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REVELLING IN FOOD:

An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's debut novel *The Edible Woman* follows protagonist Marian MacAlpin's life over the span of a few months, through her engagement to, and subsequent breakup from, Peter Wollander. There are references to food on almost every page, and the relationship between women and food in particular has been extensively analysed by feminist critics of the novel. Typically, this feminist criticism has interpreted the protagonist's rejection of food, particularly meat and other animal products, as symptomatic of anorexia. However, this criticism has assumed a *dominant discourse of meat* and failed to see the positive aspects of Marian's increasingly vegetarian diet. Furthermore, by focusing either on Marian's rejection of food or *the edible woman cake*, other more subtle food references are overlooked. This essay explores those seemingly insignificant mentions in order to better understand Marian's emotional state and ideals, and the ideals of the time in which the novel is set. In addition to this, it examines Marian's rejection of food from an ecofeminist perspective, with the aim of revealing a positive interpretation.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, feminism, ecofeminism, vegetarianism, eating habits, body, animals

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Introduction

In the introduction to *The CanLit Foodbook* celebrated Canadian author Margaret Atwood argues that “authors could be divided into two groups: those that mention food, indeed revel in it, and those that never give it a second thought” (CanLit 51). Atwood is a prolific writer, active in many different genres and forms, and is certainly an author who *revels* in food. Her debut novel, *The Edible Woman*, was published in 1969, some four years after it was written. It follows protagonist Marian MacAlpin as she becomes engaged, and subsequently breaks off the engagement, to Peter Wollander. One thing that no reader of this novel can miss is the sheer volume of food references: breakfast, lunch and dinner are described in detail, fussy eating habits are noticed, and pregnant stomachs are seen as watermelons and pumpkins. Additionally, two of the main events of the story revolve around food. In the second part of the novel Marian begins to reject food, especially animal products, and in the end of the novel she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and offers it to Peter.

Described as a protofeminist work the novel, and specifically the relationship between food and women, has been studied extensively from a feminist perspective. Some critics have labelled this issue *Atwood fatigue* and asked whether there are “still new avenues to be explored and new approaches to be implemented” (Galletly web). In particular, the two events outlined in the previous paragraph have been analysed comprehensively, with Marian’s rejection of food almost always interpreted as anorexia, perhaps the most common eating disorder. Jennifer Hobgood (2002) quotes psychologist Kim Chernin who claims that it is through food that “the principal way the problems of female being come to expression in women's lives” (web). Hobgood is quick to mention that “Marian doesn't starve herself to become thin-and isn't ‘starving herself’ at all in the ways our culture has come to think of anorexia in recent years as a conformation to media images of thinness” (web), a view that Sarah Sceats shares (98). Queer theorist Jill E. Anderson (2011) disagrees with this analysis and argues that Marian’s anorexia is caused by a desire to be thin; “a desire to straighten out her womanly curves and assume the shape of a boy” (web). However, Marian takes vitamin pills to stay healthy and does not lose weight; her rejection of food barely makes an impact on her body at all.

It is interesting to note that these analyses of Marian’s rejection of food, in particular animal products, have taken place within a “dominant discourse of meat” (Adams 98), which makes it difficult to see any positive aspects of Marian’s actions. Furthermore, this narrow focus has meant that the *bigger picture* has been somewhat overlooked. In this essay I explore

the presence and purpose of food in *The Edible Woman* as a whole, aiming to prove that the seemingly insignificant mentions reveal a great deal of information about Marian's emotional state and ideals, and the ideals of the time in which the novel is set. In addition to this I aim to argue for an alternative, ecofeminist interpretation of Marian's rejection of food; one that sees it as a positive ethical action. Ecofeminism, specifically cultural ecofeminism, aims to "challenge the 'ontological divide' between nature and people [since] 'Nature' has become separate from human experience" (Stephens 51). Therefore, "[t]he core concern of ecofeminism is to remind humanity that we are an integral part of the physical environment, of a larger system" (Stephens 18).

My approach centres on the close reading of the primary text, *The Edible Woman*. Sarah Sceats' *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* provides not only an analysis of *The Edible Woman* but useful examples of other food-centred close readings. Diane McGee's *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (2001) is similarly helpful, despite focusing on the eating habits of women in a different era. Essential information about ecofeminism comes from both early works and more recent developments, and Carol J. Adams' books on feminist-vegetarian theory contain essential ideas to the understanding of the problems with meat-eating. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) she explains the various ways in which eating animals act "as a mirror and representation of patriarchal values" (187).

In the first chapter I examine eating habits, and what this tells us about the characters and the society they live in. In the second chapter I explore the novel from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on the vegetarian aspect of Marian's rejection of food. Finally, in the third chapter I discuss the other ways in which food and the human body are linked in the novel, adding to the *bigger picture*. My research will contribute to the ongoing discussion of Atwood's influential debut work, and of the role of food in works of fiction. Moreover, this research will contribute to the wider interdisciplinary discussion of food, and how it can give a greater understanding of culture and society.

1. Eating Habits

The study of food is "a major topic of interest in the social sciences [...] not only because it can be approached in so many different ways but also because it resonates in so many parts of our lives" (McGee 12). In *Writing the Meal* McGee explores the importance of food in early twentieth century women's writing. Although she focuses on dinner and a different era her

research is highly applicable to the presence and purpose of food in *The Edible Woman*. While the texts that McGee studies (by Woolf, Mansfield and Wharton among others) indicate “social change, cultural fragmentation, and personal anxiety” at the turn of the twentieth century (8) these same issues are raised in Atwood’s debut work some decades later.

To begin with, McGee states that “[o]n a very basic level, it makes sense that meals should be important in literature; food is as fundamental to human beings as to any other living organism” (4). As women have traditionally occupied domestic roles it is not unexpected that women writers often include food to a high degree, with McGee noting that “meals have particular resonance in the writing of women” (3). In this first chapter I examine the eating habits found in the novel in order to uncover information about the characters and the society they live in. This close reading will also inform the following chapter which focuses on Marian’s departure from ‘normal’ eating habits. The novel is divided into three parts and this chapter is divided in the same way.

Part One

In the second line of *The Edible Women*, Marian goes to the kitchen to prepare breakfast, an activity described in more detail a few pages later: “I had to skip the egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which I knew would leave me hungry long before lunchtime” (4). She arrives at work, where she is a market researcher for a company that handles food and body-related products, and is singled out to taste-test canned rice pudding, which she undertakes happily, reminding herself that she “could use the extra breakfast” (11). By the end of the day Marian is “hungry again. I had been eating in bits and pieces all day and I had been counting on something nourishing and substantial” (24), and is therefore disappointed when her boyfriend cancels their dinner arrangements (24). Already the reader is aware of Marian’s preoccupation with food and her constant hunger, something that she seems unable to satisfy. McGee explores the link between a character’s appetite and their spiritual or psychological well-being, claiming that “[t]he 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” (87). This idea will be explored further as we witness how Marian’s attitude to food changes as events in her life cause her to question the direction that her life is taking. Marian instead eats dinner at the home of her pregnant friend Clara, whose husband Joe prepares a meal consisting of “wizened meat balls and noodles from a noodle mix, with lettuce” (35). When Marian discusses the meal with her

housemate Ainsley later that evening she compliments Joe's cooking, but Ainsley is disgusted by his domestic role: "Think how confused their [children's] mother-image and father-image will be" (42). This remark could easily be overlooked but it shows both the changing gender roles and the resistance to them.

On day two of the novel Marian wakes for work and prepares breakfast, this time a boiled egg, toast, tomato juice and two cups of coffee (47). Her task for the day is to interview men about a brand of beer. She meets Duncan, a twenty-six year old student, and her thoughts go directly to sustenance when describing him: "He didn't look as though he ever drank anything but water, with the crust of bread they tossed him as he lay chained in the dungeon" (54). Her observation could be due to her general preoccupation with food or the fact that she is doing a beer survey or both; in any case it is clear that she sees Duncan as very different to herself, and very different to her stereotypically masculine boyfriend. When her workday is over she returns home before seeing Peter, explaining that they usually "went out for dinner, but when we didn't the pattern was that I would walk over to Peter's and get something to eat on the way" (64). At Peter's apartment Marian prepares "frozen peas and smoked meat, the kind you boil for three minutes in plastic packages" (73) as once again, "Peter had decided against going out for dinner" (73). This reveals that as a woman Marian is expected to purchase and prepare food, despite the meal taking place at the man's home. At one point during the meal Peter pushes his plate away and asks, "Why can't you ever *cook* anything?" (73). Marian is hurt by this question as she has been refraining from cooking at Peter's apartment so that he wouldn't feel 'threatened'. Instead Peter is disappointed by her lack of domestic skills which in turn upsets Marian. They go for drinks with Len, a friend of Marian's, and are joined by Ainsley and the evening ends with a dramatic climax in which Peter proposes to Marian. The next day Marian wakes feeling terrible but her thoughts still go directly to breakfast. This time however, the reader is left unsure as to whether she consumes anything other than tomato juice. She heads to the laundromat and once there sees Duncan whom she kisses passionately; an unexpected action for the newly-engaged and usually controlled protagonist.

Part Two

Marian and her colleagues, the *office virgins*, go to a nearby restaurant for lunch. Her colleagues order food: Millie chooses a steak-and-kidney pie "a good substantial lunch"; Emmy chooses a salad with cottage cheese; Lucy "fussed and fretted and changed her mind several times and finally asked for an omelette". Marian surprises herself: "She had been

dying to go for lunch, she had been starving, and now she wasn't even hungry" (135). She decides on a cheese sandwich, and this loss of appetite is so out of character that it signals a changing point; something that is also emphasised by the sudden narrative switch from first to third-person.

Not long after this, Marian and Peter finally eat a 'proper' dinner together at a restaurant. Marian has become incredibly passive since their engagement, leaving all decision-making, including what to order from the menu, to her traditional fiancé: "His taste ran towards steak and roast beef: he did not care for peculiar things like sweetbreads, and he didn't like fish at all. Tonight they were having Filet Mignon" (180). The filet arrives at the table "oozing juicily" and Marian begins "slicing and chewing, conveying the food to her grateful stomach" (181). However, during the meal her mind wanders; from her relationship with Peter to advertisements for beer; from violent news stories to the food she is eating. Marian suddenly realises that her meal is "a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed" (185), and she cannot take another bite.

Over the next few weeks Marian's eating habits change drastically. She is unable to eat "anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre" (187). She is still able to eat fish, and meat-products that have been "ground up and re-shaped" such as hot-dogs and hamburgers (187). She becomes fearful that "this thing, this refusal of her mouth to eat, was malignant, that it would spread; that slowly the circle now dividing the non-devourable from the devourable would become smaller and smaller, that the objects available to her would be excluded one by one" (187). Soon, Marian must add eggs to her list of *non-devourables*.

The Christmas party at Marian's workplace is a food-centred occasion. Marian and her colleagues, the *ladies*, each provide a certain item, "more food than they needed really, salads and sandwiches and fancy breads and desserts and cookies and cakes" (200). Marian notes the pressure to eat a little of everything, "or else the contributor would feel slighted" (200), signalling that a woman's worth is linked to her domestic abilities. Despite her decreased appetite Marian contributes chocolate brownies which she has bought from a bakery and "switched to a different bag" (200), presumably so that her colleagues will think she has baked them herself. This shows that femininity is still very much linked to a domestic role; for example, the ability to create tasty food from raw ingredients. The party also shows one of the most important aspects of sharing food, that is, the idea that eating as a group both represents and creates togetherness (McGee 17).

In the next chapter we follow Marian at a supermarket: "She picked listlessly through the vegetables. She used to be fond of a good salad but now she had to eat so many of them she

was beginning to find them tiresome. She felt like a rabbit [...] How she longed to become again a carnivore, to gnaw on a good bone!" (215). We learn that she was unable to eat turkey at Christmas and that her "strange loss of appetite" had been explained by her family as overexcitement caused by her upcoming nuptials (215). Marian has now stopped eating all meat products, a significant action that will be examined in the second chapter of this essay.

Marian and Peter have been spending time with his friends, attending "cocktail parties with the more official ones and [...] dinners and evening get-togethers with the intimates" (217). McGee argues that "meals [...] are crucial [...] in establishing the identity of a culture and in defining social relationships" (10) and it is interesting that formal dinners with Peter and his friends are only introduced once his and Marian's relationship is defined clearly, as if only people who adhere to society's expectations are permitted to join such social occasions. Marian invites Clara and Joe to dinner so that she and Peter can spend time with **her** friends. The dinner is a source of anxiety for Marian who worries about the menu and whether her guests will get along. On the evening of the dinner party she is preparing a salad to serve with the casserole she made the night before when she begins thinking of the carrot she is grating, imagining it as a living being, and forcing her to add the vegetable to the list of foods she cannot consume (220). When the dinner is over Marian deems it a failure, and "[i]t bothered her that things hadn't gone well; it made her feel responsible" (222). This shows that although Marian is not comfortable with the role of hostess she still wants to be able to perform it well, as this is what is expected of her. As McGee states, "A woman may be judged as a woman based on her dinners; the way she handles her role either as a provider of nourishment or as a social convener" (5).

Marian's discomfort as a host is seen even more clearly when compared to Duncan's housemate Trevor, who invites them to dinner. Marian and Duncan are greeted at the door by Trevor who is "wearing an apron and [...] surrounded by a delicate aroma of spices" (239). He explains again that dinner will be "nothing fancy" (239) but Marian notices that there are crystal sherry glasses and a tasteful flower-decoration with real flowers in a silver dish. Unlike Marian, Trevor relishes his role as host: His "eyes were glittering and a round red spot of excitement had appeared in the centre of each of his flour-white cheeks" (242). Trevor takes both pleasure and pride in preparing an extravagant meal. He also shows the contrast between himself and Duncan, declaring "I think eating *well* is awfully important, why eat just to stay alive as most people do?" (243) which is the exact opposite of Duncan's statement to Marian some pages earlier, "I've always thought eating was a ridiculous activity anyway. I'd get out of it if I could, though you've got to do it to stay alive, they tell me" (237). The meal

comes to a dramatic end as Trevor walks back into the dining-room just in time to see Marian throwing meat to Duncan, and Fish, another housemate, upending the table. When Duncan walks Marian home he mentions that Trevor “insists on doing these things properly, though as he says, nobody appreciates his efforts much” (249). This is typical of the attitude towards women’s provision of food, and how it is taken for granted, and the fact that a man who takes on the preparation of food is still subjected to ungratefulness shows further evidence of changing gender roles.

In the next chapter we see that Marian’s rejection of food has become more extreme as “[h]er body had finally put its foot down on canned rice pudding” (253). She is also unable to swallow a mouthful of cake, a token gift to Peter to make up for not buying him anything on Valentine’s Day (258). At Peter’s party Marian begins drinking on an empty stomach and becomes intoxicated quickly, leaving halfway through to meet Duncan with whom she spends the night. They go for breakfast at a “grimy coffee-shop” (323) and Marian realizes that “[i]t had finally happened at last then. Her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside...” (325). She cannot even drink orange juice but Duncan eats his ham and eggs with gusto (325).

Later that day, Marian is inspired by her telephone conversation with Peter and, after buying ingredients, bakes and decorates a sponge cake. Her mood has changed perceptibly; “[S]he almost hummed with pleasure” (340) and “grinned into the mirror” (340). She moulds the cake into a “blank white body” (341), adding icing to form a clothed female body and face until the cake resembles “an elegant antique china figurine” (342). When Peter arrives for tea she brings the cake to him on a platter and declares, “You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you [...] But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you wanted all along isn’t it. I’ll get you a fork” (344). Peter exits quickly, leaving the cake untouched. Suddenly, Marian is “hungry. Extremely hungry” (344). She begins eating the cake, noticing that “[i]t seemed odd but most pleasant to be actually tasting and chewing and swallowing again” (344). She is interrupted by Ainsley who proclaims, “You’re rejecting your femininity!” (345) curiously echoing the exact words that Peter had said to Marian on the evening of his proposal (95). Part Two ends with Marian still eating; “She plunged her fork into the carcass, neatly severing the body from the head” (346). This *edible woman cake* has been analysed extensively by feminist critics, with some calling it a triumphant action on Marian’s part and others dismissing it as a disappointing return to normal (Anderson web).

Part Three

The third and final part of the novel is a mere six pages long. The narrative returns to first person and we see Marian cleaning her filthy apartment. Duncan comes over for tea and while discussing Marian's broken engagement, asks her if she has started eating again. Marian replies, "As a matter of fact I am [...] I had steak for lunch" (353). Marian remembers that she has some cake remaining and offers it to Duncan who devours it. Marian experiences "a peculiar sense of satisfaction" (354) watching Duncan eat, and despite his mechanical consumption he declares the cake delicious. With that, the novel ends.

Marian and Duncan are the only characters who are shown snacking and eating mindlessly. Duncan does not have a large appetite and finds eating tedious and yet he is seen snacking on chocolate bars and pumpkin seeds. He eats despite not being hungry, which symbolises his relationship with Marian. He does not seem to need or want her in the same way she does him, and yet he still *consumes* her, most obviously when he eats *the edible woman cake*. Marian, on the other hand, is constantly hungry in the beginning of the novel, and eats a large amount while not seeming to take pleasure from the food she is consuming. McGee suggests that this hunger shows a dissatisfaction with life: "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" (14). However, food can only fulfil Marian's desires up to a point, and when she becomes even less comfortable with the direction her life is taking she is no longer able to use food to satisfy herself and begins to reject it.

This informal way of eating changes later in the novel, and as Marian's social status develops she attends formal food-centred occasions with both Peter and Duncan. Of the dinner parties portrayed in the novel, Marian hosts just one, and Joe and Trevor the other two. This shows the increasingly fluid gender roles, and that men were becoming more comfortable in the kitchen. However, it is worth noting that it is the untypically male characters that do this rather than Peter, for example. In the end of the novel we see Marian's eating habits return to 'normal' after she consumes *the edible woman cake*; yet the main part of the novel is taken up by her rejection of food which I will explore in detail in the next chapter.

2. Marian's Rejection of Food – an Alternative Interpretation

In the first chapter of this essay Marian's eating habits were examined extensively; from a constant hunger and mindless snacking, to a rejection of food, to finding pleasure in the preparation and consumption of food. It is Marian's rejection of food that is her most significant eating habit and, as stated in the introduction, the general consensus among feminist critics of the novel is that it is symptomatic of anorexia. Sceats argues that Marian "cannot contemplate the physical realities, and responsibilities, of gestation and birth" (97), but even she acknowledges that Marian "has a peculiarly symbolic form of anorexia which, though it is inconvenient and manifests one or two of the usual symptoms, causes her no actual harm" (98). At the same time she is aware that "[i]t is clear that Marian's anorexia is not appearance-driven, for she is not interested in looking thin; her not eating is simply a refusal" (98).

Anorexia is an eating **disorder**, a term which in itself has negative connotations. Disorder means a disturbance, an irregularity, and it is hard to view Marian's rejection of food as anything other than negative when it is seen in this way. However, despite a number of critics raising the importance of the fact that Marian's rejection of food is almost entirely concentrated on animal products, they do not go further with their analysis, most likely due to the *dominant discourse of meat*, that is, the opinion that eating animals is an unquestionable action. For those who see the consumption of animal products as problematic, Marian's action is an enlightened one. Ecofeminism tries to break the hierarchies that lead to the oppression of living things (Plant 2), and since meat-eating oppresses animals in multiple ways a vegetarian diet is the ethical choice. Adams agrees with this view, declaring, "Autonomous, antipatriarchal being is clearly vegetarian" (Sexual Politics of Meat 188).

Of course, Marian's rejection of meat is not a decision in the typical sense of the word, being as it is body over mind, rather than a willing decision. Marian admits that "her motives eluded her; as all her motives tended to these days" (227), and while in this instance she is thinking of her relationship with Duncan, it shows that she is aware that there are motives for her actions, even if they are beyond her grasp. However, this does not mean it is any less relevant; in fact, Susan Griffin sees this as symptomatic of the society we live in, claiming, "We come to believe that we do not know what we know. We grow used to ignoring the evidence of our own experience, what we hear or see, what we feel in our own bodies" (7). When Marian confesses her body's refusal of certain foods to Duncan she is apologetic, "I'm sorry, I don't know why I do it, but I can't seem to help it" (236). Duncan replies with

characteristic insight, “You’re probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system; though it isn’t considered orthodox to begin with the digestive system” (236). Adams echoes this when she states that vegetarianism is “a rebellion against dominant culture” (*Sexual Politics of Meat* 167).

Marian remembers that “[s]he had never been a picky eater, she had been brought up to eat whatever was on the plate” (254), and that is why she cannot understand her body’s rejection of certain foods. By omitting food that she has until then found acceptable to eat Marian is questioning the traditions and norms prescribed by her family and society and rejecting those too. Of course, Marian is a reluctant rebel and is “irritated by her body’s decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled” (219). She even considers the vegetarian aspect of her food rejection, worrying that she is becoming “one of those cranks” (187). Her attitude to vegetable-based food, regarding it as rabbit food (215), also shows that Marian has accepted the male norm, the idea that one needs meat to survive, despite her body telling her otherwise. McGee sees this attitude as a social construct, “If hunger is a biological urge, appetite is a psychological and social construct” (14). In this case it is the appetite for animal products, especially meat, which has been determined by society.

Marian may not be able to articulate or even comprehend why her body is rejecting meat but her thoughts reveal that she is aware of animals’ plight: “What fiendishness went on in kitchens across the country, in the name of providing food” (190). As time continues, Marian finds that she is unable to eat anything that reminds her of living beings. She stops eating rice pudding, a food she has come to rely on, when she sees it “as a collection of small cocoons. Cocoons with miniature living creatures inside” (253). The Valentine’s Day cake she buys for Peter has a texture like “thousands of tiny lungs” (258). Even though these are not animal products, Marian’s rejection of them shows once again that she is questioning what she consumes.

The ecofeminist idea that women and animals share a subordinate status in patriarchal society (Plant 2) is illuminated by Marian’s identification with animals throughout the novel, specifically prey animals. Here, women and Marian especially, can be seen as food, or rather *food-to-be*, with Peter often characterised as the predator. Peter not only talks explicitly about hunting and killing a rabbit, he refers to the rabbit with a female pronoun. “I picked it up and Trigger said, ‘You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts’ll fall out.’ So I whipped out my knife [...]and slit the belly and

took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place” (80). This is not a story Marian has heard before and therefore Peter’s revelation to Len can be seen as a male bonding subject, which strengthens the idea that men can be violent and oppressive. Marian is deeply affected by Peter’s words and leaves the table for the bathroom where she sees the roll of toilet paper as a fellow prey animal, “crouched in there with me, helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end” (81). She returns to the table as time is called and once outside begins to run. She hears Peter say, “I’ll go get the car and head her off” (85), and at first it is like an exhilarating game but then it changes: “It was threatening that Peter had not given chase on foot but had enclosed himself in the armour of the car” (86). When the others have caught up with her they make their way to Len’s apartment. Marian decides to slide under the bed, seeking somewhere quieter and less humid (89): “I myself was underground, I had dug myself a private burrow” (90). This affirms her identification with prey animals, especially with the rabbit of Peter’s hunting story. Even the noise she makes when discovered is animalistic: “I gave a dusty squawk” (91). On the night of Peter’s party this feeling of being hunted returns, “She should never have worn red. It made her a perfect target” (307). She worries that “Peter might be tracing, following, stalking her [...] That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye had been there all the time [...] a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands” (308-9).

Not only does this predator/prey metaphor explain and also become the reason for her feelings toward Peter but it also helps to explain her attraction to Duncan, whom she sees as a kindred animal spirit. When she meets him she describes him as “cadaverously thin” (53); “I’ve always been influenced by appearances” (36), she admits. When she and Duncan become increasingly intimate she sees him as animal-like even more, “Beneath [his sweater] she could feel his spare body, the gaunt shape of a starved animal in time of famine” (211). He is described as “frog like” (318) and a turtle (319); small, harmless animals.

Marian may not be able to examine her motives for her rejection of meat but she is able to see how meat has become removed from animals, and an object to be consumed. When she first rejects meat, the steak at the restaurant with Peter, she thinks about the Moose Beer commercial and how the images of hunting and fishing are removed from reality, “Of course you didn’t want anything in an advertisement to be ugly or upsetting” (184). She also thinks about the clinical way meat is presented to consumers, “Most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarkets they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane, with name-labels and

price-labels stuck on it, and it was just like buying a jar of peanut-butter or a can of beans” (185).

Marian concludes that her body has taken an ethical stand and hopes that it is only temporary; “[I]t simply refused to eat anything that had once been, or [...] might still be living” (220). In addition to her concern for living beings, her rejection of certain foods can be seen as a result of her anxiety about the safety of animal products. She rejects eggs after hearing Len’s traumatic childhood story of a chick in one of his breakfast eggs (196). Hamburgers are off the menu since she hears about mouse hairs being present in one; pork since she hears about a lady contracting trichinosis; mutton and lamb after learning what the word *giddy* means; and hot dogs because “they could mash up any old thing and stick it in there” (219). This all contributes to a questioning of the norms of food; behaviour that is far from passive: “[I]n this culture, it requires less energy, less knowledge, less concern, less awareness, to continue eating animals than to stop. Yet it may be that the unexamined meal is not worth eating” (Neither Man nor Beast 38).

When Marian’s eating habits return to normal, Duncan once again makes an astute observation, “You’re back to so-called reality, you’re a consumer” (353), and this is one of the most aware lines in the novel, delivered by the one character that seems to be able to see Marian’s motives when she cannot even see them herself. Analysing Marian’s actions from an ecofeminist perspective exposes the thought-provoking idea that her rejection of food, most often seen as a negative action, is actually her most enlightened behaviour because abstaining from meat reduces the oppression of other living beings.

3. Food and the Body

In the introduction to *The CanLit Foodbook* Atwood states that “authors put [various foods] in because they reveal character [...] or provide metaphors or jumping-off points into the ineffable or the inferno” (CanLit 52). The preceding chapters have shown how Marian’s changing eating habits, her constant hunger, her rejection of food, and subsequent return to old eating habits, disclose so much more than they at first seem to. The view that vegetarianism, as well as being a positive ecofeminist choice, can be viewed as a rejection of patriarchy, has also been explored, with Adams stating, “Just as revulsion to meat-eating acts as trope for feelings about male dominance, vegetarianism in women’s novels and lives signals women’s independence” (Sexual Politics of Meat 166). This chapter examines and

analyses food symbolism as it relates to the human body in ways other than eating habits, in order to add to the novel's already plentiful layers.

Adams explains that the "patriarchal gaze sees not the fragmented flesh of dead animals but appetizing food" (Sexual Politics of Meat 187) and the same objectification can be and is applied to women. Marian's *edible woman cake* symbolises her realisation of this objectification and consumption of women, and is described by Sceats as "archetypally feminine and simultaneously subversive" (99). Marian fully expects Peter to devour it but he refuses to and she does instead, beginning with the feet and legs which makes the 'woman' unable to move. The leftover torso and head is eaten by a man, Duncan, as she watches with satisfaction. The status quo is restored, and this return to normal is actually a return to and acceptance of the patriarchal society in which she lives. Despite her rebellious actions, Marian is desperate to be normal, which includes adhering to the gender norms of the time and place. The ambiguous ending leaves the story open; and while it is possible that Marian has learnt and developed from her experiences it seems more likely that she has instead returned to the person she was in the beginning of the novel. After all, her rebellion seems to be a personal one, against marrying Peter, rather than against what he symbolises, which is male dominance.

Although the novel focuses on Marian's relationships with men, she has female friends and colleagues and her descriptions of them often employ food symbolism. On three separate occasions she notes her colleague Lucy's fussy eating habits, and each time this serves to illustrate Lucy's shallow and immature nature which contrasts greatly with Marian's sensible nature. Marian's attitudes to the female body are also food-based. She describes Clara as looking "like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (30), and later thinks of the "pumpkin-like growth" (138) of Clara's pregnant stomach. She sees pregnancy as natural but burdensome; something that weighs women down. At the office party she ponders the word *immature*: "It suggested an unripe ear of corn, and other things of a vegetable or fruitlike nature. You were green and then you ripened: became mature [...] In other words, fat" (205). Viewing the women she works with she thinks, "They were ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel; [...] attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine, hanging them in various stages of growth and decay" (205). Once again women are seen as objects for consumption, and in some cases ones that have passed their *best before date*.

Marian uses food similes in relation to her own body throughout the novel: "My skin felt stifled, as though I was enclosed in a layer of moist dough" (39); "My mind was at first as

empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe” (99). At the salon before Peter’s party Marian foreshadows *the edible woman cake* with this observation: “They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented” (261). She does not mean this in a complimentary way: “She didn’t enjoy feeling like a slab of flesh, an object” (262). Portraying women and female body parts as food once again symbolizes the objectification of women in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

In this essay the plentiful food references in *The Edible Woman* have been studied in detail. The eating habits of Marian and other characters have been analysed, her rejection of food has been examined from an ecofeminist perspective, and the symbolic link between food and the human body has been explored. Clearly, the presence of food in the novel tells us more than just what the characters eat, and the fact that critics interpret this in different ways only adds to the discussion. As Sceats states, Atwood’s writing is “a picture of how food, eating and appetite in her fiction relate to ‘how people order their societies’, on micro (individual, interpersonal) and macro (cultural) levels, not just in specific instances, but woven into an overall political analysis or vision” (94). Sceats also asserts that “Atwood brings food and eating (or not-eating) into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics, using food and its activities to problematize assumed gender roles” (95). Interestingly, previous feminist criticism and this ecofeminist reading agree that Marian’s rejection of food is a result of her unease with the traditional direction her life is heading in. However, this ecofeminist approach reveals that this action should actually be seen as a positive ethical one as it contributes to a harmonious relationship between human and non-human life, which will only benefit the planet and its inhabitants. It shows the strength of Atwood’s writing that she is able to give us so much information about society, about Marian’s emotional state, about the norms, and changing gender roles, with seemingly insignificant comments about food.

In response to critics who question whether there is anything new to be found in Atwood’s work (Galletly web) I would hope that this essay proves that there is, and that the possibilities for further research are extensive: Having witnessed that “[t]he choice, preparation and presentation of food signify a good deal more than merely the available or customary diet of a people” (McGee 11-12) it would be interesting to study other novels, perhaps by the same author, as food is a common motif in Atwood’s novels, or of a similar or

different time period. It may also be useful to think along the lines of intersectionality, and look at works focusing on characters from a variety of backgrounds. The ecofeminist approach has proved to uncover fascinating perspectives and further research could include the link between women and animals, women's bodies, and consumerism. I have found the vegetarian aspect of ecofeminist theory most interesting and one that has been unfairly overlooked. As Adams states, "Feminism and vegetarianism often appear together in novels but the meaning of this is left unexplored" (*Sexual Politics of Meat* 97). Furthermore, "[w]e cannot tell the truth about women's lives if we do not take seriously their dietary choices which [are] at odds with dominant culture" (*Sexual Politics of Meat* 184).

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