demanded lessons for themselves. Ostensibly the demand was there because mistresses wanted to be able to supervise their cooks, and to ensure that they followed the most modern nutritional recommendations. However, as the number of middle-class families keeping servants declined, the cooking skills taught were more and more frequently required by the lady of the house herself.<sup>8</sup> Although French cuisine was introduced to the British and American upper classes in the nineteenth century, middle-class families could not afford to hire servants trained in French cooking, and therefore headed in another direction,

with the result that by the 1920's the American middle-classes were taking the lead in inaugurating a modern era where status would derive from ingesting much smaller amounts of food in much simpler form. This new middle class cuisine would in turn become the standard for all classes, forming the backbone of American foodways down to the present. (Levenstein 127)

The Boston Cooking School was the most influential of these institutions. Its recipes and menus ranged from the dull to the bizarre. The attitudes toward food verged on the puritanical: enjoyment of food was not an issue, except insofar as it was considered necessary to tempt people to eat. Nevertheless, menus were often determined by a certain kind of aesthetic sense: for instance, luncheons or dinners where the food was chosen to create a particular colour scheme were quite popular. (Green and white, the school colours, were served up at Boston Cooking School

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<sup>8</sup>According to Christine Frederick's *Household Engineering*, in 1910, only eight percent of American homes employed permanent servants.

graduation luncheons.) The food itself was not prepared in particularly innovative ways. Indeed, it was quite bland: a plain white sauce was used indiscriminately in almost any dish and there was a heavy emphasis on traditional New England fare, such as “baked beans, brown bread, fish balls, doughnuts, and Indian pudding” (Shapiro 63). Cooking school cuisine was similar in England. Collections of recipes used in schools in Liverpool, Manchester and London

represent food very much in line with what one would expect from accounts of lower middle-class food. . . . It is very English, with almost no sign of the French influence prevalent in the higher reaches of society. Cooking methods are very simple – boiling, roasting, frying, stewing. There are lots of pies, puddings and cakes. Leftover recipes are prominent. . . . (Mennell 231)

Mennell also notes that as the cooking schools developed during the twentieth century, the focus tended increasingly toward kitchen sanitation and “the prevention of food poisoning” rather than the pleasure of either cooking or eating (232).

The theoretical underpinnings of these schools were supposedly scientific. In fact, Ellen Richards, one of the founders and leaders of the domestic science movement, was the first female student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Admitted in 1870 as a special student, she was responsible for setting up facilities for women to take chemistry courses at that institution beginning in 1876, some eight years before women were finally admitted as regular students (Shapiro 37-8). Her approach, advocated both in her training of other teachers and in her book *The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning*, was to create “a household that ran as quietly and productively as a machine, under the guidance of a benevolent technician” (Shapiro

41). Richards and her followers emphasized that chemistry, anatomy, and other academic disciplines were involved in good cooking and that women were as capable as men of learning these disciplines, although in their own proper sphere (Shapiro 142). Indeed, although the students seem to have been most interested in cooking, by the 1890's there were many other courses included as part of the six-month program of studies at the Boston Cooking School: "Psychology, Physiology and Hygiene, Bacteriology, Foods, Laundry Work, and the Chemistry of Soap, Bluing, and Starch," as well as an elective course in Household Sanitation (Shapiro 65).

Clearly, working class mothers, especially immigrants, were not capable of teaching their daughters these "modern" American ways. Thus, the discipline of home economics was born. The subject was gradually introduced into public schools, beginning in 1885 in Boston:

"Our young women, ignorant of the value of home training, persist in fitting themselves for business rather than household life," complained the president of the National Household Economic Association – and [domestic science] quickly took its place as the standard female counterpart to industrial education. (Shapiro 140)

Similar trends occurred in Europe as well: domestic science was introduced in French schools in 1882 (Mennell 231), and gradually into English schools during the same period. Domestic science also crept into American universities. Some recently-founded women's colleges – Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Wellesley – refused to establish a department of home economics (Shapiro 179), much to the reformers' chagrin, but others did: Smith, for example (Mennell 231), as did the University of Illinois and a number of other state universities. By 1914 a B.A. in Home Economics was available

at 250 American institutions, and a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago (Shapiro 185). Clearly, underlying the founding of these degree programs was the increasing demand for equal educational opportunities for women. However, the development of this field of home economics – for women only – suggests a rather segregationist view of equality and a ghettoization of women within the university.<sup>9</sup>

As well as borrowing from the traditional scientific disciplines, the household reform movement adopted from the industrial world the principles of scientific management, which it applied to household tasks. Siegfried Giedion sees Catharine Beecher as the initiator of the quest to organize the work process, particularly in her arrangement of the kitchen for maximum efficiency. As early as 1841, Beecher had published her *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* and, in 1869, *The American Home, or Principles of Domestic Science*, in collaboration with her well-known sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. These manuals addressed all aspects of household management, from taking care of children to constructing houses and arranging furniture. Beecher's point was to impose a system of rational order on all aspects of the household. There were a number of similar manuals: for instance, Maria Parloa's *Home Economics* (1898), and, most notably, Mrs. Isabella Beeton's much-reprinted *Book of Household Management*, first published in England in 1861.

Following Beecher, reformers of the early twentieth century sought to improve

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<sup>9</sup>Shapiro also makes this point. (219)

the efficiency of the home by applying directly the principles and methods of Frederick Taylor. In 1912, Christine Frederick performed time and motion studies, inspired by Frank Gilbreth's work in factories, counting and measuring the number of steps or physical movements involved in simple kitchen tasks – beating an egg, for instance – and tried to rationalize the activity so as to use only the minimum amount of human energy required. It was seen that a well-organized kitchen could reduce the steps and the time needed for everyday chores. Frederick's book *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home*, billed as a correspondence course because at the end of each chapter readers were asked to apply the book's principles to their own home, went through several printings between 1915 and 1923. Frederick specifically makes business analogies throughout her text, calling the housewife at various times a "purchasing agent" (315) and the "executive head" of the household (380). She also defines the modern housewife as a consumer rather than a producer, and notes that "[t]o become a trained consumer is . . . one of the most important demands made on the housekeeper of today. . ." (317; emphasis in original). These ideas were picked up and exploited by advertisers, who appealed at the same time to modernity and conservatism. Marchand notes that, in the 1920's and 30's, "copywriters constantly congratulated women for their presumed new capacities for management. But the proper field for these managerial talents remained the home." The wife was cast as the "general purchasing agent" of the family, "and thus analogous to a business executive of modest power," the husband "as the home's 'treasurer' or its 'president'" (168-70).

Originally, many of the early reformers saw the future lying in communal kitchens: the expansion of the family into a community, which, by pooling resources, would lessen the load of housework and especially of cooking in each individual family. In fact, in 1889, *Good Housekeeping* magazine carried an article by Edward Bellamy encouraging this idea: "The editors . . . sensed correctly that while the bulk of their middle class readership would hardly sympathize with his socialism they would find his ideas on solving the 'servant problem' of great interest" (Levenstein 130). However, the idea of cooperative kitchens never caught on. In fact, as we noted earlier, the trend in the twentieth century has been in the opposite direction: toward eating alone.<sup>10</sup> Certainly advertising has played a role in this trend by targeting individual needs and thus bolstering a sense of life which runs counter to the notion of community.<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on the individual is only partly mitigated by the advertisers' image of the perfect nuclear family – a family made up of individual consumers.

If the woman of the family was destined, then, to cook every meal alone, early

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<sup>10</sup>Lemenorel, Mintz and Mennell have all made this point; Roy Wood, however, maintains that these claims are exaggerated, and that there is little evidence that the family meal is really disappearing.

<sup>11</sup>Many people have, of course, discussed the growth of individualism as an important factor in recent history. Elias sees an increasing, although illusory, sense of the self as an autonomous actor. And Douglas notes that "the individual had once been seen as a partially autonomous subunit, gaining full significance from his part in a hierarchical whole. In contemporary philosophizing he has become a separate, self-justified unit, locked in individual exchanges with other such self-seeking, rational beings" (*Food in the Social Order* 6).

domestic scientists like Ellen Richards were very much in favour of improving kitchen technology in the interest of efficiency. Appliance manufacturers, seeing the possibility of sales, encouraged the further application of scientific management studies to housework. For instance, in the early 1930's, Lillian Gilbreth was hired by a gas company to study the efficiency of American kitchens.<sup>12</sup> There is a subtle but interesting shift, however, from Richards' valorization of housework – especially when linked to modern technological advances – as a noble, important and scientific occupation, to the early twentieth-century emphasis on housework as inherently a form of drudgery that could be alleviated by the use of up-to-date equipment. An advertisement for S.O.S. steel wool pads, reproduced in Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream*, aptly demonstrates the modern woman's attitude to housework. A young woman – standing – is talking to a seated man: "You think Im [sic] a flapper but I *can* keep house. If we get married, I'll keep my house better than mother does hers. But I'm not going to turn into a slave. You *men!* You think drudgery is a sign of good housekeeping" (355). There are a number of interesting aspects to this advertisement: first, the sense that housework is not interesting in itself, but something to be done efficiently to leave time for other activities; second, the implication that there is nothing to be learned from mother. Although a modernist break with the past is suggested in this example, it is, nevertheless, clear that being a

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<sup>12</sup>Invented in about 1850, the gas stove had come into wide use by the mid-1920's (Hooker); other nineteenth-century domestic inventions followed similar trajectories.

good housekeeper is still considered one of the most desirable qualities in a wife.

The advertising campaigns for new appliances enticed the consumer with words and expressions like “modern” and “time-saving.” In the 1920's, advertisements for refrigerators and other appliances often showed well-dressed, relaxed women, sometimes in the company of party guests, suggesting that the appliance would bestow upon the housewife a life of elegance and leisure (Marchand 270-74). Marchand points out that there is a religious aura about many of these scenes, sometimes with groups gathered reverently around the appliance and/or a mysterious light emanating from either the appliance or an unknown source. A woman on her own or in the company of friends is portrayed as brisk and efficient, but when women are shown with their families, there is usually a soft light cast over the scene (244). The lighting, the spatial structure, and the visual content of these family-oriented advertisements affirm the roles and power relations of individual family members and the social role of the family. The notion of the “new woman” is apparent in advertising, but underneath, the traditional stereotypes do not actually change.

The application of efficiency systems to the home was ostensibly intended to save women time, to create more leisure for outside activities, and, from the start of the home economics movement, to give housework the same degree of status as outside work. Changes in the economy, in education and in technology could and should have made housework more efficient, yet many have noted that, although the type of work changed, the amount of work did not necessarily lessen. As Ewen says, “[r]ather than viewing the transformations in housework as *labor-saving*, it is perhaps



more useful to view them as *labor-changing*" (163). Yet there were significant changes in the home, as well as material and attitudinal changes to housework. These are perhaps most clear in the spatial and functional reorganization of the kitchen:

The room that for three centuries had provided Americans with warmth, evening light, food, pleasant cooking odors, and an agreeable meeting place now began to lose many of these characteristics, especially in the cities, and became increasingly a laboratory presided over by a housewife-technician. The size of the kitchen shrank as its uses declined and, in urban areas, as escalating land values took their toll. (Hooker 211)

Despite the perhaps excessively sentimental and nostalgic tone of the above passage, Hooker has a point. The changes in the kitchen signify changes in the family as well, which were perhaps not always for the best. The overall impact of emulating industrial models in the home is that the housewife becomes like a factory worker (Ewen 164), and capitalism enters the private as well as the public sphere. Ultimately, whatever possibility might have existed for exercising imagination or creativity in keeping house was lessened; in the new model, women become merely foremen or managers of the home, ceding their authority to outside experts selling new products and giving advice (Ewen 169). Moreover, when efficiency and image are the major aims, the emotional, sensual, pleasurable, ritualistic aspects of both cooking and eating are somehow lost.

A similar trend occurred in food products. The cooking reformers' ultimate goal was homogeneity: the same results every time. Thus, more "scientific" and exact measurements were incorporated into recipes, with Fannie Farmer, the most celebrated principal of the Boston Cooking School and author of *The Boston Cooking-*

*School Cook Book* – first published in 1896 – leading the way. Home economists interested in precision and guaranteed results in the kitchen applauded the growth of industrial standardization, believing that it would help achieve their goal of the “scientific” kitchen. In the United States, this quest for standardization meant eliminating, appropriating and/or homogenizing regional cooking styles and the *cuisine* of immigrants. There was a clear prejudice in favour of the American (i.e. New England) way, defined as blandly as possible. Prepared foods were seen not only as more “standard,” but as time-saving and sanitary. Shapiro notes that some women who taught at or directed cooking schools and lectured around the country ended up working for food-processing companies, often endorsing consumer products: baking powder, for example, or Crisco shortening. More and more, food became merely an industrial product, not necessarily pleasurable or appealing to the senses, and not even particularly nutritious:

With the Crisco white sauce, scientific cookery arrived at a food substance from which virtually everything had been stripped except a certain number of nutrients and the color white. Only a cuisine molded by technology could prosper on such developments, and it prospered very well. (Shapiro 215)

With a recipe for Crisco white sauce, the cook can make a dish that has no colour, no texture, no taste left. It is easy to see a certain vision of society here as well. Shapiro says, perhaps unkindly, “When Fannie Farmer at last set down her measuring spoons . . . she left behind a kitchen she had helped, crucially, to redirect toward social homogeneity and American cheese” (126).

Mennell, writing mostly about England, sees this trend emphasized by recipe

columns in women's magazines, which had begun to address middle-class women in the mid-Victorian period (234), and had grown enormously in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These magazines may in fact have influenced more women than cookbooks did. He decries the lack of a "sensual quality" (245) in the description of foods, and notes that

[e]ach recipe is presented in isolation, with little sense that the dish, its ingredients, and the techniques it requires are interconnected with other dishes, ingredients and techniques – a sense of interconnectedness that can be found within an inherited tradition.  
(246)

In fact, the guarantees of "experts" in the magazines replace the inherited wisdom of a mother or a grandmother; since all recipes are supposed to have been tested by magazine personnel or by the manufacturers of the ingredients, women can consider the dishes foolproof and need not worry about failure. It is also worth noting that, as magazines counted more and more on advertising for financial support, the distinction between advertisements and articles became less and less clear, a trend that continues today in most women's magazines.

Ultimately, then, the reformers reinforced the role of women in the home, although modified ideologically with the rhetoric of equal but separate spheres, and despite the fact that they themselves were often absent from home pursuing successful careers as home economists/domestic scientists. Moreover, they reinforced the economic system, not only by extolling the stable home and implying the rightness of the American middle-class ideology, but also by encouraging women's desire for modernity and status, and preying on their insecurity about measuring up to the

model of the twentieth-century homemaker. Thus the domestic reformers helped to mold women into willing consumers of whatever the latest product might be. Early domestic scientists wanted to validate the woman's role in the home, yet, under the influence of manufacturers in the twentieth century, it was ultimately minimized and downgraded.

As the twentieth century progressed, and more appliances, processed foods, and other household products became available and were advertised with women in mind, the home became "an arena primarily of consumption" (Ewen 135-36), a notion, as we have seen, strongly endorsed by home economists such as Christine Frederick. For the upwardly mobile – then, as now – there was a clear link between consumerism and status. We will see this connection in our discussion of *The Custom of the Country* in Chapter 3: Undine Spragg, newly arrived in New York City from a small town, wants not so much to own what the wealthy own, as to buy whatever she believes that the fashionable crowd is buying. (Red stationery and white ink are an example of her inept purchases.) In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, published in 1929, possessions are important to Irene, the middle-class black protagonist, as a confirmation of her own class status. The novel, told largely from Irene's point of view, thus frequently calls attention to details of domestic items and of meals, both in Irene's home and elsewhere. The following description of a tea party in the hotel room of Irene's girlhood friend – who is passing for white – is a good example:

The tea things had been placed on a low table at Clare's side. She gave them her attention now, pouring the rich amber fluid from the tall glass pitcher into stately slim glasses, which she handed to her guests,

and then offered them lemon or cream and tiny sandwiches or cakes.  
(197)

This is a world where every object, every gesture is important and suggestive. Such overwritten descriptions – excessively, annoyingly detailed – often have symbolic overtones; here, the tea things evoke associations with race and with feminine beauty. But, more important, the writing itself, in suggesting Clare’s careful attention to detail and Irene’s attribution of meaning to minor objects, underlines the two women’s insecurity and wariness, and emphasizes the constant vigilance necessary, in Clare’s case to “pass” successfully,<sup>13</sup> and in Irene’s, to assure herself of her middle-class identity. Although race makes the cases of these women extreme, advertisers preyed upon similar insecurity in the female population at large.

This insecurity was also acute in the general area of social life. As we see in *Passing*, for instance, women expended a good deal of energy – and worry – on socializing and entertaining. In addition to their new scientific approach to cooking and domestic work, cookbooks at the turn of the century paid considerable attention to social life. Beyond providing recipes for individual scientifically-prepared dishes, many cookbooks addressed the question of presenting them in a socially-acceptable and attractive way to entertain the right people. The titles of many cookbooks suggest an emphasis on what ought to be served and how: for instance, *Dinners, Ceremonious and Unceremonious and the Modern Methods of Serving Them* (1890) and *What to Have*

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<sup>13</sup>Irene also sometimes passes for white, at, for instance, the rooftop tea-room where she encounters Clare for the first time in many years.

*for Dinner: Containing Menus with the Recipes Necessary for their Preparation* (1905).

Many books on entertaining were also published in the turn-of-the-century period, including such titles as *Party-giving on every Scale: or the Cost of Entertainments with the Fashionable Modes of Arrangement* (1880), and, simply, *The Art of Entertaining* (1897).<sup>14</sup>

Sociability may not, however, always have indicated profound or meaningful ties. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writing in 1903, argues that the home is for private life, and not for display, and that women should undertake more meaningful pursuits than entertaining. She notes that real contact may not even happen at a party:

Your friend may be at the same dinner. . . . Your friend may be at the same dance . . . at the same reception, the same tea, the same luncheon – but you do not meet. As the “society” hand is gloved that there be no touching of real flesh and blood, so is the society soul dressed and defended for the fray in smooth phrase and glossy smile – a well-oiled system, without which the ceaseless press and friction would wear us raw, but within which we do anything but “meet.”  
(204)

That a good deal of entertaining was being done may be indicated by the very fact of its being criticized. Despite such dissenting voices, at the turn of the century, a preoccupation with serving dinner was a major part of the social and economic – as well as the domestic – landscape. People were indeed still meeting, if under increasingly alienating circumstances. We will pursue this question of sociability further in the next chapters in the context of Edith Wharton’s work.

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<sup>14</sup>These are books for hostesses; in Chapter 3 we will take note of the equivalent books for guests.

## Chapter 2

### In with the In-Crowd

## I. Manners and Social Change

This chapter looks at the rituals of dining in the turn-of-the-century period, particularly in the work of Edith Wharton. As described in her novels, the dining customs of the wealthy in this era are manifestations of a whole code of manners and social ritual which represented tradition, but also responded to the economic and social changes that had been building up for a period of years. It is significant that Edith Wharton, like and through her character Newland Archer, refers to upper-class New York society as a tribe: the people within a tribe, precisely because tribal life is their only reality, cannot imagine any other existence and do not see the relativity of their own customs and rituals. Nearly all of Wharton's New Yorkers are complacent about their way of life. Yet Wharton's work depicts a society whose manners may have become more prescriptive for the very reason that the society they represent is about to be destroyed. As the author, Wharton herself plays the roles of both hostess and critical guest.

If "the custom of festive gatherings probably originated in motives of conviviality and religion" (Veblen 65), Wharton's novels demonstrate that dinner parties and other forms of socializing are also opportunities for the upper classes to show off wealth, to give evidence of "conspicuous consumption." According to Veblen, writing at approximately the same time as Wharton, the display of good breeding and manners showed that a person had enough leisure time to cultivate these qualities; as well, a display of luxury goods and the "consumption of choice articles of food" (61) became not only the prerogative but even the responsibility of



the leisure class. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dinners and the rituals and customs surrounding dining helped to define elite society both for its inner circle and for those who were outside. The effect on the latter was to emphasize to them that they were excluded. The effect on the former was a validation of the group itself and of the individual's place in both the group and the hierarchy within the group.

The term "manners" is certainly appropriate in talking about the formalized rituals that define a society. Yet it is difficult to delineate the parameters of this rather slippery notion. Today, as in earlier periods, manners are often seen as synonymous with etiquette – a superficial veneer on social behaviour – and the code of manners is usually viewed as prescriptive. Indeed, for centuries, dating back to Erasmus's very influential *De civilitate morum puerilium*, books on manners have helped to define the culture's norms of behaviour, and have been particularly instrumental in teaching the young. However, although it is almost impossible to avoid the denotation of prescriptive etiquette, the notion of manners goes far beyond the limit implied by the use of the word in this way. A form of communication among those who know the code, manners are a language encompassing both verbal and non-verbal components. Gary Lindberg, in his book on the novel of manners, emphasizes the formal aspect of this language:

[Manners] are the real or implied actions – in gesture, speech, decoration, dress – that provide forms for individual expression, and *within* the social order these forms quicken public feelings by summoning up unspoken meanings and beliefs. (3)

In this sense, manners are rather a dialect than a language, having “their origins and their significance within a specific social order” (3), and not necessarily transparent to those outside the particular group. Lionel Trilling’s definition emphasizes the force of unstated communication implicit in a code of manners:

What I understand by manners, then, is a culture’s hum and buzz of implication. I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made. It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning. They are the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture. . . . In this part of culture assumption rules, which is often stronger than reason. (200-01)

Manners are particularly identified with food, in large part because of the heavy cultural associations of mealtime customs. For Norbert Elias, writing in the 1930’s, “the civilising process” has been characterized by an increasing repression of the physical, evidenced by a “gradual transformation of behavior and the emotions,” and an “expanding threshold of aversion” (83). Thus, most human activities which respond to biological needs – including sexual activities, bathing, sleeping, and elimination – have become progressively more private. Eating, however, has not; on the contrary, the meal has nearly always been considered a social occasion, one of its main functions to establish, affirm and mediate not only interpersonal relationships, but larger social ties as well. While remaining social and public, then, the act of eating is ritualized and surrounded by taboos. Moreover, in the West, attitudes toward food have become increasingly divorced from the fundamental realities of

eating both as a bodily function and as the fulfillment of desire. That is, reminders of the physical have become less and less acceptable at the table: there are strict regulations on eating with the fingers, wiping the hands and mouth, *etcetera*. As well, while remaining a public activity, eating has become more personal and individualized: for instance, it has evolved that people do not eat out of the same dishes. By the very fact of their importance, these customs indicate that the physical, although suppressed, is still lurking unpleasantly under the table.

Elias argues that these changes, which he defines as part of the evolving system of manners, while certainly influenced by social, political and economic factors, have in turn profoundly affected both the society at large and the construction of individual personalities. Both levels of change have occurred gradually and concurrently. Elias links the process of privatization and the expanding boundaries of what is defined as intimate behaviour with an increase in social control and the centralization of power in the state. Further, as the middle class gains prominence, "Elias suggests . . . [a] displacement of merely exterior, superficial aristocratic *civility* into a psychologized *cultivation*. . . ." (Litvak 29) – a major shift in both the notion of manners and the definition of the self.

Class differences, then, are crucial in the evolution of manners, with the ascendant class usually setting the tone for change. On a material level, innovations such as the use of the fork began in the court circle and spread gradually to other sectors of society before finally becoming the norm; and, as we see in Edith's Wharton's work or in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, elite groups set the standard in

the early twentieth century as well. In everyday parlance, good manners are frequently linked with good taste, the latter expression – obviously based on the palate – indicating not only the ability to choose the appropriate food and other consumable items and possessions, but to act with a certain self-restraint. Both qualities are often defined by the behaviour of a certain class. Joseph Litvak, in his discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*, uses the terms “manners” and “taste” almost synonymously, referring to the reader’s

submitting, consciously or not, to a rigorous aesthetic *discipline*, undergoing subtle but incessant schooling in the ever-finer classifications, discriminations, and aversions that maintain Austen’s exacting (because never quite explicit) norms of good manners and good taste. . . . (22)

Good manners, by their very definition, then, imply a way of eating. Litvak gives examples of how the value judgments made about individuals and individual behaviour by and within *Pride and Prejudice* are often based on explicitly or implicitly stated eating preferences or manners of eating. One example of both the judge and the judged is “the ‘indolent’ Mr. Hurst, whose vice is confirmed and whose character irreversibly discredited, in the summary observation that, ‘when he found [Elizabeth to] prefer a plain dish to a ragout, [he] had nothing to say to her’” (Litvak 23; brackets in original). However, beyond such explicit connections, as Litvak notes, the term “disgusting,” from the Latin word for “taste,” is commonly applied not only to food items, but also to both manners and non-gustatory preferences, not to mention sexual behaviour.

Despite popular usage, then, a code of manners has a more profound and far-

reaching effect than that suggested by the relatively simple and apparently even arbitrary etiquette of the dinner table; manners are represented by, but not synonymous with, social protocol. As well as merely smoothing or facilitating social intercourse, manners may determine the content of both speech and action, and thus of interpersonal relationships and even of thought itself. In this sense, manners are implicit in a given society; often unconsciously followed, they cannot be learned easily by an outsider and are a buttress to the kind of class exclusivity that we see in Edith Wharton's work. Richard Godden notes that manners cannot be separated from social economy; insofar as they strengthen "the stability of the social order" (3), they affirm the economic underpinnings of that order. The economic security of the leisure class both demands and provides the opportunity to develop the highly-mannered life which is in the interest of that class. Thus, although the term "novel of manners" is often disparaging, suggesting a superficiality in the concerns of the novel, the portrayal or examination of manners in a novel is potentially more than a mere exercise in structural and social formality. Viewed in the light of Elias, for whom the notion of manners comprises both ritual and the evolving social and psychological history of a people, and Godden, for whom manners are based on social relations grounded in economic realities, the implications of manners are profound.

In Edith Wharton's work we find one of the most thorough presentations both of the period before 1914, which Eric Hobsbawm calls a golden age for the haute bourgeoisie (166), and of the changes undergone by this society as it was supplanted. As portrayed in Wharton's novels, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

present an apparent anomaly of heavily and strictly codified social behaviour at the same time as changes in family structure, a redefinition of classes and an increase in geographic and social mobility. The former was in part a response to the latter: that is, the perception and the experience of instability led to a system of tighter controls, which were imposed not by law but by the social group and, as we see in the case of Newland Archer, ultimately accepted and internalized by the individual. Social mobility was particularly evident in the United States, where class distinctions had always been constructed loosely. But even in England, if perhaps to a lesser extent, there was movement.<sup>1</sup> Thus working-class people set their sights on the middle classes at the same time as the middle class was aspiring to the level of the haute bourgeoisie. By the 1920's, we can see evidence of change in Virginia Woolf's novels, where salaried work has, to some extent, become not only financially necessary but also acceptable to the upper classes; where somewhat disparate groups are brought together socially; and where the war itself has had a certain levelling effect. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, members of Clarissa's circle, people with whom she has grown up, are colonial administrators, wives of industrialists, as well as members of the House of Commons. And, although birth may have given them a head start, all face the possibility of failure, if they – or their husbands – do not pursue their work with a certain degree of alacrity. Peter Walsh's position in India, for instance, is not merely a sinecure for a younger son; he is apparently expected to do something there.

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<sup>1</sup>Certainly this trend was not new, but had been going on since the Industrial Revolution and, in England, the breakdown of the landowning system.

However, at Mrs. Dalloway's party, conformity with a certain social code is still assumed; eccentricities can be tolerated within that code because of the general acceptance of the prevailing rituals and standards of social behaviour.

Leonore Davidoff sums up the impact of these changes, and especially the increased structuring of social life that may have resulted:

[T]he shift from a society where patronage and familial or client relationship were the norm to a system where individual achievement was rewarded with great wealth and power, was bewildering to those living through the change. Increased geographical mobility through better transport also disrupted received notions of social placing. In contradistinction to those chaotic new developments, the rules of Society and the confining of social life to private homes made possible the minute regulation of personal daily life. It also made possible the evaluation and placing of newcomers in the social landscape. . . . (17)

Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter Walsh remembers an incident from his youth when Clarissa made fun of a housemaid turned squire's wife who did not know the social conventions of dress or conversation. But rituals were not created just to maintain exclusivity. Because rituals seem permanent, seem to create a link with both the past and the future, they can reinforce a belief in the rightness of a particular social order. The resulting sense of security, of solidity in the face of geographical and/or class mobility might have been reassuring even for those with the most secure and acceptable backgrounds.

Wharton's novels present various incarnations of the American upper class. *The Age of Innocence* gives the most complete picture of the old New York elite, and thus forms a background to some of her other novels. Although it was written in the

twentieth century, most of *The Age of Innocence* is set some years previously, at a period when the crisis of society was starting to be felt. The old society was not necessarily the most wealthy. Many people were beginning to have money – Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* calls them “the Invaders” (74) – but, although “a multitude of the newly enriched gravitated to New York as a field for both larger financial operations and social advancement” (Lindberg 5), their wealth was not a guarantee of entry into upper-class society. Wharton captures the difference between the two groups in her description of the “shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy [of Music]. Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to. . .” (*The Age of Innocence* 3). The new wealthy clamoured for a new opera house: bigger, newer, more convenient, although without historical associations. “Drawn to,” in the above passage, suggests not only that, for unstated – perhaps financial – reasons, these new people are becoming unavoidable, but also that the old elite are, almost against their will, somehow attracted to them.

This dynamic is illustrated in William Dean Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, written much earlier than *The Age of Innocence*, but set at approximately the same time. In that novel, the Coreys clearly have less money than do the Laphams at their height. But they do have history, pedigree, old possessions, a tastefully decorated home, education, leisure, manners and style – all attributes that the Laphams can never hope to acquire. Nevertheless, the young Tom Corey not only marries one of the Lapham daughters, but goes to work for her father. In Wharton’s *The House of*



*Mirth*, set a few decades later, Gus Trenor realizes, before most of his social set does, that the Jewish businessman Simon Rosedale is an important man to know because of his emerging financial position and influence. At the end of the novel, Rosedale is well on his way to inclusion in Trenor's circle; similarly, Elmer Moffatt in *The Custom of the Country* is eventually accepted by polite society, despite his origins and his boorishness. We will return to these points in the next chapter.

Godden notes that "the foundation of manners is economic; and as economic structures change, so manners change" (12). But the first step was the acceptance of the *nouveau riche* into the inner circle. Although money eventually did break down the barriers of society, it did not do so at first. Indeed, against the perceived onslaught, the upper class made a perhaps unconscious, yet desperate and therefore more prescriptive attempt to define its distinguishing characteristics, as well as the appropriate behaviour for its members. Wharton's novels demonstrate the degree to which the upper classes in New York defined themselves and clung to the most minute technicalities of this self-definition. Measured against this entrenched conservatism are the fringes of society; the novels also explore the permissible degree of deviation from the norm, and the consequences of non-conformity within the class. As Davidoff notes about England in this period, "The domesticating of public life via the dictates of Society was combined with control of individual behaviour and face-to-face interaction through a rigidly applied code of personal behaviour" (33). In *The Age of Innocence*, Americans, with their democratic traditions, seem far more concerned about behavioural distinctions than do their cousins in Europe, where

class distinctions were more definite and therefore were not threatened to the same degree by individual aberrations. Newland's first name reflects the resulting ambiguity: is Newland on the verge of doing something really innovative, original and modern, or does his name merely refer to an America which is, ironically, far more interested in the old than the new?

If one of the conflicts in Wharton is between the old wealthy and the upwardly-mobile, a second is inherent in the notion of manners itself. In Newland Archer's responses to the dominant code of his world in *The Age of Innocence*, he is torn between the security of his society and its repressiveness. Newland's dilemma may be more complex and profound than it first appears. A code of manners, as Joanne Finkelstein points out, potentially has a double function. The use of "good manners" is frequently seen as a way of putting the common good of society above the interests of an individual; manners, in this sense, constitute "a language and abstract code of behaviour which promise to enhance the life of the group rather than advancing the singular survival of any individual" (127). This view is based on a kind of fear, wariness or

. . . the underlying assumption that people may not be virtuous by nature; indeed, they may be malevolent and destructive, and in anticipation of this possibility, a general obedience to manners is necessary. Consequently, manners need to be acquired by members of society in order to give the appearance that they will not be socially antagonistic; manners impose a veneer of virtue on everyone's behaviour which will conceal any signs of base or destructive emotions and desire. (131)

This definition, however, becomes a self-fulfilling one: a person who acts like a

gentleman must be a gentleman and vice-versa. Manners are admitted to be merely veneer, but the surface attributes become the essential reality. Thus, people who do not know the code are considered suspect and, as such, are automatically excluded.

With a slight shift in perspective, then, manners become a conservative force. If one does not look beneath the veneer, then hypocrisies, injustices, defects in society are not revealed or confronted:

[A]n individual's faithful observance of manners can produce a patterned form of sociality which has the effect of annulling doubts and questions that may arise from anomalies or improprieties encountered in our sociality. From this viewpoint, manners express the mute violence of routine; they. . . become a form of social control which effectively maintains the life of the group but, at the same time . . . can stifle the private intellectual struggles of the individual.  
(Finkelstein 131-32)

The exercise of manners disciplines "both the mind and body," and the consequent triumph of routine becomes "an impetus toward the unexamined life" (Finkelstein 131-32). Under an apparent moralism, amorality may be accepted, even encouraged. From this perspective, Lily Bart's clinging to "one of those abstract notions of honour that might be called the conventionalities of the moral life" (*H of M* 405), after having been destroyed in part by hypocritical social codes, begins to seem absurd: "What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial?" (*H of M* 405). Newland's dilemma, while not fatal, is perhaps more difficult because he has a stake in the social order and therefore has something to lose.

## II. Rituals of Dinner in *The Age of Innocence*

We have noted that both the narrator of *The Age of Innocence* and Newland Archer describe the society of old New York as “tribal,” with its customs, rituals and taboos. Those surrounding dining and entertaining are some of the most important ones. Since dining practices are arguably the most central to social identity and therefore the most potent, there are multiple levels of meaning associated with dining. Thus it is frequently around the numerous dinners and other social events in *The Age of Innocence* that the most important issues in the novel coalesce.

In the upper-class world of Wharton’s novels, women are the upholders of mealtime ritual and custom rather than the actual providers of food. In holding a dinner party, the hostess actively participates in endorsing and maintaining the stability of her society. In *The Age of Innocence*, dinners are very rigidly structured and the rituals surrounding them strictly adhered to: indeed, dinners play a large part in structuring the life of this particular segment of New York society. Dinners are given habitually by the same people at the same time of the year, or to mark a recurring event in the calendar: not only holidays like Thanksgiving, but events such as the opening of the opera season. The form of each dinner is apparently unvarying, with the several courses followed by the segregation of men and women for a period of after-dinner conversation. After-dinner calls may follow an ordinary family dinner, but the novel does not show us too many of these, for the really important dinners are those eaten with invited guests – even though, on one level, the social group seems like one big incestuous family. The invitations, the details of the menu, the dishes and

silverware used, the seating arrangements – all signify the particular meaning and the importance of the event. Within this prescribed structure, a subtle variation may indicate an important message being conveyed to one or more of the diners or to the society at large.

The dinner hour structures the day and does so in the same way for everyone. For instance, we are told that “[o]ld-fashioned New York dined at seven” (100), and it is emphasized at one of the van der Luydens’ dinners that this schedule is strictly adhered to: “Nothing was done without ceremony under the van der Luyden roof, and though there were but four guests the repast had begun at seven punctually, so that the proper sequence of courses might be served without haste before the gentlemen settled down to their cigars” (317). After the dinner hour, “the habit of after-dinner calls, though derided in Archer’s set, still generally prevailed” (100). Thus, walking up Fifth Avenue, Archer can see the almost choreographed parade of callers leaving home and arriving at their destinations, and, in this very small world, he knows who is visiting whom.<sup>2</sup> This last passage also suggests how difficult it is to change habits. “Archer’s set,” presumably the more self-consciously modern members

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<sup>2</sup>This scene of evening activity is somewhat reminiscent of the passage in *Mrs. Dalloway* where Peter, on his way to Clarissa’s party, watches people leave their houses for the evening. However, the latter scene is far more anonymous, urban and festive, as well as evocative of a larger world:

Doors were being opened. . . . women came; men waited for them, with their coats blowing open, and the motor started. Everybody was going out. What with these doors being opened, and the descent and the start, it seemed as if the whole of London were embarking in little boats moored to the bank, tossing on the waters, as if the whole place were floating off in carnival. (249)

of the younger generation, is powerless in the face of custom; although they may criticize, eventually they too will most likely follow. Indeed, at the moment of his observation, Archer himself is on his way to make an after-dinner call. Arguably, this after-dinner circulation is a form of public knowledge accounting for everyone's whereabouts and everyone's destination for the evening, and producing a complete picture of both personal and social relations in the group as a whole.

If one knows more or less what everyone is doing at the dinner and after-dinner hours, one also knows who they are. The same people keep seeing each other at different dinners, and the demographics of New York society are generally familiar to all its members, as are details about each other's histories, genealogies, and even personal quirks. In the event of questions, Mr. Sillerton Jackson, the unofficial keeper of all this information, can be applied to. With Mr. Jackson as a dinner guest, the meal seems to have been sanctioned by the forefathers. It is worth quoting at length the description of his role, in order to capture the flavour of the petty yet powerful forces at work to maintain the network of static social relationships. Jackson

knew all the ramifications of New York's cousinships; and could not only elucidate such complicated questions as that of the connection between the Mingotts (through the Thorleys) with the Dallases of South Carolina, and that of the relationship of the elder branch of Philadelphia Thorleys to the Albany Chiverses (on no account to be confused with the Manson Chiverses of University Place), but could also enumerate the leading characteristics of each family: as, for instance, the fabulous stinginess of the younger lines of Leffertses (the Long Island ones); or the fatal tendency of the Rushworths to make foolish marriages; or the insanity recurring in every second generation of the Albany Chiverses, with whom their New York cousins had always refused to intermarry – with the disastrous exception of poor Medora Manson, who, as everybody knew . . . but then her mother was

a Rushworth. (9-10; ellipses in original)

To people like Mr. Jackson, a peculiar form of genetics masks the real socio-economic factors as the nearly absolute determinant of individual characteristics. Thus everyone is not only known but explainable. With some exceptions, outsiders are only minimally tolerated. One anomaly, "Catherine Spicer of Staten Island, with a father mysteriously discredited, and neither money nor position enough to make people forget it" (12), was not only accepted into the fold, but eventually, as the widow of Manson Mingott, becomes one of the *doyens* of New York society. The situation for men is a bit different. Julius Beaufort is marginally acceptable, not because of his marriage to a woman of old family, but because of his money and his ability to live in the appropriate way. But Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, the widow of a man who made his money in shoe-polish, is, at least in the early part of the novel, extremely suspect. Within the inner circles, however, individual eccentricities and failings are generally well-known and accepted. For instance, it is considered almost amusing that some people within this small society – specifically Mrs. Mingott and Mrs. Archer – have a reputation for serving dreadful food. There is a kind of stability in the knowledge that what one is served at a particular house will be scarcely edible, and, like the quaint habits of a favourite aunt, these dinners are not only tolerated, but play an integral part in the ritual and custom supporting society. Indeed, this culinary deficiency, like others, is seen as so historic as to be almost genetically

determined. "Society,"<sup>3</sup> in its narrative mode, notes:

But then New York, as far back as the mind of man could travel, had been divided into the two great fundamental groups of the Mingotts and Mansons and all their clan, who cared about eating and clothes and money, and the Archer-Newland-van-der-Luyden tribe, who were devoted to travel, horticulture and the best fiction, and looked down on the grosser forms of pleasure.

You couldn't have everything, after all. (32-3)

If a socially-ambitious person of Undine Spragg's class would not be able to get away with a bad chef, the bad food at Mrs. Manson Mingott's and Mrs. Archer's houses is a fixed constellation in the New York galaxy. The quality of the food itself is not necessarily critical; in this world, dinners have other, more important functions than the enjoyment of food.

If mealtimes in many cultures serve as an opportunity for indoctrination of the young into the mysteries of society, it is particularly important to uphold social institutions on these occasions. It is within this context that talk at dinner in *The Age of Innocence* occurs. The conversation is basically gossip, and Mrs. Archer is sometimes worried about what her unmarried daughter Janey may hear; still, the prevailing responses to other people's problems and activities are certainly instructive, and she allows her to hear enough to know the pitfalls to avoid, as well as to

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<sup>3</sup>It is hard not to write about "society" as a discrete, almost living entity in *The Age of Innocence*. Some critics have argued that society is indeed the main character in this novel. Gary Lindberg notes, "Wharton investigates a society as an anthropologist examines a tribe, not as a collection of persons but as a system of sanctions, taboos, customs, and beliefs. This abstract system is, in turn, reified by both author and characters, assuming a personality that corresponds to the moral ambience of the community" (9).



participate with her elders in relishing the difficulties of others. Mr. Sillerton Jackson is invited to the Archers' specifically for his knowledge of his neighbours' intimate affairs, be they sexual or financial, for these seem to be the two main ingredients of gossip. He is the keeper of scandals, some of them decades-old:

. . . these mysteries . . . were loosely locked in Mr. Jackson's breast; for not only did his keen sense of honour forbid his repeating anything privately imparted, but he was fully aware that his reputation for discretion increased his opportunities of finding out what he wanted to know. (10)

Jackson is a master at dropping hints, making suggestions, never fully imparting what he knows, and thus keeping himself always at the top of everybody's guest list.

At Jackson's dinner with the Archers early in the novel, the people discussed are those on the fringes, either through birth, like Julius Beaufort or Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, or through prolonged absence and subsequent aberrant behaviour, like Ellen Olenska. Bringing "fringe" behaviour and "marginal" people to the forefront helps to better define the standards of the centre. In a comical sequence, Mr. Jackson's impressions of the food are interspersed with his remarks. Thus, "cautiously inspecting the broiled shad, and wondering for the thousandth time why Mrs. Archer's cook always burnt the roe to a cinder" (35), he begins to discuss Beaufort; he wonders "why no one had ever told the butler never to slice cucumbers with a steel knife" (36) as he begins to talk about Mrs. Struthers; and "Mr. Jackson's 'sniff' at the mushroom sauce is 'scarcely perceptible' but is enough to suggest that he 'would probably finish his meal on Ellen Olenska'" (Knights 25). What he does to his subjects – without losing his acceptably genteel manner – is akin to the chef's

treatment of the roe and the cucumbers. Indeed, gossip is food and drink to Mr.

Jackson: about to produce what to him is a very juicy morsel – that Ellen was seen walking on Fifth Avenue with Julius Beaufort – he “gave a faint sip, as if he had been tasting invisible Madeira” (39). The infractions committed by Mrs. Archer’s chef fuel Jackson’s comments on the more important sins of Beaufort, Struthers and Olenska, whose scandalous behaviour is as expected as are the shortcomings of the meal.

The constancy of habits is made clear at this dinner: as Knights points out, both Newland’s grandfathers are mentioned during the meal. Indeed, they almost seem to be present, as Jackson infers one ancestor’s probable attitudes toward both the dinner and the subject matter of the dinner conversation:

“Ah, how your grandfather Archer loved a good dinner, my dear Newland!” he said, his eyes on the portrait of a plump full-chested young man in a stock and a blue coat, with a view of a white-columned country-house behind him. “Well–well–well . . . I wonder what he would have said to all these foreign marriages!” (38; ellipses in original).

The portrait of this gentleman – looking rather like a specimen of stuffed poultry himself – overlooks the dinner table. More important, his views would, if possible, still be solicited by the diners as a relevant part of the dinner-table conversation, and Jackson assumes that the opinions of the deceased would be similar to his own. In fact, the grandfather’s era seems still to define the limits to the conversation. Some subjects cannot be discussed, some words not uttered:

the word [divorce] had fallen like a bombshell in the pure and tranquil atmosphere of the Archer dining-room. Mrs. Archer raised her delicate eye-brows in the particular curve that signified: “The butler– ” and [Newland], himself mindful of the bad taste of discussing such

intimate matters in public, hastily branched off into an account of his visit to old Mrs. Mingott. (41)

The word “bombshell” suggests the most intrusive possible image at a dinner party, and its equation with the word “divorce” implies that the latter word is capable of destroying both the table and the society it represents. It is an understatement to note that such items of discussion are not “tasteful” in the context of the meal; sexual habits can provoke more disgust, in Litvak’s terms, than burnt roe. A second *faux pas*, in the passage quoted above, is breaching the walls between public and private. In this context, the two spheres obviously refer to class rather than to the dinner’s location inside or outside the home. Although this is a private meal in a private home, “public” is a euphemism in this passage for “in front of the servants,” who suddenly seem not merely part of the accoutrements of the meal, but people as capable of gossiping as the diners are. In such a situation it is more “tasteful” to talk about Mrs. Mingott, who, despite her oddly-arranged house with its beckoning ground-floor bedroom, is safely beyond the stage of sexual adventures.

Topics that have been launched but dropped and innuendos that have been merely glanced over may be picked up again after dinner. The customary after-dinner rites are gender-specific. In the drawing-room, Mrs. Archer and Janey firmly take control of the future domestic arrangements of their son and brother, sewing “a tapestry band of field-flowers destined to adorn an ‘occasional’ chair in the drawing-room of young Mrs. Newland Archer” (41), and thereby, in their choice of wildflowers as a motif, civilizing nature into an endless future of after-dinner

sociability. Meanwhile Mr. Jackson is telling Newland about the rumour of somewhat less conventional living arrangements once entered into by Ellen Olenska. For a young man, indoctrination into the ways of the tribe may occur over cigars and brandy. Thus, for Newland Archer, “the best fiction, combined with the after-dinner talk of his elders, had long since initiated him into every detail of [the] code [of affairs with married women]” (305). This gender-restricted interlude, after the confirming ritual of dinner and a snifter or two of brandy, also provides the opportunity to speak more freely than usual – although the discussion always ultimately returns within the boundaries of the social code. Newland’s disagreement with Sillerton Jackson about the subject of women after this particular meal indicates Archer’s attempt to position himself as a rebel in his society. He himself, however, seems unaware of “the terrific consequences” (42) of his own words: “I’m sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of [Ellen’s] age if her husband prefers to live with harlots. . . . Women ought to be free – as free as we are. . .” (41). This remark prepares the reader, of course, for Archer’s attraction to Ellen, but it also paves the way for the irony that he ultimately does not find himself to be particularly free.

At Wharton’s dinners, then, the mouth is not only used to ingest food: speaking is, arguably, a more important part of dinner than eating. Dinner conversations classify, categorize and judge people, and in so doing uphold the way of life and affirm for the diners the current attitudes to morality. In this way, they are a means by which society responds to crisis, clarifies its attitudes and makes its presence and its weight felt. Sometimes, in *The Age of Innocence*, this latter function is the

reason for the dinner to be given at all. It is, for instance, the reason why the van der Luydens hold a dinner for Ellen early in the novel. Invitations to the Lovell Mingotts' dinner in her honour have been refused by everyone except the Beauforts and Sillerton Jackson and his sister, people who, for their own different reasons, are interested in the margins of society. The van der Luydens cannot countenance this snub to a New York family, in this case the Mingotts, which has made clear its position of support for an errant member. If the invitation to dine is usually a confirmation of one's place within the group, and acceptance of an invitation an affirmation of conformity with the group's values, here the invitation is not to celebrate a joint conformity – as at a wedding dinner, for instance – but to define the boundaries of acceptance and, in so doing, both contain unconventionality and demand conformity of those on the edge. The higher echelons of the bourgeoisie have more freedom to press the limits of conformity; the irreproachable pedigree of the van der Luydens allows them, then, to resolve for the community the more difficult issues of convention.

The strength of the van der Luydens' defense of Ellen, or more accurately, of the principle of Ellen, is shown first of all by their holding the dinner at all. Any dinner at the van der Luydens' is by definition an important occasion, given their role as the arbiters of New York society. And, as Ellen sees, their dinners have been accorded this weight in part precisely because they entertain so rarely. Moreover, they pair their recognition of Ellen with a second special occasion, the visit of their English cousin, the Duke of St. Austrey. Finally, the accoutrements of their dinner raise it to

a particular level of significance: “The van der Luydens had done their best to emphasize the importance of the occasion. The du Lac Sèvres and the Trevenna George II plate were out; so was the van der Luyden ‘Lowestoft’ (East India Company) and the Dagonet Crown Derby” (61).

The conventional Newland feels that Ellen does not adequately appreciate the honour of her invitation to dinner with the Duke, nor the fact that she has just made a narrow escape from social ostracism. The Duke, like Ellen a semi-stranger to New York society, dresses shabbily and makes little attempt at brilliant conversation. Moreover, neither he nor Ellen obeys the protocol of who should speak to whom after dinner. Ellen does not seem to realize that a woman is supposed to be passive, like a dish waiting to be chosen and eaten:

It was not the custom in New York drawing-rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. But the Countess was apparently unaware of having broken any rule. . . .(63)

This behaviour is overlooked because, as outsiders – or more accurately, perhaps, *distanced* relations – both Ellen and the Duke are permitted to seem ignorant of and even uninterested in the petty subtleties of the New York dinner party. It is perhaps not so acceptable to be unimpressed by the honour of being present in so august a company and in such surroundings. After dinner, Ellen shocks Newland by calling the Duke “the dullest man I ever met” (63), and later by criticizing the gloominess of the van der Luydens’ house. However, until nearly the end of the novel, the van der

Luydens, unlike others, continue to excuse Ellen's behaviour because she is "foreign." Their eventual rescinding of this indulgence later in the novel is signalled when, again at dinner, Mrs. van der Luyden deplores Ellen's visiting the disgraced Mrs. Beaufort, especially in her grandmother's carriage (May Archer is, upon this occasion, for reasons as yet obscure to Newland, Ellen's only champion). A more important social protocol has now been breached, this one involving money.

This incident marks a second time in the novel that the van der Luydens hold a dinner to reassure and solidify society. Having returned hurriedly from their country house after hearing of Julius Beaufort's ruin, they give a small dinner solely to demonstrate that Beaufort's bankruptcy is not going to destroy the world of New York. Mr. Sillerton Jackson is again the expert on Ellen at this dinner. The chapter opens with his remark, and the table is thus set by him: " 'At the court of the Tuileries,' said Mr. Sillerton Jackson with his reminiscent smile, 'such things were pretty openly tolerated' " (316). Beaufort and Ellen, the principles in Mr. Jackson's gossip, are associated, this time by analogy, with the recurring issues of money and sex: " 'At the Tuileries,' he repeated, seeing the eyes of the company expectantly turned on him, 'the standard was excessively lax in some respects; and if you'd asked where Morny's money came from –! Or who paid the debts of some of the Court beauties. . . ' " (318-19). Neither question is answered or even completely asked. Again, much of the dinner table conversation is made up of tidbits: unfinished questions and answers, suggestions and innuendo. The fact that the talk is interrupted by mouthfuls of food and sips of wine perhaps excuses, but does not

completely account for, such interruptions.

The final dinner of the novel, given for Ellen's departure, is the complement of Ellen's welcoming party at the van der Luydens'. It is a ritual in two senses. On the one hand, it is the Newland Archers' first formal dinner party, and, as such, it represents the consummation of their marriage. Certainly, in many cultures, the marriage vow is pledged with ceremonial food: the wedding feast where the newly-married couple feed each other wedding cake is a contemporary example. For Newland and May, whose society places such importance on social categories and definitions, this dinner party marks full entry into society as a married couple. In the world of *The Age of Innocence*, however, in order to consummate the marriage, it is not enough for the married couple themselves to eat and/or serve food together; since the union of two New York families is an important aspect of the marriage, the mothers-in-law are involved with the dinner preparations, and agree that it is to be "a great event" (326). The dinner also cements the marriage by affirming its monogamous character, for it marks the departure of Ellen Olenska, the woman Newland believes he loves. It is appropriate that Newland learns of his wife's pregnancy after the party: it is as if the dinner party itself impregnated her.<sup>4</sup> For Newland, the marriage vows are then completely sealed.

Second, the party is the ritual of Ellen's banishment: "There were certain

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<sup>4</sup>The association of eating and pregnancy, often manifested in children's misconceptions, and in some cultures explicitly ritualized, comes to mind here. We will see this link again in some of Mansfield's work.



things that had to be done, and if done at all, done handsomely and thoroughly; and one of these, in the old New York code, was the tribal rally around a kinswoman, about to be eliminated from the tribe" (334). Wharton tells us that Ellen's foreignness is emphasized by the apparent tribute to her of being seated on Newland's right. This designation of status makes the fact of her being exiled less complicated for the circle of her family and acquaintances. Because so much is unstated at this dinner, there is a sense of unreality about it. Thus, although he takes the customary position of host, Archer does not feel in control; in fact it is a different dinner than it pretends to be, and he plays a different role than the obvious one. No longer clear about his relationship to social categories, he "begins to come apart, losing his sense of himself, his language, position, bodily space" (Knights 36). He ". . . seemed to be assisting at the scene in a state of odd imponderability, as if he floated somewhere between chandelier and ceiling" (334). Newland's sensation is that he is not at the table at all, not actually part of the circle of diners. And, indeed, in a certain sense he is not, for, as he realizes, he has himself become the subject of gossip: everybody believes him and Ellen to be

lovers in the extreme sense peculiar to "foreign" vocabularies. He guessed himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears, he understood that, by means as yet unknown to him, the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything, or had ever imagined anything, and that the occasion of the entertainment was simply May Archer's natural desire to take an affectionate leave of her friend and cousin. (335)

The power of the society is clear in the coming together of this final dinner

party, “a big dinner, with a hired *chef* and two borrowed footmen” (327). The choice of menu, an impressive guest list, and a certain dress code are inseparable components which automatically entail each other, and which, taken together, constitute an important communication about the status of the young Archers: “the Roman punch . . . signified either canvas-backs or terrapin, two soups, a hot and a cold sweet, full *décolletage* with short sleeves, and guests of a proportionate importance” (327). Similarly, the consumption of the food is presented as integral to the conveying of social disapproval. The meal is a coherent, predictable whole; Archer and Ellen must not only be prevented from destroying the structure that it represents, but also be incorporated back into that structure even if, in Ellen’s case, by a ritualized banishment. Despite his feeling of detachment, Archer knows what is happening: “As his glance travelled from one placid well-fed face to another he saw all the harmless-looking people engaged upon May’s canvas-backs as a band of dumb conspirators, and himself and the pale woman on his right as the centre of their conspiracy” (334-35). May’s ownership of the ducks – indeed of the dinner – puts her in charge, and the guests, perhaps particularly the women, rally round their hostess. “Spatially, ritually, and thus physically and psychologically, so complete is the women’s control over their world” (Fryer 139) in *The Age of Innocence*, that they automatically come to May’s aid to force Newland to give up Ellen. It is perhaps not stretching a point to imagine the dinner guests cutting up and eating the couple at the head of the table – or at least consuming their aberration – as well as the ducks. Without anything being said, the meal itself both reinstates the social order and

celebrates its return. In this sense, the meal itself speaks.

The social code of dinner has its parallel in and reinforces the code of sexual behaviour. Ritualized flirting is encouraged in this world: for “the most popular married women of the ‘younger set’ . . . it was the recognised custom to attract masculine homage while playfully discouraging it” (7). The further evolution of this “custom” is seen in *The House of Mirth*, where a woman who is bored with her husband may encourage his friendship with another woman, and a man acknowledge that his wife has a favourite young man, while everyone pretends that these relationships are platonic. Even in *The Age of Innocence*, despite the fact that “a certain measure of contempt was attached to men who continued their philandering after marriage” (305), society is not altogether shocked when extramarital affairs do occur. But Archer’s proposing to himself that he and Ellen go away and live together threatens the social cohesion:

Archer felt like a prisoner in the centre of an armed camp. He looked about the table, and guessed at the inexorableness of his captors from the tone in which, over the asparagus from Florida, they were dealing with Beaufort and his wife. “It’s to show me,” he thought, “what would happen to *me* –” and a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash words, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault. (335)

The ordinary act of eating vegetables (perhaps imported especially for the occasion) becomes threatening. Are these Archer’s own guilty responses or are his dining companions really trying to make a point? As with so much in this novel, we do not know for sure, but in the end it makes little difference. Archer himself, as long as he stays in his social role, is in fact one of his own “captors.”

It is noteworthy that nothing is spoken here, that Archer *guesses* that he is the subject of gossip and that others assume that he and Ellen are lovers. Indeed much is assumed throughout the novel. We do not know exactly what Count Olenski did to his wife; we are not sure whether she and M. Rivière were lovers; we do not really know about Mrs. Struthers' background. We think we know about the sexual exploits of Julius Beaufort and Larry Lefferts, but only because, as readers, we have become a part of the grapevine, and ourselves participate in the gossip and speculation. At dinner, then, Archer's assumption is a reasonable one, given the hints, innuendo and rumour which have been evident throughout the novel, and particularly at earlier dinners. Although there is much talk in this novel, there are also significantly profound silences; manners and ritual as a form of language almost always communicate more than words do.

If dinner parties constantly re-create and re-affirm the characteristics and boundaries of the social group, intimate meals are less important, and, indeed, are scarcely portrayed in the novel. When we do see the Newland Archers dining privately, it is during the crisis following Ellen's return from Washington, and we are told only that "during dinner their talk moved in its usual limited circle" (294). Bound by conventions and in itself a convention, dinner is not the place to talk about real problems or even to admit that any exist. It is after dinner in Newland's library that more important discussions occur between Newland and May, in a sense reminiscent of the conversations among men over brandy and cigars after the more formal dinners of the novel. From the private space that Newland foresees before his

marriage, a room that May “would probably let him arrange . . . as he pleased” (71), the library becomes the site of the most significant events of his married life, or, as he later defines them, “most of the real things of his life” (344). Looking back at the end of the novel, Archer seems to be oddly satisfied with the invasions of his private sanctuary. Still, Dallas Archer says of his parents, “You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other, and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact!” (356-57).

However, at various points in the novel there are meetings between Ellen and Newland, sometimes with a small meal or tea, which stand apart from all the usual social rituals. Newland’s first visit to Ellen’s little house with its unacceptable address is an example. He feels himself to be on foreign soil here; tea is served in “handleless Japanese cups” (75), and the entire ambiance of Ellen’s house takes him away from his normal world, although he is quick to regain his conventional aspect when the Duke of St. Austrey enters with Mrs. Lemuel Struthers. Pamela Knights points out the complexity of Archer and Ellen’s later meeting at the Patroon’s cottage. There is a feeling of intimacy, of two people together by choice and even desire, not just by social arrangement. But there is also a feeling of playing house, as if they are in “a fairy-tale gingerbread cottage for two lost children” (Knights 37), outside of society, “transcending time and history” (37). This feeling is recreated to some extent when Ellen and Newland meet in Boston, take a boat out to an island in the harbour, and have tea in an intimate little room at an inn, apart from, although in perhaps an

unusual proximity to, the vacationing schoolteachers who fill the main dining room. The meal or tea *à deux*, then, may sometimes allow an escape from social constraints, and signal the possibility of authentic intimacy. But such meetings, taking place in an unusual setting and sometimes outside of the usual class structures, are also very much associated with the realm of fantasy, that other place which Newland imagines where “categories like [mistress] won’t exist” (290), but which Ellen says is not “at all different from the old world . . . but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous” (290). In fact, despite their sometimes novel physical surroundings, Ellen and Newland remain firmly within the context of society and its roles. For instance, by the time of the meeting in Boston, Newland is married: “there they were, close together and safe and shut in; yet so chained to their separate destinies that they might as well have been half the world apart” (244).

The manners and rituals of dinner, performed in the usual way, help people get through difficult situations, like the unpleasantness that might result from Archer’s infatuation with Ellen and the potential ugliness of Ellen’s banishment. Thus customs, assumptions and unspoken rules – whether minor ones or major – theoretically protect society from deviance and non-conformity, and, since associations are so strong in this world, protect friends, acquaintances and family members from the consequences of scandal and misbehaviour. Rituals and ritualized behaviour provide a sense of security, a sense of belonging; and acceptance of this way of being is as natural as breathing for most of Wharton’s characters. But personal conduct is certainly constrained, and the range of permissible attitudes and activities

extremely circumscribed. Confronted by the prejudices of his young wife when he wants to invite to dinner a man who is merely a tutor, Newland thinks:

After all, her point of view had always been the same. It was that of all the people he had grown up among, and he had always regarded it as necessary but negligible. Until a few months ago he had never known a “nice” woman who looked at life differently; and if a man married it must necessarily be among the nice. (203)

To return to one of Finkelstein’s points cited earlier, although they may superficially smooth social intercourse, manners and rituals, particularly in the changing economic world of the late nineteenth century, may keep people apart, in fact in competition. To the degree that ostentation, show, and ritual are uppermost at the dinner party, very little actual, in the sense of non-ritualized, personal contact occurs. The most notable example, of course, is the final dinner of *The Age of Innocence*, where Ellen and Archer, seated side by side, forced to celebrate their loss, speak in the perfectly-acceptable banalities appropriate to two people who are bored with the dinner, the conversation and perhaps with each other.

*The Age of Innocence*, then, shows us a world of rituals which seem eternal and which, by their very existence, reinforce the cohesion of the whole society. The same opera is sung year after year by the same soprano to the same people seated in more or less the same boxes. And annually, before her ball, Mrs. Beaufort appears at the opera in order to demonstrate the efficiency of her household. There is a degree of social upheaval even in the prospect of these balls being terminated after Beaufort’s bankruptcy. At every Thanksgiving dinner, Mrs. Archer laments that New York is changing. These complaints – as much a part of the yearly ritual as Mrs. Peniston’s

fall house-cleaning in *The House of Mirth*, the opening of the season and the holiday dinner itself – have ceased to have meaning. Immersed in the ritual of her dinner and her usual ideas, Mrs. Archer does not in fact see some of the real changes that have occurred.

Unlike these women, Wharton, who has played the role of hostess at the reader's dinner, is off to France with Ellen Olenska. The novel ends with a "sociable hour" (361) at Olenska's apartment in Paris, but we are excluded, left with Archer's view of "the awninged balcony" (361) from the square below. Within our framework of New York sociability, a Parisian social hour is not something that we can know.



### Chapter 3

The Art of Being an Honoured Guest:

*The House of Mirth and The Custom of the Country*

If Newland Archer thinks of escaping from his social group, with its oppressively formalized dinners and enforced conventions, he is, nevertheless, aware of how difficult exclusion would be. But what of those on the outside? The Undine Spraggs of New York certainly see membership in Newland's world as highly desirable. Those wishing to find acceptance in higher circles were very much aware of the codes of behaviour of that class, even though it may be that the upper classes were unconscious of their often-unstated rules as prescriptive until they were broken. And at that point, depending on the circumstances and on the social position of the transgressor, the incident might be overlooked or attended to with a mild warning or remonstrance. Still, even for those born into society, continued membership in the elite circle was not at all a given. It is extremely tenuous for Lily Bart, who does not, for all her reservations about New York society, discover any other way to live. As Pamela Knights points out, "Some readers would agree with Archer that to be locked in the family is to be buried alive, but the text also suggests, conversely, that *loss of social being is a form of death*" (36; emphasis in original). For Lily, exclusion literally does mean death.

In *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton explores two particular manifestations of people on the margins of society: those on the fringes trying to stay in position, and those trying to attain or create a new position for themselves. She focuses especially on women in these situations: in Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton shows us both the downwardly and upwardly mobile. Lily has birth and knows all the

conventions of her class, but does not have money; Undine has money, but is an outsider by birth and by upbringing. Both suffer from a lack of family protection and various kinds of domestic failure: deficiencies which require each to make her own way in the world. The fact that both women are usually guests rather than hostesses at the social occasions described in the novels is the key indication of their position on the margins.

From a general anthropological perspective, and on the most basic level, dinners not only provide nourishment, but create structure, facilitate sociability and define membership in a group. All of these aspects of meals are at issue in *The House of Mirth*. In this novel, which takes place at least a generation later than *The Age of Innocence*, the rituals which we saw associated with meals in the latter novel barely conceal the jockeying for position that is the real dynamic at dinner. And if the structure of meals is perhaps less rigid, nonconformity is still punished. The focus in *The House of Mirth* is on Lily, who finally fails in the competition; but other characters, as well, are involved in similar struggles. Thus, the social situation in the novel is characterized by, at the very least, a certain lack of empathy and sometimes even cutthroat rivalry and opportunism.

Although a member of the more modern version of Newland Archer's society, Lily is on her way out, just as Undine Spragg is on her way in. In Lily, we nearly always have a sense of someone undernourished – emotionally, sexually and, at the end, aesthetically, and even physically. This sense of starvation is connected to a general impression of rootlessness and estrangement which is the legacy of her family:

a frivolous mother, an overworked father – both deceased at the time of the novel – an aunt who has taken her in only grudgingly, and cousins who are also *nouveau* poor and, like her, jockeying for position in society. This pervading sense of hunger is fittingly underlined by the fact that the specific act of eating is rarely described in detail in this novel. Yet dinners and other gatherings are extremely significant to the New York social group, and, moreover, mark key moments in the downward curve of Lily's life. The very importance of meals in the structure of the novel and in the society it depicts calls attention to the lack of detail about food: dinners figure as events, but not as meals.

In *The House of Mirth*, the first “meals” in which Lily participates are not meals at all, but rather performances:<sup>1</sup> the ritual of the table has become almost a parody of itself. In many cultures – including, as Susan Williams notes, the Anglo-American – the drinking of tea and other beverages has been, traditionally, one of the most ceremonial of food rituals. Williams points out the importance of ritualized tea-drinking in late nineteenth-century America as an affirmation of social values and an expression of women's decorative role (14).<sup>2</sup> It is fitting, then, that two tea ceremonies open the novel. When, in the first chapter, Lily meets Lawrence Selden at

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<sup>1</sup>Cynthia Wolff's comments on the roots of this novel in contemporary drama are useful in this context. She notes the theatrical references throughout, comments like Gus Trenor's “don't talk stage-rot,” and Simon Rosedale's “it's a farce – a crazy farce” (“Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity” 75). She also points out that many of the characters are drawn from and/or against stage stereotypes.

<sup>2</sup>Tea is also drunk frequently in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, where an affirmation of middle-class gentility is particularly important.

the train station, he invites her to his apartment for tea because she acts helpless and asks to be looked after, behaving in a frankly flirtatious way that surprises him, as he cannot believe that she really considers him to be marriage material: "The provocation in her eyes increased his amusement – he had not supposed she would waste her powder on such small game; but perhaps she was only keeping her hand in; or perhaps a girl of her type had no conversation but of the personal kind" (10). Indeed, it is as if she is incapable of turning off the charm. She exhibits for Selden her elegant manner of pouring tea, as if she is a commodity to be acquired and displayed like a tea service:

. . . he knelt by the table to light the lamp under the kettle, while she measured out the tea into a little tea-pot of green glaze. . . . he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist. . . . (8-9)

Lily's studied charm reflects a hunger and thirst, not for the tea and cakes which Selden provides, but for a certain kind of life in which she would permanently play the tea-pouring hostess, a woman who is a notch above actually having to prepare and serve food, but rather presides decoratively over the household. Yet, even as she plays the conventional role, the rebellious side of Lily's character is implied. She is breaking the norms of acceptable behaviour by having tea in Selden's rooms; it is unclear whether this is a flippant scoffing at convention or a serious expression of alienation from society and social standards. Although Selden himself seems oddly immune from the hunger for social success, the other characters in this chapter are not. Lily is observed and confronted leaving the apartment building by others who are

hungry for higher status and who observe people like her, waiting for a sign of vulnerability, looking for an advantage. It is the first of a series of compromising situations which will hasten her downfall. The charwoman who refuses to move aside for Lily as she descends the stairs seems to be commenting on their relative worth: a lady leaving a bachelor's apartment is, presumably, no lady. This woman will later try to blackmail Lily with what she believes are her love-letters to Selden. Simon Rosedale, appearing out of nowhere at the entrance to the building – which, as it turns out, he owns – clearly files away his encounter with Lily for future use as a bargaining chip.

Later that afternoon, on the train with Percy Gryce, Lily again makes tea, and her performance is even more marked: she does not actually want any tea, but she wishes to create a certain effect, to be observed in a certain light, and to use this opportunity to buy herself future economic security. Thinking she understands the kind of wife that Gryce wants, “ she resolved to impart a gently domestic air to the scene . . . ” (24). By making tea in a jouncing train carriage – and in so doing creating the illusion of a drawing room – she succeeds in impressing Gryce:

When the tea came he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread. It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train. . . . [S]ecure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration.

Lily, with the flavour of Selden's caravan tea on her lips, had no great fancy to drown it in the railway brew which seemed such nectar to her companion; but, rightly judging that one of the charms of tea is the fact of drinking it together, she proceeded to give the last touch to

Mr. Gryce's enjoyment by smiling at him across her lifted cup. (23-4)

In this scene, the adjective “inky,” a rather surprising choice of words to describe tea, underlines the communicative role of the beverage. Standing in metonymical relation to the customary social ritual surrounding it, the tea itself functions as the *écriture* of social performance.<sup>3</sup>

The ability to create an elegant and intimate tea-party *à deux* even on a train would appear to suggest the ability to create a gracious home under any circumstances. Actually, however, the experiences of Lily's whole life are the opposite: she has had no real home and little knowledge of domesticity. In her childhood, dining meant either dining out, entertaining, or lunching on leftovers from a party the night before: “. . . it was one of Mrs. Bart's few economies to consume in private the expensive remnants of her hospitality” (40). Born into an old New York family which can no longer afford the level of expenditures demanded by her mother, Lily comes from a “turbulent element” rather than a home, marked by a “chaos” of constant visitors and social engagements, a frequently-changing contingent of servants, “precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking . . . grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense” (37). Later, after her father's death, Lily is literally homeless, as she and her mother

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<sup>3</sup>Sidney Mintz's book *Sweetness and Power* chronicles the history not only of sugar, but of tea and other foods and beverages associated with sugar. According to Mintz, the social, cultural and economic importance of tea in England, particularly, during the last few centuries can hardly be overestimated.

wandered from place to place, now paying long visits to relations whose house-keeping Mrs. Bart criticized, and who deplored the fact that she let Lily breakfast in bed when the girl had no prospects before her, and now vegetating in cheap continental refuges, where Mrs. Bart held herself fiercely aloof from the frugal tea-tables of her companions in misfortune. (43-4)

It is noteworthy that this, to Mrs. Bart, degrading life, is expressed in terms of meals; clearly, for her, meals are a defining symptom of her much-feared “dinginess,” and her two-year widowhood is described as a period of “hungry roaming” (46). No matter how little money she has, she refuses to accept the structure of meals that her poverty should decree.

Meals have the same significance for Lily. Gerty Farish, Selden’s cousin, offers her shelter on the night she escapes from Gus Trenor’s advances and, when Lily is later disinherited by her aunt and ostracized by society, would be willing to accept her as a flat-mate. But although, throughout the novel, Gerty’s life is presented as a possible alternative for Lily, living like Gerty is not a choice that Lily can make. When Selden, during their first tea together, mentions that it is possible for a woman to live alone, she says of his cousin’s life: “. . . she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap” (8). Later, at the Van Osburgh wedding, Lily views with condescension Gerty’s vicarious excitement at the food, the gifts, the wedding itself. Gerty is ebullient about the whole experience:

“Did you ever taste anything more delicious than that *mousse* of lobster with champagne sauce? I made up my mind weeks ago that I wouldn’t miss this wedding, and just fancy how delightfully it all came about. When Lawrence Selden heard I was coming, he insisted on fetching



me himself and driving me to the station, and when we go back this evening I am to dine with him at Sherry's. I really feel as excited as if I were getting married myself!" (118)

To Lily, her friend's enthusiasm demonstrates her lack of hope, her acceptance of the status of outsider in this social world. The wedding banquet and the dinner at Sherry's, like other aspects of the day, are a fantasy come true for Gerty, an experience outside of normal reality. Lily herself means to experience marriage first-hand, and to take expensive food and restaurants for granted.

In the structure of the novel, dinners and parties are particularly important in defining Lily's social world, setting out the backdrop of men who are interested in her, and, ultimately, marking her fall. Where the men are not present – at luncheon at the Trenors', for instance – the meal is an opportunity for the catty machinations of the women. These social gatherings increasingly emphasize Lily's position as an outsider: underneath the party atmosphere, she is always on a different level than the other guests. Thus, early in the novel, during a weekend at the Trenors' country house, she is the only guest who worries about the money her stay requires, and the only guest whom Judy Trenor asks to help with secretarial functions, as if to earn her keep. This position is only exacerbated as the novel continues, and Lily is asked to "help out" in more unsavoury ways, finally clearly becoming an employee. The tea table rituals over which Lily presides at the start of the novel are gradually supplanted by increasingly anguished and tenuous performances. Lily never attains the position that the tea ritual ought to represent; she never actually takes her place at the head of a dinner table or as the lady of the house.

The fact that the food itself is not particularly emphasized at any of these social events – except, in the example noted above, as a commodity to be consumed by the wealthy, and the object of Gerty’s admiration – suggests both that the coming together of the social set is for other purposes than communality, and that, on a metaphoric level, although such events may have enormous social, even economic importance, they are not at all nourishing or even pleasurable. At the Wellington Brys’ party, Gus Trenor, sounding rather like one of the more old-fashioned characters from *The Age of Innocence*, and feeling somewhat grouchy because Lily is ignoring him, calls attention to what some of these dinners are like: “Stay for supper? Not if I know it! When people crowd their rooms so that you can’t get near any one you want to speak to, I’d as soon sup in the elevated at the rush hour” (184).

One of the longer dinner scenes is near the beginning of the novel at the Trenors’ house party, a weekend event which is even more crucial to her future than Lily realizes. This is the turning point in her life. She begins the weekend with the idea of getting herself engaged to Percy Gryce, but sabotages her own plan. What surprises her later is that she cannot recover from this failure of will and recuperate her advantage with him. Moreover, with her failure to “land” Gryce, her social status clearly begins its descent. Lily’s perceptions at the dinner table – the longest and most crucial of the several meals mentioned during this weekend at the Trenors’ – crystallize her change of heart, a fatal one, given that she has no alternative strategy. Although we are parenthetically given an idea of what people are eating at this dinner, details of the menu are not emphasized. In fact, references to eating tend to be

rather negative; thus, Gus Trenor is described as “carnivorous” (72), and George Dorset as unable to eat the rich food because of his jealousy-induced dyspepsia, as he watches his wife flirt with Selden. There is no real pleasure or festivity in the meal; rather, in forming a backdrop for the various dynamics played out in the group, it demonstrates a false conviviality. We are introduced here to most of the major and minor characters of Lily’s “set,” and, influenced by Selden, Lily looks critically at them seated around the table:

How different they had seemed to her a few hours ago! Then they had symbolized what she was gaining, now they stood for what she was giving up. That very afternoon they had seemed full of brilliant qualities; now she saw that they were merely dull in a loud way. Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement. (72)

The next day, although she means to follow through with her plan, her dinnertime perception of the Trenors’ world as a “great gilt cage” (71) has stolen her will. Consciously, she does not mean to change her decision to marry Gryce, but the following day she seems unable to pursue her project. Thus, Lily fails to attend church with Gryce, as planned, and also alienates Bertha Dorset, who takes revenge by turning Gryce against her.

Other social gatherings in Book One of the novel have a similar flavour: dinners remain important as events, but not as meals. And they are peopled by the same group of players, doing and saying the same sorts of things. Beginning with the Trenors’ dinner, these social occasions trace Lily’s slide. The Van Osburgh wedding, mentioned earlier,

was the kind of scene in which Lily had often pictured herself as taking the principal part, and on this occasion the fact that she was once more merely a casual spectator, instead of the mystically veiled figure occupying the centre of attention, strengthened her resolve to assume the latter part before the year was over. (115)

Ironically, considering her “resolve,” it is at the wedding that Lily finds out that she has lost Percy Gryce for good. Instead, the novel pairs her with Gerty. The two seem to be somewhat outside the main group of diners at the wedding banquet: “Do let us go and take a peep at the presents before every one else leaves the dining-room!” suggested Miss Farish, linking her arm in her friend’s” (117). The narrative jumps directly from the church to the after-dinner display of wedding gifts; dinner itself is skipped by the novel. Lily is not shown eating at this wedding, but working: trying to discover the truth about Gryce’s engagement, walking a thin line with Gus Trenor, working her charms on Sim Rosedale in order to defuse his potential danger to her. Similarly, at the Wellington-Brys’ entertainment, where she reaches the apex of her beauty in the *tableaux vivants*, Lily speaks with Selden instead of eating: “. . . they moved away, not toward the supper-room, but against the tide which was setting thither” (181-82). If earlier Lily gave up her “meal-ticket” in Percy Gryce for Selden, here she gives up her meal, and, once again under Selden’s influence, distances herself from the rest of the group heading for the table. But it is more possible for a man than for a woman to maintain an ironic distance from the social world and still belong to it. The encounter seems to promise the start of a love affair, but Selden is more tied to the social values of his world than he realizes, and, therefore, nothing ever comes of

their mutual admiration.<sup>4</sup>

Dinner invitations can also play an important role in the novel, even without the dinner itself; in some cases, they constitute a social minefield rather than an opportunity to enjoy food in pleasant company. The day after the Wellington-Bryson party, Lily's tentative relationship with Selden is thwarted because she is trapped between two dinner invitations. A victim of social juggling, on the one hand she enjoys Carrie Fisher's "indefatigable hospitality" (186) and, on the other, wishes to "reestablish [her] former relations" (186) with Judy Trenor. Although she already plans to dine with Mrs. Fisher, "who had gathered at an informal feast a few of the performers of the previous evening" (186), when the jealous Gus Trenor decides to cash in on his investment by sending Lily a dinner invitation supposedly from his wife, she tries to do both. For once, Mrs. Fisher's dinner is a gathering that seems genuinely enjoyable: "Lily was reluctant to leave, for the dinner was amusing, and she would have liked to lounge over a cigarette and hear a few songs; but she could not break her engagement with Judy. . ." (186). Thus, she arrives late at the Trenors', to discover that Judy is not really there. In a parallel to her leaving Selden's apartment at the start of the novel, she is seen by Selden and Van Alstyne as she leaves the house, having narrowly escaped the amorous Gus, and Selden, whom the novel suggests is

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<sup>4</sup>Some critics have seen Selden as the villain of the novel. Hochman, for instance, calls him a moral coward, and hypocritical in regard to his expectations of Lily and his own physical attraction to her (229). Norris says he "transform[s] her into a specimen" and "conduct[s] moral experiments" on her (433).

the potential “true mate,” is thus dissuaded from pursuing her.<sup>5</sup>

An invitation to one of Mrs. Peniston’s apparently rare dinners is also particularly important, even though, again, the dinner is never described. The issue in this case turns on the difference between the stodgy dinners of the old-fashioned and the “smart” (163) entertainments of the younger set:

Mrs. Peniston disliked giving dinners, but she had a high sense of family obligation, and on the Jack Stepneys’ return from their honeymoon she felt it incumbent upon her to light the drawing-room lamps and extract her best silver from the Safe Deposit vaults. Mrs. Peniston’s rare entertainments were preceded by days of heart-rending vacillation as to every detail of the feast, from the seating of the guests to the pattern of the table-cloth. . . . (162)

In order to have a more interesting circle at the dinner table, Lily advises her aunt, “who leaned helplessly on her niece in social matters” (163), not to invite Grace Stepney. In retaliation, the latter informs Lily’s aunt of her extravagances, and therefore ultimately takes Lily’s place as the beneficiary of Mrs. Peniston’s will. The fact that “Mrs. Peniston . . . had been prevailed upon to pronounce Grace’s exile” (163) leads to Lily’s own eventual exile.

In the second section of the book, meals are one of the few constants in the highly irregular situation of the Dorsets’ marriage. Life on the Riviera with the Dorsets and other members of the New York set – which seems to be life in New York merely transplanted – is defined by a continuous succession of breakfasts, lunches and dinners. These culminate in the restaurant dinner where Bertha Dorset publicly

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<sup>5</sup>As in *The Age of Innocence*, it seems that everyone knows where everyone is. For this small set of New Yorkers, Fifth Avenue is like Main Street in a small town.

banishes Lily. The “labyrinth of courses” (288) at that dinner corresponds to the Byzantine relationships, conspiracies and deceptions engaged in by Bertha Dorset and her set. It is a “triumphant” (290) occasion for Mrs. Wellington Bry, one of the “new people” (184), who has for some time wanted to be able to play hostess to the social set which she aspires to join. But if this dinner marks her ascent, it punctuates Lily’s fall.

Still, the acceptance of new people into society creates a temporary niche for Lily. If her invitation to France is not essentially a social one, but rather the offer of a job keeping George Dorset busy while his wife has an affair, upon her return, Lily finds more regular employment as social consultant to Mrs. Hatch, a newcomer trying to establish herself in the social world of New York. Lily is to teach her what she needs to know and how she needs to act in order to find acceptance; ironically, however, this position contributes to society’s final rejection of Lily herself. Mrs. Hatch, like Mrs. Bry, will ultimately become acceptable to New York society, but Lily’s association with Mrs. Hatch before the latter gains acceptance is one more step in her downfall.

Mrs. Hatch is considered to have a disorderly and hence disreputable life. This quality is described in terms of her mealtime habits: the manicurist might be invited for luncheon and Mrs. Hatch might be “in the hands of her masseuse” (373) rather than available to visitors during the “tea-hour.” Even Lily does not question social norms to this extent. She herself is uncomfortable that, at Mrs. Hatch’s house,

no definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day

flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements, so that one had the impression of lunching at the tea-hour, while dinner was often merged in the noisy after-theatre supper which prolonged Mrs. Hatch's vigil till daylight. (370)

The social conventions which structure the day represent conformity to a larger set of social values; Mrs. Hatch's failure to keep normal mealtime hours suggests a threatening chaos. Moreover, the confusion about meals and meal-time exacerbates Lily's own confusion about her identity and her place in the world. With little definite structure in her life, and incapable of generating her own, Lily needs an imposed sense of order to keep her from fully realizing the terror of time passing.

Lily misses "the smiling endurance of tedious dinners" (352) when she is no longer invited. Although she seems to become progressively more conscious of her situation and critical of the social world and the performances and compromises it requires, she is never able to extricate herself from it fully or to construct her life differently. Nevertheless, she shows a good deal of perceptiveness in telling Gerty:

You think we live *on* the rich, rather than with them: and so we do, in a sense – but it's a privilege we have to pay for! We eat their dinners, and drink their wine, and smoke their cigarettes, and use their carriages and their opera-boxes and their private cars – yes, but there's a tax to pay on every one of those luxuries. . . . the girl pays it by tips and cards . . . and by going to the best dressmakers, and having just the right dress for every occasion, and always keeping herself fresh and exquisite and amusing! (358).

We noted earlier a passage in *The Age of Innocence* where the invitations, the china, the menu and the clothing are all automatically included as part of the trappings of a formal dinner. Dresses – like manners and social conventions part of the accoutrements of dinner – are not an issue in *The Age of Innocence* because being



well-dressed is assumed. But such is not the case in *The House of Mirth*; rather, Lily struggles with dressmakers' bills throughout the novel. Thus, the evening before her death, when Lily looks at her dresses one last time and packs them away, each dress evokes the social occasion upon which it was worn. Entry tickets to dinners and parties, they are now useless, yet "[a]n association lurked in every fold: each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past" (428). The dresses are the equivalent of a written record; they form a text of her social performances and of her attempts to fit into "the life she had been made for" (428).

If, for Lily, dinners and other social events are at first the occasion for showing herself to prospective husbands, and for keeping herself a part of the social world, food becomes more real as she descends the social scale. Throughout the novel, as we have seen, the purpose of dinner parties has not been to enjoy a good meal; dinners are rather the stage for an obligatory performance where one jockey for position, makes connections, watches others for potential weaknesses and, with luck, is, oneself, seen to advantage. For Lily and her set, food itself is not a problem; it is assumed, a given that one need not think or worry about. This may be one reason why food is hardly mentioned in the descriptions of dinners. However, if Lily does not think about the biological necessity of food, she is aware that invitations to and attendance at various entertainments are in fact essential for life in this world. For Lily, social "life" does, in fact, literally mean living. She is incapable of any other kind of survival. Thus, ostracism from the social world puts her physical survival in question as well. In the last part of the novel, she suffers aesthetically, as her mother

would have, from the dinginess of the basement dining room in the boarding house. As well, the novel mentions for the first time that she is hungry. The fact that the ritual of tea has changed at the end of the novel is an indicator of Lily's decline. If, in the early chapters, she gracefully and elegantly pours tea for Selden and for Gryce, in the end she drinks tea hungrily, almost desperately. If tea was at first important for its social value, and as a backdrop to flirtation, it is finally important as a stimulant and as a substitute for the food she can no longer afford.

Thus, the vague feeling of exile which always attaches to Lily Bart becomes a real exile from the only world she knows. At the somewhat melodramatic end, which Norris calls "pure Dickens" (436), she momentarily feels at home in Nettie Struthers's kitchen, where she watches Nettie feed her baby. She is for the last time a guest, this time in the kitchen of a working-class woman who was once the recipient of her charity, rather than in a salon or a dining-room. Offered coffee, she does not take any. Instead she watches while the baby is fed: another little girl taking nourishment and beginning life. Later that night she imagines the baby in her arms as she falls into her deadly sleep. There is a sense here not only of a change in generations, but of the waxing and waning of two classes. Although poor, Nettie has displayed an energy and a recuperative ability that the decadent Lily lacks; as a result, the former has, at least, a family and a warm kitchen, where she can offer food and drink to others.

Incapable both of compromising as required to create a home in her world, and of searching for an alternative, Lily is unable to nourish herself either spiritually, emotionally, or, finally, physically. The novel suggests that Lily is right to question

certain aspects of the old society; indeed, although she does not appear to have any impact on the process, society is changing. From a later vantage point the changes may not seem profound, yet, for instance, the acceptance of “new people” into the social elite certainly represents a greater degree of openness. In *The Age of Innocence*, this quality is represented by Ellen Olenska, and later by the young Dallas Archer. Both are members of old families, but are also people who have, because of their experiences or their generation, become more progressive, more modern. Some of the new people, on the other hand, merely try to adopt the values of the old society; however, in embracing only the surface elements, in failing to grasp what lies beneath the surface of the social ritual, they create a new world that is merely a parody of the old one.

Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* is one of the people changing New York society, although, of course she does not set out to do so, but rather to join it. In a very different way from Lily, Undine also conveys a feeling of being undernourished: she is constantly hungry for wealth, admiration, status, and an indefinable sense of security and acceptance which is perhaps only possible for those born into the world she covets. Her hunger to be in the spotlight is literally insatiable because she wants an unspecific “everything.” Undine is the daughter of one of those wealthy men who, having recently made their money in trade, manufacturing or investment, sought, particularly for their children, the social *imprimatur* that could only be conferred by association with the old families of inherited wealth. The fiction of the early part of the century – Dreiser’s is an excellent example – is full of people

who are trying to “make it,” not only financially, but socially as well. The fact that *some* people changed classes encouraged a belief that social mobility was at least possible; that it was not common or likely made it all the more desirable. These people were not, of course, the leisured, and may have devoted as much work to becoming acceptable and respectable as they did to making their fortunes in the first place.

Thus, “[u]nder the impact of industrialisation, new forms of wealth as well as newly wealthy groups produced a flood of applicants that threatened to overwhelm the [upper-class] life-style itself” (Davidoff 15). Since there were no formal barriers, “circles of informal but definite exclusiveness . . . had to be established” (Hobsbawm 178).<sup>6</sup> Money was certainly one of the “collective recognition signs” (Hobsbawm 181), but not the only one. Even those with not quite enough money might hope to socialize with the higher classes, if they could carry off the impression of living in the appropriate way; after all, as we see in *The Custom of the Country*, the very wealthy themselves often had little money to spend.

“Establishing recognizable criteria was thus urgent” (Hobsbawm 174), not only for the wealthy, but for the upwardly mobile as well. They too needed “a hierarchy of exclusiveness, without closing the possibility of climbing the steps of

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<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting in this context that the British *Who's Who* was first published in 1897. The New York *Social Register* was begun in 1887 and the list of the Four Hundred first published in the New York *Times* in 1892. F. Rhineland Jones, whose name appears on the list, is presumably Wharton's brother Freddy.

[the] social stairway” (Hobsbawm 174); they wanted to know what they had to do to achieve social status and they wanted “barriers to entry” (Davidoff 41), so that their own success would be worth something. At the turn of the century, those aspiring to a higher class might well engage in what Stephen Mennell calls “anticipatory socialisation”: that is, “consciously or unconsciously adopting the ways, tastes and manners of a social group to membership of which one aspires” (Mennell 75). Thus, for the newly-arrived or aspiring member of the haute bourgeoisie, or for that matter, of the middle class, instruction in the niceties of polite society was in order. As we have seen, Lily Bart earns her living tutoring the *parvenue* Mrs. Hatch in proper social behaviour. The “elaborate code of etiquette which grew up from the 1820s onwards” (Davidoff 41) was exclusionary, but also could serve as guidance for these aspirants. This interest in etiquette is not only pragmatic, but also reflects the particularly American concern for image. The lower and middle classes could follow high-class etiquette at their own poorer tables, perhaps in preparation for future success, but at the very least to differentiate themselves from their peers by setting a better table and taking on the manner of the class to which they aspired.

Thus, in the United States alone, the sheer number of etiquette books published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is astounding (Schlesinger 18). Lessons on etiquette were accessible to all: magazines and newspapers – particularly, although by no means solely, women’s magazines – also included advice on etiquette. Such instructions nearly always imply the practicality of the advice given and the eminent feasibility of carrying it out. It is worthy of note that

many titles include words such as “all,” “everyday,” “for everyone,” reinforcing the American ideology that there is really no such thing as class and that anyone can achieve success.<sup>7</sup> The 1901 guide, *Encyclopedia of Etiquette: What to Write, What to Do, What to Wear, What to Say: a Book of Manners for Everyday Use*, like Emily Post’s *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home*, first published in 1922, went through a number of editions over a period of years. The purpose of all this advice, as well as the blandness of what is expected or desired, is suggested in the title *The Art of Being Agreeable* (1897).<sup>8</sup> However, the titles also suggest an anxiety that permeated every aspect of life. Like the cookbooks described in Chapter 1, the etiquette manuals reassuringly suggest that success is merely a question of following the right recipe, yet at the same time encourage insecurity by implying that there is only one correct way, and that experts know better than the ordinary person what that way is.

Increased literacy was certainly one of the factors contributing to the proliferation of etiquette manuals. A second was that people had to look outside the family unit for information and instructions about appropriate behaviour. In a situation of increasing social mobility, adults who, like Howells’ Silas Lapham, rather

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<sup>7</sup>A few examples: *Good Form for Women: a Guide to Conduct and Dress on all Occasions* (1907); *Social Usage and Etiquette: a Book of Manners for Every Day* (1904); *A Dictionary of Etiquette: a Guide to Polite Usage for all Social Functions* (1904) and *Correct Social Usage: a Course of Instruction in Good Form, Style and Deportment, Being also an Authoritative Work of Ready Reference, Covering all Essentials of Good Manners* (1904).

<sup>8</sup>My favourite title, from 1922, is *Perfect Behavior*, tantalizingly subtitled “A Guide for Ladies and Gentlemen in All Social Crises.”

suddenly found themselves rich, needed to learn quickly, and parents did not have adequate knowledge to teach their children how to integrate into a higher class. Thus, in *The Custom of the Country*, the Spraggs move to New York to improve their daughter's chance of success, but it is she who tells them how to live, even if she changes her mind with experience: a hotel is not, she realizes, after having demanded the move to the Stentorian in the first place, the most fashionable place to live; and, by the time she has divorced Ralph, she sees that stalls, not boxes, are more desirable at the Opera.

Although men also had to learn to behave in polite company, it is particularly important that Undine, as a woman, be able to comport herself properly.<sup>9</sup> Less concerned about social niceties, Elmer Moffatt, to his wife's chagrin, never achieves a really polished manner, even though he becomes perhaps more aware than Undine of prevailing taste and custom, and certainly of the distinction between what has real value and what is merely faddish. As Schlesinger notes, women were "the principal guardians of decorum in the middle and upper ranks of society" (viii); in Wharton's novels, it is women who are really in charge of the social world. Thus, a conspiracy of women ostracizes Lily in *The House of Mirth*, and, one suspects, is responsible for the exile of Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*; the men, in general, either merely observe or acquiesce. Following Veblen, Richard Godden argues that women's power

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<sup>9</sup>A good number of etiquette books are clearly addressed to both sexes: two examples are the 1889 book, *The Home Manual: Everybody's Guide in Social, Domestic, and Business Life*, and the 1914 title, *Good Form for all Occasions: a Manual of Manners, Dress and Entertainment for Both Men and Women*.

derives from their functions as consumers, commodities, and items of display: “in her double role as display case and womb, the bourgeois woman. . . . [is] at the centre of the drawing-room” (16), and therefore in charge of the sphere of dinner parties, houses, marriages and dress – all in one way or another aspects of consumption or the exchange and distribution of accumulated wealth. As part of this function, women are the guardians of manners (17).<sup>10</sup> The title of *The Custom of the Country* comes from this view of women’s role: Ralph Marvell’s friend Charles Bowen notes that “the custom of the country” keeps women out of family business affairs and encourages their role as consumers and their other apparently trivial interests (155-56).

It is natural that table manners and the protocol of dinner parties and other forms of entertainment were a major component of the books on etiquette, for, in the terms of Veblen’s paradigm, the consumption of food is closely linked to the consumption of various forms of wealth. It is expected that those who have achieved wealth will demonstrate, if not flaunt, their wealth at the table. This expectation is reflected in the expanding social importance of dinner parties, which we noted in Chapter 1. In England, socializing and entertaining in the home increased during the nineteenth century (Davidoff); in the United States as well, despite the “servant

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<sup>10</sup>Wharton’s avowed interest in anthropology makes it tempting to look to anthropological theory in studying her work. In *Felicitous Space*, Fryer cites Sherry Ortner’s article, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” to point out that women may have a biological predisposition toward ritual (130-31). However, it makes more sense to argue that if women in this class are supposed to be decorative, they themselves would need to make sure they create a context in which they can be fully appreciated.



problem,” from approximately the 1870's,

dinner parties at home for friends, acquaintances, and important personages were . . . becoming central aspects of middle class social life. On these occasions, not only was the food expected to impress, but so was the table. Flower-bedecked, linen-clad, and glittering with china, silver, and cut glass, it was expected to reflect the creativity and inventiveness of the hostess. (Levenstein 129-30)

The dinner party provided “a magnificent opportunity to show off the material possessions of the host” (Burnett 193). The dining room itself was an indicator of status.<sup>11</sup> A nineteenth-century innovation (Hooker), it became a symbol of middle-class respectability: “The possession of a well-furnished dining room indicated that the owner of a house had the wealth, the time, and the social knowledge to devote special effort to meal preparation and consumption” (Clark 149).

The right invitations were the surest sign of acceptance into the higher echelons. Once she is told about the social status of the Marvells, Undine Spragg knows that her invitation to dinner at the home of Ralph Marvell's sister means that she is on her way. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, when Silas and his family are invited to the Coreys for dinner, they study etiquette books in preparation. Silas knows nothing about behaviour at dinner: the use of various forks and glasses, conventions such as the ladies' leaving the table first, and so forth. To deal with the gaps left by the etiquette books, Silas tries to act the way he has seen other people act, but is made

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<sup>11</sup>Siegfried Giedeon, writing in the 1940's, suggests that, with the “servantless household” firmly entrenched after World War I (620), houses with a more open design became fashionable, because woman wished to feel less isolated in the kitchen. In any case, even today, the equipment, size and layout of the dining and kitchen areas continue to be an index to social standing and to modernity.

uncomfortable by the fact that he himself is now being observed. Undine is an observer as well, but much of her knowledge of society and of etiquette has been formed by the newspapers. If Undine tries to rewrite the entire text of her life, she has begun this process by faithfully reading the society pages, rather than the etiquette manuals that the Laphams study. Thus, long before she meets them – indeed, before she arrives in New York – she knows many people from their photographs.

However, there is a difference between the popular journalistic image of the wealthy and the way New Yorkers of long-standing social status behave. Undine is very disappointed by her dinner at Mrs. Fairford's. Accustomed to the view of society described in the newspapers,

. . . she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrées in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognize – as if they'd been dyspeptics on a diet! With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer; and as the evening progressed she began to suspect that it wasn't a real "dinner party," and that they had just asked her in to share what they had when they were alone. (44)

For Undine, a "dinner party" does not mean an invitation to share dinner, to enter the intimate family circle, but rather a photogenic society event to celebrate the social standing of the guests. Mennell reminds us that, whenever food supplies have been dependable and plentiful, the rich have distinguished themselves not so much by eating large quantities, as they did in the periods of relative scarcity, but by the innovativeness of their menus, the talents of their cooks (Mennell 34). However, in an old and socially secure family like the Marvell/Dagonet clan, subtlety is

appreciated; there is no need to impress with fancy dishes or display. Thus Clare Van Degen will give Paul Marvell a “battered old Dagonet bowl” (160) for his birthday. Undine is offended by this gift; if Elmer Moffatt understands that solid history is both classier and more valuable than showiness, Undine never really learns this lesson.

At this first dinner party, Undine is also shocked by Mrs. Fairford’s house:

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding, no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of “Back to the farm for Christmas”; and when the logs fell forward Mrs. Fairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily. (44)

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton and Codman emphasize simplicity and respect for architectural structure rather than ornamentation and veneer. Undine’s “preference for display and artifice” (Waid 135) is an expression of the worst of the new taste, if it can be called that, an attraction to a style which, in its showiness, might allay the insecurity of one of newly-wealthy and reassure her that she has truly “arrived.”

But it is not only the physical setting that Undine fails to understand; it is the way the meal is constructed. Indeed, some conventions are not easily learned. Silas Lapham, having somehow weathered the manipulation of dinner utensils, experiences terrible moments as a dinner guest when everyone looks at him, expecting him to speak. Although he has observed others, he does not understand what might comprise

dinner table conversation and, having drunk an unaccustomed number of glasses of wine, proceeds to make a fool of himself. Neither does Undine comprehend what is below the surface of the simpler rules of etiquette: "All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene" (47). Thus, she does not understand the conversation at Mrs. Fairford's dinner, neither the subject matter, nor the conventions of who speaks to whom, nor indeed the hostess's role of drawing out her various guests: ". . . with Mrs. Fairford conversation seemed to be a concert and not a solo. She kept drawing in the others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow harmonizing and linking together what they said" (45). Undine assumes that the hostess is the star, as indeed she is, but in a different way from the guest, and a rather more complex and subtle way than Undine understands. Still, Undine is an apt learner. Although she never understands the difference between manners and mere etiquette, by the time of her dinner with Ralph's mother and grandfather, "Her quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to modulate and lower her voice, and to replace 'The i'dea!' and 'I wouldn't wonder' by more polished locutions" (82), even though her own conversation still consists of meaningless responses. Judith Fryer finds that "Undine is quite literally unable to speak" (113); however, she does in fact speak – often too much or inappropriately. She shocks the table with her outspoken and rather flippant views on divorce, certainly tactless under the circumstances of an engagement dinner.

For Undine, dinners are important social occasions, but not in the sense of meeting and conversing with people: the point is to be invited in the first place and then to be admired. Indeed, guests are expected, even required to shine, and Undine gradually learns the acceptable boundaries of dining behaviour. From her perspective, dinner parties are quantitative: the number of dinners per week is an index to one's popularity and to the status of one's circle. In this attitude she reflects that of the unsophisticated Mrs. Heeny: "They certainly do things with style over here [in France] – but it's kinder one-horse after New York, ain't it? Is this what they call their season? Why, you dined home two nights last week. They ought to come over to New York and see!" (332). For Undine, the ideal is to live in "a house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company'" (*H of M* 37), like the house where Lily Bart grew up. But, indeed, although she may seem crass compared to the refined Fairfords and Marvells, Undine is not so different from the people in Lily Bart's social circle; just, at first, unpolished and a bit too obviously eager.

As a guest, being observed is never the problem for Undine that it is for Silas Lapham; she herself constantly observes her reflection in mirrors, and, indeed, even sees herself in other objects: the Boucher tapestries, for example, become "mirrors reflecting her own image" (360). But eventually her hosts want more.<sup>12</sup> Thus, during

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<sup>12</sup>The characteristics of a good guest are still at issue. "The Art of Being an Honored Guest" in the "Style" section of the November 26, 1995 *New York Times* uses a visit of Monaco's Prince Rainier to analyze, light-heartedly, the behaviour of the perfect guest. The article poses the question, "What makes a good guest? A century ago, when New York's 'Four Hundred' were the only people invited to private balls, the rules were well understood. . . . They've been changing ever since." Prince

her period as the Marquise de Chelles, when the dinner invitations stop arriving, her American friend Madame de Trézac divulges that this perceived neglect is because, although people still find her beautiful and are “delighted to bring [her] out at their big dinners, with the Sèvres and the plate” (368), they also find her boring: thus, “those who regard conversation as a necessary part of ritual finally stop inviting her to small dinners because she has nothing to say, because she does not understand” (Fryer 113).

What is more difficult for Undine than being a guest, however, is playing the role of hostess. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* presents a rather humorous account of the anxiety of the newly-wealthy about entertaining: “Up to a certain period Mrs. Lapham had the ladies of her neighborhood in to tea, as her mother had done in the country in her younger days. Lapham’s idea of hospitality was still to bring a heavy-buying customer home to pot-luck; neither of them imagined dinners” (23). Mrs. Lapham might well have been a potential reader for the books on entertaining mentioned in Chapter 1. But in Undine’s case, the style of entertaining is not the problem. The fact that, during most of *The Custom of the Country*, we do not see Undine as a hostess reflects her desire to be out rather than at home, her measuring her social progress by the number of invitations she receives. Not until she is married to Raymond de Chelles is there even any reference to guests. When Mrs. Heeny

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Rainier provides one model: “He was, first of all, polite to a staff member. He was enthusiastic. He held up his end of the conversation. And most importantly, he was flexible. He took things in stride” (51). Apparently, one can still turn to royalty for inspiration.

arrives in Paris with Paul, she says, "I suppose you'll begin to give parties as soon as ever you get into a house of your own. You're not going to have one? Oh, well, then you'll give a lot of big week-ends at your place down in the Shatter-country; that's where the swells all go to in the summer time, ain't it?" (332-33). But these "week-ends" do not happen; other than the mention of family parties, which are torture for Undine, the only other references are to parties that do not occur because of the mourning period for her father-in-law or a lack of money.

Whatever the novel's explanation of her not having parties, Undine's playing the guest rather than the hostess is typical of her chosen social role: although she is an active, not to say aggressive, participant in getting where and what she wants, she fights first to be noticed, then to be observed and admired, but not to play a dynamic role. In fact, she does not understand the role of the hostess: that the hostess must be ready to receive homage, but also to supply socialization; she does not *need* society because she *is* society. For Undine, playing the hostess is tied up with ostentatious display; a party is nothing in itself, but merely a subject for the society pages of the newspaper. Moreover, the only life she really knows is that of aspirant. Upon marriage into the upper classes, her driving ambition remains, but its goal becomes confused; hence her several marriages. Because she continues to view the world with yearning, Undine never feels settled or established, and thus she never has a solid base as a hostess. In one way or another, she is ashamed of and/or not at home in most of her houses: the West End Avenue apartment is badly located, the Paris apartment too small, the chateau too much part of the de Chelles family history. Just as Undine

wants to be desired, but never loves, a certain passivity is also apparent in her avoidance or refusal of the role of hostess. She achieves what she wants, but because her desire was for the outward appearance of something, what she gets is empty for her.

Finally, Undine cannot play the role of hostess because, although she masters the basic conventions of etiquette and style, she never learns that there is a deeper level to the appropriate codes of both social behaviour and language. It is not that Undine is unable to speak, but that she does not speak the same language as the Marvells and the de Chelles – representatives of the traditional American and French social milieus she thinks she wants to join. As Waid points out, when Raymond tells her that she does not speak his language, he is not just referring to French. The courtly, kindly aspect of the manners of the old wealthy class is missing for her; and only the naked competition under the “veneer of virtue” (Finkelstein 131) is evident.

Undine is portrayed planning to host a dinner party only after her re-marriage to Moffat at the end of the novel. Perhaps this finally occurs, as she suggests to Mrs. Heeny, because she only now really feels as though she has a house of her own. Also, even though Undine again shows hints of dissatisfaction in this marriage, the novel implies that she has found her appropriate match. The preparations for the dinner party are poignantly juxtaposed with Paul Marvell’s lonely wandering through the unfamiliar house. His alienation in this house and in his new family is emphasized by his discovery that his mother has lied about his “French father” and that both she and Elmer Moffatt are pleased about having tricked and defeated his beloved de Chelles in



acquiring the Boucher tapestries. When he finally seeks out Mrs. Heeny for some help in trying to make sense of his life, she pulls out her bag of newspaper clippings about Undine: this is the only explanation ever given to Paul of his mother's divorce and re-marriage. On the last pages of the novel, Paul wants to tell his mother about a composition prize he has won, but she brushes him away to dress and place the dinner cards. Uninterested in his writing, as she was uninterested in his father's (unless he were to have made a lot of money at it), her only use for language, other than reading the society pages, is to place the guests at her table: applications of reading and writing that appropriately complement each other. If her son is lost and misplaced, and she is not capable of or interested in giving him direction, her guests, at least, will be guided to their appropriate seats at the table.

If we had many details about May Archer's first dinner party, we have none about Undine's. Although it is going to happen, it remains unrealized at the end of the novel. There is no reference to the food that is being prepared; as in *The House of Mirth*, the food itself is less important than the social scene to which it gives an occasion. Still, the Moffatts' dinner party is a signal of social change. The society that Undine wanted to enter is clearly finished, both in New York and in Europe; she sees that herself during her marriages to Marvell and de Chelles, even if she is not able to articulate her realization clearly. She has proved that she can be accepted by this society, but people like her, coming into ascendancy, are inevitably changing its

values.<sup>13</sup> Although the novel is critical of the Undines and the Elmers, still, as Wolff reminds us, it does not idealize the old society of New York. Clare Van Degen, although kind and sensitive, has bartered herself for “the Van Degen diamonds and the Van Degen motor [which] bore her broken heart from opera to ball” (*Feast of Words* 73). Ralph, although perhaps tragic, is a dilettante, the final product of a dying society and incapable of making the transition into the new one.

In this contrast between the new and the old lies the difference between Undine in *The Custom of the Country* and Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. While Undine desperately wants social invitations, Lily desperately needs them. But Lily, like Ralph from a decaying class, similarly finds herself incapable of constructive action. Through the course of the novel, dinner and other social invitations come to her less and less frequently and, ultimately, Lily finds herself truly alone, homeless, and with no solutions, given her very restricted set of values. Crippled by the old way, she has a decorative manner of pouring tea, and she can present herself as a rare work of art to be collected, but she does not have the drive to succeed of Undine’s class: men like Moffatt who are capable of making cutthroat business deals, women like

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<sup>13</sup>Godden explains the fall of the traditional elite society thus:

“What capital increasingly needs after 1900 is a highly mobile, highly reproducible and highly controllable system of manners. That is to say, fashion must supplant manners: where taste once stood, style must stand. . . . Fashion penetrates the mannered self and opens it for the market” (20).

And, in Lipovetsky’s terms: “In order for fashion to come into being, the ‘modern’ had to be accepted and desired; the present had to be deemed more prestigious than the past; in an unprecedented move, what was novel had to be invested with dignity” (47-8).

Undine who barter themselves aggressively to the highest bidder. Undine's ultimate success occurs, however, because the new values and manners of her class are in the process of defeating the old, and because she finally links up with a man like herself. It is Undine and, in *The House of Mirth*, the Gormers and Mrs. Hatch, who, once they have achieved a veneer of social manners, will demonstrate that, in a profound sense, the deeper code of manners dear to the society of *The Age of Innocence* has indeed changed.

## Chapter 4

### **“Hungry Roaming”: Food and Starvation in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield**

### I. Homelessness and Hunger

Yes, I hate hate HATE doing these things that you accept just as all men accept of their women. I can only play the servant with very bad grace indeed. Its [sic] all very well for females who have nothing else to do. . . & then you say I am a tyrant & wonder because I get tired at night! The trouble with women like me is – they cant keep their nerves out of the job in hand – & . . . I walk about with a mind full of ghosts of saucepans & primus stoveses [sic] & “will there be enough to go round”. . . & you calling . . . isn’t there going to be tea. Its [sic] five o’clock.<sup>1</sup>

Although Lily Bart belongs to the old, pre-modern New York, she points the way to changes in consciousness that are typical of the modernist period and that affect women and are expressed in the writing of women in very particular ways. The social change which Edith Wharton’s work traces is well established in the works of Katherine Mansfield. If, in Wharton, society is defined in large part by customs of dining and entertaining, in Mansfield’s short stories, dining and food in general are linked to the modern predicaments and modernist themes of homelessness, rootlessness, alienation, and isolation. In particular, Mansfield’s meals elucidate the contradictions surrounding changing roles for women in the context of the larger social changes which marked the first part of the century.

Because food is so central to notions of the home, the treatment of food is a key index to modern experiences of homelessness or a sense of homelessness, and, in

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from a 1913 letter from Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry (O’Sullivan and Scott 1:125-26; first and third sets of ellipses in original).

Mansfield, reflects a profound ambivalence about that state of being and/or state of mind. From childhood, as noted in Chapter 1, food plays a crucial role in people's lives, not only in forming our habits and tastes, but in defining our feelings of warmth and security. Food figures strongly in our memories of home, usually evoking positive associations: a nostalgia for "mom's home cooking" is expected, a cliché. In adult life, food is a crucial element in creating a home – usually the job of a woman. However, if homes are problematic for various reasons in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, they are particularly so in Mansfield's work. If circumstances in the story sometimes seem to make it impossible for characters to create a home, it may also seem to be a character's choice not to do so, an attempt, perhaps, to liberate herself from the constraints a home might impose. Mostly, the lines are blurred between longing for and rebellion against home, and the two apparently contradictory positions of desire for liberation and anxiety about isolation may fade into each other.

One can view Mansfield's people as caught between the limitations of two eras. Consciously rebelling against lingering and tenacious Victorian ideals about the proper role of women, her female characters may be trapped by another constraint: that sense of estrangement – itself, in part, a consequence of the reaction against Victorianism – which is intrinsic to modernity. In other words, the very forms of rebellion contain this sense of alienation; what looks like freedom may, in fact, be oppressive in another way. This peculiarly twentieth-century dilemma is reflected in the structure of a number of stories, which seems to trap the characters, at the same

time as the content of the stories explores or at least hints at new ways of living. For instance, although Mansfield's characters present an impression of being in motion, actual mobility is minimal; many of the stories are very contained in both time and space. Indeed, even though the characters may have broken away from the traditional home and family setting, some of the stories seem scarcely to give them breathing room.

Rita Felski notes that "[t]he so-called private sphere, often portrayed as a domain where natural and timeless emotions hold sway, is shown to be radically implicated in patterns of modernization and processes of social change" (*Gender of Modernity* 3).<sup>2</sup> Modernist expressions of alienation and homelessness are indeed congruent with actual historical changes in gender roles and family structure. Although the food reformers succeeded in establishing food science in school and university curricula, they did not, in so doing, cure social ills or solidify the family unit as they had originally hoped to do. World War I pushed women into new situations which forced them to see themselves differently. In addition, the cultural disillusionment arising from its battlefield horrors had a huge impact on social structures. But even before the cataclysm of the war, there had been changes in the family. As noted in a previous chapter, despite the focus of early advertising on the family, one can trace a breakdown in family structure beginning in the nineteenth century. Ernest Groves's and William Fielding Ogburn's *American Marriage and*

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<sup>2</sup>Felski bases her argument on Gail Finney's 1989 study, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*.

*Family Relationships*, published in 1928, cites the statistic that in the United States, “Divorce between 1870 and the mid-1920s had risen 35 percent for each ten year period” (Ewen 120).

Certainly, the most cursory look at early twentieth-century fiction reveals a concern with fragmented families. If Ellen Olenska’s possible divorce in *The Age of Innocence* is a matter for some discussion among the members of the New York aristocracy, divorce is relatively common in *The House of Mirth* and nearly unremarkable in *The Custom of the Country*. As well, many early twentieth-century novels portray orphaned children and parents who do not fulfill a traditional role. As we have seen, etiquette manuals were so popular partly because parental guidance was no longer sufficient for the upwardly-mobile; thus children of newly-wealthy but old-fashioned families like the Spraggs might take charge of the family themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In some early twentieth-century works of fiction, we see families in the process of disintegrating completely. One or both parents may be entirely absent, and guardians – like Mrs. Peniston in *The House of Mirth* – not completely committed to their roles. Given the destruction of black family structure by slavery, it is perhaps not surprising that in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janey is raised by her grandmother. Similarly, in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the parents of some major characters – most notably Helga Crane and Clare Kendry – are dead, and

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<sup>3</sup>On the other hand, children in some novels of the nineteen-twenties seem to have no reality; children in *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, and in Carl Van Vechten’s *Parties* are treated as dolls by both their parents and the writer.



in neither of these cases was the parent-child relationship a happy one in the first place. However, white families are also portrayed as fragmented. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna's mother has died young, and her father is not a reliable source of paternal guidance; moreover, she leaves her own two young sons motherless. By the end of *The Custom of the Country*, Paul Marvell, having had two fathers rather violently taken away from him, is a lonely and neglected little boy.

We have already noted, generally, a difference in meaning between nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictional portrayals of dinner. These differences signal a change in the portrayal of families as well. The history of the novel is full of orphans like Pip or Jane Eyre, making their way in the world. However, in this tradition, the family itself is not questioned. What we see in the early twentieth century, on the other hand, is not the unfortunate and unpredictable loss of the family, but the rejection of the family. In the literature of the early modernist era, when characters leave home and set out on their own, it may be because they have to, but, more likely, also because they consider the beliefs and values of their parents and their home to be hopelessly old-fashioned. Thus Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby not only leaves the Midwest, but tries to eradicate his origins completely. Carrie in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Ellen in Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* are women making their own way in the world more out of desire than because of dire financial necessity. Most of the characters of Dorothy Parker and Kay Boyle come to mind as having made similar choices and being in similar situations.

Geographical mobility, then, also contributes significantly to the sense of

homelessness in this period: indeed, it is well-known that many of the writers discussed in this study themselves lived in a self-imposed exile, an exile which they apparently found necessary for intellectual, artistic and/or psychological survival, even though they may have written longingly and frequently or – as Joyce did – even exclusively about their home country.<sup>4</sup> Edith Wharton’s experience is presumably mirrored in that of Ellen Olenska, who, despite her short-lived attempt to integrate back into New York, ultimately does better alone in Paris. It is groundbreaking for a woman to be on her own, creating, by herself, her own home and, thereby, her own stance in relation to society. The conventional marriage plot with the conventional role for women is upended in *The Age of Innocence*.

As Marshall Berman argues, there may be economic reasons for the modernist emphasis on the solitary individual struggling with both loneliness and – apparently inconsistently – the desire for distance from home or roots: the notion of striving and the feeling of mobility are, Berman says, inherent in modern capitalism. Because expansion is necessary, change is necessary as well.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, in both Marxist and standard capitalist terms, this philosophy is profoundly optimistic; in

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<sup>4</sup>Although she never returned to New Zealand, Katherine Mansfield never felt fully accepted in England either. Quoting from her journals, Gardner McFall reports that “Mansfield considered herself the ‘little Colonial walking in the London garden patch – allowed to look perhaps, but not to linger’ ” (54).

<sup>5</sup>Felski sees Berman’s definition of modernity as specifically male; however, the “creative destruction and constant transformation unleashed by the logic of capitalist development” (Felski *Gender of Modernity 2*) would surely have had an impact on women as well, and certainly applies to modernist depictions of women and their relationship to the home.

another sense, it is both frightening and profoundly isolating, as notions of family, community and even selfhood become fluid. Thus, we see a desperate need for intimacy at the same time as traditional group relationships can no longer be assumed, and as it becomes increasingly difficult to be certain of one's own identity (Berman 110).<sup>6</sup> As indicated by the rising interest in psychoanalysis during the early twentieth century, the notion of the self becomes more important at the same time as its very existence becomes questionable. Djuna Barnes's dream-like *Nightwood* is a striking example of modernist fiction in which not only the characters, but also the entire narrative, evince a sense of distance and dissociation from self and/or from what is generally constituted as reality. In Mansfield's fiction, the shifting quality of personal and social identity is frequently associated with a change in the relationship to the home. In particular, the treatment of food expresses both this loss of tradition and the search for a new way of being, especially for women. Loss or rejection of food habits, customs and rituals may signal various other losses as well.<sup>7</sup>

Much recent criticism of Mansfield includes a strong biographical element.

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<sup>6</sup>The modernist emphasis on questions of identity is reflected, for instance, in Mansfield's interest in the motif of masks and the notion of multiple selves.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia Waugh argues that "[i]n modernist fiction the struggle for personal autonomy can be continued only through *opposition* to existing social institutions and conventions. This struggle necessarily involves individual alienation and often ends with mental dissolution" (10). Waugh's argument is perhaps oversimplified. "Personal autonomy" is not the clearly definable state she seems to imply. Also, while "mental dissolution" may seem imminent in *Nightwood*, this is not a very common situation in modernist fiction. Generally, "individual alienation" is both far more mundane and more subtly pervasive.

While such criticism may be valuable – interesting and insightful – we must certainly be wary of interpreting works of fiction in the light of excerpts from journals and letters.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, even as a historical example of women’s relationship with food, it is worth noting a “preoccupation with eating” (Moran, “Unholy Meanings” 108) in Mansfield’s personal writing as well as in her fiction. Like Virginia Woolf, who apparently could not eat during her several breakdowns (Poole ch. 8), Mansfield may have suffered from food-related anxiety and health problems. As a child, she was sensitive about being plump, and her weight remained a source of some tension, especially in her relationship with her mother, until tuberculosis finally cured that problem with a more serious one.

It has been suggested that food disorders are more common in periods of social change, that the disruption, dislocation and instability inherent in such periods may be indicators for anorexia, and specifically, that the condition “afflicts many women during periods of change in female roles” (Perlick and Silverstein 81).

Anorexia has been seen by some as a disease peculiar to the twentieth century.

Indeed, there is an anorexic quality to the experience of many of Mansfield’s women

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<sup>8</sup>Mary Burgan’s *Illness, Gender, and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield* and Patricia Moran’s “Unholy Meanings: Maternity, Creativity, and Orality in Katherine Mansfield” are examples of recent influential criticism almost completely based in Mansfield’s life. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas quite rightly sees problems in the fact that “. . . all female writing has traditionally been decoded as autobiographical” (“KM’s Piece of Pink Wool” 5) and notes in particular “the unwillingness of readers to separate the popular myths of [Mansfield’s biography] from the characters in [her] fiction” (24). In Mansfield’s case, this critical approach has sometimes reduced her work to a question of neurosis, leading to her “being read as a ‘case’ rather than as a writer. . .” (Fullbrook 4).

characters, a rejection of food which is not typical of usual definitions of anorexia – that is, an obsession with weight dictated by cultural norms of beauty – but which nevertheless involves self-rejection. The potentially liberating movement away from the roles that usually link women to the provision of food and the creation of a home seems, in much of Mansfield's fiction, to entail an alienation from the physical self and a lack of interest in the nourishment – both literal and metaphorical – required to sustain that self. In other words, the roles of server and consumer of food may be conflated: the rejection of the former may involve the rejection of the latter as well. Male modernist characters may generally have been able to assume that, in the end, dinner would somehow be cooked. And, with notable exceptions such as Joyce's Bloom cooking breakfast, they did not need to pay too much attention to how. But Mansfield's women who divorce themselves from such details of mundane existence may sometimes seem to be at risk of starvation. At the very least, they seem to have no pleasure in food; moreover, the magical, transformatory quality of meals may be lost, forgotten or even deliberately avoided.

In Mansfield's work, then, women who view themselves and/or are viewed by the author as resisting the mold of Victorianism have a particularly complex and difficult relationship with food. Mansfield writes about women alone, in couples and within the family; in each of these instances, characters may evince both an attempt to find meaning in food and the rituals of dining, and, at the same time, an alienation from eating that reflects a larger sense of social and personal alienation, even despair. Moreover, food is inextricably tied up with language, and Mansfield's sense of the

relationship of food with the forms of discourse that structure people's lives is often quite acute. If the dinner table fails in these stories, this failure is frequently linked with a failure of communication as well.

## II. "Ghosts of Saucepans & Primus Stoveses"

If Lily Bart is on the cusp of modernity, most of Katherine Mansfield's women lead a definitely "modern" life. Many of her stories are about independent, mobile people, often young, and looking to reject the past. On the surface, at least, class may be unimportant to them. Sometimes they are intellectuals or artists, people who could be classified as bohemian; often they are single and may have had many lovers, or, if married, have a consciously different view of marriage than their parents did. They are the mold for the kind of characters found in the popular short stories of writers like Dorothy Parker, Jean Rhys and Kay Boyle in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Unlike Lily, who only begins to recognize the degree of her alienation from society and to discover the depth of her loneliness late in *The House of Mirth*, many of Mansfield's characters do not need to discover their own solitude and anomie: it is rather the milieu in which they move, the air that they breathe. In some of the stories, alienation is so much an accepted state of being that people would be as hard-pressed to live otherwise as Lily is to survive outside the Trenors' circle.

As noted earlier, this alienation is frequently expressed in terms of food. The emphasis on food is a striking characteristic of Mansfield's work: most of her short stories include at least a reference to some kind of meal, tea or snack. Some of Mansfield's stories present an arguably neurotic obsession with food; in many, food is foregrounded as an integral part of the often dissociated, alienated or fragmented lives that the story follows. Lily Bart's failure to nourish herself, although in a very different context, has become the norm in many of Mansfield's stories, where the

serving and consuming of food establish a level of realism, but also represent major sites of conflict and conceal a tangle of anxiety and unease. A character's state of spiritual or psychological well-being, on the one hand, or *malaise*, on the other, is reflected and made concrete in her relationship with food. The strong emphasis on food suggests a pervasive hunger that cannot be assuaged, a constant question about survival – physical, emotional and financial – and the means of survival.<sup>9</sup> However, the importance of the issues raised by food goes beyond the problems of individual characters; as descriptors of a particular view of the modern and modernist world, issues of food are an integral part of the narrative consciousness and, as such, are woven into the context of the story as a whole.

In providing an extreme, even exaggerated example of an alienated consciousness controlling the story, “Je ne parle pas français” may suggest a useful insight into the modernist narrative at work in Mansfield. The framework of the story is a Paris café, where the self-absorbed, cynical and corrupt narrator, Raoul Duquette, a would-be writer, sits telling his story as he observes the waiter, the other customers and his own reflection in a mirror. He also sees his reflection in the proprietor – Mansfield herself, perhaps – who, like him, watches the movements of others:

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<sup>9</sup>This question certainly poses itself for the characters within the story, but may also pertain to the writer's relationship with her own work. In an interesting essay on Mary Wilkins Freeman, Virginia Blum suggests that the pervasive poverty faced by Freeman's characters, and their resulting obsession with money, is reflected in an anxiety about food. Like Freeman, Mansfield wrote many of her stories because of an immediate need for money, a fact that Blum sees as significant both in Freeman's work and in her attitudes toward literary value.



Madame[']s] . . . dark-ringed eyes search among and follow after the people passing, but not as if she was looking for somebody. Perhaps, fifteen years ago, she was; but now the pose has become a habit. You can tell from the air of fatigue and hopelessness that she must have given them up for the last ten years, at least. . . . (61)<sup>10</sup>

Although he lives in his native Paris, Duquette poses as an exile from life and remains essentially homeless in spirit, if not in fact. He takes pride in stating that, in his first apartment, he “didn’t use the kitchen except to throw old papers into” (67).

The events he describes occur elsewhere: in a train station, taxi, hotel, and the streets of Paris. Yet there is a sense of stasis, passivity, and a lack of physical movement in the story, as if it is not only the act of narration but the story itself that is bounded by the walls and defined by the world of the café – or by Duquette’s perspective on it, which is all that we know. The café is not a cozy or congenial setting; food is not served there, and, in fact, we see little drink consumed either. Moreover, the interactions among its denizens seem devoid of any real human contact. Similarly, despite their travels, the people in Duquette’s story seem to be going nowhere, and the various arrangements of couples are all failed ones, involving betrayal, corruption, even overtones of incest. All of this negativity both reflects and is reflected in the narrator’s rather self-consciously cynical pose and in his description of the ambience of the café – limited, depressing, even claustrophobic – which becomes the larger context of the story. In some stories, one feels that this is Mansfield’s context as well.

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<sup>10</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, page references are to the 1981 Penguin edition of Mansfield’s collected stories.

Overall, two major emphases emerge in Mansfield's treatment of food. First, in many stories, the presence of food has an almost ironic effect, if not intent: meals underline the absence of that very communality, commensality, intimacy and warmth which the rituals of sharing food are supposed to create or enhance within families, among friends and between lovers. Even when such positive associations with food seem about to appear, they are either shown to be false or undercut in some way. In some stories, love, friendship and family are directly parodied. Although Mansfield usually focusses on the loss of mealtime ritual from a woman's perspective, its effect on men is also demonstrated in a number of stories. Second, the treatment of meals, as of domesticity in general, particularly reflects and reveals the tensions in women's lives; that is, for women, the modern sense of alienation expresses itself in the context of their traditional roles – especially that of organizing meals – and through each individual woman's position within or against these roles.

In much of Mansfield's work, then, if there is any association of food with pleasure, sociability and intimacy, it is solely in the expression of lack, absence or unfulfilled desire. The meals in Mansfield's stories often occur within an atmosphere of loneliness, repression, even moral corruption – as in “Je ne parle pas français” – and suggest the failure of intimacy, the dashing of hopes. Many of the meals in Mansfield's stories are eaten alone, largely because “her people are ceaselessly on the move, traveling, wandering, often in foreign or threatening situations. . . . Mansfield wrote almost compulsively of outcasts, exiles, minorities, and fringe dwellers” (Robinson 4). In some of Mansfield's stories, then, eating is done on the fly; meals are

consumed in nameless restaurants or are replaced by snacks. When eating in restaurants because they are away on holiday, vacationers may seem more like exiles. Sometimes people simply do not get to eat: in "Poison," for instance, the table is set for lunch, but lunch is not eaten; in "Marriage à la Mode," the fruit that the husband brings home somehow just disappears. In these last two examples, it is largely the man's alienation within the couple that is explored. In both cases, the men seem to be looking for the traditional marriage that their partners apparently reject. Although spurning the traditional role, the women in these two stories still seem to the men to be in control of meals.

Such a manner of eating does, of course, suggest a release – for both men and women – not only from the entrenched rituals of the Victorian dinner table, but from the social structures implied and reinforced by such rituals: those, for instance, described in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Most important, perhaps, is a release from class distinctions. Eating in restaurants is one expression of the partially-illusory democracy inherent in the anonymity of the modern crowd, the twentieth-century street scene which figures prominently in the work of many modernists. This relaxation of class demarcations can also be seen in depictions of public transport, another site where classes mix. Except for those in the highest stratum of society, everyone takes the bus, from Mansfield's Rosabel, a hat-shop clerk, to Woolf's Elizabeth Dalloway. But beneath the semblance of equality, class distinctions remain. Thus, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the upper-class Clarissa mingles with the Bond Street crowds; yet her shopping errands remain firmly rooted in her class, their purpose to prepare

for the party that she will be hosting as the wife of a member of Parliament. Mrs. Dalloway's attention, like that of the other shoppers and strollers, is seized by a passing limousine; but, for readers of the novel, she is distinguished from the crowd by the fact that the Prime Minister – quite possibly the passenger in the car – will be a guest at her party.

Like these street scenes, the fictional restaurant setting conveys the impression of equality. As Joanne Finkelstein notes, “[b]y following the formulated modes of sociality accepted in the restaurant one can appear as one desires without the risks of actually crossing social barriers or attempting to realize these imagined postures” (15). In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry drink tea in the roof-top restaurant of a whites-only hotel. With the appropriate clothes and class demeanour, a light-skinned woman can “pass” in such a situation. When Miss Kilman has tea with Elizabeth Dalloway in the restaurant of a department store – itself a leveller of classes – the anonymity of the tea-room momentarily erases class. However, despite this temporary equality, when Elizabeth has to leave to get ready for her mother’s party, the differences of class – and the material and social advantages of class – reappear between her and Miss Kilman. The older woman is left wallowing in self-pity: “ ‘I never go to parties,’ ” said Miss Kilman, just to keep Elizabeth from going. ‘People don’t ask me to parties. . . . Why should they ask me? . . . I’m plain, I’m unhappy’ ” (200).

Public dining, then, creates only a superficial equality – defined strictly by one’s ability to pay the bill. Moreover, Joanne Finkelstein argues that, although it is

public, the restaurant meal may not be truly social, even when it is shared. Highly “stylized” (Finkelstein 13), such meals may in fact preclude rather than encourage interaction. Certainly, the restaurant setting does not inspire the profound resonance of meaning associated with the historic rituals of a culture. Despite its liberating aspects, then, this new world of dining out is not without its price; it may in fact entail a loss of ritual and sociability, which creates or reinforces a sense of loneliness or rootlessness. The above example from *Mrs. Dalloway* suggests not only that Doris Kilman’s craving for sweets during tea emerges from her feeling of deprivation, but, moreover, that the tea room brings out this feeling:

Elizabeth rather wondered whether Miss Kilman could be hungry. It was her way of eating, eating with intensity, then looking, again and again, at a plate of sugared cakes on the table next them; then, when a lady and a child sat down and the child took the cake, could Miss Kilman really mind it? Yes, Miss Kilman did mind it. She had wanted that cake – the pink one. The pleasure of eating was almost the only pure pleasure left her, and then to be baffled even in that! (197).

Arguably, Miss Kilman’s desperate loneliness, envy, and unhappiness are especially evident in this tea-room setting, which seems to suggest just the opposite: camaraderie, intimacy, festivity, pleasure.

For women in general, the restaurant meal certainly represents freedom from domestic fetters and liberation from such potentially onerous tasks as serving, cooking and organizing meals. Yet, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mansfield’s stories emphasize that dining on the run, especially alone, is both rooted in and symbolic of other things that are missing in a character’s life. Obviously, many of the people in the stories eat alone because they are literally alone in the world; others may feel alone or experience

themselves as profoundly divided from society or within themselves. Mansfield's heroines may demonstrate at any age that relationship to food that reflects what Hardy, in a different context, calls "the ache of modernism." Their sometimes very minimal diet is in keeping with their minimal pleasure and minimal expectations. Moreover, the fact that very small details about food or changes in diet are so terribly important in their lives and carry such subtle nuances of meaning for them shows the tenuousness of their accommodation with life, the fine line between joy and despair.

If left with only the physical necessity of eating, the person feels spiritually bereft. Yet, at the same time, food can create meaning even for those who are alone or alienated from social life. "Miss Brill," reminiscent of some of Joyce's stories, describes the simple rituals of the lonely and suggests the importance of these rituals for survival. An English teacher living in France, Miss Brill makes a habit of a weekly Sunday afternoon outing to a park where a band plays. The stop on the way home to buy herself a Sunday treat of honey-cake is a high point of the week, and central to her life:

Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present – a surprise – something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way. (335)

Miss Brill's weekly treat of cake, like Miss Kilman's desperate consumption of pink cakes and éclairs, seems laughable, pathetic. But buying the cake reflects more than greed, self-pity or sublimated desire; it is a ritual, and as such, not only fills a need for Miss Brill, but creates meaning in her life. The secret possibility of a nut hidden in the

cake represents a chance prize or gift, a hoped-for yet unexpected bonus or reward, and thus the possibility of optimism. Even on this very limited scale, food can transform reality. Thus, for Miss Brill, finding an almond in her slice of cake creates feelings of gaiety, frivolity, excitement and transforms her afternoon, so that she even lights the gas "in quite a dashing way."

The almond in the cake is also related to her sense of a hidden part of herself: sexual, perhaps, or in any case unknown and unappreciated by anyone else. Like buying the cake, wearing her rather moth-eaten old fur piece, a special possession that she treats almost as a pet, is part of the weekly ritual; it represents that weekend self which is hidden from others, a part of her which would surely surprise her pupils and "the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper four afternoons a week while he slept in the garden" (334). Although her words are surely wasted on the sleeping man and perhaps on her students as well, Miss Brill is a person who deals in language. She has created for herself a highly-significant personal text or script to describe her Sundays. Wearing her Sunday fur, she is part of the crowd in the park, someone with a place in the world and a knowledge of character and of life, an accomplished actress with a role in a play, a woman who is curious, interested, almost beautiful. Thus, she is devastated when two young lovers sharing her park bench make fun of her fur. The fact that she does not buy her slice of cake that day, depriving herself of even the possibility of finding an almond, indicates the degree of her humiliation. She returns directly home to "her room like a cupboard" (335) after hearing the couple laugh at her: "The box that the fur came out of was on the bed.

She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying" (336). Denying herself her ritual of cake expresses her despair; indeed, it is a kind of suicide of the spirit.

In Mansfield's early story, "The Tiredness of Rosabel," the main character is young, and not only lonely, but poor; the fact that she has had little to eat for tea opens the story and sets its context. For a young woman on a limited budget, dinner must be weighed against other needs; thus flowers replace food.<sup>11</sup> Rosabel has bought

a bunch of violets, and that was practically the reason why she had so little tea – for a scone and a boiled egg and a cup of cocoa at Lyons are not ample sufficiency after a hard day's work in a millinery establishment. . . . [S]he would have sacrificed her soul for a good dinner – roast duck and green peas, chestnut stuffing, pudding with brandy sauce – something very hot and strong. (513)

Clearly, although written in the third person, this passage represents Rosabel's own text of her life. In fact, despite the way she describes her experience, especially in the cliché of the last sentence, it is obvious that Rosabel would *not* sacrifice her soul: the flowers she buys are "soul food," and are at least part of the reason for her eating a minimal dinner. As a shop-girl, involved in the world of exchange, Rosabel, like many of Mansfield's heroines, knows the value of things and is painfully conscious of having to weigh various needs and desires against each other.

But Rosabel has also written a second, more romantic script for herself.

Fantasizing about the wealthy young couple who came into the shop that day, she

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<sup>11</sup>Flowers appear frequently in Mansfield's stories, and are often associated with food as well as with femaleness. Unfortunately, a full discussion of their importance is beyond the scope of this study.



imagines the life she would lead if she were in the other woman's place: the house, the clothes, the food and drink, the invitations to social events, and especially the man. She sees herself having dinner and later tea with him: " 'Sugar? Milk? Cream?' The little homely questions seemed to suggest a joyous intimacy" (517). Food is part of Rosabel's fantasy of sexual desire and fulfillment. As in many of Mansfield's stories, however, desire is repressed, and food minimal. For the independent, solitary woman, both social conventions and economic pressures make the expression of sexuality problematic except in fantasy. In fact, Rosabel's fantasy reflects economic realities: in other words, good food is linked with both economic security and emotional intimacy. For the self-supporting woman, living outside the traditional family structure, both may be lacking. Rosabel is not alone in this situation: as she daydreams on the bus, the woman next to her reads a romance novel, the text of which quite probably parallels Rosabel's own writing and rewriting of her life. If nineteenth-century bourgeois dining rituals are disappearing in the early twentieth century, a version of them may still exist in fantasy for the working class.

Even when parts of Rosabel's dream come true for other women – women, that is, who have some money and are not alone – intimacy itself often stays at the level of fantasy. A number of Mansfield's stories depict meals shared by a man and a woman, meals which might automatically suggest intimacy, as they do for the male narrator in "Poison":

As always, the sight of the table laid for two – for two people only – and yet so finished, so perfect, there was no possible room for a third, gave me a queer, quick thrill as though I'd been struck by that silver

lightning that quivered over the white cloth, the brilliant glasses, the shadow bowl of freesias. (674)

These meals *à deux* occur in various situations in Mansfield, but any sense of intimacy they suggest always remains potential, if not false. "Sexually, one devours or is devoured," Fullbrook (88) says of Mansfield's stories. However, the recurring link between food and sex is more varied and usually more subtle than Fullbrook suggests, and is always part of the all-encompassing context of alienation. In "Je ne parle pas français," the meal does not even happen. At the end of the story, Raoul Duquette thinks about dining with and seducing the proprietor, but he does not:

I must go. I must go. I reach down my coat and hat. Madame knows me. "You haven't dined yet?" she smiles.

"No, not yet, Madame."<sup>12</sup>

I'd rather like to dine with her. Even to sleep with her afterwards. Would she be pale like that all over?

But no. She'd have large moles. They go with that kind of skin. And I can't bear them. They remind me somehow, disgustingly, of mushrooms. (Alpers, *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield* 299)

To one extent or another, then, frustration permeates a number of the stories, and the superficial trappings of intimacy may make the situation all the more painful. If the combination of food and conversation brings the potential for closeness, the failure of this potential is demonstrated in the sometimes inadequate menu, the lack of joy or pleasure in eating, and the halting, stunted conversation. Thus, as conversation over food sputters and falters, the dinner table fails as the setting for

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<sup>12</sup>This story was originally privately printed in 1919. When it was included in the volume *Bliss and Other Stories*, the publisher insisted that a number of changes be made, including the excision of the following lines.

intimacy and sometimes even for conviviality, as well as for any profound degree of communication. "The Honeymoon," for instance, is indeed about the intimacy of a newly-married couple. But as they drink tea and eat éclairs in the south of France, the story delves beneath the surface of love and the novelty of marriage. We see the sexual attraction, certainly, but also the awareness of differences, the attempts to overlook flaws, the beginnings of questions which remain suppressed, perhaps the seeds of the failure of their marriage, as they negotiate the gaps between everyday life and their idealized notions of love. George is incapable of understanding his wife's desire for intimacy, a desire that she can scarcely express, even awkwardly: "So often people, even when they love each other, don't seem to – to – it's so hard to say – know each other perfectly. They don't seem to want to. And I think that's awful. They misunderstand each other about the most important things of all" (396). Their differences are apparent to the reader; even as the couple hold hands across the table, the distance between them cannot really be breached. In the few minutes described in the story, their relationship appears insubstantial, superficial, although sweet and delicious, like the pastries they are eating. Their marriage is, so far, a sweet snack, their vacation a month of honey; whether it will ever really become nourishing remains open to question, but, the story suggests, is unlikely.

This halting tea-table discourse appears in a different context in "Psychology," where, again, the minimal meal of cake and tea reflects another kind of limited relationship. A man and a woman – each of them a writer and an intellectual – are having tea at the woman's home, and seem to be on the verge of becoming lovers.

Here there is a lot of talk, much of it about books and writing, but it is almost compulsive, ultimately boring even for the talkers, covering their fear of being together in silence and of considering another level to their conversation and their relationship. Each is afraid of broaching the subject of the attraction between them. However, the woman tempts the man with her cake: “ ‘Do realise how good it is,’ she implored. ‘Eat it imaginatively. Roll your eyes if you can and taste it on the breath. It’s not a sandwich from the hatter’s bag – it’s the kind of cake that might have been mentioned in the Book of Genesis. . . .’ ” (113; ellipses in original). The man sees that their eating together is significant, and tries to speak about it, but can do so only in a halting way:

It’s a queer thing but I always do notice what I eat here and never anywhere else. I suppose it comes of living alone so long and always reading while I feed . . . my habit of looking upon food as just food . . . something that’s there, at certain times . . . to be devoured . . . to be . . . not there. (113; ellipses in original)

Although the man clearly associates the enjoyment of food with the presence of his companion, and sees that, when they eat together, food is transformed from a mere physical necessity and a backdrop to his reading into something pleasurable, he seems not to go any further with this thought, and his resistance to intimacy remains. For her part, the woman, although she seems to want to respond, does not. Both are quick to break a silence or to change the subject to intellectual banalities. In this story, it is not a lack of facility with language that precludes closeness, but the limitations and barriers reinforced by their language itself.

A dinner table or tea table, then, can set the framework of both a relationship

and a story. In "A Dill Pickle," a restaurant is the occasion and the setting for the chance meeting of a pair of ex-lovers for the first time in six years. Unlike "Je ne parle pas français," where the decadent and depressing ambience of the café setting – or at least the narrator's impression of it – permeates the story, here the description of the restaurant is limited to one or two small details. The one sentence that sets the scene at the beginning of the story – "He was seated at one of those little bamboo tables decorated with a Japanese vase of paper daffodils" (167) – suggests a stylish but anonymous décor. Other diners do not seem to exist; the interior reality of memory, imagination and emotion dominates the surroundings.

Even though "A Dill Pickle" involves a man and a woman in a restaurant, it is not about a meal, a relationship, or even a date. It is almost a parody of all of the above: food is not shared, and, although they are linked, the two characters remain separate. Yet years of personal history are evoked at the restaurant table, and food plays a part in their shared but different memories – his, perhaps, romanticized; hers more negative – and defines both their closeness and their distance from each other. Past intimacy is suggested in the fact that the man's eating habits are still recognizable to Vera: "There was a tall plate of fruit in front of him, and very carefully, in a way she recognised immediately as his 'special' way, he was peeling an orange" (167). She, however, declines fruit and takes only coffee, her refusal to eat emphasizing their separateness. There is also a sense of austerity about this choice; indeed, Mansfield mentions that Vera has taken her coffee black: a detail noted only because, after her departure, the man insists that he not be charged for the unused cream. Both seem to

be worried about money. Yet the man presents himself as well-off and vaguely successful; Vera, on the other hand, has presumably had to choose food over art, for she mentions “with a little grimace” (170) that she has sold her piano.

The man’s stories are associated with strong images of food. He tells of eating a dill pickle during his trip to Russia, a trip that they once spoke of taking together. The image of the pickle sparks Vera’s imagination, and she feels that she herself is “sitting on the grass beside the mysteriously Black Sea” (171). She even seems able to taste the pickle: “She sucked in her cheeks; the dill pickle was terribly sour. . .” (171; ellipses in original). The congruence between the pickle and the soured love affair is perhaps too obvious, yet, indeed, the relationship returns almost as palpably as the taste of the pickle. Across the table, their old dynamic is picked up again: competition, ambivalence, pain both felt and inflicted. The pickle – which gives the story its title – is more real than what is actually on the table, and the past seems more tangible than the present, the future non-existent. The vividness with which Vera imagines the pickle also suggests the hunger that characterizes her life – and perhaps her ex-lover’s as well. Indeed, both are still alone. The opening of the story – “And then, after six years, she saw him again” (167) – suggests that, despite the break in the relationship, she has not let it go. And, briefly, there is an illusion of intimacy once more at the table. But as the man talks on, Vera sees his “naïve and hearty” remarks as “dreadfully like another side of that old self again” (174), and she exits abruptly.

If these stories seem pessimistic about the possibility of human interaction

over a shared table, others present an even harsher vision, as Mansfield explores the physical vulnerability implicit in sharing a meal. After all, as Margaret Visser notes, at dinner we are supposed to relax our guard and literally put our weapons aside, even though we are surrounded by tearing teeth and sharp instruments. Moreover, unless we have cooked the meal ourselves, we are ingesting unknown substances. The fear of poisoning is a terrible one, suggesting not merely alienation from the provider of food, but an absolute failure of trust: the very opposite of commensality. If sharing food is a bond, poisoning is the most insidious betrayal, occurring, as it does, from inside the site of “communion.” Some of Mansfield’s stories draw an analogy between this kind of betrayal and that occurring in love: for example, a husband’s poisoning his wife figures in the unfinished “A Married Man’s Story.” In “Poison,” as well, the physical danger of meals is linked with the emotional danger of relationships. Like “The Honeymoon,” this story takes place in the south of France, but the couple are sophisticated, even world-weary, and the story is far more cynical. The man is trying to convince himself that he is finally sure of his aptly-named lover Beatrice; this, despite the fact that her anxiety for the postman to appear strongly suggests to the reader that she expects a letter from another man. As noted earlier, the sight of the table set for two people implies a happy intimacy to the man, but not to Beatrice: “She took my arm. ‘Let’s go on to the terrace—’ and I felt her shiver. ‘Ça sent,’ she said faintly, ‘de la cuisine. . . .’ ” (675; ellipses in original). Her aversion to the smell of food and the kitchen suggests a disgust with the physical, the sexual, a refusal to “get her hands dirty”; and her avoidance of the table indicates a rejection of love and

intimacy. No lunch is eaten during the story, then; instead the man is served up an intense and rather dramatic discourse on poisoning. Beatrice becomes “pale with excitement” at the subject: “ ‘It’s the exception to find married people who don’t poison each other – married people and lovers’ ” (679). The “gleam of the pearl” on her ring begins to look ominous – a poison ring, perhaps? Finally, Beatrice’s words transform the taste of his drink into something unpleasant and frightening: “Good God! Was it fancy? No, it wasn’t fancy. [His apéritif] tasted chill, bitter, *queer*” (680; emphasis in original).

If loneliness, unhappiness, a failure to communicate and even cruelty seem to be endemic and inevitable in these stories, the option of traditional family life, which some of the characters have either missed or rejected and others still hope for, is not without its drawbacks in Mansfield’s fiction. The families and pseudo-families which appear throughout the stories are almost invariably oppressive, if not destructive to their members. The very title of “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” indicates the family relationship which has destroyed its main characters. Constantia and Josephine have, indeed, been defined as daughters for their entire lives; they do not know how to be adult women. The whole story takes place within their father’s house, and the occasional sense of a world outside the window does not go very far: they notice the organ-grinder in the street below because he used to bother the colonel, the sun shining because it illuminates objects in the house. Having stayed within the parameters of their father’s life, as within his house, they are, in a sense, stuck in the nineteenth century, framed and fading, like their mother’s photograph.



A preoccupation with food runs throughout the story. Tea, meals, and discussions about food form part of the actual time frame of the story, a week after their father's death, and are a significant part of their recent memories: dinner with Nurse Andrews, the vicar's offer of the sacramental bread, and, a bit longer ago, tea with their nephew. However, their own role as consumers of food has apparently always been secondary to their father's. Oppressed by him for so long, the two women do not know what they want to eat, if they want to eat, or even what it is possible to eat:

“I think it might be nice to have it fried,” said Constantia. “On the other hand, of course, boiled fish is very nice. I think I prefer both equally well . . . Unless you . . . In that case—”

“I shall fry it,” said Kate, and she bounced back, leaving the door open and slamming the door of her kitchen. (279; ellipses in original)

If they fire the servant, of whom they are terrified, they are not sure what they can manage to cook, or indeed what kind of food there is to buy; nevertheless, the prospect seems childishly exciting:

“What it comes to is, if we did” – and this she barely breathed, glancing at the door – “give Kate notice” – she raised her voice again – “we could manage our own food.”

“Why not?” cried Constantia. She couldn't help smiling. The idea was so exciting. She clasped her hands. “What should we live on, Jug?”

“Oh, eggs in various forms!” said Jug, lofty again. “And, besides, there are all the cooked foods.” (280)

The lack of regular meals seems to them to be liberating, and they are annoyed that when they invite Nurse Andrews to stay an extra week, it means having to have “regular sit-down meals at the proper times, whereas if they'd been alone they could just have asked Kate if she wouldn't have minded bringing them a tray

wherever they were" (265). However, the anticipated informality of their mealtimes is double-edged: if it is liberating, it is also symptomatic of their repression and self-denial. Meals are for other people, perhaps mostly for men; with the Colonel dead, they may not need the cook.

The daughters can, however, organize a tea and serve others. They have invited their nephew Cyril from time to time: "one of their rare treats" (275), if, clearly, not one of his. The last tea before the Colonel's death is awkward: there is really nothing to say, and Cyril – mindful, perhaps, of Persephone's fate – does not want to eat the extravagant cake and meringues which they press upon him:

Josephine cut recklessly into the rich dark cake that stood for her winter gloves or the soling and heeling of Constantia's only respectable shoes. But Cyril was most unmanlike in appetite. (275)

Although the form of the family meal is here, there is no content to it. The sisters look to the tea party to transform their everyday reality, to draw their nephew into their world and to create the family they do not have. But Cyril is a disappointing guest; he merely tolerates the tea table, remains detached and leaves as quickly as possible for the real world of friends and business connections. Conversation is a matter of form as well. The tea-table provides the occasion for conversation, but, since there is nothing to say, food becomes the only subject of conversation, and a banal and meaningless one at that. The discussion of whether or not Cyril's father likes meringues continues from the table into the absurd and finally pathetic scene in the colonel's sickroom where the young man, at his aunts' insistence, tries to tell his grandfather about his father's taste for meringues. The old man has difficulty hearing

the young man's words, and then comprehending why they are being spoken; the subject of the exchange leads to a ridiculous communication across the generations that neither Cyril wants to make nor the old man to hear.

The sisters, however, do not see the absurdity; for them, speaking is as divorced from meaning as eating is. Both are also potentially terrifying: either making a choice about food or stating something in words could, perhaps, lead to the frightening prospect of admitting desire, seeking fulfillment and stating hopes. At the end of the story, both Constantia and Josephine want to say something about their fragile and tentative desires for the future, but each backs away, claiming to forget what she intended to say. The two aging spinsters remember the frustrated longings of their younger years with a kind of vagueness, but a vagueness that is somehow more real than what their everyday lives have been. Constantia thinks,

There had been this other life, running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them with Jug, and taking them back to get more things on approval, and arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father. But it all seemed to have happened in a kind of tunnel. It wasn't real. It was only when she came out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm that she really felt herself. (284)

If food is, literally, the text of Cyril's trivial communication about his father, the text of their lives has been domestic duties of the most trivial and meaningless sort. Since they have only been servers in their father's home, they have found in domesticity neither content, nor meaning, nor nourishment – only a marking of time.

*In a German Pension*, Mansfield's first published collection of stories, raises the

issue of food in the context of families and pseudo-families.<sup>13</sup> Some stories, primarily those told by an omniscient narrator, are specifically about families, sexuality and marriage. Other stories, set at a German spa, are peopled by characters who, although away from home, talk frequently about their absent families and re-create certain family dynamics at the spa, suggested particularly in the large, family-style meals and the rather intense personal interactions of the group. The sense of family here is a negative one: the stories are both a critique and a parody of bourgeois family life. The ersatz family of guests is viewed through the eyes of a young English woman who feels herself doubly in exile: not only is she, like the others, away from home, but she is a foreigner and, for this and other reasons, nearly always remains apart from the other guests at the spa.

Eating is at the centre of most of these stories. When finally asked by the narrator what he does all day, the silent and mysterious eponymous hero of "The Baron" – much-admired by the other guests for his elusiveness – replies, "I imbibe nourishment in my room" (691). Diet is presumably one component of the cure for guests at the spa, all suffering from various real and imagined ailments, but in the pension stories, food is more than this: it is the constant obsession, and under Mansfield's ironic gaze, the hungry guests appear comical, pathetic, neurotic, even

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<sup>13</sup>Mansfield later disavowed this early collection, and resisted having it reprinted. Certainly, the stories are immature, somewhat clumsy, and dwell rather heavily on pre-World War I stereotypes of Germans. Still, as a number of recent critics – Patricia Moran, C. A. Hankin and others – have pointed out, the collection is quite important in the context of her whole work, and is particularly linked to her New Zealand stories.

revolting. The opening story, somewhat crudely called “Germans at Meat,” begins with the following:

Bread soup was placed upon the table. “Ah,” said the Herr Rat, leaning upon the table as he peered into the tureen, “that is what I need. My ‘magen’ has not been in order for several days. Bread soup, and just the right consistency. I am a good cook myself. . . . Now at nine o’clock I make myself an English breakfast, but not much. Four slices of bread, two eggs, two slices of cold ham, one plate of soup, two cups of tea – that is nothing to you.”

He asserted the fact so vehemently that I had not the courage to refute it.

All eyes were suddenly turned upon me. I felt I was bearing the burden of the nation’s preposterous breakfast – I who drank a cup of coffee while buttoning my blouse in the morning. (683)

This is more an accusation than an interchange, and is typical of much of the dialogue in the stories. Food is discussed aggressively and eaten aggressively. The *Kurgäste* talk about the benefits of a good diet throughout “Germans at Meat,” at the same time enjoying a multi-course meal, and finally applying themselves without restraint to cherry cake with whipped cream. Characters in other stories may demonstrate a more dogmatic approach to food. For instance, a woman in “The Luft Bad” attests to

living entirely on raw vegetables and nuts, and each day I feel my spirit is stronger and purer. After, all, what can you expect? The majority of us are walking about with pig corpuscles and oxen fragments in our brain. The wonder is the world is as good as it is. (731)

In either case, food is at the centre of their universe: an explanation and a cure for the ills of individuals and of the world; the subject of talk and testimonials.

In contrast to the baron and other guests, the narrator, like the heroine of “A Dill Pickle,” is clearly the sort to eat and run. As we have noted, she remains an

outsider throughout the collection of stories, part of but apart from the group. While she eats with the other guests and participates in some group activities, “she sets herself in squeamish, often derisory opposition to what is depicted as the gross physicality of those around her – particularly the men – in relation to food, sex and health” (Parkin-Gounelas, “KM’s Piece of Pink Wool” 501). Thus, in contrast to the self-righteous, somehow perverse gluttony of most of the characters, the narrator seems ascetic, almost ethereal. Her body hardly seems present in the stories; we do not know, for instance, the nature of the physical complaints that have brought her to the spa.<sup>14</sup> She observes the other diners, but does not mention eating, herself. In comparison to the other guests, she appears anorexic, even frigid. Although a young woman, she remains an aloof observer of the spa flirtations, in “Frau Fischer” concocting a story about a sea-captain husband away on a “long and perilous voyage” (702). The narrator sometimes seems to relish her distance, but at other times admits to feeling “a little crushed. . . . at the tone – placing me outside the pale – branding me as a foreigner” (692). Thus her voice is sometimes ambivalent: the “. . . mixed irony [is] both self- and other-directed. . . . while the tone is defiant, the rebellion is qualified by the partial complicity of the narrator” (Parkin-Gounelas, “KM’s Piece of Pink Wool” 501). Her separateness from those who are mired in physicality may enhance the powers of observation and analysis which allow her to tell the story; but her role as story-teller also maintains her distance from the life around her. Given the

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<sup>14</sup>Mansfield herself was at a spa in 1909, where she suffered a miscarriage, her pregnancy the most likely reason for her being there in the first place.

description of the guests, the narrator's detachment seems, on one level, eminently sensible. Yet her separation from the physical life around her calls to mind Mansfield's statement of her own internal division: "I am a writer first and a woman second" (Parkin-Gounelas, "KM's Piece of Pink Wool" 22).

Swirling around the focal point of food, then, is an exploration of the appropriate role for women, and, beneath that, of the tension between the woman and the artist. Moran argues, from the journals, that "Mansfield connects eating, impregnation, and engulfment; more ominously, she perceives these 'female' functions as inhibiting analysis and self-examination" ("Unholy Meanings" 112). Certainly there are no grounds in the *Pension* stories for seeing eating as particularly female; nevertheless, the prevailing obsession with food in these stories extends to a preoccupation with all bodily functions: monologues on complications of pregnancy and causes of death are interspersed with those on digestion. Grappling with traditional roles of women as both cooks and mothers, the stories link the ingestion of food and the production of children, almost as if from a child's view of conception and childbirth as oral activities. In "Germans at Meat," a widow who has nine children advises the narrator that she is childless because she is a vegetarian, and goes on to recount, "A friend of mine had four at the same time. Her husband was so pleased he gave a supper-party and had them placed on the table. Of course she was very proud" (685). Both food and children are seen here as signs of a man's status, and, therefore, as Moran points out, a source of security for women ("Unholy Meanings" 116). In "Frau Fischer," the narrator is thus advised to produce "handfuls

of babies, that is what you are really in need of. . . . Then, as the father of a family he cannot leave you" (703). The true womanliness of the English woman is clearly suspect. In "Germans at Meat," the whole table reacts with horror that she does not know her husband's favourite meat: "A pause. They all looked at me, shaking their heads, their mouths full of cherry stones" (687). And in "Frau Fischer" it is considered highly unusual that she is travelling alone, and that she enjoys sleeping without her husband at her side. Frau Fischer refuses to accept seriously the narrator's provocative comment, "I consider child-bearing the most ignominious of all professions" (703), and speculates that the young woman must have suffered greatly to have such views, impossible for a real woman. Yet widows generally seem glad that their husbands are gone, although they speak of them in a formalized mournful way: for instance, "Frau Hartmann, in an ashamed, apologetic voice: 'We are such a happy family since my dear man died' " (697). For the speaker, there seems to be no inconsistency in this odd statement.

Although always associated with food, which is certainly attacked with vigour, if not pleasure, by both women and men, sexuality, in the *German Pension* stories, is presented as frightening and harsh, or at best, confusing for women. Fullbrook argues that "At Lehmann's" joins "images of male assault, female desire, pain, bewilderment and violence as the important aspects of a typical sexual initiation for women" (58). In this story, Sabina, a young servant girl and waitress in a café, "loved to stand behind the counter, cutting up slices of Anna's marvellous chocolate-spotted confections, or doing up packets of sugar almonds in pink and blue



striped bags" (722-23), an image of baby colours underlining the girl's feeling that perhaps "it would be very sweet to have a little baby to dress and jump up and down" (724). Hitherto apparently ignorant about all matters sexual, she learns at the same time about sexuality and childbirth. Frightened and disgusted by her mistress's pregnancy, she is sexually aroused by a young man who appears in the café with photographs of naked women. At the end of the story, Sabina, her mistress, and the newborn infant are linked by their intermingling cries of pain, passion, fear and birth. If Sabina's seduction in the cloak-room is temporarily interrupted by the cries of the woman in labour upstairs, the cry of the newborn baby after the subsequent line of ellipses – indicating, presumably, the actual seduction – sends her shrieking and "rushing from the room" (729). Real experience, then, is contrasted with the fantasies inspired by the candies and the photographs. The problematic juncture between the two, however, is not resolved.

This harsh view of sexuality occurs in other stories as well. In "Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding," the bride already has a baby. The chorus of older women disapprovingly reports that, "[h]er mother says she's been like fire ever since she was sixteen!" (708). But in this case, the bride herself, not the baby, is described as a piece of candy or cake: she wears "a white dress trimmed with stripes and bows of coloured ribbon, giving her the appearance of an iced cake all ready to be cut and served in neat little pieces to the bridegroom beside her. . ." (706). If she has been sexually active before, she seems passive now, "remain[ing] very still, with a little vacant smile on her lips, only her eyes shifting uneasily from side to side" (707),

apparently forced by her mother and the priest into offering herself to this rather repulsive young man. Most of the older women express a kind of glee that she will soon share their burdens: “ ‘Nice time she’ll have with this one,’ Frau Rupp exclaimed. ‘He was lodging with me last summer and I had to get rid of him. He never changed his clothes once in two months. . . . Ah, every wife has her cross. Isn’t that true, my dear?’ ” (709). Just as an intimate meal may be a prelude to seduction, the eating, drinking and other wedding festivities are, of course, a prelude to sexual consummation. But married love is portrayed as an unpleasant, even cruel experience that women must endure, a reality contrary to the sugary, pink confectionary image. Frau Brechenmacher’s drunken husband recalls their own wedding night: “Such a clout on the ear as you gave me. . . . But I soon taught you” (ellipses in original). And things do not seem to have changed between them since. Back at home after the wedding, Frau Brechenmacher “lay down on the bed and put her arm across her face like a child who expected to be hurt as Herr Brechenmacher lurched in” (711).

As Moran and other recent critics have pointed out, the connection of food with sexuality and with female roles in *In a German Pension* sets the stage for Mansfield’s New Zealand stories, written several years later. The themes of homelessness, loneliness and alienation continue, although in a different and rather more subtle and complex way, applied to women at four stages of life: that of widowed grandmother, wife and mother, single woman and little girl. The Burnell stories are about an apparently stable family, not lonely, single people or uneasy couples wandering around Europe. Yet the underlying sense of dislocation is

emphasized by the fact that in neither "Prelude" nor "At the Bay" is the family at home: in the former they are in the process of moving house, as Roger Robinson also points out (4), and in the latter on vacation. Moreover, as well as the sense of disruption, there is also a pervasive feeling of isolation experienced by at least some of the family members, and reflected in the context of the stories as a whole. In "Prelude," the family has moved away from town; in "At the Bay," we feel the "sense of isolation of the little summer colony, the sense of there being no 'others' in the background" (Alpers, *The Life of KM* 346).<sup>15</sup> In other words, despite the fact that these two stories are about a family, they take place within an uneasy or temporary rather than established family setting. Nevertheless, most of the characters are actively working to create a home: Stanley Burnell's role as wage-earner and provider of the home is emphasized, and much of the women's time – especially that of Mrs. Fairfield – is spent on domestic chores. As well, Beryl Fairfield dreams of marrying and establishing her own household.

The fact that meals are somehow askew is a major factor contributing to this sense of uneasiness. The first meal in "Prelude" introduces, right at the beginning of the story, a sense of being homeless, of bitter satisfactions in exile. The meal is not eaten at the Burnells' home, but at the Josephs', neighbours with whom Kezia and her sister Lottie have been left behind because there is not enough room in the wagon

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<sup>15</sup>Alpers believes that V.S. Pritchett was responding to this characteristic of Mansfield's work when "he declared that the sense of a country, the sense of the 'unseen character,' was . . . weak in her writing . . ." (*The Life of KM* 346).

taking their mother, grandmother and sister to their new house:

“We shall simply have to leave them. That is all. We shall simply have to cast them off,” said Linda Burnell. A strange little laugh flew from her lips; she leaned back against the buttoned leather cushions and shut her eyes, her lips trembling with laughter. (11)

Abandoned, at least temporarily, in favour of what their mother calls “absolute necessities that I will not let out of my sight for one instant” (11), the girls have tea with a surrogate family, whose dinner-table behaviour is pointedly unfamiliar, as are their customs of discourse. They are outsiders at the family table, excluded from the habits and rituals of a group of initiates. Thus, Kezia does not understand that one of the menu choices is a joke. Offered “strawberries and cream or bread and dripping” (13) for tea, she naturally chooses the former, much to the delight of the whole table. Everyone laughs at her, and “beat[s] the table with their teaspoons” (13) because only the latter is in fact available. “Even Mrs. Samuel Josephs, pouring out the milk and water, could not help smiling” (13), an echo of their own mother’s laughter at leaving them behind. The fact that the boy who teases her is named Stanley, like her father, also sets up a parallel to her own family. In fact, in the first pages of the story, the “storeman” who drives them to their new house that evening is more friendly than members of either the Burnell or Josephs family.

Fullbrook defines Kezia’s licking her tears away at the table rather than allowing the Josephs to see her cry as “a gesture of emotional self-consumption that . . . sends ripples of meaning through the story” (70). Indeed, her tears become food, while Kezia tries to control her feelings by transforming the actual food into another

kind of object: “. . . Kezia bit a big piece out of her bread and dripping, and then stood the piece up on her plate. With the bite out it made a dear little sort of a gate. Pooh! She didn't care!” (13). A gate is a potent symbol of transitions and limits: an entry, an exit, a potential point of access in a barrier. Mansfield tells us that the two girls stand “just inside the gate” (11) – a place that was within the family circle but now is on the wrong side – as the cart leaves for the new house. The fundamental loneliness of family life is suggested by Kezia's returning, after the meal, to her family's former house, now empty; indeed, the sentence, “After tea Kezia wandered back to their own house,” immediately follows her whisking her tears away. She enters the house through the scullery and the kitchen, and, wandering through the dining room, drawing room and the bedrooms of her parents, her grandmother, and the servant girl, looks for treasures in the detritus of family life.

If there is no clinical anorexia in these stories, there is still an uncomfortable relationship with food. Left outside the Josephs' inner circle, Kezia finds this first meal confusing and painful; however, her mother seems to have put herself permanently in a similar position, outside the normal pattern of eating. Thus, when the children arrive at the new house, Stanley and Beryl are having dinner, but Linda sits apart:

Linda Burnell, in a long cane chair, with her feet on a hassock and a plaid over her knees, lay before a crackling fire. Burnell and Beryl sat at the table in the middle of the room eating a dish of fried chops and drinking tea out of a brown china teapot. (19)

Later in the story Stanley says to Beryl, “You and I are the only ones in this house with a real feeling for food” (50). We only once see Linda eating. On the first

morning in the new house, she comes into the kitchen and says, "I'm so hungry . . . where can I get something to eat, mother?" (30). Yet she takes only a piece of gingerbread, and gives Beryl half of it.

Patricia Moran sees as particularly significant Linda's refusal to eat meat:

Like the narrator in the *German Pension* stories, Linda connects eating with reproduction and initially sees men as devourers and consumers; when with her husband, who is always eating, she refuses to eat meat, as if she can thereby reject sexuality and childbearing. ("Unholy Meanings" 118)<sup>16</sup>

However, it is difficult to argue absolutely for meat as part of gender identification in this story, since other female characters do eat meat: the story pointedly shows Beryl and Isabel eating pork chops; in fact, Isabel, who has arrived at the new house without her sisters, boasts that she has had meat for supper as if it is symbolic of entry into the adult world. Still, if the consumption of meat is not necessarily linked with men, the technical skills involved in preparing meat are indeed presented as the purview of men in the division of domestic labour:

Burnell ran his eye along the edge of the carving knife. He prided himself very much upon his carving, upon making a first-class job of it. He hated seeing a woman carve; they were always too slow and they never seemed to care what the meat looked like afterwards. Now he did; he took a real pride in cutting delicate shaves of cold beef, little wads of mutton, just the right thickness, and in dividing a chicken or a duck with nice precision. . . . (50; ellipses in original)

The source of meat is also emphasized, and specifically the fact that the animal was

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<sup>16</sup>Moran follows the line of thought traced by Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady*: "Disgust with meat was a common phenomenon among Victorian girls; a carnivorous diet was associated with sexual precocity. . ." (129).

killed by a man. The duck eaten in Section XI may taste like “a kind of very superior jelly” (50), but the children have seen the animal beheaded by Pat, the handyman, whose gender is emphasized in Kezia’s surprise at a man wearing earrings: “She put up her hands and touched his ears. She felt something. Slowly she raised her quivering face and looked. Pat wore little round gold ear-rings. She never knew that men wore ear-rings. She was very much surprised” (47). The earrings distract her from the duck’s death, but also raise for her the question of the essence of gender, and particularly the relationship between biological gender and its usual surface symbols. Here, as elsewhere in the story, fundamental gender differences are, at the same time, both suggested and questioned.

In any case, it is not just meat that Linda avoids. As we have seen, she does not eat her breakfast gingerbread either. She also puts aside the gifts of a pineapple, oysters and cherries that Stanley brings her, calling them “silly things,” and giving the excuse – a rather lame one, given her general lack of interest in meals – “You don’t mind if I save them. They’d spoil my appetite for dinner” (37). The couple treat the fruit in a “silly” way – Stanley has placed some of the cherries in his button-hole and she hangs them over his ear. “Don’t do that, darling. They are for you” (37), he says. Her playfulness masks both her reluctance to eat and her rejection of his gift.

Linda’s attitude toward food seems to be the opposite of that of the Germans in the *Pension* stories; however, her not eating may indicate an obsession with food as much as eating incessantly would. Caroline Bynum, in her work on the Middle Ages, argues that it was in the area of food that mediaeval women felt they could make

some choices and exert some control: "Women's food behavior – fasting and feeding – was an effective way of manipulating the environment in a world in which food was woman's primary resource" (30). Fasting was one way for women to assert themselves against their parents and the church; it could be, for instance, an effective way to avoid marriage. As noted earlier, food disorders seem to have increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period when, certainly, food was still largely women's domain. In "Prelude," it is too late, of course, for Linda to avoid marriage, and, indeed, her husband seems to pay little attention to her eating habits. Still, Linda's avoidance of food makes a statement about her life, at least to herself, and expresses an attitude toward the physical in general: her children, her husband, her body, sexuality – in short, the fecundity, the mortality and the daily routine of adulthood. In addition, Linda often appears to be somewhat sickly, a reaction, perhaps, to her apparent pregnancy, but also a withdrawal from her overall identity as wife and mother.

If Linda will not or cannot take on a women's role, she is able to remain a child herself because her mother is still there to run the Burnell family for her. Thus, walking in the garden with Mrs. Fairfield at night, Linda wonders why she should bother staying alive, and thinks how surprised Stanley would be if he knew that hatred was among her feelings for him; her mother, on the other hand, thinks of canning for the winter:

I wondered as we passed the orchard what the fruit trees were like and whether we should be able to make much jam this autumn. There are splendid healthy current bushes in the vegetable garden. I noticed



them to-day. I should like to see those pantry shelves thoroughly well stocked with our own jam . . . . (55; ellipses in original)

Cooking and mothering are linked in Mrs. Fairfield,<sup>17</sup> who takes charge of both the kitchen and Linda's children. Indeed, she has a far closer bond with the little girls than Linda does. Linda's attitude toward the children seems at best disinterested. Not only do her belongings have priority over Lottie and Kezia at the start of the story, but, when the two girls reach the new house that evening, her response to their arrival is minimal: "Are those the children?" But Linda did not really care; she did not even open her eyes to see" (19). She refers to her daughters as "three great lumps of children" (54), as if still experiencing their bulk in her body before birth.

There is a suggestion in "Prelude" that, because Linda has not fully surrendered to the demands of adult life, she has not lost the imagination of childhood, and is still capable of creativity, of dreams. Indeed, she has the capacity to see the world as imaginatively as Kezia does, although sometimes with a more sinister cast.<sup>18</sup> Linda daydreams of escape from mundane household existence; the aloe becomes the ship which will take her away. She imagines

that she was caught up out of the cold water into the ship with the lifted oars and the budding mast. Now the oars fell striking quickly, quickly. They rowed far away over the top of the garden trees, the paddocks and the dark bush beyond. Ah, she heard herself cry: "Faster! Faster!" to those who were rowing.

How much more real this dream was than that they should go back

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<sup>17</sup>We will return to a discussion of Mrs. Fairfield's role in the next chapter.

<sup>18</sup>See, for instance, the passage on pages 27-28 of "Prelude," which describes Linda's perception of household objects "coming alive."

to the house where the sleeping children lay and where Stanley and Beryl played cribbage (53).

She also imagines that the aloe is her swelling body, but strong and equipped with thorns and claws. Interestingly, her only moment alone with Kezia in the story is when they look at the aloe together; this has been viewed as the scene where the mother passes along her creative vision. But if Kezia is the artist as a young girl, Linda's creative potential has never been fulfilled: her creativity, if it exists, is merely part of her disquiet; she is not, after all, an artist.

To some extent, Linda's case fits the view of anorexia as a response to a confusion about gender or as a rejection of the sufferer's femininity.<sup>19</sup> However, it is hard to tell whether Linda is fundamentally questioning gender roles or acquiescing to them. Her response to having finally given birth to a boy in "At the Bay" is a standard one, seeming to resolve much of her predicament by ending the necessity of child-bearing, but also affirming her success as a woman in finally giving her husband an heir and filling the empty place that Stanley sees at the nursery table (38). Moreover, her own preference for boys becomes clear as, looking at the sleeping infant, Linda for the first time feels drawn to one of her babies. But the child also reminds Linda of her own youthful fantasies of *being* a boy, of her father promising that the two of them would sail up a river in China: "[W]e'll escape. Two boys

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<sup>19</sup>"...[T]he key to the development of [anorexia] is feeling ambivalent about one's own gender." (Perlick and Silverstein 89).

together” (221).<sup>20</sup>

Moran insists on Linda’s behaviour as a neurotic response to her own mothering. This approach follows Showalter’s sources in defining anorexia: “. . . in the rigid control of her eating, the anorexic both expressed her fear of adult sexual desire and enacted an exaggerated form of the deadening life of the dutiful daughter” (*The Female Malady* 129). But it is too simple to cast Mrs. Fairfield as the villain of the piece, as Moran sometimes seems to do. By the standards of her culture, like the standards of the women in the *Pension* stories, Linda must, of course, be considered neurotic or she would be a better mother. However, especially in the context of Mansfield’s corpus, Linda’s questioning of femininity – inconsistent, to be sure, and expressed in a passively “feminine” way – cannot be seen as an individual failure, but rather as an indictment of social roles. “Prelude” calls into question the culture’s standards, even if the existence of any other role for women is scarcely imaginable within the story.

Women who more actively seek non-traditional roles in other Mansfield stories also rarely find fulfillment; Mansfield’s people are often split, anguished, searching. In “Prelude,” and “At the Bay,” this fragmentation is made real, as women are divided in two: on the one hand Mrs. Fairfield, the nurturing, motherly cook; on

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<sup>20</sup>Linda’s dual response to gender might fit what Parkin-Gounelas refers to in terms of the woman writer as “the discourse of the hysteric”: in other words, “a simultaneous refusal of, yet submission to, femininity as it is constructed under patriarchy” (“KM Reading Other Women” 45). Parkin-Gounelas credits Julia Kristeva as the originator of this notion.

the other, the imaginative, but anorexic and unhappy Linda. In fact, all the women and girls in these two stories can be read as pieces of the same woman, at different ages and stages of life, and having made different accommodations to the world. It is a challenge for the fragmented individual to live in the modern world: stereotyped roles are at the very least unsatisfying, and an identity outside of these roles both dangerous and hard to find. Thus, the options of the dependent spinster, the independent bachelor girl, the traditional wife and mother, the “liberated” married woman are all oppressive, each in its own way. Certain men in Mansfield’s stories, like Jonathan Trout in “At The Bay,” feel a similar oppression.

In general, then, through the most basic human need of food, Mansfield’s work explores other needs as well, affirming the difficulties not merely of being human in the twentieth century, but particularly of functioning fully as a female human being. New ideologies may be in the process of replacing the old, but they do not necessarily solve all problems. Although Mansfield’s fictional worlds at first seem far more open and full of possibilities than, for example, Lily Bart’s world in *The House of Mirth*, ultimately there may be a similar lack of room to manoeuvre. The fact that food is constantly present in Mansfield’s stories does not necessarily indicate nourishment, but rather emphasizes a pervasive anxiety about home, security and loneliness.

Looking through the stained glass of the dining room window at the start of “Prelude,” Kezia sees a fragmented world, in different colours and pieces depending on the pane of glass she looks through. The vision from this dining room is

disconcerting, as it shifts her perception of reality – Kezia can play with the idea that the little girl she sees may not really be her sister – yet it is magical too. Perhaps, sometimes, although not for Linda, the opportunity for imagination can be the saving grace. We will return to this point in the next chapters as we look first at the creative potential of women within the domestic space and then at the woman artist.

## Chapter 5

### Through the Dining Room Window

## I. Behind the Scenes in the Kitchen

Kezia's looking through the dining room window at the start of "Prelude" serves as a metaphor for Katherine Mansfield's work: much of her insight into modernity, into gender roles, into marriage and the family, and into art is developed from the perspective of the woman's relationship with food. Many of Mansfield's characters, however, although they regard food with wary, tempted and/or envious eyes, are nevertheless unwilling or unable either to eat or to cook. They avoid occupying the dining room and, therefore, seeing the world from this vantage point. Still, despite the anxiety about food and meals which emerges in Mansfield's fiction, there are many examples in the modernist period of meals being served – both to the family circle and to the larger social world. In most modernist, as in pre-modernist, works of fiction where food plays a part, however, the emphasis is usually on the guests, rather than on the hostess of the party or the server of the meal. In other words, the fictional meal is presented as an outcome only, without any reference to the history, labour, or intention that went into organizing, planning, cooking, and serving it.

Some twentieth-century women writers, however, have foregrounded the role of women as cooks, servers and hostesses; indeed have made it the centre of their work, not only thematically but structurally as well. In such cases, the central role of dinner-maker defines women's spaces within the novel; as in life, the dining room is the centre of the woman's world. As well, the dining room may form the central component of an architectural model or metaphor that is used as a primary

structuring device of the novel: the dining room is literally and figuratively the hub of the fictional house and the dinner at the centre of the fictional world. As Daphne Spain says, “[D]omestic architecture mediates social relations, specifically those between women and men. Houses are the spatial context within which the social order is reproduced” (140). Looking at the ways in which “spatial and social relations mutually reinforce one another,” Spain quotes architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright, who “proposes that homes serve as metaphors, ‘suggesting and justifying social categories, values, and relations’ ” (111). As Robert Harbison says, the architecture of a home may sometimes be read “as the expression of an individual life” (22), yet to some extent, the architecture of any European or North American home in the twentieth century reflects a similar role for women.

If women’s domestic role – varying, of course, with class differences – was largely assumed in the nineteenth century, it was rarely the subject of fiction. Although nineteenth-century novels are redolent with meals described in detail, rarely is there any sense of their having been cooked or even planned. Similarly, in the twentieth century, Gatsby’s celebrated parties in Fitzgerald’s novel seem almost to happen of their own accord. Although Gatsby’s role as party-giver is a crucial part of his character and of the novel, the party guests hardly see their host and often do not even know who he is. And there is no sense of who actually organized the parties and did the work. Still, we do begin to see a different perspective in some twentieth-century fiction by men. In Joyce’s “The Dead,” a story which centres around the Misses Morkans’ traditional Christmas party, we are given at least some details about



the providers and the providing of the feast. The Morkan sisters and their niece are structurally and symbolically central as characters, and their role as hostesses is emphasized. Thus the two older women worry about when Gabriel will arrive, whether Freddie Malins will be drunk again, and who will do the carving. We are given such homely details as the fact that there has been a dispute over whether the goose should be accompanied by applesauce and that it is Mary Jane Morkan who has chosen the way of serving the potatoes. This story suggests the work involved in serving dinner, then, albeit in a comic vein and from a male viewpoint. For instance, rather than sitting down with their guests, the hostesses fuss about the dinner table:

Aunt Kate and Aunt Julia were still toddling round the table, walking on each other's heels, getting in each other's way and giving each other unheeded orders. Mr. Browne begged of them to sit down and eat their suppers and so did Gabriel but they said there was time enough so that, at last, Freddy Malins stood up and, capturing Aunt Kate, plumped her down on her chair amid general laughter. (197-98)

But the story is called "The Dead," not "The Christmas Dinner." The thoughts and motivations of the hostesses are not presented; the three women are seen largely from the perspective of their nephew and cousin Gabriel – like Joyce, a writer. The fact that Gabriel's is the central consciousness of the story suggests two levels of narrative control: Joyce has created a second writer, a character like himself, to interpret and define the story and the dinner. Ultimately, the women's role as cooks, hostesses, servers, organizers is only marginally important to the story, secondary to larger philosophical and political issues. It is Gabriel, as the chosen speaker, who plays the central role at the table. The wordsmith is ranked higher than

the cooks.

To clarify this point, we might look briefly for contrast at a later story, Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast," first published in 1952, although set in the late nineteenth century. This is one example of a piece of fiction in which the meal is seen from the perspectives of both the guests and the cook. Although, after making the dinner, Babette does not sit at the table or eat the food, and is largely forgotten during the meal by most of the diners, she re-appears after dinner and ends the story. Thus both the dinner and the story are framed by the cook: it is her idea to prepare the feast, her unexpected money that pays for it, her history as a great chef in Paris that it celebrates; and, although the extent of her talent remains unacknowledged by most of the guests, her work has a major – almost magical – impact on their lives. The meal is in every way the centre of the narrative, and Babette, although her role appears to be a subservient one in the social hierarchy of the small Norwegian town, is completely in control; she is the artist of the story.

One can argue, of course, that in the world of nineteenth-century fiction, there is little emphasis on the actual preparation and serving of the meal because these activities would have been performed by servants. Thus, nineteenth century novelists, both male and female – Austen, the Brontës, or Hardy, for example – might have ignored the details of cooking and serving meals because neither they nor their characters would have known anything about these activities. (Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, on the other hand, does include details about the servantless Mrs. Cratchit's cooking Christmas dinner.) And, although a governess could be a main character in

the nineteenth century, a cook could not; if a servant in a nineteenth-century novel happened to have a background like Babette's, her employers would generally not have known it, nor would writers and readers have been interested in such a character. But a lack of servants is not the only explanation for the increased attention to the organizing of dinner in some modernist work. True, as the nineteenth century moved toward its close, reliance on servants, originally relatively common even fairly far down on the social scale, evolved into the "servant problem" of the century's end, and, by the nineteen-twenties, servants had become rare in middle-class homes on both sides of the Atlantic. Still, the early twentieth-century women writers who portray the serving of meals, as well as other domestic tasks, depict a variety of social milieus, including upper-class households with servants. And, whether or not a servant or cook is present, a woman of the house – wife, mother, grandmother, daughter – is usually described as being in charge of the meal.

Rather, the modernist focus on meals occurs because, as suggested earlier in this study, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ideology of women's role as homemaker was being shaken. No longer taken for granted, the role was increasingly perceived as problematic, and embraced – or acceded to – far more consciously, if at all. The proliferation of books, periodicals and advertising which set out to define models of domesticity and to give advice on cooking and other domestic chores is, in itself, evidence of change. The set of ideas about housework that was in the process of evolving, in varying manifestations according to class, was presumably partly a response to contemporary anxiety about women's role. If the novel reflects

the crises and preoccupations of a culture, surely this uneasiness also influenced the presentation of female roles in fiction.

## II. Women's Domestic Space in Mansfield's Stories

Clearly, there are different terrains for men's and women's activities and, as Spain notes, the differences are associated with power.<sup>1</sup> In some of Mansfield's stories – for instance, “Prelude,” “At the Bay,” “The Garden Party” and “Bliss” – men are more often shown leaving the house and women more frequently staying at home. Yet even though we may assume that separate spaces imply domination, exclusion or inferiority, the notion of women's space is not necessarily a negative one. Mansfield's “At the Bay,” for instance, valorizes the household of women, delighted to be alone when Stanley leaves for work each day. The early-morning activities in the Burnell household are arranged around Stanley's needs. Although the older, more sanguine Mrs. Fairfield is “unruffled” (210) by her son-in-law's series of orders for such things as his polished shoes and a slice of bread, Beryl's frustration at Stanley's petty but tyrannical demands to be served at the breakfast table – “You might go and see if the porridge is ready, Beryl?” and “Hallo! . . . you've forgotten the sugar” (210) – is turned upon Kezia, who feels unfairly and unaccountably criticized for digging “a river down the middle of her porridge” (211). But after Stanley's departure, Beryl gives “a little skip” (212), and Linda, Mrs. Fairfield, “even Alice, the servant girl” share in the feeling of “reckless” (213) gaiety. Not only the kitchen and the dining room, but the whole house is theirs:

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<sup>1</sup>Spain argues that “nonindustrial societies in which the division of labour is associated with spatial proximity of the sexes tend to have lower levels of gender stratification and higher status for women” (91).

Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house. Their very voices changed as they called to one another; they sounded warm and loving and as if they shared a secret. Beryl went over to the table. "Have another cup of tea, mother. It's still hot." She wanted, somehow, to celebrate the fact that they could do what they liked now. There was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs. (213)

In Mansfield, satisfaction or serenity may be found in these moments, these "glimpses" (Sandley)<sup>2</sup>, even if such interludes always give way to other moments of unfulfilled, even undefined, desire. In their work overall, however, both Mansfield and Virginia Woolf see these times as anachronistic, lost, in that they are based on a set of traditional roles which are disappearing. As the narrative focus of her Burnell stories moves among the several women characters, now alighting here, now there, Mansfield emphasizes both the gains and losses involved in the modern reaction against these roles. Woolf, on the other hand, in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, explores the traditional role from the inside, situating one of the two central consciousnesses of each novel in the traditional woman herself – the provider of food and the giver of parties.

If, as we have argued, the roles of cook and hostess are relatively recent sites of emphasis and loci of anxiety in fiction, and if this anxiety tends to be expressed by

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<sup>2</sup>Sandley takes this word from Mansfield's journals and uses it loosely to mean a sort of epiphany. Mansfield called it a "moment of suspension. . . . In that moment . . . the whole life of the soul is contained" (Sandley 71). Sandley also suggests a difference between male and female perceptions of time, reading the release of the women from Stanley's presence as liberation from "a chronological series of nows, ruled by the clock" into "a discontinuous time of half-thoughts, daydreams, fantasies, and remembrances" (88).

younger characters, the women portrayed cooking and/or serving meals are frequently, although not always, of an older generation and are seen by younger characters as old-fashioned. The most notable example discussed here is Mrs. Fairfield in "Prelude"; however, Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay are also middle-aged, and, at certain points in their novels, each is regarded critically by younger women. In Joyce's "The Dead," of the three single women giving the Christmas dinner, two are elderly, and the attitude of the younger guests toward this annual event is ambiguous, if not exactly critical. It is questionable whether any of the other women will take over the tradition when the elder Misses Morkan are dead. Gabriel, although he attends faithfully each year, seems to do so with a condescending and somewhat studiedly reluctant air. Nevertheless, he enjoys and takes seriously the role of master of ceremonies conferred on him. In many cases, then, the presentation of cooks and hostesses is double-edged: they may seem a nostalgic element in the piece of fiction as a whole, and at the same time be viewed critically or even disdainfully by other characters and/or by the writer.

Although anxiety about food is particularly acute in Mansfield, her work also demonstrates the profound importance of the meal in the structure of women's lives and at various stages in their lives, even if they resist its centrality. Mansfield's Linda Burnell has little or no association with food either as a consumer or a server, except insofar as she rejects these roles. She expresses her refusal in a passage quoted earlier by positioning herself apart from the diners eating at the table, and by entering the kitchen only as a visitor:

Someone tapped on the window: Linda was there, nodding and smiling. . . .

"I'm so hungry," said Linda: "where can I get something to eat, mother? This is the first time I've been in the kitchen. It says 'mother' all over. . . . (30)

On the other hand, her mother, Mrs. Fairfield, is strongly identified with cooking and preserving, and with the kitchen. Even though the family is just moving in, the kitchen of their new house is already described as hers by the narrator as well as by Linda:

It was hard to believe that she had not been in that kitchen for years; she was so much a part of it. She put the crocks away with a sure, precise touch, moving leisurely and ample from the stove to the dresser, looking into the pantry and the larder as though there were not an unfamiliar corner. When she had finished, everything in the kitchen had become part of a series of patterns. She stood in the middle of the room. . . . (29)

Mrs. Fairfield not only makes the space her own immediately upon moving in, but creates "patterns": that is, organizes to create meaning. The room seems to emanate out from her in orderly symmetry; every corner has become hers and her. It is her domain.

We see Mrs. Fairfield serving others more than eating; her association with food and the kitchen is clearly coupled with her maternal quality and her child-rearing function. Mrs. Fairfield does not share her daughter's fear of nurturing; perhaps she never felt Linda's fear, because she is of an earlier generation which accepted this role without question; or, equally likely, since her child-bearing years are over, she no longer perceives the danger in the role that her daughter does. The grandmother never really leaves her role as the keeper of the house; indeed, the fact



that we do not know her first name suggests that she has no other identity. Thus she is the last one to sleep, having waited until the household is safely shut down, and she climbs into the bed she will share with Kezia for the night accompanied by cries of owls which seem to refer to the chops eaten at the evening meal: “ ‘More pork; more pork.’ And far away in the bush there sounded a harsh rapid chatter: ‘Ha-ha-ha . . . Ha-ha-ha’ ” (23).

As Patricia Moran points out, owls also appear on Mrs. Fairfield’s brooch: as “the symbol of female wisdom” (*Word of Mouth* 109), an appropriate motif for an older woman. Yet the odd laughing in the woods – outside of and encircling the house – also suggests an undercutting, a mocking, and a negation of that role. Moran sees a sinister cast here: “owls are predators as well as the emblems of Athena, the goddess who affirmed father right” (*Word of Mouth* 109). She finds that Mrs. Fairfield’s apparently unquestioning acceptance of mother-identity implies an absolute acceptance of the traditional male role as well, and therefore of the patriarchy. But Moran’s real concern is with Mrs. Fairfield’s motherliness itself: she sees Mansfield portraying her as smothering and engulfing. As we have noted, Linda’s adoration of her mother does not take the form of emulation, but rather of a child-like dependence. It is likely that Mansfield is indeed critical of – or at least ambivalent about – the characteristic expressions of mothering in the culture at large; however, if Mrs. Fairfield’s effect on her daughter could be read as destructive, her presence also allows Linda the space to protest against and to refuse these cultural demands and feminine standards. Moreover, in the story itself there is never any

specific negativity associated with Mrs. Fairfield, never any actual sense of the oppressively engulfing mother about whom Moran writes; she seems, rather, particularly in her relationship with her granddaughters, to be associated with food, nurturing and women's wisdom in a positive way.

In any case, it is largely because of Mrs. Fairfield's presence that, in "Prelude," women's spaces are central. The identification of the grandmother with the kitchen is obvious, and the dining room is the centre of family life. In fact, in seven of the twelve sections of "Prelude," there is a scene either in the dining room of the new house, in the dining room of the old house, at a nursery dining table or in a make-believe dining room. One other section is set in the kitchen and another is about killing the duck which is to be dinner that night. In other words, only three of the sections have nothing directly to do with meals; and in one of these (Section V), Stanley is called to breakfast from his bedroom, in another (Section XII), Beryl called to lunch. The dining room is the first room we see when the children arrive at the house, and is portrayed as especially important for Beryl and Stanley. In what is presumably the story's commentary on the role of men, the latter is only depicted either leaving for work, coming home from work, in the bedroom or eating. For Beryl, the dining room seems to hold significance even between meals. In one scene, Beryl is playing her guitar in the dining room; it is as if the music she plays might have the transformatory power to give her access to her own dining room and her place in the world as a married woman, presiding over her own dining table. The fact that it is Linda's sister Beryl, rather than Linda herself, who helps Mrs. Fairfield clean and set

up the kitchen suggests that she is perhaps more fit for the life of a housewife than Linda is. Beryl is annoyed when the maid asks her to leave the dining room so that she can set the table. However, as the maid well knows, while the kitchen is completely women's territory, the dining room is a place of service where the woman serves her man and meets the needs and/or demands of others. It is not meant as a place for a young woman to please herself by dreaming alone.

In "Prelude" and "At the Bay," Stanley has an access to town that the women do not have; his sister-in-law Beryl, especially, bemoans her isolation. Still, there is a certain power in women's space, too. In "At the Bay," Stanley's freedom to leave the house seems to him like banishment. He feels cast out when he leaves for work, and is hurt that his wife and the other women so clearly want him to leave, that they are happy to be alone in the house. Since these stories are written from the perspective of the women and of the house, we do not see Stanley at work. For Linda's brother-in-law, Jonathan Trout, in "At the Bay," however, the office is a closed space, a trap, claustrophobic, and the apparent freedom of men an illusion: "On Monday the cage door opens and clangs to upon the victim for another eleven months and a week" (236), he says, and "I'm like an insect that's flown into a room of its own accord. I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling, do everything on God's earth, in fact, except fly out again" (237). In the architecture of the home there is at least more space than this.

Mansfield's story "The Doll's House" reinforces this notion of the power of women's space, especially in terms of the competition among women. The miniature

house of the title is at the centre of the story, sitting in the Burnells' courtyard like a parody of its larger neighbour. The possession of this "perfect, perfect little house" (383), an imitation of their mother's, gives the Burnell children status with the other girls at school, much as a married woman with her own home has more status than a single woman. Moreover, by choosing which girls they wish to invite to see the doll's house, and in what order, the children use it as a social demarcator, separating those who are more privileged from those who are less so. Class is reinforced as well as individual favouritism: just as their parents would never invite Mrs. Kelvey, the washerwoman and a single mother, to their home, so the girls are forbidden to invite the Kelvey children to see the house. Beryl chases Lil and "our Else" away when Kezia breaks the rule.

The story also suggests in concrete terms how little girls learn to become adult women, the various rooms of the doll's house denoting their various roles: hostesses in the dining room, mothers in the nursery, cooks in the kitchen and housekeepers overall. The realism of the doll's house makes it special: every room is perfectly furnished. Kezia, the potential artist, particularly likes the lamp on the dining room table,<sup>3</sup> a preference she shares with "our Else" Kelvey:

It stood in the middle of the dining-room table, an exquisite little amber lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something inside that looked like oil and moved when you shook it. (384)

However, the toy house also mimics the less than perfect reality of family life.

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<sup>3</sup>We will return to this point in the next chapter.

Somehow the people seem not to fit, even though they are placed in the appropriate rooms: “The father and mother dolls, who sprawled very stiff as though they had fainted in the drawing-room, and their two little children asleep upstairs, were really too big for the doll’s house. They didn’t look as though they belonged” (384). The constraints of the home are inflexible: it is up to the inhabitants to live within its norms.<sup>4</sup>

Thus do little girls learn how to invite guests, play hostess, and make family members fit into a house. The Burnell children also learn how to feed a family. In Section VIII of “Prelude,” the children’s activities centre around food, as the girls play house and invent meals. The section begins with the game already in progress:

“Good morning, Mrs. Jones.”

“Oh, good morning, Mrs. Smith. I’m so glad to see you. Have you brought your children?”

“Yes, I’ve brought both my twins. I have had another baby since I saw you last, but she came so suddenly that I haven’t had time to make her any clothes yet. So I left her . . . . How is your husband?” (40; ellipses in original)

This scene is presented with no introduction, and, up until the suggestion of juvenile misinformation about childbirth, the reader may not realize that these are children playing, so acute is their imitation of the adult female world. In a lovingly detailed sequence, the table is laid with

two geranium leaf plates, a pine needle fork and a twig knife. There

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<sup>4</sup>Although “The Doll’s House” certainly evolved out of Mansfield’s childhood and is connected to other New Zealand stories, it is hard not to think of Ibsen as well. Library records in Wellington show that Mansfield’s reading of “some Ibsen” (Alpers, *Life of KM 50*) goes back to her adolescence.

were three daisy heads on a laurel leaf for poached eggs, some slices of fuchsia petal cold beef, some lovely little rissoles made of earth and water and dandelion seeds, and the chocolate custard which she [presumably Kezia] had decided to serve in the pawa shell she had cooked it in. (41)

Gender roles are further emphasized with the arrival of the Burnells' two male cousins. The boys are the proud furnishers of gingerbread, although their participation in its creation is limited to having licked the spoon, beater and bowl. The younger brother, Rags, is delighted to be able to play with the girls and thus indulge his "shameful" (42) secret passion for playing with dolls. Pip, the leader, and more typically male, emphasizes danger and experimentation in his attempts at cooking, which consist largely of concocting various supposedly-explosive mixtures to feed to the long-suffering dog. And he is proud of having skinned the almonds for the gingerbread, an activity which he presents as a feat of bravery and domination: "I just stuck my hand into a saucepan of boiling water and grabbed them out and gave them a kind of pinch and the nuts flew out of the skins, some of them as high as the ceiling" (42). In contrast to Pip's adventurous attitude to food preparation, the girls' playing house seems to be straight out of a popular women's magazine. Moreover, their flower-food blooms; the boys' food blows up.

As little girls get older, they undergo a further stage of apprenticeship. "The Garden Party" shows the adolescent Laura Sheridan learning to be a hostess at a real party. Before the festivities begin, it is necessary to transform the house and yard, as well as the party-givers themselves, from the ordinary to the marvellous. Re-organizing the furniture to create a party space and atmosphere, setting a table, and

ordering, preparing and arranging food – all these chores also have a larger meaning in terms of the social skills and ideological priorities which she is to learn. Mansfield makes it clear that all aspects of party-giving reflect social values, and Laura particularly learns about the applicability of class distinctions. Even as she thinks of them as “absurd. . . . Well, for her part, she didn’t feel them. Not a bit, not an atom” (247-48), she shows that the lesson has already been internalized. Thus, for instance, when Laura is sent to instruct workmen on where in the yard to erect a canopy – valuable practice for a future hostess – she is terribly conscious of what she says and does.

More important, she learns that the death of a workman who lives near her home is not a reason to cancel the party. Proximity of dwelling does not make someone a neighbour: class is more important than propinquity, and what Laura calls “nearly neighbours” (255) is very heavily qualified, for there is a solid demarcation between rich and poor districts, no matter how near to each other geographically. The border can be traversed only for certain reasons, under certain conditions, and in certain ways. News of the accident is subsumed to the priorities of the party: ironically, as Nathan points out (43), it is the man delivering cream puffs – some of which are later sent to the workman’s survivors – who brings the news. The pretty hat that her mother gives her – black for fashion, not for mourning – distracts Laura from the death. In her bedroom, the domain of the young girl, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror:

. . . she saw . . . this charming girl . . . in her black hat trimmed with

gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided. And somehow that seemed quite the best plan. . . . (256; last set of ellipses in original)

In the ideology of a garden party and the world of the story, this plan is as it should be: both in terms of her being a young, pretty girl, who is not at all dead, and in terms of her class.<sup>5</sup>

The reader actually sees very little of the party: only a summary, really, of Laura's impressions, including compliments on her appearance and on her hat, and her own proud self-consciousness as a hostess offering her guests tea and ices, and looking after the band. The party euphoria she experiences, the sense of heightened sensibility, is one we will see in other works as well. And Laura's elation is not just frivolous; the story demonstrates the sense in which truths are much easier to perceive at such moments. Thus, the mysteries of sex, love, life, and time seem to be fleetingly but profoundly grasped under such festive circumstances. As we will see in *Mrs. Dalloway* as well,<sup>6</sup> death also has a central, although hidden, place at the party.

Afterwards, although she would not cancel the party because of the workman's death, Mrs. Sheridan deems it appropriate to deliver party leftovers to the

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<sup>5</sup>Fullbrook also makes this point (122).

<sup>6</sup>Indeed in this instance, as in a number of others, it is difficult to ignore the strong influence that Mansfield may have had on Woolf.



grieving family. Laura's venturing outside her family's yard is like a trip into the underworld:

It was just growing dusky as Laura shut their garden gates. A big dog ran by like a shadow. The road gleamed white, and down below in the hollow the little cottages were in deep shade. (258-59)

The workman's house as well is dark and "gloomy," with a "wretched little low kitchen, lighted by a smoky lamp" (260). Although a small house, the arrangement of rooms appears somehow obscure, even labyrinthine, with the word "passage" repeated several times, as if the house itself is the tunnel to the underworld. Laura is an upper-class voyeur in the workman's home. To her family, death is "other" on this particular day, not only secondary to the party but very much associated with the working class. Still, the experience has an impact on her, more so than on her brother who, although he affirms her perception with his male authority, does not actually enter the dead workman's house:

Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said in his warm, loving voice. "Was it awful?"

"No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie—" She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life—" But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

"Isn't it, darling?" said Laurie. (261)

The sense of party euphoria which can lead to an openness to both heightened perceptions and overwhelming emotions is also depicted in "Bliss," as the title suggests. "Bliss" is actually the only one of Mansfield's stories that is about the giving of a *dinner* party. In its focus on a wife, mother and hostess, the story describes that further stage in a woman's life for which the young Burnell and Sheridan girls are

preparing. For Bertha, the thirty-year-old hostess, the party is a success: the guests apparently enjoy the food and each other's conversation; the table is beautiful, the food attractive and ready on time, and the transition from dining room to coffee in the drawing room accomplished smoothly. Nevertheless, the party ultimately demonstrates to Bertha her failures as a woman, and, for the writer, provides the opportunity for a devastatingly mocking critique of modern social life.

In "Bliss," as in "The Garden Party," the values of Bertha and her "set" are reflected in the party's structure. The superficiality of this world is demonstrated in the fact that the dinner party is reduced to a contentless form: decorative, but not nourishing, either physically or spiritually. Just as the cream puffs sent to the worker's family in "The Garden Party" are absurd – more a reminder of class than anything nourishing or consoling – so food loses its reality in the story to become a poem, a metaphor, an object of art rather than a source of sustenance or of pleasure. Although she enjoys her guests on the level that she expects to enjoy them, Bertha's only real sense of communion at the party is with the woman who turns out to be her husband's mistress. The profundities that Bertha feels she grasps during the party are not what they at first seem, and, like the much-younger Laura, she achieves only a certain level of understanding. Although she begins for the first time to feel her own sexuality, and to glimpse its mystery and importance, this understanding is both too late and somehow confused. Moreover, she never fully sees, as the reader does, that in her marriage she, like the Burnell children, has been only playing house.

Although, at the start of "Bliss," Bertha is outside on the street, she is

returning to her house, which is clearly her centre; she does not seem to have the life outside it that her husband does. She describes herself, in the second person, as filled with joy at returning home: "turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss – absolute bliss!" (91). Yet her happiness at returning home remains unexamined; she does not acknowledge the profound emotional resonance of home and family. Thus her house seems to be merely a structure, a set of rooms filled with objects. Bertha's lack of depth is further suggested when, arriving home in her girlish state of euphoria, she arranges a bowl of fruit:

Mary brought in the fruit on a tray and with it a glass bowl, and a blue dish, very lovely, with a strange sheen on it as though it had been dipped in milk. . . .

There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. (92-3)

The fruit is beautiful, even sensual, but it is the surfaces of both the bowl and the fruit that are emphasized. The fact that Bertha has chosen purple grapes to match the carpet reinforces the suggestion that, just as, for her, the fruit is purely aesthetic, so her relationship to her own home is largely as an expression of her own stylish modern taste.

Before receiving her guests, Bertha assists at her baby daughter's dinner. In a sense, she interacts with her child in the same way as she arranges the fruit. If she seems to play at being married and running a household, Bertha does not seriously identify herself as a mother either. Her alienation from this role is different from that of Linda Burnell, however; she is interested in her baby, but as a delightful possession.

Although she insists, despite the nursemaid's reluctance, on feeding the child herself, she is clearly unused to doing so. This is not an image of maternal nurturing, then; rather, she seems awkward, shy, inept, and there is an air of novelty and of unreality in the scene:

The baby looked up at her again, stared, and then smiled so charmingly that Bertha couldn't help crying:  
 "Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her her supper while you put the bath things away." [. . . .]  
 She ate delightfully, holding up her lips for the spoon and then waving her hands. Sometimes she wouldn't let the spoon go; and sometimes, just as Bertha had filled it, she waved it away to the four winds.  
 When the soup was finished Bertha turned round to the fire.  
 "You're nice – you're very nice!" said she, kissing her warm baby.  
 "I'm fond of you. I like you." (93-4)

The baby seems just another beautiful object in the house, another small piece of a perfect life, but a life in which Bertha seems somewhat lost.

The set of dinner guests around the table is also reminiscent of the fruit arrangement. In fact, the dinner scene is described very sensuously, with an emphasis on the colours of the women's dresses, of the fruit in the middle of the table, and of the food itself. The dinner guests are part of the colour scheme of Bertha's dining room, and the dinner party seems two-dimensional, a tableau of guests, dinner and surroundings. Even the pear tree that Bertha finds so significant in her relationship with Miss Fulton is unreal in the moonlight, an image of a tree, framed in the drawing-room window. Bertha has given great attention to inviting splendidly modern, interesting people to her party:

The Norman Knights – a very sound couple – he was about to start a

theatre, and she was awfully keen on interior decoration, a young man, Eddie Warren, who had just published a little book of poems and whom everybody was asking to dine, and a "find" of Bertha's called Pearl Fulton. What Miss Fulton did, Bertha didn't know. (95)

Bertha finds these people "delightful" because they are "a decorative group . . . they seemed to set one another off and . . . they reminded her of a play by Tchekof!" (100). Although she finds her dinner guests "dears – dears" (100), the reader sees falseness and superficiality in their conversation, their interests, and their projects. They are all surface: not even actors, but merely reminders of fictional dramatic characters, and thus perhaps several levels removed from their genuine selves, if such indeed exist.

If, in Bertha's thoughts, the work of Tchekov, whom Mansfield so admired, and indeed imitated,<sup>7</sup> is reduced to ornamentation, the story itself parodies and mocks modern literature. Eddie Warren calls Bertha's attention to a poem called "*Table d'Hôte*" which begins with what he calls the "*incredibly* beautiful line: 'Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?' " The poem is obviously silly, although the effete Eddie finds it "so *deeply* true, don't you feel? Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal" (105). The poem undercuts and trivializes both Bertha's aesthetic sense and her choice of menu: "The beautiful red soup in the grey plate" (100) served at dinner, apparently chosen more for its colour than its taste, is presumably the same sort of soup as that referred to in the poem which Eddie so admires.

Although references to food abound in "Bliss," they are not necessarily about

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<sup>7</sup>Some critics have indeed accused Mansfield of plagiarism in "The Child Who Was Tired," modelled very closely on a story by Tchekov.

real food, from Mrs. Norman Knight's "banana skin dress" to that same woman's statement that "the train . . . rose to a man and simply ate me with its eyes," and both Knights' response to their fellow-passengers' reaction as "cream" or "creamy" (97). Mrs. Knights' abilities as an interior decorator are called into question when she mentions her idea of redecorating someone's house with a fish and chips motif:

"You know, my dear, I am going to decorate a room for the Jacob Nathans. Oh, I am so tempted to do a fried-fish scheme, with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying-pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains." (102-03)

Such references to food are fun, silly, playful, stylish, but a veneer on the real importance of food in terms of basic needs and passions. Bertha's husband Harry is associated with food as well, and although the reader begins to understand him, it is not clear to Bertha whether her husband is a real sensualist or his devotion to food is an affectation:

Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his – well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose – his – something or other – to talk about food and to glory in his "shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster" and "the green of pistachio ices – green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers." (100)

Harry's "real" character, then, is unknown to his wife; Bertha is incapable of knowing whether a "passion" for food could exist because she seems to live largely on a non-physical, "slightly hysterical" (Moran, *Word of Mouth* 67) level – indeed Bertha refers to herself as "hysterical" (93).

Bertha shares her guests' pretension to being terribly modern, a self-image which also provides Bertha with a justification of her lack of sexual desire for her

husband:

Oh, she'd loved him – she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way. And equally, of course, she'd understood that he was different. They'd discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. They were so frank with each other – such good pals. That was the best of being modern. (104)

Despite Mansfield's satire of the modern, "artsy" crowd, perhaps Bertha's dinner party does, after all, open her in an unexpected way. Although Bertha has never felt any kind of passion, during the course of her party she begins to desire her husband for the first time. She also, without exactly admitting it, feels attracted to Pearl Fulton. It is both ironic and sad that her awakening is too late. Yet her own glimpse of what passion might be seems to be necessary before she is capable of seeing that her husband is in love with Miss Fulton. It is because Eddie wants to show her the foolish tomato soup poem that she is at the drawing-room door, and able to see her husband embracing Miss Fulton in the hall. Their positions are significant: while Bertha, at the entrance to the drawing-room, is at the boundary of the area which she controls, Harry and Pearl Fulton are embracing near the door to the outside, the exterior world that Bertha seems scarcely to know. Bertha's most important view of the outside world, which she shares with Miss Fulton during the party, is of the pear tree. But she does not go into the garden herself, and, significantly, experiences the tree and the moon, along with, earlier that day, the unpleasantly erotic tulips and cats, only in the frame of the drawing-room window.

### III. Mrs. Dalloway's Party, Mrs. Ramsay's Dinner: Looking In/Looking Out

Although Bertha follows the forms expected of a hostess, a wife and a mother, and believes that she is in control not only of her party, but of her marriage, such is not the case. These roles are, for her, powerless ones, and what is really happening at the party and in her home is beyond both her control and her understanding. Traditionally, however, women's power is, in fact, based in women's domestic work, in the agglomeration of small daily tasks that ultimately define a life. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* raise the significant question of how women's power, used for economic and ideological purposes by a patriarchal society, can be channelled creatively by women themselves. For Woolf, this is a major issue for the modern woman trying to emerge from nineteenth-century Victorianism. In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, then, Woolf explores the burden of meaning inherited by twentieth-century hostesses and providers of food: the Victorian ideological model of woman's domestic work as a civilizing force. Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Dalloway present two versions of the bourgeois ideal of the hostess/wife/mother. Each in her own way represents a forging of community, a bringing together of disparate elements into at least a temporary whole, around a table, at a party – within a house. Thus, Mrs. Ramsay creates order for her husband and children, succeeds in bringing about a marriage, and integrates loners and confirmed individualists into the community of her table. Mrs. Dalloway sees her party as almost religious, calling it “an offering for the sake of offering” (185). Or, as



Christopher Ames puts it,

Acknowledging the separateness at the heart of life, Clarissa proposes her parties as a solution. . . . [H]er parties are an attempt to bridge the separateness of selves, to create a community. . . . The party, she thinks, will be magical and unifying. (90)

In their own domestic context, in their own domestic centre, these women are powerful. At the same time, Woolf's ambivalent relationship to the traditional female role is clear,<sup>8</sup> especially in *To the Lighthouse*, where the life of Mrs. Ramsay is both affirmed and undercut, in part by the perspective of the unmarried artist, Lily Briscoe.

There are a number of similarities between Mansfield's "Bliss" and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Each piece opens with the main character on the street, feeling girlish, excited about her party. In each case, there is also a strong pull back to the home. Clarissa Dalloway is older, however, and as – in part – a post-war and urban version of Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay, retains and endorses many of the strong and established ideological foundations which sustain the latter.<sup>9</sup> Still, although she plays a similar domestic role to that of Mrs. Ramsay, it is a role changed significantly by the context. Even though most of the characters in the central plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* must have grown to adulthood in the nineteenth century, the novel is clearly about the modern

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<sup>8</sup>"On the one hand, Woolf felt a deep nostalgia for the security and emotional intensity the nuclear family had provided; on the other, she was implacably hostile to the fundamental assumptions and practices of nineteenth-century domestic life" (Zwerdling 175). These complicated feelings are clearly based in Woolf's conflicted memories of her mother, Julia Stephen, the model for Mrs. Ramsay.

<sup>9</sup>Although *Mrs. Dalloway* was published two years before *To the Lighthouse*, it is entirely set after the war, thus several years later than the first two sections of the later novel.

era. And Mrs. Dalloway is very much a Londoner. Although the very title of the novel indicates her role in life as a wife, Mrs. Dalloway seems much less tied to her house and family than is Mrs. Ramsay, as we will see, and the depiction of her daughter Elizabeth's skill on the busses suggests even more mobility and freedom for the next generation of women. Yet Clarissa is hardly liberated from domestic concerns. If her party only begins late in the novel, her whole day – and everything in the novel – leads up to it in some way. Her leaving the house on the first page of the novel to buy flowers for her party is directly related to her role as hostess. And she is back at her front door on page 42.<sup>10</sup> There is a strong sense of the city throughout the novel, and London scenes continue to be described, but through the eyes and the activities of others: Richard or Elizabeth Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus and Rezia Smith.

The outing is a prelude to the party in another way as well: for Clarissa, as for Woolf, the crowded London streets provide an inspiration for the evening to come. With a specific purpose and specific errands in mind, Clarissa is hardly the “*flâneuse*” that Rachel Bowlby (214) sees in Woolf's “Street Haunting,”<sup>11</sup> yet the love of London is there, or rather, the love of *her* London, the London encompassing all those components that will make up her party and that constitute the life her party will

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<sup>10</sup>Her outing is balanced by the party itself, which takes up approximately the last forty-five pages of the novel.

<sup>11</sup>“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” was written in 1927 and published in the posthumous collection edited by Leonard Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942).

affirm and celebrate. Filtered through her eyes, London does not quite become an extension of her drawing room; yet, pulling into her centre the world in which she lives and its people, her party is an expression of a particular nation, class, and set of values and beliefs. Prefaced by Clarissa's encounters with her husband, her daughter, Miss Kilman, and especially Peter Walsh, the party also organizes into a whole the people, places and events of her own life; it represents a culmination of her wanderings through life.

Yet larger issues reverberate in the party – and in the novel – as well. Recently ended, the war is still a clear presence in *Mrs. Dalloway*, its aftermath, its long-term, profound impact on English social, domestic and political life, still in the process of emerging. Still, the pre-war world seems not to have been entirely lost. Clarissa shops for flowers for her party on Bond Street – busy, commercial, yet traditional:

Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock. (15)

But history has speeded up and the tweed shop is already two eras behind. London has been transformed from a war to a consumer economy in which advertising and purchasing are very important; in the new post-war world there is a bombardment of commodities. Despite the military name, the Army and Navy Stores sell consumer goods, indeed very feminine consumer goods: Elizabeth Dalloway and Doris Kilman have tea there, and buy petticoats. Instead of dropping bombs, an airplane advertises a product, the identity of which is a matter of some conjecture for people on the

street.

Christopher Ames points out that both the skywriter and the mysterious limousine going down Bond Street

serve a political purpose, introducing the themes of state and empire on the one hand, and commercial enterprise on the other – both linked by the memories of the recent war that add poignancy to the symbols of state and fear to the sound of an airplane. (88)

As the war presumably did, the royal car draws people together (Ames 90), in this case linked by curiosity and awe, as well as patriotism. The novel takes note of the general sense that “greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand’s-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state. . .” (23). Similarly, the act of trying to decipher what is being written in the sky binds people together momentarily, even across class lines, as “[a]ll down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky” (29-30). Thus, the street scene provides both a link with England’s past and a hint of the future. We can see here the beginnings of advertising’s role as part of a unifying popular culture. Ames notes, however, that by specifying people’s “diversity of interpretation” (89) – Is the plane writing “Glaxo,” “Kreemo,” “toffee,” “C E L,” “K E Y,” or “E G L”? – Woolf emphasizes the individuality of the gazers as well. Indeed, it is both of these responses that advertising typically draws: creating and catering to people’s desire for individuality at the same time as it demands conformity.

Beginning in this first scene, then, *Mrs. Dalloway* underlines a change in

women's role from wife, mother and keeper of the house to hostess and consumer. We see Clarissa less as the mother of Elizabeth and the wife of Richard than as a hostess, although the former roles are certainly integral to the latter. Older, more certain and more adept than Bertha, as well as less insistent on being "modern," Mrs. Dalloway likes giving parties, and, although she is, at times, criticized and indeed criticizes herself for this passion, she is in her element when playing hostess. Peter Walsh remembers that even as a young girl, she had this quality:

Clarissa came up, with her perfect manners, like a real hostess, and wanted to introduce him to some one – spoke as if they had never met before, which enraged him. Yet even then he admired her for it. He admired her courage; her social instinct; he admired her power of carrying things through. "The perfect hostess," he said to her, whereupon she winced all over. (93)

Peter's youthful impression of her as hostess does not seem to have changed. Wanting to be special, and not just another party guest, he reacts negatively to Clarissa's greeting: " 'How delightful to see you!' said Clarissa. She said it to every one. How delightful to see you! She was at her worst – effusive, insincere" (254). Clearly, Clarissa herself also hates to be defined as a "perfect hostess"; she can feel the connotation of superficiality in that phrase, even though giving a perfect party is the most important thing in the world to her.

The transformation of women's social role from provider of food to hostess is demonstrated in the lack of attention paid to food at the party – both by Clarissa and by the text. She is less concerned with what food to serve than with whom to invite. Although a select few come to dinner before the party, the meal is not even portrayed

in the novel. A psychological interpretation might posit that the lack of attention to food reflects Clarissa's general repression, in keeping with the "fear of embodied existence" that Moran (*Word of Mouth* 78) sees elsewhere in the novel, most readily in Septimus and Doris Kilman. The former cannot eat and the latter eats desperately: "[F]or both, food functions as a symbolic expression of distress about living within the confines of the body" (Moran, *Word of Mouth* 79). Although in Clarissa's case, no specific dissociation from food is portrayed, Moran sees evidence of her sharing this "distress" in her simultaneous retreat from heterosexuality and repression of homoeroticism, except at a safe distance in memories. She cites, as further evidence of Clarissa's disembodiment, Jane Marcus's analysis of "the cloistered imagination" (72) suggested by the monk-like attic room where Clarissa naps.<sup>12</sup>

However, there is more going on in this novel. The lack of emphasis on the meal is, first, a signifier of class structure. Only the servants refer to the food, but the placement of their conversation about the meal indicates its importance to the novel. In a sense, the servants begin the party with their after-dinner perspectives of the ladies leaving the dining room for the drawing room upstairs as the gentlemen take their after-dinner drinks. Here, in the below-stairs attention to cleaning up and worries about the salmon having been underdone, are presented the bones – the essentials – of the party: in the sense of both its skeleton or framework and its

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<sup>12</sup>Moran enumerates an "astounding number of resemblances" (*Word of Mouth* 67) between Clarissa and Mansfield's Bertha in "Bliss," including a "prefer[ence] for a companionate marriage" (68) and a partly-repressed attraction to women.

leftovers.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is only from the kitchen perspective that we have a sense of the menu, after the meal itself is over:

Did it matter, did it matter in the least, one Prime Minister more or less? It made no difference at this hour of the night to Mrs. Walker among the plates, saucepans, cullenders, frying-pans, chicken in aspic, ice-cream freezers, pared crusts of bread, lemons, soup tureens, and pudding basins which, however hard they washed up in the scullery seemed to be all on top of her, on the kitchen table, on chairs, while the fire blared and roared, the electric lights glared, and still supper had to be laid. (251)

Not only does the dinner take place before the party, one comes to the dining room first in the architecture of the house; it is a floor below the party level, suggesting that, even though the meal is not emphasized, the fact of eating dinner together still has some basic and prior importance. The narrative takes us smoothly up the social scale at the same time as we go upstairs to the party with the guests arriving after dinner: from the kitchen staff, who only hear the cars pulling up and the doorbell ringing, to “Mrs. Parkinson (hired for parties)” (253) greeting the guests, and Clarissa’s old nurse, Ellen Barnet, helping the ladies with their garments; and thence, with Lady and Miss Lovejoy, up the stairs to “Mr. Wilkins (hired for parties). He had an admirable manner, as he bent and straightened himself, bent and straightened himself and announced [names] with perfect impartiality. . .” (254). The presentation clarifies that the below-stairs world of the kitchen, and the downstairs world of the cloakroom are the building blocks which support the upstairs party. It is

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<sup>13</sup>One is reminded of Christie Logan’s “By their garbage shall ye know them” in Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* (32).

only after passing through the structure of servants that we arrive finally at the hostess, standing at the top of the stairs.

Except for Peter Walsh, and, in another context, the Bradshaws, we see the guests only after they have entered the house, and, in most cases, after we have followed them upstairs. This area of the house is scarcely described except as a space for the party; it is as if these rooms cease to be part of the Dalloways' everyday house. Details of the environment are unimportant; there is little description. The family's furniture and possessions are seen only from the point of view of a maid, who imagines that the guests "must think how clean, how bright, how beautifully cared for, when they saw the beautiful silver, the brass fire-irons, the new chair-covers, and the curtains of yellow chintz. . ." (250). But Lucy is, apparently, incorrect: neither the guests nor the novel seem to notice. Precisely because everything is so cared-for, so completely as expected, the surroundings go unnoticed by the party guests. As in the case of the dinner and the supper which, as we hear in the cook's passing reference, "still . . . had to be laid," it is only the preparation and/or the clean-up which we hear about, and only the household staff who need to be concerned. The curtains are the only furnishings described – several times – either as a backdrop for conversation or blowing in the open window, as if magically infusing energy into the party: "Gently the yellow curtain with all the birds of Paradise blew out and it seemed as if there were a flight of wings into the room, right out, then sucked back" (256). No longer part of the Dalloways' house, then, the party seems to become its own world, "the sharp borders of . . . which set it apart from the outside world . . . designating that a



distinctive world exists within, distinctive because more controlled and ordered than the vagaries of day-to-day existence” (Ames 106).

The lack of emphasis on food at the party also suggests a particular definition of the event. The notion of a party is transformed from an opportunity to share food and conviviality with friends to a more political gathering, partly motivated by pragmatic, if not specifically utilitarian, goals. At the same time as the party becomes a world unto itself, it also remains a construction of the real social, political and economic world. Thus, the party is about more than celebration, and, if the hostess in *Mrs. Dalloway* is only tangentially involved in presenting the party meal, her political function is a major one. The role delegated to women of upholding civilization and empire is clearly present in the novel. The wife of a member of Parliament, Clarissa's parties support her husband's political career; she plays hostess not to the philosophers who visit the Ramsays, but to the Prime Minister. The Dalloways are like Minta Doyle's parents, of whom Mrs. Ramsay says, “He wore a wig in the House of Commons and she ably assisted him at the head of the stairs” (87). Richard Dalloway is not a highly prominent politician, although influential enough. There are, presumably, legions of such men – some more, some less successful – and women like Clarissa playing hostess for them. For women like Lady Bruton, “derived from the eighteenth century” (264), and influential in her own right, the role of hostess is also important: she uses parties to wield her influence, inviting to her renowned luncheons men whose help she needs in promoting her latest cause. Clarissa is somewhat hurt that Lady Bruton invites Richard and not her to lunch. But there is a

clear purpose to the guest list: the lunch party is not merely a social function.<sup>14</sup>

If Clarissa's party has a less specific purpose than Lady Bruton's, it is political not only in that it supports Richard's position, but also because, in a larger sense, it reflects and endorses the values of the British Empire. As critics have noted, the novel is about a class at least as much as a woman or a party. Zwerdling reminds us that, if some critics – and Clarissa herself – refer to “her ability to merge different worlds and create a feeling of integration. . . . Clarissa's integration is horizontal, not vertical” (127). Lady Bruton, who has “the thought of Empire always at hand” (275), is present, monopolizing the ear of the Prime Minister. Clarissa arranges that those with imperial experience abroad should speak together: Lady Bruton, Peter Walsh, Miss Parry. Peter Walsh, a modern bureaucrat in India, is seen rather as a failure, but Miss Parry nostalgically evokes a more romantic and glorious time as a Briton in Asia:

For at the mention of India, or even Ceylon, her eyes (only one was glass) slowly deepened, became blue, beheld, not human beings – she had no tender memories, no proud illusions about Viceroys, Generals, Mutinies – it was orchids she saw, and mountain passes and herself carried on the backs of coolies in the 'sixties over solitary peaks; or descending to uproot orchids (startling blossoms, never beheld before) which she painted in water-colour; an indomitable Englishwoman. . . . (271)

The response to the Prime Minister's entrance, although more discreet among this privileged crowd, is similar to the effect generated by the passing royal car on the

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<sup>14</sup>This is not a new phenomenon. Felicity Heal notes, in her study of notions of hospitality in early modern England, that “as peers and gentry shifted to London to pursue office as well as fashion . . . the calculus of reward became a more important element in entertaining” (402).

people in the street earlier that day: "Nobody looked at him. They just went on talking, yet it was perfectly plain that they all knew, felt to the marrow of their bones, this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society." (262)

Yet, from the perspective of Ellie Henderson, one of the lesser guests, a cousin invited grudgingly at the last minute, the Prime Minister is like the emperor in his invisible clothes:

He looked so ordinary. You might have stood him behind a counter and bought biscuits – poor chap, all rigged up in gold lace. And to be fair, as he went his rounds, first with Clarissa then with Richard escorting him, he did it very well. He tried to look somebody. It was amusing to watch. (261-62)

Beneath the trappings of his office, the economic base of the country shows through in the man, as if England is, literally, a nation of shopkeepers.

However, despite the still-evident glory of the empire and the grandeur of the monarchy, despite the post-war prosperity in the Bond Street shops and the busses, motor-cars and airplanes, Clarissa's party occurs in the context of a painful world. Lady Bexborough's opening a bazaar with a telegram in her hand announcing the death of her favourite son is perhaps apocryphal, yet there is indeed always an undercurrent of cataclysm and devastation running below even the festive aspects of the post-war world. At Clarissa's party, this undercurrent is manifested by news of the death of her unknown *alter ego*, Septimus Smith, who has also seen the skywriter and spent part of his day wandering around London, although with a very different purpose; and whose experiences with and responses to the twentieth century have been particularly acute. Septimus is destroyed by both war and British culture. His

service in the war, his inability to express his perhaps homoerotic feelings for the dead Evans, and the unfeeling arrogance of the medical establishment – all contribute to his madness. Dr. Holmes's admonition to him to act like a man emphasizes the cage of limited roles and possibilities where Septimus, like others, finds himself. Thus, war itself is not the only culprit in his death, but those institutions and sets of values that presumably both precipitated and were reinforced by the war. At least some of Clarissa's guests have had a hand in this personal destruction and international ruin: the Bradshaws, clearly, but presumably others as well, in their own ways. Still, although the party stops short of endorsing or celebrating their world, the novel is forgiving, if not of the Bradshaws, then at least of the other party guests. Just as the novel does not hide Clarissa's failings, yet looks at her tenderly, so the social satire of her class, its values and habits is muted. Underneath – or beside – the social criticism, there is a compassionate understanding of the individuals formed by British society. Sometimes Peter Walsh – to some degree an outsider now to his class – seems to be the voice of the novel, critical of Clarissa and her world, but at the same time appreciating her, still half in love with her.

Part of what exonerates these people is the party itself and the common, basic humanity implied in the party. The emphasis on the guest list might suggest that Clarissa's party, like Bertha's, would be an empty structure. But the political aspect of her party is not veneer or superficiality; it is somehow genuine. And, as well, something more evolves. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as in Joyce's "The Dead," the "festive vision" (Ames 82) is never completely submerged, no matter what else is going on.

Ultimately, a party is supposed, as Ames points out, to transcend the limitations of whatever individuals are present, and create a celebratory life of its own. Clarissa creates at her party the same sense of a multitude of individuals temporarily coming together that we will also see in *To the Lighthouse*, and that exists, momentarily, in the Bond Street crowds looking up at the airplane. After the inevitably slow beginning, the party takes off: “So it wasn’t a failure after all! it was going to be all right now – her party. It had begun. It had started” (258-59). If the image of people drawing together against the exterior darkness is not presented as clearly in *Mrs. Dalloway* as in *To the Lighthouse*, a sense of this is still present in the novel.

Clarissa’s first reaction to learning of Septimus’s suicide is that this information, indeed this event, is out of place at the party. Ames calls it “an intrusion, a violation of the sanctity of her party. It is the introduction of precisely what the party spirit triumphantly, if temporarily, excluded – death” (96). Yet ultimately, of course, celebrating life means celebrating, or at least coming to terms with, death. Even young Laura in Mansfield’s “The Garden-Party” has an inkling of the relationship between the two:

What did garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane. Happy . . . happy. . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content. (261)

In this sense, Ames argues, death is and must be “the center of the party” (104). In Bakhtin’s words,

“[T]hrough all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to

moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts. (9)

In both "The Garden Party" and *Mrs. Dalloway*, the story of a death parallels the story of the party. In Woolf's novel, however, we actually follow Septimus's day just as closely as we follow Clarissa's and Peter's. Moreover, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the report of the death occurs *during*, not before the party. Death thus becomes an integral part of the festivities. One could argue that, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, dinner could not be the party's centre because death, in fact, occupies this place.

After learning of Septimus's death, Clarissa retreats for a time from the party. As she thinks about Septimus and the window through which he jumped, she looks through her own window across the way at her neighbour, an old woman she has seen many times before in a similar window across the courtyard. For the first time, the old woman looks back at Clarissa, as if a reflection in a mirror. This is her other *alter ego*. "Equally Clarissa's double" (Ames 102), she represents Clarissa's other choice: one can die or one can grow old. In other words, there are two ways out of the window. Within the novel's focus on war, class, politics, economics, Clarissa's party still celebrates both options. Woolf's original intent that Clarissa kill herself has been transformed into a more complex vision. Septimus felt both desperately alone and at the same time haunted by ghosts and at the mercy of the social establishment around him. Clarissa's ghosts and many of the pillars of the establishment are present at her party, still going on in the adjacent rooms. Giving her party allows her some control

over the spectres that destroyed Septimus.

Mrs. Ramsay, the main character of *To the Lighthouse*, is of Clarissa's generation, born perhaps a decade or so earlier, although slightly younger than Clarissa during the day depicted in "The Window," the first section of the novel. Like Clarissa, Mrs. Ramsay is always at home or associated with the affairs of home; however, her role as a hostess is a more basic one, more rooted in the immediate family. She is, indeed, the mother of eight, while Clarissa has only one nearly-adult child. Although the Ramsays presumably have another house in London, we only see them in the country. Running a large household of her family and their guests, Mrs. Ramsay is only minimally subject to the stimuli of outside events even on the most ordinary level of street life, chance encounters, and so forth. There are references to past and future outings to the beach or to the circus, but within the frame of the novel, she leaves her home only to do the marketing and to visit sick people in the village, a direct continuation of her role at home. Mrs. Ramsay could belong to another century. Certainly the modern world is present in *To the Lighthouse*: the availability of household appliances, the existence of mail-order catalogues, the centralized distribution system for agricultural products all reflect the industrialization and the boom in consumerism at the turn of the century. But, although there are also hints of the complexities of a twentieth-century life led by the house guests when they are not in Scotland, Mrs. Ramsay scarcely seems affected by modernity. If, for us, as for Woolf, it is hard not to feel the War hovering over the first section, the fact that an era is about to end is not apparent to the characters.

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is perhaps the best literary evocation of women's work, of this life that some of Mansfield's perpetual wanderers desire and yet reject. Mrs. Ramsay's ways of being, knowing, creating and communicating are continually contrasted with her philosopher husband's highly abstract way of thinking and of using language. Unlike her husband, Mrs. Ramsay is grounded in the everyday, in the domestic objects which surround her. Even her speculations, meditations and dreams are based there. In the following passage, she feels herself merge with the domestic environment: "Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light, for example" (97). In this novel, reality seems to be gendered. While for Mrs. Ramsay a table is both the real and the metaphoric centre of her day, for her husband, its very existence is questionable, its function – indeed its very relationship to human life – a matter of perception. Andrew Ramsay – the budding mathematician in the family, whose death in the war will be as appropriate to his gender as is his sister Prue's in childbirth – tells Lily to "think of a kitchen table, then . . . when you're not there" (38) in order to help her understand his father's philosophical work on "[s]ubject and object and the nature of reality" (38). This gendered relationship to the world is also suggested in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Septimus must concentrate hard on ordinary domestic objects in order to maintain the sense of reality that his wife never questions:

And so, gathering courage, he looked at the sideboard; the plate of bananas; the engraving of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort; at the mantelpiece, with the jar of roses. None of these things moved. All



were still; all were real. (215)

Of course, *To the Lighthouse* does not leave us completely mired in these gender distinctions. It bears remembering that the overriding consciousness controlling and interpreting both the everyday and the philosophical in this novel is that of Woolf, a woman. In fact, an amalgamation, if not a fusing, of the two gendered perspectives occurs at the level of art, in the text and in the process of writing. The role of the woman artist in this fusion will be explored further in the next chapter.

Still, the two focuses around which *To the Lighthouse* is built echo and reinforce gender differences and divisions. Clearly, the lighthouse is both the central symbol and the central feature of the novel's landscape. It is not where we *are*, either as characters or readers, but what we *see*, and, moreover, because it gives the novel its title, the image that comes first to mind when we think of this book. Not only is it phallic in form, but repeatedly connected with men, who seem to have the final control over the planning of visits to the site, and, it is emphasized, whose heroic job it is to live there alone, with no women. Mrs. Ramsay describes the situation of the lighthouse-men to her daughters thus:

“For how would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn . . . and to have no letters or newspapers, and to see nobody; if you were married, not to see your wife, not to know how your children were. . . . How would you like that?” she asked, addressing herself particularly to her daughters. (11-12)

This is a description of “gendered spaces” carried to an extreme. Certainly, Mrs.

Ramsay believes that her daughters should not “like” living alone in a lighthouse on

an island, although it is within the capacity of men to endure or even like it.

As a physical structure, the lighthouse is balanced by the house where almost the entire novel is actually set; symbolically, that image of male life is balanced by the domestic centre of the novel. Taken together, the two structures underline the differences between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, between the ideal and the real, and between the life of the mind and the life of the body. In the first – the major – section of the novel, the trip to the lighthouse is only planned; the dinner actually takes place. Moreover, although this dinner is over early in the novel, it remains central for the characters and the novel itself. The trip to the lighthouse, although it remains an idea throughout the novel, is only undertaken at the end, when time and events have radically transformed the meaning of the outing. In fact, like Mr. Ramsay's letter "R," the lighthouse is not actually reached. The novel ends just as the boat arrives at the island, with Cam and James poised "to follow [Mr. Ramsay] as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock" (308).

As in the case of Mansfield's Mrs. Fairfield, we do not know Mrs. Ramsay's first name. And, again as with Mrs. Fairfield, the maternal and nurturing roles are inextricably intertwined. From the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is defined not only generally as a mother and a wife, but specifically as a nourisher. Thus, on the first page, her young son James, who is busy cutting a picture of a refrigerator out of a catalogue, seems to feel an unspoken association between his mother and the appliance: in a child's eyes, the source of the food his mother provides. He "endow[s] the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother [speaks], with heavenly bliss" (9). Her

promise that he will go to the lighthouse the next day transforms the advertisement, so that it becomes imbued, as are his mother's words, with the power of imagination and the anguish of desire.

Early in the novel as well, Mrs. Ramsay is introduced as the mother of a large family in the context of her place at the dinner table. Associated with this role of nurturer, emanating from it, is Mrs. Ramsay's position as the upholder of the institution of the family and, by extension within the framework of the Victorian ideology of the family, of civilization as well. In this context, it is worth quoting again a passage we first mentioned in Chapter 1:

She was now formidable to behold, and it was only in silence, looking up from their plates, after she had spoken so severely . . . that her daughters . . . could sport with infidel ideas which they had brewed for themselves of a life different from hers . . . as they sat at the table beneath their mother's eyes. . . (14)

The reference to her daughters is important. The table is the place where the expectations of the family are reinforced, and, given their future roles, it is particularly crucial that the girls learn appropriate behaviour in this context. The girls' social conditioning includes not only lessons on table manners and the treatment of guests, but also instruction in the appropriate cultural values which underpin everyday behaviour. As in Mrs. Ramsay's description of life at the lighthouse, the socialization of her daughters is a key part of her role.

Thus, although she is to some extent a free-thinker in her personal beliefs – she questions the existence of God, for instance – in family and other personal matters, Mrs. Ramsay functions as a conservative force. She wants and encourages

Paul and Minta to marry; indeed, Lily Briscoe credits her with having engineered their engagement and Paul himself feels “somehow that she was the person who had made him [propose]. She had made him think he could do anything” (109-10). In “Prelude,” Linda Burnell remarks that her mother habitually organizes things in pairs, and Mrs. Ramsay seems to see people this way. At least momentarily, she even hopes that Lily and William Bankes might marry: “Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed right” (157). She thinks of encouraging them by sending them on a picnic. A meal without the formal restraints of a dining room – domesticity in the wild – seems to be her recipe for creating romantic commitment; a situation that resonates with the combined connotations of an intimate, communal structure and something earthier, uncivilized, natural must inevitably lead to marriage.

The story that Mrs. Ramsay is reading to James throughout much of the first hundred and twenty pages of the novel reflects her support of marriage as the way to live happily ever after. The Grimms’ fairy tale of the fisherman and his wife (in contrast to Günter Grass’s more recent and more feminist version, *The Flounder*) is presented here as a sort of morality tale about food, marriage, and the status quo. In Section X, as Mrs. Ramsay reads the story, she is thinking about her own life, and also about Paul and Minta and whether they will become engaged during their long walk after lunch. The bits of the story quoted in *To the Lighthouse* form a counterpoint to her thoughts, emphasizing the marital conflict in the tale, and particularly the woman who will not stay in her appropriate place:

Flounder, flounder, in the sea,

Come, I pray thee, here to me;  
 For my wife, good Isabil,  
 Wills not as I'd have her will. (87)

As is usually the case in fairy tales, the couple end by living happily after, thereby upholding the rightness of Mrs. Ramsay's view of the world and emphasizing this lesson to the child James. However, fairy tales do not always reflect real life; ironically, although Paul and Minta do come back engaged, their marriage will not follow the terms of Mrs. Ramsay's lesson. Lily Briscoe thinks, at the end of the novel, that "[s]he would feel a little triumphant, telling Mrs. Ramsay that the marriage had not been a success" (260).

Throughout the first section of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is also knitting socks for the lighthouse keeper's son – an insertion of the domestic and the feminine into that male world. But her knitting also becomes a metaphor for her role as a wife. Mrs. Ramsay is well aware that her ordered housekeeping creates an environment where her husband can thrive:

It was sympathy [her husband] wanted, to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life – the drawing-room; behind the drawing-room the kitchen; above the kitchen the bedrooms; and beyond them the nurseries; they must be furnished, they must be filled with life. . . . Flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself. (59)

The above passage suggests that her role begins on an individual level of "sympathy" and assurance, but it goes far beyond this. Through the metaphor of knitting, we see that she actually creates the house, not building it with boards, nails and plaster, but

transforming the bare structure into a set of rooms with purposes and meaning. Her husband is “barren,” not only incapable of giving life, but needing his own life given to him. He – metaphorically at least – may build the house, but only she can put life in it. Her support of Mr. Ramsay’s work in turn allows her a feeling of security and validates her notion of men’s place in the economic and political world and her sense of security in that larger world:

[S]he let it uphold her and sustain her, this admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence, which ran up and down, crossed this way and that, like iron girders spanning the swaying fabric, upholding the world, so that she could trust herself to it utterly. . . . (159)

This view of the structure of civilization is, however, illusory; the novel suggests that it is really the domestic constructions created by women that allow the male intellect to function at all. This valourizing of Mrs. Ramsay’s work is certainly congruent with the Victorian ideology that the home is ultimately the foundation of the British Empire. The novel, however, while suggesting a certain degree of truth in this official perspective, is not interested in the co-optation of the domestic for purposes of imperial propaganda, but rather attempts to look more closely at the meaning of domestic work for the women actually doing it.

As already noted, the dinner in the first section reverberates throughout the novel. Even though there are servants, providing dinner is still clearly Mrs. Ramsay’s job. Thus, during dinner, she is emphatically in control, having chosen the menu, worrying about whether the main dish will be over-cooked, organizing the table and the guests, wondering where the stragglers are, dishing out soup, giving orders to the

maid throughout the meal, overseeing the flow of conversation. But this central dinner does more than characterize Mrs. Ramsay and define her role in the family. It is also significant to the other characters both as individuals and as a group.

According to Ames, the temporary gathering of people into a larger whole represents

“Woolf’s . . . belief in the redemptive potential of the secular festive community”

(82). In truth, Woolf frequently seems ambivalent about this kind of redemption, yet the process of gathering together is impressive. When dinner is ready,

the great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all those scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms, on little perches of their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth to their hair, fastening dresses, must leave all that, and the little odds and ends on their washing-tables and dressing-tables, and the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner. (124-25)

The very architecture of the house emphasizes the centrality of the dining room. The dinner-bell pre-empts all other activities; all the guests in all the other rooms with their independent functions – which were made possible by Mrs. Ramsay in the first place – now bow to her call to assemble. Although they are unaware of it, the diners, and indeed the entire house, are celebrating her.

A combination of many ingredients make up the main dish of the meal, the *boeuf en daube*, “with its . . . confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats and its bay leaves and its wine . . .” (151). This *mélange* characterizes the dinner party too. From people who, an hour before, were reading, writing, painting, dressing, thinking, they have all become diners. In their coming together, individuals lose their isolation and the company becomes more than the sum of its parts. It is because she, egoistically,

perhaps, wants everyone to be joined in this totality, and William Bankes generally resists being incorporated into the group, that Mrs. Ramsay says, “‘I have triumphed tonight,’ meaning that for once Mr. Bankes had agreed to dine with them and not run off to his own lodging where his man cooked vegetables properly. . .” (111). Bankes himself later adds to Mrs. Ramsay’s victory by referring to the *boeuf en daube* as “a triumph” (151), and thus vindicating Mrs. Ramsay’s belief in the rightness of the dinner table.

It is only after the candles are brought in that the dinner party fully becomes what Mrs. Ramsay intends it to be: a world unto itself. The outside ceases to exist and becomes only a distorted reflection of what is in the dining room. Everyone is in Mrs. Ramsay’s world, as indeed they want to be, or want her to make them be:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle light, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished waterily.

Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (146-47)

The table and its candles become another sort of lighthouse, with, in a sense, a similar function of allowing people to find a safe haven. Visually, one can imagine the two sets of lights speaking to one another across the water: the lighthouse blinking out in the fog, and the answering flicker of the dining room candles. It is as if the people at dinner are on an island, just as the people at the lighthouse are; the wavering



reflection of the candles in the windows even suggests that they are surrounded by water, “that fluidity out there.”

Eight candles are lit – one for each child presumably – and it is these that make the table a whole: “after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit” (146). The dish, integral to the wholeness of the table, is Rose’s arrangement: clearly she is one of her mother’s heirs. Reminiscent of the fruit bowl in Mansfield’s “Bliss,” this fruit arrangement alludes to both the aesthetic and the nourishing. As the meal draws to a close, Mrs. Ramsay, having fed everyone, prefers its artistic aspect. It is all that is left of the dinner – her work of art – and she finds herself “keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realising it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it” (163). She refuses a pear (again, the particular reference to a pear is a reminder of “Bliss”), not wanting to spoil the arrangement. Yet, eventually, a piece of fruit is eaten, just as the spell of wholeness will be broken, the dinner finished and the children grown.

For all this forging of community, however, the individuals are nonetheless important at the dinner, as is the complexity of their interactions and interrelationships. Thus, around the table people are noticing each other, criticizing, admiring, attracting, envying, playing out or resisting various social roles, thinking about their own concerns, wishing they were elsewhere and/or glad to be at the table. For part of the meal, William Bankes chafes at the party and thinks that “it is a terrible waste of time. . . . How trifling it all is, how boring it all is . . . compared with

the other thing – work.” (134). But the “code of behaviour” (137), known by most of the diners, if resisted by some, restrains such impatience, like the convention that, “when there is a strife of tongues, at some meeting. . . . speaking French imposes some order, some uniformity” (135-36). Thus, despite the differences, through the common customs of social decorum, the successful party develops its own common discourse or *langage*.

If Mrs. Ramsay has several spiritual daughters, Lily Briscoe is the most important, and Lily’s responses to the meal are particularly emphasized. A woman who has not taken on Mrs. Ramsay’s role as a wife and the mother of a family, and who has ambivalent feelings about not having done so, she is still inspired as an artist by these roles. They seem to be an aesthetic source for her, a necessary base from which to work. The tableau of Mrs. Ramsay and James at the window early in the novel was the original inspiration for the painting on which she is working, and in the dinner table itself Lily finds the inspiration for solving a problem in her painting: looking at the relationship of the salt cellar to a leaf on the tablecloth helps her to see the structure of her work more clearly.<sup>15</sup> The dinner also emphasizes the, at first, apparently irreconcilable conflict for Lily between her identity as an artist and what she perceives as the very different role of a woman, for, although highly ambivalent about this ability, she is indeed capable of the same traditional woman’s role in relation to men that Mrs. Ramsay plays:

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<sup>15</sup>We will return to a discussion of Lily Briscoe as an artist in the next chapter.

There is a code of behaviour, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite so that he may expose and relieve the thigh bones, the ribs, of his vanity, of his urgent desire to assert himself; as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. (137)

Dinner not only reinforces, but generates and imposes the social code, even if an individual does not fully believe in it. In William Bankes's case, it is the code of table behaviour that is at issue; for Lily, it is a larger social code – always overseen by women – in which the two sexes are mutually responsible for the smooth functioning of society.

Since structure and balance are of utmost importance to Lily in her painting, she seems to understand intuitively that such is also true for Mrs. Ramsay in her dinner party. Thus, in response to an unspoken plea from her hostess, Lily placates Charles Tansley, helps to dissipate his anger and to make him comfortable, and thus to keep him within the group: “. . . of course for the hundred and fiftieth time Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment – what happens if one is not nice to that young man there – and be nice” (139). Her art, in fact, inspires her in her task, for once she sees the solution to her technical problem, “her spirits rose so high at the thought of painting tomorrow that she laughed out loud at what Mr. Tansley was saying. Let him talk all night if he liked it” (140). Ironically, she accepts the role of assistant hostess because the table itself has permitted her to rise above the social fray.

Later, in the final section of the novel, she will experience a similar conflict in

relation to Mr. Ramsay.<sup>16</sup> In the latter example, she is at first resentful at his demands, but finally, and then almost desperately, wants to accommodate his need: "For she felt a sudden emptiness; a frustration. Her feeling had come too late; there it was ready; but he no longer needed it. He had become a very distinguished, elderly man, who had no need of her whatsoever. She felt snubbed" (231). Near the end of the novel, on the way to the lighthouse, Cam, as well, is strongly tempted to give in to her father's insistent demands and be kind to him, even if this means breaking her pact with her brother against what they see as their father's oppression. In these latter two instances, the novel shows something very compelling, even irresistibly appealing, if not exactly satisfying, for women in reaching out to meet a man's needs for comfort or assurance.

If Lily, like Mrs. Ramsay, sees some of the interpersonal complexities of the dinner table, her perceptiveness is portrayed as a female quality. The men have their own very particular attitudes about dinner. Thus, Mr. Ramsay wants the meal to move along and is clearly annoyed when Augustus Carmichael asks for more soup:<sup>17</sup> "He hated people wallowing in food. . . . He hated everything dragging on for hours like this" (144). Both Charles Tansley and William Bankes dislike dinner parties, and

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<sup>16</sup>Hermione Lee, in her biography of Woolf, suggests a basis for this scene in Leslie Stephen's emotional demands on his stepdaughter, Stella Duckworth, after his wife's death, and on Vanessa after Stella died.

<sup>17</sup>Zwerdling quotes Mrs. Beeton on this behaviour: " 'It is generally established as a rule' . . . 'not to ask for soup or fish twice, as, in so doing, part of the company may be kept waiting too long for the second course . . . ' "(160).

would prefer to be eating in their rooms – quickly and efficiently. Yet they like Mrs. Ramsay, even love her, and are willing to be seduced by her feminine vision of the meal.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Ramsay remembers wandering happily through the countryside as a young man, with just a biscuit in his pocket, stopping at a pub for dinner. Later in the novel, after he has become an old man, his daughter Cam sees that “[n]ow he was happy, eating bread and cheese with these fishermen”; and James, “watching him slice his cheese into thin yellow sheets with his penknife,” thinks that “[h]e would have liked to live in a cottage and lounge about in the harbour spitting with the other old men” (304). Yet, during his marriage, in the years between youth and old age, Mr. Ramsay very much wants his life to be structured by his wife. He expects those separate roles, those separate spaces which some of Mansfield’s more “modern” characters may reject or resist, yet at the same time desire and long for: “. . . he liked men to work like that, and women to keep house, and sit beside sleeping children indoors, while men were drowned, out there in a storm. So James could tell, so Cam could tell . . .” (245). Mr. Ramsay may not want to see himself as a participant in the feminine and the domestic, yet he wants it to surround him.

Part of Woolf’s ambivalence about the traditional female role is expressed by Mrs. Ramsay herself. Perhaps, on an abstract level, “the hostess stands for the life force, dissolving differences” (Conradi 436), but we see somewhat more complexity in the character of Mrs. Ramsay: she is not merely a representative of the female “realm . . . [which] enshrines the lost wholeness of life” (Conradi 434). Although she has

created the dinner and brought together the dinner guests, she questions the meaning of having done so and the significance of all that dinner represents – a manifestation of what her husband dislikes as her “pessimistic” (91) side – even while she goes through the motions, even while she believes in it all. She recognizes and even has doubts about her compulsion to get people to marry and to reproduce, and about the rightness of having herself forced life upon eight people, of having “said to all these children, You shall go through it all” (92). At the beginning of section XVII, immediately following the description of everyone assembling, at the same time as she tries to organize everyone in the appropriate seats, Mrs. Ramsay thinks,

But what have I done with my life? . . . taking her place at the head of the table and looking down the table at all the plates making white circles on it. . . . She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy – there – and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it. (125)

This is partly a case of start-of-the-party jitters, which Clarissa Dalloway, like nearly every hostess, shares. It is also in part her own fatigue. Just as her attention to her husband is presented as exhausting at the start of the novel, so is the task of hostess: “They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (126). But her questioning also partly derives from her understanding that creating a dinner is both everything and nothing. If dinner is a creative inspiration for Lily Briscoe, cooking, or even organizing dinner is a creative activity in its own right. Eating is a biological necessity; but if everything works, if all the many parts come together – from the cooking of the main course, to the serving

of the soup and the placing of the guests – the dinner may create, at least temporarily, a sense of meaning or structure. In the novel, the significance of dinner is rivalled only by that of art – certainly both are presented as more meaningful than Mr. Ramsay's attempt to reach "R" in his philosophy. This feeling of meaning would be impossible for most of the characters to put into words. But although intangible, its necessity is assumed – unconsciously by the guests and family and consciously by Mrs. Ramsay.

However exhausting, Mrs. Ramsay's role as creator of structure and meaning is certainly successful. Indeed, when Mrs. Ramsay leaves the dining room, Lily notes that "directly she went a sort of disintegration set in" (168). After dinner, Mrs. Ramsay continues the same nurturing and structuring role when she goes upstairs to tuck in her two youngest children – and also to mediate between them, allay their fears, and see that each one's needs are met. She does more than say good night; she arranges their world for them, including their dreams. Afterwards, declining a walk to the beach with some of the others, she sits with her husband, not to converse, because he doesn't want to speak, but to be there with him, to form the context of his evening, as she knows he wants her to do. After the central punctuating event of dinner, she is still in charge of the widening ripples within the family, and she slowly eases the day toward the pseudo-death of sleep. In this sense, she almost seems to be in charge of time, as she is of the creation, reproduction and maintenance of life.

After Mrs. Ramsay's death, the novel almost seems to have ended, to have become an afterthought or epilogue of what Mrs. Ramsay started: the now-adolescent

children's trip to the lighthouse, under very different circumstances; Lily Briscoe finishing her painting; and, pervasively, the subcurrent of the aftermath of war. The third section, "The Lighthouse," is clearly situated after the fall. Significantly, the place of food in the motherless family is different. James refers to his father's sometimes sitting silent at the head of the dinner table throughout the meal. In the final section of the novel, it is breakfast that is emphasized, and the sandwich lunch on the way to the lighthouse. Breakfast may possibly have also been informal in Mrs. Ramsay's day, but it was not described. Here, Lily's breakfast consists of grabbing a cup of coffee and watching the preparations for the trip to the lighthouse before going outside to paint. Everything is somehow familiar to her, yet not at all the same:

Now she was awake, at her old place at the breakfast table, but alone. . . . And Cam was not ready and James was not ready and Nancy had forgotten to order the sandwiches and Mr. Ramsay had lost his temper and banged out of the room. . . .

Nancy had vanished. There he was, marching up and down the terrace in a rage. One seemed to hear doors slamming and voices calling all over the house. Now Nancy burst in, and asked, looking round the room, in a queer half dazed, half desperate way, "What does one send to the Lighthouse?" as if she were forcing herself to do what she despaired of ever being able to do. . . . But this morning everything seemed so extraordinarily queer that a question like Nancy's . . . opened doors in one's mind that went banging and swinging to and fro and made one keep asking, in a stupefied gape, What does one send? What does one do? Why is one sitting here, after all?

Sitting alone . . . among the clean cups at the long table, she felt cut off from other people, and able only to go on watching, asking, wondering. The house, the place, the morning, all seemed strangers to her. She had no attachment here, she felt, no relations with it. . . ."  
(217-18)

The very architecture seems to miss Mrs. Ramsay. The house, like the household, is disordered and disorganized, out of control. Doors bang literally and metaphorically,



as if they themselves do not know where they lead. And indeed, there is no emotional, structural or domestic centre. In all the rushing about, the dining room is no longer the focal point. The rooms are finally just an assortment of spaces, with no inherent meaning. Nobody knows what to do. Lily wonders if she should get herself some more coffee, as Nancy wonders what to send to the lighthouse.

Yet, despite the chaotically banging doors, the house still stands, imbued with at least some remnant of Mrs. Ramsay's spirit. "Time Passes," the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* is about war and change, yet the house on its own, in the absence of the Ramsays and their guests, is the important presence. "Time Passes" answers the question of what is a kitchen table – or a whole house – when no one is there. It is through the house and the down-to-earth domestic practicality of Mrs. McNab that we learn about major events: the war, and the deaths of Andrew, Mrs. Ramsay, and Prue, the heir to her mother's maternity. Thus a female and domestic vision is reinforced. Despite the passage of time, and the tragedy and cataclysm occurring outside its walls, the house, although somewhat decayed, is still there ten years after the Ramsays have left it. It is *only* the domestic that, in fact, endures with any certainty.

The first section of *To the Lighthouse* is titled "The Window." Indeed, windows are very important in that section. They frame views of the distant lighthouse and of the moon, and, conversely, can separate the indoors from the outside world, enclosing people together around the dining room table to create a sense of coziness and communality. Possibilities of looking in and looking out through a window come

together when Lily Briscoe paints Mrs. Ramsay sitting in the drawing room window with her little boy. The literal sense of vision that a window provides becomes, here, the artistic vision, although, significantly, Lily is looking toward the window from the outside, not through the window to the exterior world. As well, there are a number of significant windows in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Curtains are a recurring image at Clarissa's party; a window is also Septimus's exit from his tortured existence, and a window provides Clarissa with her moment of insight during the party. In Mansfield's work, particularly in "Prelude," "Bliss," and "At the Bay," the window frames experience and defines knowledge. The window is, then, an appropriate metaphor for a discussion of women's work. Between two worlds, the window is domestic, part of the structure of the house, yet it opens onto the world. A barrier, a transparent lens and an opening, it provides security, while allowing a vision beyond the house as well as a potential means of egress. It conveys a wide outside world not as neatly divided into domestic functions as those delineated by the rooms of the house. While part of the structure of the house, then, the window takes the stance that the house is not enough and offers the imagination access to a wider world.

Robert Harbison posits that "a strong concern with architecture signifies in fiction as it does outside a concern with protection, a desire for established existence and a home for consciousness" (73). The hostesses, cooks and servers described in this chapter are in charge of that protected, safe, organized existence. For them, the home is a contradictory place, one which can certainly be oppressive, in that women are more or less forced to occupy it from early childhood, yet one which may also be

actually or potentially powerful and creative. The issue for the early modernist woman remains, however, how to integrate this women's work with the larger world. The next chapter will explore this question by looking more closely at the relationship of the woman artist to the domestic, and also at the possibility of reading the novel itself as both a dinner and a work of art.

## Chapter 6

### The Art of Domesticity

## I. Creativity and Meals

Throughout this study, we have looked at various changes in and reactions to women's roles within the context of the family structure and traditional forms of sociability. In this chapter we will explore another way in which modernist women responded to domestic work: through art. The previous chapter touched on the links in fiction between creativity and the serving of meals; in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly, organizing a dinner or a party is represented as an essentially creative activity. But we can go farther in our exploration of these links. In a larger sense, the domestic realm becomes a metaphor for other kinds of creativity; for both fictional characters and the writer herself, preparing the meal is an especially important metaphor for artistic work. Moreover, some early twentieth-century fiction portrays the work of the woman artist as actually emerging from women's domestic lives, in some cases through a fictional artist's conscious recognition of the creativity involved in such work. In other words, despite what the common view of household drudgery might suggest, domesticity is presented not only as potentially creative in itself, not only as a metaphor for the work of art, but also as a creative inspiration for the developing artist. Specifically, in some works of fiction, the serving and preparation of dinner or other meals provide an impetus for creativity for one or more characters; even for the artist who has moved beyond the domestic sphere, the work surrounding food may retain a profound creative resonance.

Looking at a number of texts, but especially Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Mansfield's "Prelude" and other New Zealand stories, and *To the Lighthouse*, we will

consider both the presentation of the woman artist who may be struggling with, learning from and/or inspired by the domestic context, and the piece of fiction itself as a work of domestic art. Mansfield presents the domestic world as part of the soil from which Kezia Burnell's artistic sensibility may grow, and Woolf's Lily Briscoe is quite conscious of her debt to the domestic. The domestic vision may also inform the content and /or structure of the entire work, as if, in creating a work of fiction, the writer is serving us a meal; indeed, from the reader's perspective, the novel, novella or story may present itself as an invitation to dine. The relationship between the writer, the reader, the work of fiction and the serving of food may be developed in a number of ways: first, the whole work may literally be about a meal or meals; second, much – even all – of the novel may be structured around the serving of meals; third, the writer may explore her own art through the relationship of the work of the fictional artist to the chores – and the delights – of preparing meals.

The relationship of the writer to meals is part of a larger question confronting the woman modernist: whether, in order to become an artist, it was more important, in Woolf's terms, to "think back through our mothers" (*Room 76*), or to reject all that "our mothers" stood for by killing "the Angel in the House," as Woolf defines her in "Professions for Women." Attempting to reconcile women's traditional role with modern expectations presented a dilemma that was difficult to resolve and that sometimes led to ambivalence or confusion rather than synthesis. The fact that Woolf poses these problems is, of course, symptomatic of her time and her highly self-conscious literary generation. Actively engaged in questioning their relationship to

artistic as well as other traditions, modernists saw themselves as having broken with history, and, after 1914, history as having broken with them. The rejection of and by history may have been particularly far-reaching, if not always liberating, for women, some of whom tried to brush away any lingering nostalgia for the old order, including family structures as well as social, political and artistic institutions. If, arguably for writers of both sexes, “one of the organising principles of the *avant-garde* writing of the period was centred on a new examination of gender, its origins and its instability,” it is certain that “women writers were analysing themselves with great attention to discover if, and if so *how*, they were other than they had been portrayed” (Fullbrook 12).

While the notion of the “new woman” was, in the end, reduced to a stereotype and an advertising icon (Marchand 179-88), in fact many women writers and artists, like other women, did reject their own pasts: Edith Wharton moved to France; Kathleen Beauchamp left New Zealand and changed her name; Virginia and Vanessa Stephen escaped the paternal home at Hyde Park Gate into a self-conscious bohemianism. And, in one way or another, they all rebelled against standard sexual relationships. In *To the Lighthouse*, as Margaret Homans points out, these changes are represented when Minta Doyle, on her way to the vacation that will lead to her engagement, leaves *Middlemarch* on the train, and later loses her grandmother’s brooch during the walk on the beach when Paul Rayley proposes marriage.<sup>1</sup> Both

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<sup>1</sup>Gilbert and Gubar also mention this point (3:30).

literary and biological foremothers are thus sacrificed<sup>2</sup> – in Minta's case for love and what eventually turns out to be a new kind of marriage: openly adulterous but apparently friendly.

Thus, in early twentieth-century fiction, women writers frequently depicted their women characters in the process of re-inventing themselves. Their transformations may occur on the apparently superficial level of their donning the social masks sometimes worn by Mansfield's characters – one thinks as well of some characters' obsession with clothes and manners in Wharton's work – as well as on a deeper, more agonizing level. The process of creating or re-creating the self becomes their narrative. For example, when Janie returns home at the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her overalls and her long, loose hair are grist for the town gossips. From her own perspective and that of the novel, her appearance sums up the choices which she has made in her life and the person she has become as a result. It is the story of these choices that forms the substance of the novel.

Since women have been linked to the home both historically and ideologically, whatever their possibilities for exploring new notions of themselves would of necessity have arisen from and/or in reaction against the domestic centre. For a woman to create or re-create herself without somehow dealing with the

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<sup>2</sup>Woolf would probably not have been enthusiastic about losing *Middlemarch*. She considered Eliot one of the great writers, and published several pieces on her work. In 1919, the centenary of Eliot's birth, she wrote a long essay for *TLS*, later revised and reprinted in *The Common Reader*; in 1921, a brief article for the *Daily Herald*; and in 1926, a review of Eliot's collected letters in *Nation and Atheneum*.



domestic part of life would have been nearly impossible; even though – or, rather, because – it is a site of contention, the traditional role had to be resolved. As a result, the focus on domestic and maternal responsibilities in the work of many women writers of the early twentieth century is a crucial one: not only as a component in the presentation of character or setting, but in the exploration of creativity, in depictions of the struggle of the artist, and in the structure of the text itself. The prevalence of the two contradictory views of the mother that Woolf suggests may result in a textual ambivalence or ambiguity reflected in the portrayal of various aspects of the domestic, but especially in the serving of food, one of the most obvious responsibilities of a mother. As the traditional role is transformed into art, the central domestic activities of preparing, serving, sharing or providing a meal become key to the very essence of various works of fiction. The potential for transforming everyday experience into art is one way in which it may have been possible to “think back through our mothers if we are women” (*Room 76*), and at the same time to reject the role of “Angel in the House.”

## II. A Domestic Language

This study argues that a critical portrayal of domestic experience is not only a major component of the art of modernist women writers, but the most important way in which they might be viewed as thinking through their mothers. However, the role of language in this transformation of everyday experience into art is not neutral, and we should note that women's language could be – and has been – viewed as in itself the most important aspect of female modernism. Although there are problems implicit in an essentialist definition of female language, it is important to recognize, in some of the works under discussion, a language which is closely related to – indeed arises from – the portrayal of domestic life. This domestic discourse not only suggests an enhanced appreciation of everyday experience, but creates a crucial link between domesticity and art.

Of course, for many modernist writers of both sexes, an experimental approach to language formed part of their questioning of identity and tradition: new ideas called for a new language in which to express them, and the overturning of traditional forms was part of what Kaplan calls modernism's defining "revolt against Victorian fathers" (*KM and the Origins* 6). However, for the woman modernist, the issue of language may have been particularly complex. Woolf argues that nineteenth-century women novelists were already alienated from standard syntax: "[p]erhaps the first thing [they] would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for [their] use" (*Room* 76). Moreover, she argues that this alienation extends to literary forms: if "[t]here is no reason to think that the form of the epic or of the poetic play

suits a woman . . . who shall say that even now 'the novel' . . . is rightly shaped for her use?" (*Room* 77). If such was indeed the case, women writers at the turn of this century may have had a different relationship than men had to the modernist break with linguistic and literary traditions. Thus, even from a feminist perspective, there might be some validity in traditional critics' having excluded women – other than, usually, Woolf – from the modernist canon. Rather than arguing for women's inclusion in the canon, Shari Benstock, for one, suggests the existence of a parallel and perhaps ambivalent female modernism: "[W]omen writers of this period and place both mimed and undermined Modernist principles, and we have yet to discover whether the 'Modernist Mime' constituted an enforcement of the patriarchal poetic law or a skillful subversion of it" ("Expatriate Modernism" 29).<sup>3</sup>

The task of defining a separate category of female modernism is, if possible, even more slippery than that of defining modernism in general.<sup>4</sup> But however they are classified, a number of women "modernist" writers certainly strove to tear down the edifice of traditional fiction, playing with both language and form in very innovative

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<sup>3</sup>As Kaplan reminds us, "it is still necessary to restate the fact that until recently the academic critical tradition generally ignored the presence, let alone the overwhelming significance, of women writers – *as women* – in the creation of the [modernist] movement" (6). She goes on to note, however, that a more liberal definition of modernism than was used by, especially, the New Critics, might be more useful than a project of creating a whole new modernism (*KM and the Origins* 7).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, Benstock's quasi-definition of female modernist writing as "a genderized writing that situates itself creatively, politically, and psychologically within a certain space and time" ("Expatriate Modernism" 29) is far too general to be either meaningful or useful.

ways. Clare Hanson points out those

who, seeing language as inherently oppressive and male-centred, aimed to challenge it, and who saw the forms of *fiction* too as potentially restrictive and gender-bound. The work of [May] Sinclair, [Dorothy] Richardson and Gertrude Stein . . . offers a particularly rich field for the study of the relations between gender, language and literary form. (18)

One way of “thinking through our mothers,” then, might have been to transform literary discourse by discovering and using their language and, in the process, redefining form. Margaret Homans, like a number of other critics and theorists, stresses the importance to women’s writing of a female language, the mother’s language. But, although modernist women writers were certainly experimenting, it may be difficult to state that they were actively engaged in writing a female, maternal language. In the Lacanian terms ordinarily used to define such language, the feminine is associated with the literal; the text, on the other hand, represents a step beyond the literal to the figurative, the imaginative, the intellectual, the abstract. It is both a cause and an effect of this view of language that women are always “the other” in male culture. By definition, women cannot be subjects: a “‘feminine’ sense of identity . . . traditionally has depended on the static nature of definitions accepted from outside the self” (Fullbrook 6).<sup>5</sup>

Writing the mother’s language, then, is not a straightforward proposition.

First, the woman writer must redefine maternal language to insist on her own identity

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<sup>5</sup>Fullbrook uses de Beauvoir’s notion of women’s collusion in this position: that “‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ by accepting definition as object rather than seizing one’s exigent individuality as subject” (6).

as a subject. Moreover, if the son's gradual detachment from the mother makes "language both necessary and possible" (Homans, *Bearing the Word* 13) for him, the question of the literal and the figurative is more complex for the daughter. On one level, since she is female, she continues to identify with the female parent and thus does not have to abandon the mother for the father as a model. But on another level, the girl child is as abandoned as her brother is: Irigaray notes that, in fact, both sexes are thrown into the symbolic order at the moment when the umbilical cord is cut (Homans, *Bearing the Word* 24). Obeying Woolf's imprecation to "think back through our mothers" by writing the mother's language would presumably recoup this loss and affirm the daughter-mother relationship. However, most of "our mothers" did not write, and, by definition, the maternal language is not a written language. If there exists some sort of essential feminine language, then, its application may be problematic; as Homans observes, the very notion of female language may be in conflict with the cultural definition of literature:

[W]omen's memory of and wish to reproduce the nonsymbolic language they shared with the mother takes the form of a literal language that looks like . . . an embrace of the very position to which male theory condemns the feminine. These differing versions of – or differing valuations of – the literal will collide with each other and especially with women writers' wish to write in the symbolic order where literature has traditionally taken place. (*Bearing the Word* 32)

Even if, hypothetically, a written maternal language is not a contradiction in terms, it would certainly not be generally accepted by mainstream culture; thus, the attempt to use such language could marginalize the woman writer even more, as Stein, H.D., and other writers considered unorthodox and "feminine" in their use of

language were “buried . . . or excluded” (Benstock, *Textualizing the Feminine* xxviii).<sup>6</sup> Homans notes (*Bearing the Word* 22) that the historical sanctions against women writing have in fact made women more likely to try to write as men, even to the extent of adopting a male *nom de plume*, as many did in the nineteenth century. Certainly any attempt to recuperate a putative mother-daughter language would have to be carefully weighed by women writers wishing to be accepted and published, not to mention paid for their work<sup>7</sup> in a predominantly male literary world. To perpetuate links with the mother by using a different sort of language or form would also have meant perpetuating the writer’s own exclusion and therefore upholding the *status quo* of the literary establishment.

It is not surprising, then, that in *A Room of One’s Own*, as Rosenman points out (103-07), Woolf’s position on female language is contradictory: she seems loathe to abandon the traditional completely, and, although she calls for the development of a “feminine” language, she also vacillates on the question of whether it is desirable to use such language, and even on whether it exists.<sup>8</sup> Certainly she experimented; however, if Lytton Strachey calls Woolf “the inventor of a new prose style, & the

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<sup>6</sup>Benstock sees Stein’s deconstruction of both gender and language as so radical that it excludes her as a good example of “feminine writing” (*Textualizing the Feminine* xxvii).

<sup>7</sup>In any case, as Woolf reminds us in *A Room of One’s Own*, married women in England had no right to their own money until 1870 (24; see also Rosenman, 49).

<sup>8</sup>Woolf herself calls these “difficult questions. . . . I must leave them, if only because they stimulate me to wander from my subject into trackless forests where I shall be lost and, very likely, devoured by wild beasts” (*Room* 78).

creator of a new version of the sentence" (McNeillie 4:xvi), Hanson notes (18) that both Woolf and Mansfield were at best ambivalent about Dorothy Richardson's quite conscious attempts to write a new women's language. In Woolf's 1919 *TLS* review of *The Tunnel*, for instance, she seems uncomfortable with Richardson's experiment, if reluctant to criticize it directly. She calls Richardson's "a method that demands attention, as a door whose handle we wrench ineffectively calls our attention to the fact that it is locked" (McNeillie 3:10), and carries her ambivalence a step farther in observing: "That Miss Richardson gets so far as to achieve a sense of reality far greater than that produced by the ordinary means is undoubted. But then, which reality is it, the superficial or the profound?" (3:11) However, Woolf finally concludes that "... *The Tunnel* is better in its failure than most books in their success" (3:12), and, in a 1923 review of Richardson's *Revolving Lights*, she seems to appreciate Richardson's having

invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. (3:367)

Some of Mansfield's innovative techniques in the short story genre have also been considered by a number of critics as distinctly female.<sup>9</sup> Her use of ellipses, for instance – which at different times might suggest either an infinite openness, a refusal

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<sup>9</sup>Kaplan argues, on the other hand, that "Mansfield frequently takes the culturally defined characteristics of 'feminine' style as the object of satire. Mansfield *sees through* the stylistic devices to their origins in women's oppression or self-delusion" (*KM and the Origins* 159).

to state or acknowledge something, a quality of uncertainty, or a lack of concentration characterized by thoughts lost or trailing off – has been viewed as feminine. She avoids a solidly-defined subject position, frequently using a shifting narrator and a generally fluid narrative perspective – the stylistic counterparts of her conception “of self as multiple, shifting, non-consecutive, without essence, and perhaps unknowable” (Fullbrook 17).<sup>10</sup> Mansfield’s work had a great influence on Woolf’s own stylistic and formal innovations; in the end, however, to make a strong argument that such technical experiments are by definition “female” would be difficult and perhaps of little value.<sup>11</sup>

In describing the discourse of characters, on the other hand, the notion of feminine language is very useful. Homans makes a cogent argument for the occurrence of such language in *To the Lighthouse*, particularly in the bed-time conversation between Cam and her mother. She points out that this language is quite

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<sup>10</sup>The beginning of “At the Bay” provides an example of one of her methods of narration. The perspective of an omniscient narrator, identified, oddly enough, with the second person, merges with those of the flock of sheep, dog and shepherd which appear around a bend in the road and slowly pass by. The narration – temporarily resembling a children’s story in which animals think and talk – is briefly taken over by the Burnells’ cat and then the shepherd’s dog before reverting to a more conventional narrative voice, as the flock disappears again (205-07). As a number of critics have pointed out, Mansfield’s narration is very cinematic. Although the subject matter is completely different, Woolf uses a similarly mobile perspective in following the movement of the dinner guests up the stairs in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

<sup>11</sup>One of the problems with insisting on the need to define feminine language is that the relationship of language to the writer’s gender can become so blurred as to render the term meaningless. Hence the issues that have arisen with the approach of a critic like Kristeva to Joyce’s linguistic experimentation.



different from that used by Mrs. Ramsay with her son:

. . . there is no gap at all between Mrs. Ramsay's words and her bodily presence for her daughter. . . . This is what I mean by a literal language shared between mother and daughter: a language of presence in which the presence or absence of referents in the ordinary sense is quite unimportant. . . . Woolf defines as distinctly female the pleasure Cam and Mrs. Ramsay share in the rhythm and feel of words, which . . . derives from and constitutes a myth of a daughter's never having lost the literal language she shared with her mother. (*Bearing the Word* 17-18)

Mrs. Ramsay's facility at non-verbal communication – and Woolf insists upon this quality – is related to this ease with “literal language.” Thus, at dinner, Mrs. Ramsay conveys to her husband her disapproval of his impatience with Augustus Carmichael<sup>12</sup> and to Lily a plea for her help with Charles Tansley. Later, with her husband in his study, she silently responds to his need, and communicates to him her understanding, without his being fully conscious of her doing so. Gayatri Spivak sees this facility as a significant characteristic not only of her public life as a beloved hostess, wife and mother, but of her personal, interior life as well: “. . . she relies little on language, especially language in marriage. Her privileged moments (a privilege that is often nothing but terror), are when words disappear, or when the inanimate world reflects her” (32). Although, as Spivak notes, there is a disjunction between the pessimistic inner person and the woman who gives comfort and love apparently unstintingly to her family and guests, the deep-seated suspicion of language is a characteristic of both.

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<sup>12</sup>We have already seen another version of this female communication of silent but strong disapproval at the dinner table, in the farewell party for Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*.

Other writers also portray very acutely a particular verbal and non-verbal interaction between women that is quite different from the usual verbal exchange among men or between men and women: “a communal voice that erases female boundaries” (Moran, *Word of Mouth* 106). Specifically, we have already called attention to the interactions between Linda and Mrs. Fairfield in “Prelude,” and among Linda, Mrs. Fairfield and Beryl in “At the Bay.” There are also scenes between Adèle Ratignolle and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, and between Janie and Pheoby in *Their Eyes were Watching God* where communication seems to go beyond words to a level of shared understanding that the text itself acknowledges as female. Patricia Moran sees this language as powerful. Writing about Mansfield, she refers to “the singularity and potential subversiveness of a female language that inheres, not in meaning, but in sound” (*Word of Mouth* 106). It is worth noting that in each of the above cases, this communication occurs in a domestic setting: while minding children, sewing, doing housework, cooking or eating together. If a particular feminine language exists within a text, then, it often arises from women’s shared domestic experiences.

### III. "The dish     appropriately delectable"<sup>13</sup>

The domestic content or orientation of women's writing may have been one factor – among others, to be sure, both socio-economic and ideological – in the ongoing exclusion of women from literary circles and publications. Homans's assertion that "[t]he literal is ambiguous for women writers because women's potentially more positive view of it collides with its devaluation by our culture" (*Bearing the Word* 5) is consistent with Huysen's analysis that "... the repudiation of *Trivalliteratur* has always been one of the constitutive features of a modernist aesthetic intent on distancing itself and its products from the trivialities and banalities of everyday life" (47). In other words, critical definitions of male modernism may have excluded women's writing from the realm of high art, in part at least, because of what content was defined as acceptable for art. Indeed, Huysen sees the "avoid[ance of] any contamination with mass culture and with the signifying systems of everyday life" (54) as one of the basic characteristics of the mainstream modernist movement. The everyday, the literal, the domestic – all of these become associated with a second-rate art. Woolf concurs that this critical bias in constructing literary canons has been a problem for women writers:

... it is the masculine values that prevail. . . . This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (*Room* 74)

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<sup>13</sup>Mina Loy, "The Effectual Marriage" (37).

Certainly Joyce, Eliot, and other male modernists do portray ordinary domestic life, and, in so doing, validate the everyday experience of ordinary people as the subject of art. However, women modernist writers, in specifically linking their work itself with domestic life, demonstrate not only the importance of women's relationship with food but also the particular creative power of this link. The fact that, in their fiction, the gender of both the writer and the server of food is the same adds an important dimension to their work. Following Woolf's comments on her literary foremothers in *A Room of One's Own*, one could also argue that the use of the domestic in fiction feminizes the literary form to better suit women writers and readers.

Thus, the notion of the text as meal has been a notable, if not exactly frequent, literary conceit in the twentieth century. The process of cooking may organize or function as a metaphor for the text, but more than this, the preparing, serving and eating of a meal, as well as the life surrounding and defined by these activities, may be the entire subject of a piece of fiction. In such a case, where the text is the meal and the meal the text, the writer herself becomes the server of both the book and the dinner. To further develop the metaphor of the novel as meal, we might say that the tasks of the writer, like those of the cook, require her to look both inward and outward. That is, cooking, like writing, may be a solitary, introspective act, based on a personal relationship with one's tools, ideas, and raw materials. But ultimately the text demands readers and the meal must be consumed; just as the novel must be published, circulated and read, so serving and dining are necessary outcomes of the meal's preparation. Further, like literature, cooking transforms both its raw materials

and, potentially, people's lives. As readers, we are the recipients of this transformatory power, and, in books where dinners occur, our position with respect to the table may be very important in our experience of the fictional world.

In the second half of the twentieth century, meals have provided the structure and/or the content for a number of works of fiction. As we noted earlier, in *Babette's Feast*, by Isak Dinesen, food has quasi-magical and certainly spiritual qualities. Despite the suggestion of the title, the meal does not make up the entire story, even though it seems to. However, the cook emerges as the central figure – almost the author – of the work, as her dinner transforms the small town and the relationships among its people, linking them with the larger world and the historical events that she has experienced. Dinner also becomes key in expressing emotional life, and Babette the great artist who can bring emotions to the fore. Although it takes place at the end of the story, the dinner is the subject as well as the culmination of the work; such is its power that it defines the work of fiction, just as it transforms and redefines the entire context of the small Norwegian town and the lives of the villagers.<sup>14</sup>

*Like Water for Chocolate*, a recent novel by Laura Esquivel, is a good example of a novel which is completely about meals. The book is organized around meals, but more than this, its *subject* is the preparation and serving of a series of meals. These

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<sup>14</sup>The recent film *The Big Night* is similar in its structure, with the planning and preparation of an elaborate feast making up much of the script, and the dinner itself the culmination of the work. It is noteworthy that all the recent works of fiction mentioned here have also been made into films. Elaborate meals seem to provide excellent cinematic possibilities.

dinners are completely intertwined with the lives of the family whose history the novel traces; the preparation and consumption of food are not only parallel, then, but integral to the other events of the novel. Meals resonate in ways which can only be described as spiritual and magical, as well as pleasurable. Moreover, the reader is drawn into the creative process of the work: each chapter begins with a recipe for a dish which will be crucial to that chapter, as if allowing the reader to participate in the novel by cooking its meals herself.

Even where the whole work is not completely about food, a meal or meals may be crucial to the novel both structurally and thematically. In such cases, the reader may also feel herself present at the writer's table. For instance, in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, the reader participates at the *mah jong* parties hosted by a group of aging Chinese-American women. The food served at these social events is not only a device for recounting the stories of the four women and their families, it is a key factor in the friendship among the women and defines their link with Chinese history and culture. Moreover, the food served throughout the novel, in every generation, illuminates both the relationships between individual mothers and daughters and the passing down of female tradition throughout history.

In the modernist period, the party at the end of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* structures and informs not only the activities of Clarissa's day, as she prepares for the party, but all the events of the novel, even, in a sense, for characters like Septimus and Rezia Smith who are unaware of the party. The party is both the culmination and the centre of the novel: if we view the novel's structure as circular rather than linear, the

party is the hub around which, for that day, at least, the entire world of Mrs. Dalloway revolves. As readers, we are invited guests at the party, if perhaps somewhat out of our element like cousin Ellie Henderson or the inappropriately-garbed Mabel in Woolf's preliminary story, "The New Dress." Our status outside the inner circle is made clear by our not being invited to the pre-party dinner; the novel does not describe this meal itself, only the state of its leftovers. In fact, the dinner remains so private that even the guest list is not divulged.

Another work of the modernist period, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is structured entirely as an after-dinner tale, and offers a particularly good example of the traditional relationship between eating and storytelling. The novel opens with what feels like a ritual dinner and a ritual tale. Meals are mentioned in passing throughout the novel as part of Janie's everyday life and, especially, as descriptors of men's and women's roles and indications of degrees of closeness and conviviality. But the meal at the start of the novel is particularly significant as both the introduction to and the culmination of Janie's story. After her third husband's death, and having returned home from her adventures with him, Janie tells her story to her friend Pheoby, and therefore to the reader, only after Pheoby has made dinner for her and she has eaten. It is a reciprocal relationship. Just as a good eater can inspire a good cook, so "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story" (23). Indeed the need to tell one's story is presented as second only to the need for food, and the desire to listen as a natural human impulse:

They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager

to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing – self-revelation. Pheoby held her tongue for a long time, but she couldn't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke. (18)

The reader identifies with the server of dinner in this case; like Pheoby, we are impatient to hear Janie's story. However, once Janie begins to speak, the roles are reversed, and it is as if she is serving *us* a rich meal.

Janie's narrative makes up the entire novel, except for the first chapter and part of the final chapter. Yet only the first two pages of her story are written in the first person. After this, the novel slips into an omniscient narration; in effect, Janie becomes the novelist, her story transformed into the novel. It is particularly appropriate that the activities of cooking and eating dinner introduce her tale, first of all because Janie's life is largely measured by her role as wife in three marriages, each of which represents a further step both in her maturity and in Hurston's development of her character. In a sense, her life has been a multi-course meal; her most recent marriage to the aptly-named "Tea Cake" suggests the dessert. On the day of her return, instead of playing the roles of cook and server herself, she eats a dinner that has been cooked for her, an appropriate end, at least for the moment, to her experiences as a wife. One could say, as well, that Pheoby's motherly kindness rounds out the story that begins with the loss of Janie's own mother. In any case, Pheoby is the catalyst, for the novel comes to be solely as the result of her serving dinner; she provides not only the food, but the occasion and the audience for the narrative.

Finally, it is worth noting Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, even though, since



it is usually classified as a work of poetry rather than of fiction, it is somewhat outside the purview of this study. One section of the poem is entirely concerned with food. This section presents a meal, or, rather, several meals, as Stein cooks a bubbling, if sometimes odd assortment of dishes. The experimental nature of Stein's language is tempered by her subject matter: the most prosaic of foodstuffs, along with other everyday items, are presented in a highly associative, imaginative, even bizarre way. Despite the sometimes startling incongruity of the individual images and juxtapositions of images, the subject matter of the piece keeps it grounded and gives it a warm, social, welcoming nature. The interaction between language and ordinary foods transforms both.

The poem celebrates not only the experience of eating, but also that of preparing and even naming food. For the food in *Tender Buttons* is not merely a shopping list or inventory; certainly not raw, it is worked, prepared, served. The poem is very domestic in its loving attention to food, yet at the same time questions traditional domestic organization. Sometimes meals are described, and sometimes they emerge from the contiguity of various dishes, but the arrangement of their courses is not fully developed and there are odd combinations. Much of the sorting out of the various foods, recipes and dishes is left up to the reader, as if she or he is a participating cook. Pleasure, surprise and delight seem to be the motivating factors in putting food together and in suggesting the relationships of food to other everyday objects. Indeed, every aspect of food is relished fully – including the sound of the names of foods. The feel of the words on the tongue replicates the enjoyment of

actually eating. The pleasures of language and of eating are blended, as the poem is read and devoured.

Thus, this piece of writing is not only a celebration of the domestic, but a liberation of the domestic into a new manifestation. And this joy in food is – literally – presented as art. Both meals and language are de-constructed and re-constructed along other lines. *Tender Buttons* is a meal which breaks free of domestic constraints at the same time as the poem's attention to food makes it highly domestic; similarly, the piece calls into question normal approaches to language and standard literary form through its extremely precise focus on words and its contagious enjoyment of language.

#### IV. *The Awakening*

Although with quite a different effect, dinners also provide a structure for Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, an early or proto-modernist work. The novella is structured by a series of meals, a framework which, as in Hurston's novel, is particularly appropriate to the life story of a married woman. However, here we are kept at a distance; the reader is never allowed to sit and enjoy these meals, as they remain problematic both for the novel and for Edna Pontellier, the main character. The significance of the series of dinners in the novella is multi-layered. Dinners punctuate the plot, allowing revelations, marking turning points, and opening new phases in the novella. Upon this structure is also built an examination of many issues frequently associated with food and meals in literature: family and social life, gender roles, pleasure and the erotic, boredom and routine. Dinners also narrate Edna's attempt to find a creative voice. Her struggle to radically re-define her life – to replace the domestic role imposed by her marriage with a personal and domestic life of her own choosing – is paralleled by her relationship to art: painting, music, and, implicit in her re-creation of herself, story-telling.

The structuring function of dinners is particularly important in this novella because of the nature of Edna's crisis: in marking the progress of her "awakening," the recurring dinners not only form a scaffolding for the novella, but at the same time represent the social structure within which the novel takes place. Neither the text nor the writer can escape or transcend this confining structure. Thus Edna fails to throw off her fetters completely, her story ultimately succumbs to societal expectations, the

novella yields to conventional morality, and her rebellion leads to death.<sup>15</sup>

In this turn-of-the-century work, then, both the nature and the outcome of the link between the domestic and the creative are particularly problematic. The novella demonstrates the difficulties faced by women in finding a language and a way of reconciling their creative potential with their social roles and personal history; but, significantly, the difficulties are not resolved. Marianne DeKoven, who explicitly defines *The Awakening* as an early modernist work, argues that it must be understood as functioning in terms of a “double modernist structure” (“Gendered Doubleness” 24), a structure, on several levels, of often-contradictory doubles. For instance, the opening scene is punctuated by two caged birds – a parrot and a mockingbird – on either side of a door; throughout the novella, the sea is consistently presented as both soothing and dangerous; and, most important, both Chopin and Edna see her liberation from marriage as ultimately double-edged. Because it is the negative that prevails, Edna’s potential creativity is never really developed and her freedom is self-destructive. The novella’s tentative vision of incipient links between domesticity and creativity remains nebulous; if, as we shall see, *To the Lighthouse* leaves one hoping for a reconciliation between the two, they ultimately remain antagonistic here.

Food also is presented in two ways in the novella: as beckoning, erotic, sensual,

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<sup>15</sup>Some critics have insisted on the end of the novella as a liberation. For instance, Gilbert and Gubar say that “Edna swims . . . not into death but back into her own life, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood” (2:109). However, unless we move to a completely symbolic level, it is difficult to see how drowning herself can be considered a positive outcome in Edna’s case.

liberating, and as a part of the patriarchal structure which Edna is trying to escape. In other words, food is a biological necessity and potentially a source of sensory pleasure, but these qualities have been distorted to fit into the social and domestic structure; thus, for a woman, in this novella, dinner usually means service, not pleasure. No alternative structure to the patriarchal is seriously suggested, although one is hinted at in the community of women on Grand Isle. But this community is a temporary one, limited to the summer months. Moreover, its very existence is determined by the men back in the city: it is amorphous and, by unstated agreement, as well as economic and social necessity, would be untenable on its own without the sanction of the men. Significantly, the weekday society of Grand Isle is defined by the absent husbands as asexual, although certainly sensual. The housewife is not supposed to be sexual: glowing and radiant, perhaps, like Edna's friend Adèle, and attractive to men, but not erotic in any conscious or assertive way.<sup>16</sup> The women's flirtations with Robert Lebrun and, presumably, other unattached men who for some reason temporarily inhabit the borderlands of the male world, are innocuous for all who accept the implicit constraints of the assumed structure. Thus, for the husbands at work in the city during the week, the women, children and occasional young man on their own at Grand Isle do not represent a threat, but provide a sort of voyeuristic fantasy.

For Edna in particular, then, both freedom and confinement are expressed in

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<sup>16</sup>One is reminded of the standard advertising images of women already beginning to develop at the turn of the century. Writing about the 1920's, Marchand notes that the high-fashion, sophisticated image of the modern female consumer was altered to create a "softer" picture of the housewife and mother (181).

terms of dinner. Dinners may symbolize the erotic or represent housewifely duties, the two poles between which she is caught. At various times, Edna is shown to take a real sensuous pleasure in eating, but she rejects the female roles associated with food. Although women are generally responsible for seeing that the meals are served, nevertheless, throughout most of the novella, dinners are presented as an integral part of the patriarchal mode. Thus, Edna's role as a wife is frequently expressed in terms of food. Her husband eats at the club when he is annoyed with her. On the other hand, he provides her with treats as if she were a spoiled child. During the women's vacation at Grand Isle, he sends her boxes

filled with *friandises*, with luscious and toothsome bits – the finest of fruits, *pâtés*, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance. . . . the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better. (9)

These are all treats, luxuries, trifles – nothing particularly nourishing – as if rewards for her service as a wife. Moreover, Léonce's gifts of food are a public statement; appreciated by all the other women, his gifts demonstrate to them his qualities as a man and a husband. The presents also hint at a patronizing quality in Léonce's relationship with his wife, and a superficiality in his perception of what he needs to do to make her happy. In fact, the passage quoted above suggests that Edna has some doubts about her husband and his offerings of food. "[T]he ladies" seem to appreciate Léonce's gifts more than she does; she is, indeed, "forced" to indicate her esteem for him.

Although she does what is required, Edna holds herself back from fully defining herself as a wife and a mother in the way that her peers do. We are told that, despite her apparently conventional marriage, Edna is not “a mother-woman. . . . They were women who idolized their children, worshiped [sic] their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (10). Similarly, the fact that she is often late to lunch and dinner at Grand Isle suggests a rebellion against the traditional meal-imposed structures of the day. It seems as though food, or more likely the rituals and/or structure surrounding food, are irrelevant to her. This habit of lateness, this hanging back, fits with her desultory manner, her languidness, what Dr. Mandelet later describes as her “listless” quality (92). But her apparent apathy, her lack of energy or interest in life, only emerges when she is in her role as a wife. When Edna falls asleep during an outing to another island, she awakens as if it is a whole new world and “our people from Grand Isle disappear[ed] from the earth” (49). Preceded by what Gilbert and Gubar (2:106) point out is a ceremonial partaking of bread and wine, the meal she shares with Robert Lebrun at the Chênière is the first meal in the novella which feels real to the reader. If not described in great detail, it is nonetheless very tangible, and Edna eats it with pleasure:

[Robert] stirred the smoldering ashes till the broiled fowl began to sizzle afresh. He served her with no mean repast, dripping the coffee anew and sharing it with her. Madame Antoine had cooked little else than the mullets, but while Edna slept Robert had foraged the island. He was childishly gratified to discover her appetite, and to see the relish with which she ate the food which he had procured for her. (50)

While Edna is vacationing at Grand Isle, she is not responsible for dinners; indeed, in the case of the dinner with Robert, *he serves her*. But back in the city, she returns to her usual duties as Léonce's wife. When Léonce discovers, at dinner one evening, that Edna has not been home to receive callers, he responds by complaining about the meal and criticizing her for not adequately supervising the cook. The roles of society hostess and domestic meal-provider are linked, and she is not being a good wife in either sense:

She was somewhat familiar with such scenes. They had often made her very unhappy. On a few previous occasions she had been completely deprived of any desire to finish her dinner. Sometimes she had gone into the kitchen to administer a tardy rebuke to the cook. Once she went to her room and studied the cookbook during an entire evening, finally writing out a menu for the week. . . .

But that evening Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. (68)

Although this recurrent scene is an old one, Edna's reaction to it is new. Criticized as the server of food, she has begun to focus on herself as an eater. Eating has begun to be linked to Edna's "awakening."

Edna's growing aversion to marriage gives her a new perspective when she dines with the Ratignolles. Although "it was . . . a delicious repast, simple, choice, and in every way satisfying" (74), the dinner depresses her, perhaps, as DeKoven suggests, because of her friend's deferring to her husband throughout the meal (*Rich and Strange* 144). In any case, "[t]he little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (74). Shortly



afterwards, the status of dinner as a patriarchal institution is made particularly clear at the meal where Edna is confronted by all the male authorities in her life: her husband, her father, and the old family doctor whom Léonce has consulted about Edna and invited in order that he might observe her.

If Edna rejects these particular manifestations of dinner, however, she does not reject food itself. In fact, Edna's enjoyment of food seems to grow. When Léonce goes to New York on business, Edna takes pleasure in dining alone:

The candelabra, with a few candles in the centre of the table, gave all the light she needed. Outside the circle of light in which she sat, the large dining-room looked solemn and shadowy. The cook, placed upon her mettle, served a delicious repast – a luscious tenderloin broiled *à point*. The wine tasted good; the *marron glacé* seemed to be just what she wanted. It was so pleasant, too, to dine in a comfortable *peignoir*.  
(96)

Edna's enjoyment of food is quickened by a feeling of independence and the absence of the usual domestic habits and formalities. It is also connected with sexual attraction. A few pages later we again see Edna hungry: after a dinner at the Highcamps with Alcée Arobin, she has a midnight snack of cheese, crackers and a beer. Raiding the kitchen was not something she would have done as the wife of Léonce Pontellier; as Edna, she has an appetite – for what, she hardly knows as yet, but she “regretted that she had not made Arobin stay a half hour to talk over the horses with her. She counted the money she had won. But there was nothing else to do, so she went to bed, and tossed there for hours in a sort of monotonous agitation” (99).

If part of Edna's hoped-for liberation is expressed sexually, another part

manifests itself in her interest in the arts. The instances of music and story-telling which run through the text are always occasions which evoke passionate emotion in her. Her falling in love with Robert is associated with feelings aroused by Mademoiselle Reisz's concerts at Grand Isle;<sup>17</sup> this association continues in New Orleans, where she visits Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, after the first time, largely to hear news of Robert. The story-telling sequence following the dinner with her husband, her father and Dr. Mandelet demonstrates the connection, for her, between emotion and imagination. Under the "beneficent influence" (92) of dinner, claret and champagne, each person tells a story, like Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, following the tradition of after-dinner story-telling. Léonce Pontellier reminisces about his youth, and the Colonel about his war experiences; the doctor relates a rather moralistic anecdote about a woman who almost leaves her marriage. Edna's tale of runaway lovers is not very original, yet "every glowing word seemed real to those who listened" (93). Very different in its intensity and evocativeness from the stories told by the men, Edna's narrative blurs the line between truth and fiction. For the men, telling a story means reminiscing, recounting history or moralizing; for Edna, it invokes emotional truth.

However, Edna's attempt at rebirth is expressed particularly in her painting. When she gives up receiving visitors on Tuesdays, she paints. As a hobby, painting is

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<sup>17</sup>Mademoiselle Reisz plays Chopin. The pun suggests the author's taking credit for awakening Edna (I am indebted to Jay Bochner for calling this *jeu de mots* to my attention).

not unusual; it seems to be normal in the novella for housewives to dabble in the arts, but only as long as they do not go too far. Thus, Léonce says,

It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family. . . . There's Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos. (75)

It is easy to dismiss Edna's painting as a hobby; indeed, the novella itself seems to share the general view of housewife-artists with little real talent. But for a time, Edna takes her painting quite seriously. Although highly critical of her own work, she sells a few sketches. Indeed, a dealer, whom she tells that she might be going abroad to study in Paris, has found her work good enough to commission "some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December" (137).

Edna's attraction to the artist's life is at the basis of her friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz. The poverty-stricken spinster pianist explicitly links art with liberation from the quotidian, telling Edna that "to succeed, the artist must have the courageous soul. . . . The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (84). Her advice is similar for the rebel: after Edna has formed the plan of leaving her husband's house and has admitted her love for Robert, Mademoiselle Reisz cautions her, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (110). But liberation can become deprivation; Mademoiselle Reisz herself apparently leads a very earth-bound life. Her apartment, described as "cheerless and dingy" (104), is furnished with "a gasoline stove on which she cooked her meals when disinclined to descend to the neighboring restaurant" (81). Her feeling of deprivation

and the lack of pleasure in her life are evident at Edna's party, where "[a]ll her interest seemed to be centered upon the delicacies placed before her" (117).

Mademoiselle Reisz is at the other feminine pole from Madame Ratignolle, the good and fecund wife, whose interest in music remains within acceptable bounds. But she is also stunted, in her own way, and her life is at least as unappealing as that of a wife.

Edna's two friends represent the essence of her dilemma: in the society of the novella, both positions – that of the artist and that of the housewife – would seem to require giving up too much. Synthesis of the two is apparently impossible.

All the previous meals in the novella are really *hors d'oeuvres* leading up to the dinner which marks Edna's leaving the house she has shared with her husband for a small house around the corner and an attempt to create a domestic centre that is her own, a *ménage à une*. In this case, serving the meal is not a wifely duty. Rather, the dinner party is a celebration of herself as an independent woman: it is completely *her* party, in honour of her moving and, appropriately, of her birthday as well. As the hostess, Edna holds herself regally and feels the full power of that role. Everything is rich and perfect. No longer playing the hostess for her husband, Edna has created the party for herself and for the people she has chosen to invite; she has assembled everyone who is important in her life, with the notable exception of Adèle Ratignolle, who is nearing the end of a pregnancy.

The dinner is characterized by the kind of high-society trappings that Undine Spragg so envied at the start of *The Custom of the Country*. The table itself is described in opulent terms:

There was something extremely gorgeous about the appearance of the table, an effect of splendor conveyed by a cover of pale yellow satin under strips of lace-work. There were wax candles, in massive brass candelabra, burning softly under yellow silk shades; full, fragrant roses, yellow and red, abounded. There were silver and gold, as she had said there would be, and crystal which glittered like the gems which the women wore. (115)

But although the format of the dinner is such as would generally announce one's having "arrived" in society, in fact, the meal rather marks Edna's farewell to social institutions. If not a parody, the party is certainly an ironical and critical reflection of itself, for, in this celebration, Edna is, in fact, rejecting that life in which such parties can occur. Indeed, she intends to leave directly from dinner for her own rented house.

In its visual detail, the description of the dinner table suggests a painting, emphasizing not only Edna's interest in that art, but her attempt to change her life creatively. Some of the guests join in the aesthetic aspect of the evening. Mrs. Highcamp places on Victor Lebrun's head a multi-coloured garland of roses, which, "[a]s if a magician's wand had touched him . . . transformed him into a vision of Oriental beauty" (118). When she also drapes him in silk, he lapses into silence and becomes a "picture" (119), startlingly beautiful to the others. But, verging on the decadent and orgiastic, this image is not what Edna seeks to create. Breaking a glass in her agitation, and the spell of the dinner as well, she finally makes him stop posing when he begins to sing his brother's song, "Ah, si tu savais . . ." (120), because it seems to parody love, and, perhaps, to mock her feelings for Robert. As Gilbert and Gubar note about the after-dinner story Edna told earlier in the novella, Victor's posing "betrays desire into the banalities of conventional romance" (2:108).

We noted earlier that a novel may be presented as a dinner; conversely, Gilbert and Gubar see Edna's dinner as, in itself, a narration, and, moreover, in comparison to the after-dinner story she told earlier in the novella, "the best, the most authentically self-defining, 'story' she can tell" (2:108). But if it is a story, it is a complicated one, and defines her life in unintended ways. Although the dinner is a symbolic turning point and is meant to be a celebration, ironically, in a number of ways it also emphasizes her connection with the men of her family. The party starts with a cocktail invented by her father, and in her hair she wears diamonds sent from New York as a birthday gift by her husband, who has scrambled to concoct a public excuse for her moving out of his house. The party – extravagant, rich, on the verge of ostentatious – must also represent the final expenditure of her husband's money. Given her plans to support herself on a combination of an inheritance from her mother "which [her] father sends [her] by driblets" (105), race winnings and the sale of sketches, she will likely not entertain on this scale again. Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar, somewhat melodramatically, also see this meal as a "Last Supper" before her eventual betrayal and "inevitable crucifixion" (2:108).

As the hostess, Edna is described as "the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (118), and this ultimate loneliness is the price of being the queen. Thus the party is followed by depression, a feeling of anticlimax: once having declared herself free, what is she really free to do? Even the little house does not liberate her completely. Certainly, part of Edna's struggle is to be free sexually, but in relationships with men she is placed, if not exactly back in her old situation, then in another

uncomfortable position. Thus, even though she feels “disheartened” (121) and wishes to be left alone, she allows Arobin to seduce her on the night of the party. Small dinners punctuate her further encounters with both Arobin and Robert, but, in general, the meals themselves are merely backdrops. Chapter XXXIV, when Robert comes to dinner, begins “The dining room was very small” (133), implying intimacy, but potentially claustrophobia as well. Chopin calls it a “dinner of ordinary quality, except for the few delicacies which [Edna] had sent out to purchase” (133). Robert talks of women he knew in Mexico, but makes it clear, by departing when Arobin arrives, that the double standard applies. Arobin also eats in her dining room (138) a few days later, but her affair with him is fast becoming a symptom of her growing cynicism: “There was no despondency when she fell asleep that night; nor was there hope when she awoke in the morning” (138).

However, Edna’s chance meeting with Robert in the suburban garden where she is eating dinner recalls the day at the Chênière Caminada. Away from the city, nearly secret, walled but outdoors, the café suggests safety and simplicity, as well as what Harbison calls “a first notion of a garden . . . a closed place set apart, protected, privileged, with different rules and styles of life inside and outside” (5-6). Presided over by Catiche, a “*mulatresse*” (138), who, like her old cat, naps in the fresh air when she is not preparing fresh, simple food, it also seems like female territory, Edna’s territory: “I almost live here” (139), she says. Her encounter with Robert – the first in some time and awkward at the start – leads to an exchange of kisses and confidences when they return to “pigeon-house.” But if Edna’s love for Robert is part of her

radical attempt at liberation from marriage, Robert's love is highly conventional.

Thus, back at her house and away from the magical garden, his "face [grows] a little white" (143) when she says to him,

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, "Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours," I should laugh at you both" (142-43).

When the consummation of their affair is interrupted by Adèle's going into labour, Robert begs her not to leave. Yet he is really not willing to love her on the free terms she has outlined, and her absence gives him time to regain control of the situation by writing a manly and correct little note: "Good-by – because I love you" (148).

Edna never quite finds the content of the freedom to which she aspires; ultimately, it seems impossible for her to exist outside of men's hegemony and standard social structures. In the terms used earlier in this chapter, she may want to be a subject, but has difficulty imagining herself into that position. At one point in the novel, Léonce voices his suspicion that Edna's father may have driven her mother to an early death. In fact, Edna's suicide, which follows closely upon her attendance at Adèle's childbirth, seems to be very much tied up with issues of motherhood, with her own roles as both daughter and mother. In what suggests a female version of the Oedipal archetype, Woolf says of the symbolic "Angel," "had I not killed her she would have killed me" (*Room* 151); in *The Awakening*, Edna resolves this dilemma by suicide. The sea, described as soothing and enveloping, has been viewed by some critics as a conventional maternal image, and Edna's death in the ocean a return to



the womb; she is, in fact, naked when she takes her final swim:

. . . for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (152)

For Edna, there is no liberation in “thinking back through her mother.” Despite her apparent love for her own two children, motherhood is part of the domestic institution she detests. However, the only alternative to the domestic seems to be loneliness. Ironically, her inability to escape the patriarchal structures which seem to encircle her and pervade the world of the novella has meant repeating the fate of her own mother; she gives up on her own awakening.

The emphasis on dinner when Edna returns to Grand Isle just before her death underlines the importance of meals to the novella. Since the text implies that Edna’s suicide is planned, it seems odd, at first glance, that she discusses in some detail with Victor and Mariequita what she wants for dinner, who will cook it, whether she has time for a swim before dinner, and so forth. She says that she is hungry and would like fish for dinner – perhaps a reference to her impending death by drowning – but repeats in a thoughtful, even slightly self-deprecating way that they should not do “anything extra” (150, 151). Certainly, it is not unusual for people on the verge of suicide to continue with their everyday lives until the last moment; in this case the emphasis on dinner is particularly pertinent in terms of both Edna’s habits and the novella’s structure. As a wife, a mother, and a lover, Edna has led a life punctuated by

meals. Indeed, her reputation seems to have become linked with food: in this last scene, Mariequita thinks of her, rather hyperbolically, as the “woman who gave the most sumptuous dinners in America, and who had all the men in New Orleans at her feet” (150). If meals have structured Edna’s days, indeed her life, they have also organized the novella, and this meal that will never be is the final punctuation mark. Edna dies within her usual daily domestic framework, with dinner planned, finally escaping this structure for good by swimming out to sea. No one will enjoy the meal that is being cooked. Chopin withholds the last dinner from the reader as well as from Edna; Edna does not eat, and the reader too is left disappointed and unsatisfied. The uneaten dinner remains as an expression of Edna’s absence.

## V. The Artist's Vision

For Edna Pontellier, the series of dinners structuring both the novella and her life creates an enclosure from which she cannot escape. If she finally fails in her attempts to transcend domestic constraints and to nurture the artist in herself, it is because she finds that the oppressive limitations of the domestic world extend outside her marriage as well. We have the sense that Chopin has abandoned her, or has refused to alter a world which is stacked against her. In other works, however, the writer, having herself managed to move beyond the domestic, at least to a certain extent, explores ways for the characters to do so as well. Some of the work of both Mansfield and Woolf not only examines the vision of the fictional artist but situates the source of this vision in domestic life. The fictional presentation of the artist offers a version of the transition from the domestic to the artistic world which may suggest a parallel to the writer's own artistic impulse. Although not so freely and ecstatically as Stein does, Mansfield and Woolf each outline the relationship between the work of art and the dining room or kitchen table, in effect making a link between their own work and that of their non-literary foremothers, and in the process, reinterpreting both women's traditional work and the work of creating fiction.

In the Burnell stories, Katherine Mansfield explores the roots of creativity. Although in some ways equally conflicted, these stories are much more positive than *The Awakening*. The recurring dinners already noted in "Prelude" are not necessarily an oppressive structure, but may, rather, establish a sense of creative order which is as nourishing to the artist as the food being served. Insofar as they focus on a child, the

stories emphasize the hopeful, the potential, the ideal. The domestic is both criticized and celebrated; however, the potential exists for daughters to learn from their mothers and foremothers, and the links between creativity and domesticity, although ambivalent, are clearly present.

The portrait of the artist as a young girl is that of Kezia, the middle Burnell daughter. We have seen already that Kezia and her sisters are apprentice women, learning to behave according to the cultural ideals of womanhood. But, although she is often presented as just one of the children, Kezia stands out from her sisters as the character with whom Mansfield identifies and also as the most conscious, observant, imaginative, and thoughtful – the potential artist. Along with her sister Lottie, she opens “Prelude” and, alone, closes it. As we have seen, in the first section of that story she looks through the dining room window and sees the world transformed, as her sister and the objects in the garden take on the colours of the stained glass. But there is more here than just changes in colour; her imagination carries her away:

Kezia liked to stand so before the window. She liked the feeling of the cold shining glass against her hot palms, and she liked to watch the funny white tops that came on her fingers when she pressed them hard against the pane. As she stood there, the day flickered out and dark came. With the dark crept the wind snuffling and howling. The windows of the empty house shook, a creaking came from the walls and floors, a piece of loose iron on the roof banged forlornly. Kezia was suddenly quite, quite still, with wide open eyes and knees pressed together. She was frightened. She wanted to call Lottie and to go on calling all the while she ran downstairs and out of the house. But IT was just behind her, waiting at the door, at the head of the stairs, at the bottom of the stairs, hiding in the passage, ready to dart out at the back door. (15)

There are other points in the stories where Kezia stands out as well. In the

children's game in "At the Bay," Saralyn Daly (87) sees Kezia's insistence on being a bee, despite the argument of one of the other children – presumably her sister – that a bee is not a real animal, as a creative rebellion against rules and roles. In "Prelude," Kezia tells her more conventional sister Isabel, "I hate playing ladies" (43). Again, in "Prelude," it is Kezia who has the strongest reaction to the duck's being killed, as if she is more able than the others to imagine the feelings of another creature. Her response is also perhaps aesthetic: ducks ought to have heads, and it is repugnant to see one running about headless. Yet, in her distraction by Pat's earring – "Do they come on and off?" (47) she asks – she also seems capable of using her experience to interpret the world, in this case to explore the notion that some actions can be undone, others not.

Kezia ends "Prelude" by playing with and gently undercutting and mocking her Aunt Beryl's self-absorbed obsession with her appearance. Having gone to call her aunt to lunch, Kezia remains alone for a few minutes in Beryl's room, fascinated by the dressing table and the accoutrements of female beauty: bedroom equivalents, perhaps, of the kitchen utensils and products used by Mrs. Fairfield. When Beryl leaves, Kezia experiments with her toiletries, playfully putting the lid of the cold cream jar on the ear of her stuffed cat, which she positions, as Beryl was positioned, in front of the mirror. When the toy falls off the dressing table and the lid flies through the air, she is, like any child, afraid of being punished; but she also seems to feel the strong symbolic importance in this apparently insignificant object. Although it is not damaged,

for Kezia it had broken the moment it flew through the air, and she picked it up, hot all over, and put it back on the dressing-table.

Then she tiptoed away, far too quickly and airily. . . . (60; ellipses in original)

Kezia is influenced by both her mother and her grandmother, and it is this dual lineage that molds her consciousness. Her link with her mother lies in sharing an imaginative, if sometimes rather frightening perception of the everyday world. Since she is a child, Kezia is actively engaged in learning to understand the properties of the material world, but Linda's imagination, as well, is still very childlike, and she seems to find physical reality uncertain and unpredictable. Thus, for Linda, as for Kezia, "[t]hings had a habit of coming alive. . ." (27).<sup>18</sup> Patricia Moran, calling attention to the critical controversy about whether Kezia's role model is her mother or her grandmother, argues that Linda's refusal to accept her own participation in the typical life of women inspires Kezia in her creativity (*Word of Mouth* 111-12). Indeed,

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<sup>18</sup>Mrs. Ramsay, as well, in *To the Lighthouse*, perceives things imaginatively; however, she does not experience an antagonistic relationship with the physical world, but rather a blurring of boundaries between the self and the world: "It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one. . ." (97). For Mrs. Ramsay this conscious identification with the natural world is not frightening or threatening, merely an acknowledgment of a truth that she lives.

In a similar vein, Mansfield wrote to her friend Dorothy Brett: "When I pass the apple stalls I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple too – and that at any moment I may produce an apple, miraculously, out of my own being. . . . When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck. . . . This whole process . . . is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe. . . . There follows the moment when you are *more* duck, *more* apple . . . than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you *create* them anew. . . ." (Hanson 28-9; final ellipses in original).

although Kezia is alone with her mother only once in all the Burnell stories, it is a significant moment, when Linda explains the life cycle of the aloe to her.

However, it is a misreading of the stories to deny Kezia's grandmother paramount importance. The child's very close relationship to Mrs. Fairfield seems to form the foundation for her growing up. Certainly, Kezia learns from her grandmother. In "At the Bay," for instance, the discussion of her Uncle William's death – and the resulting tickling fight over whether or not she and her grandmother will also die – introduces her to the profoundly contradictory notion of the magnitude and, at the same time, triviality of life and mortality. But this is more than just a case of intergenerational closeness; Mrs. Fairfield's influence on Kezia is directly domestic. Moran proposes that "Kezia's emulation of Mrs. Fairfield's domestic artistry results in a transformation of nature into culture that reenacts the old woman's transformation of the fruit into jam" (*Word of Mouth* 112), citing as particularly significant examples the several occasions when Kezia, playing with her food, transforms it into something else:

[I]n "Prelude," she makes a piece of bread "a dear little sort of gate" by eating a bite of it; in "At the Bay" she changes porridge into a landscape: "She had only dug a river down the middle of her porridge, filled it, and was eating the banks away." (112)

Moran sees this influence as a negative and anti-creative force in the girl's life: "Kezia's emulation of Mrs. Fairfield . . . raises doubt about the efficacy of the magna mater as artistic model, for, as the representative and priestess of nature, Mrs. Fairfield is not a model of the speaking subject or writer" (*Word of Mouth* 112).

However, the fact of Kezia's grandmother being house-bound and completely oriented to the domestic does not rule out a creative influence. On the contrary, as Rosenman says in her analysis of *A Room of One's Own*:

Ancestors do more than simply provide technical models for aspiring writers or symbolize particular aesthetic philosophies – indeed, they may do nothing of the sort, for they may not even be writers. Instead, this female tradition – with distinct values, attitudes, and even modes of selfhood – sustains a woman writing in a male world, giving her a kind of affirmation of identity like that which a mother ideally gives to her child. . . . If providing nurturance rather than literary models is the central function of the foremother, it does not matter whether she writes at all. . . . (85)

Mansfield's language affirms a link between the housewifely and the artistic domains. Symbolically, Mrs. Fairfield is associated with light, particularly when she is with the children. When Lottie and Kezia arrive at the new house, their first view of it includes “[s]omeone . . . walking through the empty rooms carrying a lamp” (18). The “someone” is their grandmother, who hands the lamp over to Kezia in a solemn, quasi-religious gesture:

“Kezia,” said the grandmother, “can I trust you to carry the lamp?”  
 “Yes, my granma.”  
 The old woman bent down and gave the bright breathing thing into her hands. . . . (18)

Clearly her grandmother's heir, Kezia is herself associated with light as well. When the grandmother guides the children to bed with a candle, Kezia asks, “Aren't you going to leave me a candle?” (21). And in “The Doll's House,” a story in which Mrs. Fairfield does not appear, it is the lamp on the dining room table of the miniature house that Kezia likes so much: “‘The lamp's best of all,’ cried Kezia. She thought



Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp" (387). Across class lines, she shares her appreciation with "our Else," one of the pariah Kelvey girls, who, after having been chased from the Burnells' yard by Aunt Beryl, whispers to her sister, "I seen the little lamp" (391).

Thus Kezia is inspired by her grandmother and the image of the lamp associated with her grandmother. It is significant that the doll's house lamp is on the dining room table. The imagery clearly implies that the role of mother/housewife/cook is potentially a creative one. Linda's rejection of that role in fact may stymie her creativity, just as it represses her sexuality and keeps her childlike. Daly sees Mrs. Fairfield as exemplifying order (58); viewed from this perspective, Linda's experience of the world may remain inexpressible, chaotic, even frightening to her, in part because her refusals have not in fact constituted a true rebellion but, rather, a passive acquiescence to structures set up by her mother, her husband, and/or society, and an abdication of responsibility to order or control her own life. Although she has children, Linda sees maternity, like the entire domestic role, not as creative, but merely as burdensome. Thus, given the limited possibilities of her world, by refusing to act as a mother, she necessarily remains emotionally a daughter, both supported and repressed by the continuing presence of her own mother.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Linda's dilemma can be seen as an inheritance of the nineteenth century fictional tradition, in which "the only choices available to a female protagonist are frequently revealed as negative ones: a stifling and repressive marriage or a form of withdrawal into inwardness which frequently concludes in self-destruction" (Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 124; quoted in Kaplan, *KM and the Origins* 87).

The implications of Linda's refusals are ambiguous at best. Viewed one way, Linda is protesting the constraints and imperatives of her body, which seem to prevent her from ever doing anything but reproducing; viewed another way, she is repressing whatever pleasure and creativity might be experienced or expressed through her body. Thus, not only does Linda avoid cooking, she refuses to eat as well. As Rosenman notes, we find in Woolf a similar ambivalence about whether women find their creative voice through or by transcending their physical being:

Woolf must insist on [the body's] reality, both to retrieve women from Victorian stereotypes of purity and to undo women's oppression. At the same time, however, the body remains haunted by disability and danger, and Woolf longs to escape from its complications. (111)

Thus, although Jane Marcus argues that a denial of the female body may be "a strategy of power for the woman mystic or artist" ("The Niece of a Nun"),<sup>20</sup> Woolf, in both *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, links taboos against women's writing with those against women's sexuality. As Moran says, "It is this consciousness of impropriety that most often thwarts women writers in Woolf's texts; women internalize paternal proscriptions and then become censors of their own speech" (*Word of Mouth* 73). Although there is no suggestion that Linda Burnell has literary aspirations, her struggle may nonetheless echo that of the woman writer. Homans notes the conventional, but nevertheless crucial metaphoric relationship between

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<sup>20</sup>"The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination" is reprinted in Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* 118; also quoted in Moran *Word of Mouth* 72.

maternity and the creative act, especially the act of writing.<sup>21</sup> In the terms used earlier in this chapter, if maternal language is non-symbolic language, it might make sense that a daughter who wants to write would refuse to become a mother herself. The very state of maternity might seem to preclude active participation in language; after all, a baby is not figurative.<sup>22</sup> However, Linda seems to find the worst of both worlds: in refusing to engage herself fully as a mother, and limiting her experience of motherhood to the biological fundamentals, she is all the more haunted by the spectre of pregnancy and trapped by her situation. If the birth of her son in "At the Bay" seems to signal a change, this change is not developed in the stories, and, moreover, may indicate nothing more than Linda's espousal of the cultural preference for male children.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf describes in detail the bland and minimal fare served to students at women's colleges as compared with the sumptuous meals at "Oxbridge." The difference has both physical and spiritual implications, and her point is that women must be adequately nourished in both senses in order to achieve their creative and intellectual potential. The fact that women like Linda deny themselves

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<sup>21</sup>Susan Stanford Friedman's "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse" presents an overview of various literary examples of this link.

<sup>22</sup>On a less theoretical level, it has, of course, been a truism that successful, creative, artistic women do not have children, as children interfere with "time of one's own," as well as with a "room of one's own," and both the energy and the social permission to be obsessed with one's work or one's art. Woolf notes in *A Room of One's Own* that Austen, the Brontës and Eliot were all childless. Chopin, on the other hand, had six children.

nourishment implicates them in their own impotence. Kezia's essentially having two role models, then, may liberate her to the possibility of becoming a more complete woman. Perhaps she will not spend her life as her mother has, reacting against expectations by repressing herself to a point of near total passivity.

If Mansfield gives Kezia two mothers, each with a different relationship to domestic structures, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf suggests a somewhat similar resolution to the problem of the woman artist by splitting the creative woman in two. In the characters of Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, art and chastity, on the one hand, and domesticity, marriage and fecundity, on the other, are at the same time contrasted and linked. Reverberating in each other, the two apparent antitheses become complementary creative poles. Despite the fact that Lily and Mrs. Ramsay are opposites, there is a special understanding, a special communication between them.

The connection is multifaceted. First, beyond the obvious relationship of hostess and guest, there is the subtler link between model and painter. As she sits knitting and playing with her child, Mrs. Ramsay is aware, if only sporadically, that Lily is painting her, and reminds herself that "she was supposed to be keeping her head as much in the same position as possible for Lily's picture" (29). This connection between subject and painter – as between character and writer – exists even though Mrs. Ramsay neither sees the finished work nor even evinces an interest in the canvas-in-progress. However, Mrs. Ramsay is not simply a convenient model, but provides a subject for Lily's painting in a larger sense: Mrs. Ramsay and James do not exactly "sit" for her, but continue their normal domestic routine, symbolically framed

by the drawing-room window. It is the whole situation that Lily paints, including the bond between mother and son, and their physical and emotional relationship to the house. Lily is painting domesticity. Attempting to explain to William Bankes, who is expecting something like a portrait or a landscape, why, in her painting, Mrs. Ramsay and James have become a purple triangle, Lily tells him that it is not their “likeness” she is trying to capture:

But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in his sense. There were other senses too in which one might reverence them. By a shadow here and a light there, for instance. Her tribute took that form if, as she vaguely supposed, a picture must be a tribute. (81)

Mrs. Ramsay provides Lily with inspiration on more than one level. Thus, Lily’s work is nourished by Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner table: the *actual* table, in contrast to the abstract notion of a kitchen table that Andrew Ramsay uses to explain Mr. Ramsay’s philosophy. For Lily, a lot happens at dinner. Earlier, we noted the bond of wordless communication between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay during the meal. However, it is not only the bond with her hostess, but the whole ambience of Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner which inspires Lily. Even the dinner table itself, as a physical object, a background and a reference point, helps her to define herself as a painter and to clarify her work:

She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work. In a flash she saw her picture, and thought, Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space. That’s what I shall do. That’s what has been puzzling me. She took up the salt cellar and put it down again on a flower in pattern in the table-cloth, so as to remind herself to move the tree. (128)

It is almost as if the painting, somehow inspired by dining, becomes an after-dinner story. Indeed, since the painting is not, in fact, finished until the last section of the novel, the remainder of the novel is that after-dinner story.

Perhaps Lily inspires Mrs. Ramsay as well. Although she thinks that “one could not take her painting very seriously” (29), Mrs. Ramsay appreciates Lily’s independence: “There was in Lily a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would, she feared” (157). Despite her urge to pair people up, Mrs. Ramsay appreciates the quality in Lily that resists pairing: “she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it” (29). Of the two young women guests in the first section, Minta, because of her engagement, initially seems likely to continue Mrs. Ramsay’s sort of life; the fact that her married name – Rayley – will be so similar to Mrs. Ramsay’s reinforces this sense of affinity. But Lily too is her heir, in what is perhaps a more important sense. Comparing her to the radiant, newly-paired Minta, Mrs. Ramsay thinks that “at forty Lily will be the better” (157).

The contrast between Minta and Lily echoes that between two of the Ramsay daughters, Prue and Cam. In the first section of the novel, Prue, on her way to marriage and a family, is clearly very like her mother. But Prue dies in childbirth, an event which suggests, perhaps, the demise of the traditional domesticity that Mrs. Ramsay lived, and which leaves Cam, the second-youngest child, at first described as “wild and fierce” (36), as the most important Ramsay daughter in the last section of the novel. Eating sandwiches with her brother and father, and imagining herself to be

embarked on a great adventure, Cam is the only female in the boat on the way to the lighthouse, and much of that trip is seen from her viewpoint. She not only provides one of the major narrative perspectives on the end of the novel, but participates, for her mother, in the trip to the lighthouse and the closure that it brings about.

Our first view of Lily is from Mrs. Ramsay's perspective, as she watches Lily painting herself and James. Unlike Mr. Ramsay – who, according to his nearsighted wife, “never looked at things” (108), despite his “long-sighted eyes” (307) – the two women are observers, in this scene of each other. It is perhaps because Lily is an observer that she is an artist, and vice-versa. She is particularly keenly aware of people, their relationships and interactions, and especially of love and marriage – states she expects never to experience herself. Thus, at dinner, a profound awareness of the simplicity, complexity and ambiguity of love descends upon her, as she watches the Ramsays and the soon-to-be Rayleys. Silently observing that “there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than this; yet it is also beautiful and necessary,” she returns her attention to the table, listening “again to what they were saying in case they should throw any light upon the question of love.” In an amusing juxtaposition, Lily returns from her ruminations to Bankes's comments on “that liquid the English call coffee” (155), part of his discussion with Mrs. Ramsay about the horrors of English cooking. The everyday banality of coffee, and bad coffee at that – presented as the response to her thoughts about love – punctures Lily's seriousness, but also suggests the tedium of shared meals that is, as well, a part of love.

Lily is the Kezia of this novel, but she is already an artist. We do not know for

certain that she is a better or more successful artist than Edna Pontellier, except that both she, herself, and the novel take her work more seriously. Lily explicitly sees her painting as an alternative to a traditional marriage and family life. Yet the one canvas that we see her painting is inspired by Mrs. Ramsay and seems to encompass all of domesticity. Painting is, of course, very different from writing, yet in *To the Lighthouse*, Lily represents the artist in general, as if she is both Virginia, the writer, and Vanessa, the painter. The two arts are linked by Charles Tansley's reported comment, "Women can't write, women can't paint" (130). Lily proves him wrong on both counts; in a very real sense, she is painting the novel. Her painting, begun in the first section of the novel, is finished, with the novel, on the last page:

She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (310)

If, together, the painting and the plan to visit the lighthouse form the starting inspiration of the novel, the line in the centre is the finishing stroke of the painting and, the island having been reached almost simultaneously, the last line of the novel as well. Together, the two achievements complete the "vision" of the novel, in the sense both of finishing it and of making it whole. In a striking conflation of media, the painting is about the novel, and the novel is about the painting; the time it takes for the painting to be finished comprises the novel, and the subject of the painting is the subject of the novel. The painting is never fully described – we know only that it includes a purple triangular shape and a line in the centre – yet the novel unveils the



painting to us by preserving its vision in writing.

Lily's art emerges from a domestic life which perhaps cannot exist in more modern times and in modern marriages like Minta's and Paul's. Although, or perhaps because she herself does not have children, Lily is the inheritor, and charged with preserving this domestic vision through art; perhaps one must be an outsider to that life to do so. As she tells Mr. Bankes, Lily cannot and does not wish to reproduce Mrs. Ramsay and James on her canvas, but, rather, tries to capture the essence of her subject: "rapture" (74), perhaps, which she sees Mrs. Ramsay inspiring in others; or a sense of "[h]ow life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" (73); or her own frustration at the impossibility of being one with Mrs. Ramsay and gaining access to her apparent source of wisdom, "for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired . . . nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge . . ." (79).

Unlike Mr. Ramsay, who desperately wants to be recognized during his lifetime and to have his philosophy endure after his death, Lily is aware that her achievement may be short-lived: "It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again" (309-10). For her, the act of creation itself is important. Just as the title of the novel emphasizes the intention to go to the lighthouse rather than the actual attainment of that goal, the novel is also more about the process of Lily's painting than the painting

itself as an object or a commodity. In a sense, Lily's work is parallel to that of Mrs. Ramsay, for the process of her painting recollects the futility of preparing a dinner, which is meant to disappear. However, if the latter effort, by definition, always results in a transitory creation, the cook in *Babette's Feast* is still presented as an artist as great as any, and in the painting/novel *To the Lighthouse*, the artistry of the cook/wife/mother is also preserved and celebrated.

If the tenuous nature of art that Lily accepts reflects both the fragility of human life and the ephemeral satisfaction of domestic work, it is, nevertheless, only through art that a vision or a life can be understood and have even a chance of being preserved. However, there is a sense in which domestic work also seems to transcend time. Housework is eternal not only in that it may seem never-ending to a particular woman, but also because it is a constant of human experience and existence. This is emphasized in Part II of *To the Lighthouse*, where it is not Mr. Ramsay's philosophy about the meaning of a table, but Mrs. McNab's work that holds both the house and the novel together through time, death and war. Mrs. Ramsay, her short-sightedness suggesting an attention to detail which forms a contrast to her husband's focus on the horizon, represents not so much that trivial work – this belongs to another class – but the timelessness of the domestic realm in a general sense. Thus, even after her death, Mrs. Ramsay continues to inspire Lily's painting, and the novel continues to be about her. According to Spivak's "grammatical allegory," if Mrs. Ramsay is the subject of the first section of the novel, in the third section "the painting predicates her" (30).

The fact that it is Lily and Cam, rather than Minta and Prue, who become the

more important female characters in “The Lighthouse,” the third part of the novel, indicates a change in the role of women. Yet the “wedge of darkness” (96) with which Mrs. Ramsay identifies herself near the beginning of the novel is still present at the end:

Suddenly the window at which [Lily] was looking was whitened by some light stuff behind it. At last then somebody had come into the drawing-room; somebody was sitting in the chair. . . . [W]hoever it was had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. (299)

Ultimately, of course, the understanding that the modern woman artist may have for Mrs. Ramsay does not resolve the predicaments of modernity suffered by women like Edna Pontellier or Linda Burnell. And, indeed, Lily’s artistic vision is not always clear; in fact, she finishes her painting in a leap of faith, “as if she saw it clear for a second,” although in fact her sight is “blurred.” Still, her offering is a step. At least through the language of art, a reconciliation of the two views of the mother is possible. Woolf certainly rejects the Victorian notion of the domestic realm as a necessary cornerstone of official bourgeois culture and of the British Empire; yet, through Lily, she suggests a new validation of the work of the mother and portrays another dimension of women’s work that might potentially even be subversive of these institutions. Serving the meal is affirmed as something female, but in a different and admirable way: a form of communication, of expression, it proposes a new artistic language, and, indeed, is posited as a crucial component of female art.

*To the Lighthouse* is not exactly a meal in itself in the sense that other works may be. Yet, insofar as her creative work emerges from the dinner of “The Window”

and is inspired by the entire domestic realm which that dinner represents, Lily transforms the meal into a painting, which also becomes, in effect, the novel. In *To the Lighthouse*, the unspoken language emanating from the dinner table is translated into the language of art; the reader thus shares in both the pleasure of eating and the pleasure of reading. At the end of the novel, the reader has been satisfied, not only by the meal which occurred ten years earlier, but by the recuperation and perpetuation of the vision of that meal in Lily's painting. Completed almost synchronously with the Ramsays' boat reaching the island where the lighthouse stands, the painting seems to reconcile male and female, past and future, permanence and transiency, as well as art and cooking. *To the Lighthouse*, then, represents Lily's version of the meal in two ways: both in celebrating and perpetuating that vision of Mrs. Ramsay defined by the dinner party of "The Window," and in suggesting what Lily can do instead of preparing a literal meal. Contrary to Charles Tansley's view, creating a work of art is shown to be another kind of women's work.

**Conclusion**

**“A Poem on the Milk Bill”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Mina Loy, “The Effectual Marriage” (39).

Our reading of literature in this study has occurred at the conjunction of an understanding of food's power and imaginative resonance and the more prosaic perspective on food as part of women's domestic work. Virginia Woolf's notion of the "room of one's own" became a sort of rallying cry in the twentieth century for several generations of women. However, women have always had a room of their own: the kitchen or the dining room. In, for instance, *The Age of Innocence*, "Prelude" and *To the Lighthouse*, we find some women rather comfortably inhabiting these rooms, women whom the work of fiction completely identifies with their domestic role as wife, mother, and/or hostess, women to whom, in fact, the author gives no first name. When Leopold Bloom cooks a kidney for his breakfast and makes tea and toast for his wife Molly in *Ulysses*, it is striking, unusual; for women, however, even across class lines, some aspect of getting the meal on the table is generally a major daily preoccupation, so much assumed, perhaps, that earlier generations of women writers would rarely have included details of breakfast in their fiction. However, in this study we have seen modernist women writers who not only recognize this domestic labour in their own literary work, but give it a central place. Their fiction explores women's attempts to move out of the kitchen and dining room into the rest of the house at the same time as it grapples with the power of these rooms: the power to impose and ratify conservative social values, to bind and hold back individual women; but a power also characterized by generosity, openness, sociability, and, most significantly, a strong creative force. In the modernist period, then, food and the rituals surrounding food have a special place for women writers, and, arguably, for women readers as well.

We began this study with the assumption that food – and particularly the activities surrounding the preparation, serving and eating of food – communicates a great deal; that, in fact, the cluster of customs, habits and rituals surrounding meals can be considered a sort of text or language. In this sense, food is particularly appropriate as a component of literature, and the study of food appropriate as a way of approaching literature. Certainly, food has an intrinsic biological meaning as the basis of our physical existence; however, it has a social meaning as well: the biological needs of individual human beings are at the basis of the profoundly social experience of dinner. Moreover, entire cultural and social systems are reflected in the organization, preparation, and consumption of food. It is this fusion of basic necessity and profound cultural resonance that gives meals their power. As Chapter 1 notes, it is not just the raw and the cooked that are juxtaposed when we talk about food; food marks the conjunction of the body and the imagination, the physical and the spiritual, desire and intellect, loneliness and a sense of belonging, the individual and the social. When food is prepared, changes occur: the transformation of raw materials into a meal, the transformation of individuals into a community of the table, occasionally the transformation of ordinary, everyday reality into something extraordinary. Woolf shows us this process particularly clearly in *To the Lighthouse*, but also in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where, even though the meal is secondary, the party gains sustenance from, indeed thrives on, the transitory but festive communal spirit which the proffering of food creates. On the other hand, even this basic sense of the community of the meal does not always exist. In Mansfield's stories, the appeal of

commensality is sometimes resisted; at other times it is just not there. Yet the notion of sociability is always hovering around the dinner table, even as a phantom in the absence of the real thing.

As we have seen, especially in *To the Lighthouse*, but in other works as well, these transformations can occur both around the dinner table and through art. In either case, a change is possible, not only in the perception, but in the experience of reality. The transformatory, myth-making aspect of food, then, gives it an important status in literature; one could even argue that the possibility of literature arises from the meal. Our relationship to the writer is like the relationship to the cook, to the mother. We are familiar from earliest childhood with food as a text of our lives; biologically, psychologically, culturally, imaginatively, we already know how to “read” food. Thus we are prepared for food as both a metaphor and the subject of a literary text.

If both the biological nature and the transformatory power of eating remain more or less constant through history, the particular habits surrounding meals are linked to social and historical change. At the beginning of the twentieth century, dining customs were at the crux of changes which included perceptible shifts in gender roles, new attitudes toward the home, the loss of the past and its gradual replacement by a brand new world of consumerism and advertising, and, as well, new responses of literature to everyday life. For the writers discussed in this study, the dinner is not just the metaphorical centre of their work; it is, rather, what change is about for them, and it defines them as writers and as women. If magazine articles,



cookbooks, and etiquette manuals attest to modern anxiety about change in the home – while ostensibly dishing out recipes to allay it – modernist women writers both depict and express modern uneasiness around their own fictional dining room tables. For instance, disquiet about social change is reflected in an obviously conservative and defensive set of manners and rituals surrounding meals and social events in Edith Wharton's novels, just as it is in the supposedly improved and enthusiastically modern approaches to cooking and housekeeping, which were, in many ways, fundamentally conservative as well.

Thus, for women writers, the link between the modern and "Modernism" included a whole set of issues that were far less immediately relevant for their *confrères*. And, even for those women who welcomed change, there was some confusion and even ambivalence, and not just, as DeKoven suggests, because of fear of "that power . . . lodged in male dominance itself or in its enforcer, female self-repression" ("Gendered Doubleness" 35). In fact, the possibility of liberation from the kitchen was to some degree illusory, or at least less than straightforward: Katherine Mansfield's bohemian disregard for bourgeois standards, for instance, did not free her from the obligation to get tea ready. Moreover, the cost of modernity was a loss of both traditional power and traditional security. Custom and ritual help to maintain a sense of oneself and of one's place in the world. Even if ritual may become either oppressive or too mannered to be meaningful, it sets out key parameters and guidelines of behaviour that smooth social interaction; and custom, while one may chafe at it, gives a basis for direction and decisions. Moreover, since women often

control the everyday application of custom, it can be a source of power for them. Thus, as we note in some of Mansfield's stories, the loss of custom and ritual is a significant loss for women. Yet, in the early twentieth century, there was no going back. As various writers of the time record, women's traditional role within the family and the home – caught up in a process of far-reaching social change – was not only becoming untenable, but was, in fact, disappearing. Thus, when Lily Briscoe returns to Scotland at the end of *To the Lighthouse*, she feels alone, at first, and cast adrift; everything seems “chaotic . . . unreal” (219) without Mrs. Ramsay's benignly controlling presence. But the point is that even if Lily or Nancy or Cam *wanted* to fill Mrs. Ramsay's role, none of them knows how. As a result, the sandwiches are not ready and no one knows what to send to the lighthouse. Near the end of the ten-year period of “Time Passes,” Mrs. McNab complains that “[a]ll of a sudden . . . one of the young ladies wrote: would she get this done; would she get that done; all in a hurry” (209). Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, who, because she understood Mrs. McNab's work, would never have written in this way, the letter-writer clearly does not know what is involved in these domestic demands.

In works of literature of the period, there are no easy recipes, no step-by-step instructions on how to deal with change. Everyday life is far more complicated than formulae for proper behaviour at table or colour-coded meals. However, as we have seen, fictional dinners at least raise the problems and sometimes even suggest possibilities for synthesizing the old and the new. Fictional perspectives on women as either hostesses or guests or both set out the larger dilemmas for women in general

and for the woman artist in particular. If some works of fiction specifically take up the woman artist's relationship to dinner, in a larger sense, this relationship is always at issue, for, whether or not an artist-character figures in the piece of fiction, all the writers considered here are exploring their own stance in relation to the dining room. Thus, for instance, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's party and Woolf's novel are intertwined as companion offerings to the reader, to the guest.

It is worth noting that hunger – the lack or absence of a meal – may also be a potent metaphor associated with art or the artist. In various works of literature, the inability or refusal to eat has been presented as part of a general existential *Angst*; moreover, as we suggested earlier, a denial of the body may be read as homage to a particular notion of uncompromised artistic purity. Although some of Mansfield's stories certainly depict the hunger of poverty and homelessness, or suggest a sense of anorexia and a general attitude of detachment from the dinner table, the metaphor of hunger may be particularly important in the fiction of male writers, who are cut off from the tradition of serving food, and whose work, like that of Mr. Ramsay, may assume a disjunction between everyday reality and the creative life of the mind. This hypothesis raises larger questions for another study to explore; however, we can note that the starving writer is a literary cliché, and the examples that come immediately to mind are from books by male writers. Thus, Paul Auster describes the dilemma of the nameless protagonist in Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel, *Hunger*: "The process is inescapable: he must eat in order to write. But if he does not write, he will not eat. And if he cannot eat, he cannot write. He cannot write" (9). Kafka takes the

metaphor a long step farther. His “hunger artist,” in raising starvation to an art, redefines himself as a totally spiritual and/or intellectual being and pushes the limits of art in a direction which denies the body. At first it seems possible for him to create art at a level which is, by its very definition, above basic needs; ultimately, however, he does not rise above the ordinary, but in fact becomes less than human. Ending his career and his life in a menagerie, he is even lower than a side-show freak; ironically, by rejecting his physical nature, he becomes an animal.

Given the links we have posited between the work of the artist and domestic labour, our study could lead us to agree with Virginia Blum that “[a]rt is labor, rooted in a process of material production, rooted in the body of the artist which art plunders for the very metaphors that presumably exceed corporal exigencies” (71). Like the meal placed on the table, a piece of fiction is finally the creation of a physical person moving her hand across a piece of paper, her fingers on a keyboard. Although Kafka’s artist plunders – indeed destroys – his body for his art, it is in the service of denying that the artist is necessarily grounded in the physical body and in everyday life. In the work of the women writers considered in this study, on the other hand, an active engagement with food – or, at least, a profound and perhaps intuitive understanding of that engagement – is crucial: the role of cook or hostess goes beyond metaphoric importance to become, in fact, a necessary foundation for writing. A link with art is suggested in the willingness of the cook to immerse herself in the physical, to grapple with the material world in order to create something which is ephemeral yet significant, and, possibly, of lasting importance.

Homans notes that the phrase “it was finished” is used only twice in *To the Lighthouse*: when Lily Briscoe completes her painting and when Mrs. McNab finishes cleaning the house (*Critical Essays* 6), a clear and deliberate link between domestic work and art. Yet there are limits to this connection. We have referred at various points in this study to serving the meal as one kind of domestic work; however, in some ways, it is quite different from other household chores. It is the only task that ultimately includes the whole family; it is nourishing, creative, and social. Only cooking becomes a metaphor for art; we can see the book as a dinner, but certainly not as a scrubbed floor. Like other women’s work, the process of cooking is not a finite and self-contained task. Indeed Mrs. Ramsay keeps on working once her dinner is on the table, and the dinner itself does not end definitively, but rather peters out slowly: “And directly she went a sort of disintegration set in; they wavered about, went different ways. . .” (168). However, if Mrs. Ramsay’s work has no clear end, it is not only because there is always another meal to put on the table, but also because the dinner continues to resonate across the years. In this fictional portrayal of serving dinner, then, we can appreciate the exhausting toil it demands, yet, because of the potentially multi-leveled creativity of the table, cooking becomes more than just a tedious task, and does not leave us with a sense of being bogged down in the boredom of the domestic. Throughout this study we have seen women struggling against domesticity; yet, as Chapter 6 argues, an appreciation of the creativity which resonates from the dining room and kitchen can liberate the fictional character, the writer and the reader to claim art as women’s domain, and in so doing, both to offer and to accept the book

as a meal. The kitchen table is not merely a figment of the philosopher's mind, but as the woman writer knows, it exists, and, is, in fact, central, even when no one is there to perceive it. And always, the table suggests that people will sit around it, just as dinner implies that someone will eat, and a book that someone will read.

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