Every Body Eats: Food and the Embodiment of Power in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, 1968-1972

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Every Body Eats: Food and the Embodiment of Power

in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, 1968-1972

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A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2022
Abstract

This work investigates the use of food and eating as a manifestation of power in the earliest novels of Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, those published between 1968 and 1972 at the emergence of the second wave feminist movement. Specifically, this study questions the ways Atwood and Oates depict food’s impact on the physical body and what these encounters reveal about power relations. Within each novel, scenes of food and eating are depicted in ways that illustrate a body acting autonomously when the person lacks agency, and this study reveals the corporeal nature of each author’s work with food and eating that parallel second wave feminist empowerment and its focus on a woman’s agency over her body as a means of raising consciousness and symbolic revolt. Foucault’s theories on power relations and the body as a locus of power are central to this investigation, as is a phenomenological approach to reading the texts to maintain an explicit corporeal awareness while analyzing Atwood and Oates’ work. This study traces how food is used as a structural element to frame the narratives, and examines scenes of individuals, both men and women, binging, withholding, glorifying, and abusing food, in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1968) and *Surfacing* (1972), and Joyce Carole Oates’ *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), and *Wonderland* (1971). The investigation concludes that each encounter with food is unhealthy, malnourishing, and often nauseating, consistently manifesting in highly charged, emotional situations where an external sense of power is lacking or threatened; in an attempt to assume some sense of control, the body responds: a corporeal embodiment of power without conscious thought.
Author’s Biographical Sketch

Adina Florsheim is a graduate of The University of Texas at Austin where she studied English and Philosophy. She is a National Board-Certified teacher, and she teaches Advanced Placement English Literature and Film as Literature at Newport High School in Bellevue, Washington. Ms. Florsheim believes that literature is a bridge to understanding the human condition and building empathy; it is this belief that drives her enthusiasm for working with teenagers, encouraging them to tackle challenging texts and engaging them in meaningful literary discourse. Ms. Florsheim is also an avid cook who loves to feed her friends and family, and over the years, food has become her creative outlet of choice. This project, then, is a natural extension of her two deep, lifelong pursuits: literature and food.
Dedication

For Adam, Gabe, and Noam

You know what makes it taste so good, don’t you?

It’s the love.
A huge thank you to Linda Schlossberg for her ongoing enthusiasm, cheerleading, line-edits, suggestions, and all-around awesomeness. One could not hope for a more supportive or knowledgeable thesis director; I especially thank her for pointing me to just the right sources at just the right time. I appreciate Linda’s ongoing flexibility and willingness to meet with me even with my odd hours on the opposite coast, always providing useful feedback and pep talks as needed.

Thank you also goes to Ricky Martin for making the thesis proposal process an actual pleasure. His expertise in the social sciences opened up possibilities in my work that I had not fully recognized before our conversations. Also from CTP, thank you to Nikkee Porcaro for keeping me on my A-game in and out of class. And of course, Hilary Caplan (and Sebastian!) for being my accountability buddies when it mattered most.

My ongoing pursuit of great reads, accompanied by delicious meals and thought-provoking discussion, has been nourished for over twenty years by a fierce group of women: Allyson, Diana, Fran Holly, Kate, Liese, and Melanie. I thank each of them for their wisdom and love. And I am indebted to Bryona Golding and Mai Maki for our lunch discussing The French Lieutenant’s Woman that ignited the spark for this thesis.

I am most grateful for my adult children, Adam, Gabe, and Noam, who understand my love language and allow me to use it on them freely and happily by feeding them. And thank you to my dad, Jordan Ofseyer, who taught me academia is cool. Finally, I thank my incredibly patient and generous husband, Alan, for whom none of this would have been possible without his love, support, and confidence in me.
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Chapter I.

Introduction

If we do not eat, we do not live. Yet, food is infinitely more complicated than that. It nourishes, it sustains, it soothes, it excites, it disgusts, it lures, it teases, and it even controls. Certainly, there are other human mechanisms for achieving these same effects, but what if using food—literally feeding others— is the only means at one’s disposal to exert such influence? What kind of power does it hold? Consider the 1950’s and 1960’s housewife, those Betty Friedan identifies in *The Feminine Mystique* as suffering from the “problem that has no name,” in which the woman is living a cultural ideal, confined to the world of her home, existing to serve the needs of her husband and children, ultimately having no identity of her own (27). Here, the woman is associated with food; it may begin with a mother nursing her babies, but quickly expands to feeding them strained peas in a high chair, packing sandwiches in lunch boxes, making nutritious afterschool snacks, cooking weeknight dinners, meal planning, making grocery lists, baking birthday cakes, going to the market, clipping coupons, planning dinner parties, swapping new recipes with friends, watching *The French Chef* on TV, urging a son to eat his steak so he’ll be “big and strong” like Daddy, or giving a daughter a warning glance as she reaches for a second cookie. But if women are imagined in wholly untraditional ways, and their associations with food and family shift away from these expected moments, what might the fallout be? To a woman who wields no power outside of the home,
perhaps food becomes both a literal and metaphorical power source. Food, then, is never “just food.”

Societal reaction to the publication of Friedan’s book in 1963 was explosive, and out of it grew the second-wave feminist movement, gaining prominence in the United States first with the establishment of the National Organization for Women in 1966, with Friedan as one of its founders, and then the beginnings of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s (Warhol 233). Goals of these efforts were to promote equal rights, reproductive rights, women’s safety, consciousness-raising, and autonomy for women. While some of these notions may seem theoretical in their desire to change minds and attitudes, each of them, ultimately, involve a woman’s physical body—her corporeal self. Authors Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, both in their mid-twenties when they read *The Feminine Mystique*, were keenly aware of limitations society sought to place on women, yet each of these formidable iconoclasts would blaze her own literary trail and continues to do so to this day. Though neither Atwood nor Oates considered herself a “Women’s Libber” at the time, each woman self-identifies as a feminist in her own way (Sceats, Johnson). What is abundantly clear is that the heft and power of the corporeal nature of food in and on the body is revealed in each woman’s writing. To that end, the important questions I will investigate are: How do Atwood and Oates depict food, eating, and the physical body in their early novels, and what do these encounters disclose about power relations? If food is considered a “language” of woman, how do food and eating function as a dynamic language? In what ways do negative food associations operate in their work, and what techniques does each author use to depict this visceral effect?
This thesis explores the ways in which these authors use food to embody power in their early novels, those published from 1968-1972, years that correspond with the emergence of the women’s movement. Margaret Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman*, written in 1965 but not published until 1969, hinges on Marian McAlpin’s visceral reaction to certain foods and her body’s refusal to eat as the day of her wedding draws closer, while her next novel *Surfacing* (1972) relies on the biorhythms of food to create order in the day, as well as distinguishing human vs. animal consumption. Joyce Carol Oates’ novels, *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), and *Wonderland* (1971), all contain individuals with complicated relationships with food and one another, as well as nauseating accounts of characters’ binging, withholding, glorifying, and abusing food. These food encounters within the novels occur among both women and men, functioning as a “corporeal embodiment” of power (Fahs 387). That is, each author’s concerns with food and eating parallel second-wave feminism’s focus on a woman’s agency over her body as a means of raising consciousness and symbolic revolt; it encourages developing a personal relationship with one’s own body as a means of empowerment (Fahs 387). The term “corporeal embodiment” draws on the work of Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of corporeal feminism, in which one sees an emphasis on the physical body’s narrative abilities separate from the mind, as she asserts, “All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject’s corporeal surface. Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds” (Grosz vii). In the context of this thesis, the term “corporeal embodiment” is used to question the conventional mind/body duality, as well as underscoring how the body functions as an autonomous, concrete entity, becoming and affirming existence. This lens of corporeal
embodiment will be used to examine food and eating in Atwood and Oates’ texts, uncovering how the physical body manifests power dynamics between women and men. I want to advance the conversation by returning to the early novels of Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, women living and writing at the emergence of second wave feminism, to see how they use the language of food to leverage power within their narratives.

“Food and Power” is not a new subject. Mervyn Nicholson argues that in society, eating is the only thing a person must do for himself, and in power relationships, those in control of food control power (39). He goes on to explore the significance of food in a wide range of literature, using as his most powerful examples, Homer’s *Odyssey* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In each of these texts he demonstrates how food imagery can manifest itself subtly in different kinds of power relationships; in each, the act of eating becomes a symbol of force (Nicholson 43-46). Nicholson claims those with power over food wield power over others, and he goes on to argue that those that can control food also have the potential to control their own independence (48). One may theorize that as women writers of their time, Atwood and Oates use food in their writing because it is, according to *The Feminine Mystique*, a kind of power to which they already have access, and therefore are familiar with how to exercise it. Atwood and Oates’ publications from 1968 to 1972 represent a time when the notion of equal rights for women were newly energized with the rise of the second-wave feminist movement, so Sally Cline’s research on women and food reveals an essential central idea to my work: she finds “women who have scant material power in the public arena, and often restricted control within the private world, attempt to keep hold of it where it is most easily
available to them, through food transactions” (147, italics mine). Cline’s feminist perspective is revelatory, as she discusses the undercurrents around food as well as their political implications, focusing on the specific roles of women: shopping for food, cooking, eating, eating disorders, feeding partners and children, and the myriad of complex emotions associated with all these food-related activities. If what Nicholson contends is true, that “power over food = power over other people” (48), I argue that Atwood and Oates maneuver food and its corporeal impact on the body itself, not just the person, to negotiate a world in which “Women have access to food in a way they do not have access to power” (Cline 1).

Scholars have much to say on the issue of food and appetite in both Atwood and Oates’ fiction, though they generally consider it from a political angle, rather than a corporeal one. In her book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, Sarah Sceats examines how Atwood weaves eating and appetite into her writing, illustrating how society is ordered and indicating who holds power. She further argues that Atwood’s “politics of eating” is complicated in that she exposes a variety of political and cultural issues, often ambiguous. She makes an interesting case for how Atwood uses food and eating in *The Edible Woman* to both boldly criticize sexism and assert that women must take responsibility and not be complicit in their own oppression by being passive. Others, such as David Rutledge, provide extensive analyses of *Expensive People* and *Wonderland*, exploring how the over-consumption of food in Oates’ writing often overtakes characters’ identities and reflects societal overconsumption. He points out that Oates’ frequent negative food associations, including nausea and vomiting, as well as over-indulgence and self-starvation, reflects characters’ attempts to fulfill their individual
needs; however, he suggests that Oates uses the unhealthy relationships with food as a substitute to fill a “spiritual need” (20) or “deeper understanding of the self” (8). While Rutledge focuses much of his analysis on the “hollowness” of characters and their attempts to use food to fill this void, I contend much can be gauged by the relative visceral reactions of these characters in their bodies. It is here that Andrew Appelbaum’s theories on food’s “metaphysical identity” will add an interesting dimension to the discussion. In an analysis of a climactic scene of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, Appelbaum illustrates how physical nausea can trigger one to experience corporeal disgust, releasing metaphysical sensations not accessed before. Most compellingly, he suggests the body becomes a locus of “philosophical speculation” when the protagonist’s pallet confronts a “chalky Camembert” in the restaurant provoking “the Nausea” (Appelbaum 134). He goes on to explain Sartre’s theory that much of human self-awareness is located physically in the mouth, and therefore the experiences of disgust and nausea while eating tell one who they are, and who their being is. Appelbaum jests, “I vomit, therefore, I am” (135). The corporeal nature of the argument here is helpful in delving into explaining how food, in all its forms, can empower the body and function in power relationships. At its core, this is an incredibly interesting existential angle on how food interacts with the physical body. Atwood’s work, compared to Oates’, is not as extreme in its use of nauseating depictions of food, whereas Oates’ writing overflows with depictions of overindulging to the point of absurdity and nauseating scenes of regurgitation, so an examination of the most unnerving relationships with food will give voice to an unusual female perspective.
Negative food imagery as it relates to power is often associated with danger and death, intensifying the visceral nature of the relationship. Nicholson, in his essay “Food and Power,” references *Alice in Wonderland* and the moment Alice encounters the bottle marked “DRINK ME,” immediately associating it with poison and the power that food and drink hold. Nicholson contends, “food and death are dialectically related. Food makes you grow, food makes you live; the absence of food makes you die” (46). It is well documented that Joyce Carol Oates is highly influenced by *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a favorite book as a child, and therefore no coincidence she titled her novel *Wonderland* (Johnson). In it, Oates creates a character in Dr. Pedersen who uses food to wield power over his family; the story’s protagonist, Jesse, literally grows enormous in size like Alice, when adopted by Dr. Pedersen. At the same time, Hilda Pederson fears her father, Dr. Pedersen, wants to “press [her] into a ball and pop [her] into [his] mouth” (*Wonderland* 132). Hilda’s corporeal experience in the novel requires extensive close reading in light of Nicholson’s notion that being “eaten up” is the greatest fear one can have because it is as if one never existed at all—one’s “essence” is gone if one has been “swallowed” and there is nothing to show for it. Specifically, the concept of one’s existence is entirely abstract, but the idea of being eaten, or cannibalized, is quite tangible and scary—a concrete embodiment of fear as a means of wielding power. Similarly, in *Expensive People*, Richard Everett’s mother, Nada, tells “the story of an uncle or bizarre distant cousin [who] committed suicide by overeating” (25). We learn that the gluttonous behavior of Nada’s uncle foreshadows Richard’s eating behavior after Nada’s murder, reinforcing the theory that “food and death are dialectically related.” As a child, Richard inherently holds little power, yet he is the narrator of his own story. Thoroughly studying
several scenes of Richard’s visceral reactions to food and eating will help explain the dynamics of his complicated relationship with Nada.

While some scholars have focused more specifically on the use of food, eating, and appetite as a kind of “language,” a form of self-expression for women in a world of men, this thesis argues that Atwood and Oates, as female writers of their time, use experiences of food and eating in all physical bodies to leverage and negotiate power. In all the novels I am examining, food carries complex, often fraught meaning. Emma Parker argues, “Given the patriarchal nature of language and its inability to accommodate female experience, it is unsurprising that women choose an alternative, non-verbal form of communication” (358). Alejandra Moreno Alvarez similarly suggests that due to the patriarchal nature of language generally, there exists no actual women’s language, and therefore the only true language left to women is silence and the language of food (19). Alvarez argues Atwood creates her character’s refusal to eat in The Edible Woman as a representation of her confusion around her reality and inability to articulate, in language, her powerlessness within the system. Alvarez makes a compelling argument for how Marian’s body’s refusal to eat is her body’s own language, a woman’s language, that is wholly different from the one put forth by the patriarchy. Particularly important to me is the interaction of food and the body at the individual, corporeal level, and Sofia Sanchez-Grant’s work with “positive re-embodiment” examines the relationship between female appetite and her corporeal experience, whether eating is a conscious choice or not (90). She makes the point that for the protagonist of The Edible Woman who is unable to articulate her oppression, non-eating becomes her body’s physical language of resistance (Sanchez-Grant 87). As Sanchez-Grant and Alvarez look to women’s bodies to read
issues of power in Atwood’s texts, this thesis applies the notion of embodiment to both men and women in the novels of Atwood and Oates.

This work will examine how the body itself functions as a locus of power, and for this reason, Michel Foucault’s theories on power relations and the body will help to focus my work. In his extensive philosophical work, Foucault highlights “The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, rather than in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Foucault’s claim that power is produced “at every point” is central to how this thesis examines subtleties in power relations; importantly, his view provides a theoretical framework for determining the various ways that power may manifest itself, even in unlikely places. In Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism, Elizabeth Grosz discusses Foucault’s theory as it relates to the body explaining, “the body is the object, target, and instrument of power, the field of greatest investment for power’s operations, a stake in the struggle for power’s control over materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways, according to infinitely variable cultural dictates” (Grosz 146). Scéats and McWilliams have both considered Atwood’s work “close to being a Foucauldian view of power relations,” but have done so in a higher order of “identifying the complex politics underlying food and eating” (McWilliams 79). In an interview, Atwood once famously described politics as, “Everything that involves who gets to do what to whom… to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power” (Brans and Atwood). Where this work will diverge is at the corporeal, individual level, focusing
on the body as Foucault argues, as “the object, target, and instrument of power.” I examine the language of food and eating in distinct scenes of the text and analyze its impact on the body, and in turn, the balance of power between and within characters. Sanchez-Grant, like Alvarez emphasizes how women’s bodies and food they eat (or do not) serve as a vessel of exerting power; however, little attention has been paid to Oates’ novels in this regard. With passages from each of their novels, I will investigate examples of how Atwood and Oates “appropriate food as language” as a means of distinctive communication and a way to wield power (Parker 358).

To better position an investigation of embodiment within the text, one may turn to phenomenology, “the ways in which the world appears, or presents itself, to us in experience” (Simons 21). In “What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist,” Toril Moi applies Beauvoir’s phenomenological approach to understanding literature, explaining that Beauvoir “considers language a form of action” and this action “unveils truths in the world” (191). Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a primary influence on Beauvoir, goes further in explaining how the body perceives language, asserting, “Prior to being the indication of a concept, the word is first an event that grasps my body, and its hold upon my body circumscribes the zone of signification to which it refers” (244). Like the corporeal embodiment proposed by Breanne Fahs, Moi makes an interesting connection between this visceral, phenomenological view and that of second-wave feminist consciousness-raising groups whose purpose was to “encourage women to take an interest in their own experience” and “claim authority for them” (“Adventure of Reading” 130). The aim of this thesis is to read the language of food in the text with a keen eye toward its “grasp” on the body; as Beauvoir maintains, “if the body is not a
thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects” (Beauvoir Ch.1, italics in original). A phenomenological approach to language and reading, therefore, aligns with the goal of maintaining an explicit corporeal awareness while analyzing Atwood and Oates’ work, one that leads to revelations of bodily interactions with food and an understanding of how power is negotiated.

The primary texts for this thesis, Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, and Joyce Oates’ *Expensive People*, *them*, and *Wonderland* were selected because of the years they were published--during the second wave feminist movement: 1968-1972--and the nature of the authors, both young women early in their careers. Specifically, Atwood and Oates were among the few women widely published and recognized in a predominantly male field in North America, and against the odds, were two of the most prolific and well-received writers of the day. Notably, both authors conspicuously include scenes of eating and the language of food in their novels; however, they each do so in ways that variously use and abuse food, making them ripe for analysis. For example, Atwood’s early work tends to highlight a bodily rejection of food, with characters unable to eat or self-restricting, while it is commonplace in Oates’ novels to see consumption of food in exaggerated excess. Examining these two writers, therefore, provides the perfect fodder for discovering how female writers coming out of the second-wave period use food as a means of wielding power in their work.

Atwood and Oates, today both in their early eighties, continue to write prolifically, but society of the 1960s was not quite prepared for the literary force these two young women were set to unleash. As women in North America started fighting for equal rights and autonomy over their bodies, the balance of power subtly started to shift;
while this happened, Atwood and Oates took pen to paper. As I will demonstrate, in much the same manner women of their time brandished food as a means of control over their bodies and others, so too, do Atwood and Oates in their novels.
Chapter II.

Margaret Atwood: Let Them Eat Cake

Section I. Food as a Structural Element

Margaret Atwood’s conspicuous use of food in her early work appears in ways large and small, often functioning as a means of creating structure in the text and the world of her characters. *The Edible Woman* (1969), for example, shifts its narrative point of view between each of its three sections. Significantly, each distinct point of view coincides with the protagonist’s corporeal relationship with food. Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman*, is the story of Marian McAlpin, a young woman who works in market research studying consumer habits, lives with her roommate Ainsley, and dates a handsome, and a bit too perfect man, Peter. Once Marian accepts Peter’s marriage proposal, she is unable to eat meat, and gradually her body refuses most foods, even vegetables. In Part I, Marian narrates her own story in first person, then the narration shifts to third person in Part II once she becomes engaged to Peter, then back to first person in the very brief Part III once she breaks up with Peter. Within the opening scene of Part I she establishes her hearty appetite, “feeling more stolid that usual;” she bemoans dealing with her hungover roommate so “had to skip the egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which she knew would leave [her] hungry long before lunchtime” (3-4). Continuing, “[Marian] chewed through a piece of bread, while Ainsley watched her with nauseated silence” (4). From the outset of the novel, the effect of food both on the protagonist’s physical being, and the body of the work, is set in motion, and as Kim Chernin notes, “it is growing more and more apparent that both the body and the feelings of this woman have gained autonomy from her conscious intentions and that they
will continue to behave in an erratic manner until she acknowledges and integrates them” (*Obsession* 67). Before Marian even eats breakfast, her body tells her (and the reader) to keep food on top of their mind. At the end of Part I, the morning after Peter and Marian become engaged, she describes her mind as “empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of [her] skull like a cantaloupe and left [her] only the rind to think with” (86); she then shares the news with her extremely pregnant friend, Clara, and “The rest of the conversation was about her digestive upsets,” (*Edible* 91) foreshadowing what Sanchez-Grant refers to as Marian’s “increasing distance from her somatic self” in Section II (81).

The final moment of Section I finds Marian in her bedroom sorting through her old belongings, including two old dolls, one whose “fingers and toes have been almost chewed off,” a clear nod to the woman-shaped cake Marian will make and eat at the end of the novel (109). In Section I, as Marian fully inhabits her own body, including the ability to eat, she maintains first person narration; however, once Part II begins, Marian is described as “sitting listlessly at her desk,” both the tone and point of view change (113, italic mine). At work, “She had been dying to go for lunch, she had been starving, and now [as she sits in a restaurant ready to order] she wasn’t even hungry” (119). This first moment of loss of appetite coincides with her loss of voice, as if the appetite that makes Marian who she is disappears, only to reappear in Part III once her body reclaims control of her future, even if only briefly. Atwood’s overall organizational strategy within the text, based upon the body’s access to food, suggests a powerful corollary noted by Nicholson: “If one doesn’t eat, the logic seems to be, one cannot be eaten; i.e., one is not subject to others’ control” (47). The shift in narration aligns with the struggle between loss of personal power and the expression of corporeal control in its absence.
Notably, Marian and Peter’s relationship is structured around food, and each of their encounters in the novel involves food and/or drink. The first detail Marian reveals about her relationship with Peter is that they “Usually…went out for dinner, but when [they] didn’t, the pattern was that [she] would walk over to Peter’s and get something to cook on the way” (56). Food creates a framework—a “pattern,” which later in that same scene, is reinforced by Marian’s recollection of how they “had met at a garden party” and “had eaten ice-cream in the shade together” (61). Subsequent dates provide explicit descriptions of foods consumed, whether it is “frozen peas and smoked meat” (65) early in the novel, and more significantly, “her body’s decision to reject certain foods” once they become engaged (193). On the larger, chapter-level scale, Atwood uses food to organize the protagonist’s relationship to her own identity, while at the same time leveraging food to define relations between Marian and Peter. Within these frameworks, food functions as a depiction of women without power, reflecting the concerns that led women to seek power both personally and politically in the 1960s and 70s.

Atwood again uses depictions of food to structure the events of the novel in *Surfacing* (1972), but here she does so with consistent reference to food gathering, preparation, cooking, sharing meals, and cleaning up throughout the day. In each chapter, mealtimes function as a stabilizing anchor in the unnamed narrator’s otherwise untamed surroundings. The novel centers around the narrator’s journey to a remote Canadian island in search of her father who has disappeared and is presumed dead. She travels with her boyfriend, Joe, with whom she has a strained relationship, and a married couple, David and Anna, who have even more serious issues due to David’s chauvinism and Anna’s ambiguous desire to please him. With all the uncertainty the narrator lives with,
including the mystery of her missing father, her confusing relationship with Joe, and shifting memories of her traumatic past, providing food for herself and others creates a sense of physical stability. In wholly unpredictable surroundings, the narrator exerts control. As Kathy Davis notes, women often display their power in subtle ways, and “agency is always embedded in women’s everyday interpretive activities” (60). Atwood sets up this dynamic in the novel as soon as the foursome arrive and drop their “packsacks” on the cabin floor; the narrator sees it is five o’clock and thinks, “It will be up to me to organize dinner” (32). She immediately gets a fire going, then heads to the garden to gather vegetables, where she “cut off the onion leaves and the carrot tops…then put the things in the bowl and start[s] back toward the gate, adding up the time, growing time, in [her] head” (33). This initial scene establishes the rhythm of meal preparation in the novel, as well as an indication of how food shows the passage of time, illustrated here by the growth of food in the garden. She also signals a familiarity with the concept of “growing time,” something the narrator holds physically close, “adding up the time…in [her] head.” Similarly, chapter 5 finds the narrator preparing bacon and eggs for breakfast, with narration reading, “After breakfast,” (42) followed by chapter 6 ending with the question, “What’s for dinner?” (57), and chapter 7 beginning, “After supper we finished off the beer” (58). These key phrases and indicators of food preparation and mealtimes appear consistently, providing an orderly rhythm to the day. According to Cline, women attempt to control what they can in the home through food, and in both *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, Atwood leverages food to create structure, echoing Cline’s theory. Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr contend, however, that this “attempt” truly is just that, as women, “exercise their power in other people’s interests, above all in the interests
of their partners. Thus although women may have the day-today responsibility for food provision for their families, it is men who have the power and control” (40). Atwood makes this unfortunate juxtaposition clear: it is only at the end of *Surfacing*, as the narrator evolves into her animalistic self, that she allows herself to “feed” (187) in a new way, eating according to “the rule” of the wild, when and where she can find it (186). In this non-traditional setting, not restricted by time or the confines of feeding others, she is free to control her body and existence. Although Atwood establishes “structure” in the text with food as a means of manifesting control, she also suggests one’s personal power is too readily relinquished. In the end, however, it is Atwood herself who takes the upper hand, as she has ultimate creative control, and she uses food and eating to make it happen.

Section II. Fear of Being Consumed

Atwood depicts loss of self through the body, but she also suggests it is possible to reclaim agency. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian’s body responds to the reality of her upcoming wedding, and therefore loss of independence, by avoiding food. Early on, Atwood points to Marian’s subconscious fear of losing herself; it appears in a dream where she looks down to see her “feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly,” significantly noting that she usually does not remember dreams-- a clear nod to Freud (42). Her dream of disappearance comes right after a chaotic visit with her very pregnant friend Clara and family, as well as a confounding conversation with her roommate Ainsley, who wants to entrap a man into helping her become a single mother. All told, Marian’s concerns are reasonable, and Atwood sets up what is at stake by illustrating the relative freedom she enjoys as a single woman of the 1960s, especially in contrast to
those in the throes of motherhood or potential motherhood. Both scenarios seem untenable to Marian who wakes from a dream in fear of becoming a gelatinous mess. “Melting jelly” is the embodiment of disappearing into nothingness, a fear Nicholson suggests is “a fate worse than death because it signifies the loss of essence and not merely of existence” (52). At this point in the novel, however, Marian makes her own decisions, as seen by the proactive moves she makes getting ready to start her day. She relays, “I boiled my egg and drank my tomato juice and coffee alone. Then I dressed in an outfit suitable for interviewing, an official-looking skirt, a blouse with sleeves, and a pair of low-heeled walking shoes” (42). Marian is in command of planning the details of her day, including her power outfit and what goes into her body, like “some toast and a second cup of coffee” and how she will physically manage her workday, as she “traced out several possible routes” for her interviews (42). Atwood juxtaposes body parts turning to “melting jelly” with a fully realized person in a functioning body, eating a full breakfast, to highlight how power manifests in the body through food; unconsciously Marian senses her power slipping away, but her conscious self does not, and food is the conduit creating corporeal awareness. In Foucauldian terms, Attwood assigns the unconscious as Marian’s “inspecting gaze” so that she is “operating to the point that [she] is [her] own overseer…exercising…surveillance over, and against, [her]self,” and only later will Marian consciously notice her body’s rejection of food and its usurpation of control (Power/Knowledge 155).

Hunting and meat are significant motifs within Atwood’s texts, reflecting corporeal vulnerability and threatened agency. At first, meat seems the only problematic food for Marian in The Edible Woman, and Atwood accentuates the dichotomy of social
norms when Peter takes charge in a restaurant and orders steak for them both. Marian divulges she has “fall[en] into the habit of letting him choose for her” because “Peter could make up their minds right away,” letting the reader know Marian’s passivity contributes to her own loss of power (159). Atwood is vocal in her dread of “one-dimensional Feminist Criticism,” and is not the kind of novelist to create heroines that fit a certain mold, especially as it pertains to the roles women undertake in society (Second Words 192). Therefore, Atwood’s ambiguous presentation of Marian is of a woman beholden to and charmed by her handsome fiancé, while at the same time imprisoned by him. Initially fascinated by his “capable hands…slicing precisely,” she considers the “violent action, cutting” that he conducts “operating on the steak,” from her third-person limited point-of-view, giving the signal Peter sits in the position of domination and that she identifies with the meat on the plate (162-163). In The Sexual Politics of Meat, Carol Adams draws a distinct connection between meat and patriarchy; she argues that “gender inequality is built into the species that meat eating proclaims, because for most cultures, obtaining meat was performed by men” and “Women’s status is inversely related to the importance of meat in non-technological societies” (58). Adams explains that the language with which we talk about meat has become an “absent referent;” that is, for people to eat meat, animals must be dead, or absent, so they become defined in new terms. She further argues that animals function as metaphors for human experience, as when a rape victim says, “I felt like a piece of meat.” Adams notes, “specifically in regard to rape victims and battered women, the death experience of animals acts to illustrate the lived experience of women” (67). Read in this light, as Marian attempts to continue eating the steak she did not order; she recoils, and “suddenly saw it as a hunk of
muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar” (164). Here, Marian relates to the cow, equating it to a murder victim at a trolley stop, humanizing her food. This “flesh and blood, rare” that she had been “devouring” and “gorging herself on,” her body will not allow her to consume (164).

It is the very meat of Marian’s body that will become empowered as she senses she is being trapped, and this is the same sense of “personal empowerment” garnered by the bodily awareness encouraged by second-wave feminists (Davis 59). According to Nicholson, meat is traditionally a food of the ruling class, therefore it is associated with domination. Additionally, its nature indicates one side of strength and one side of weakness, one who eats and one who is eaten, one who is dead and one alive (39). The bloody nature of the steak scene recalls an earlier one in which Peter regales Len with a lusty account of a hunting trip that left “rabbit guts dangling from the trees” and “blood and guts all over the place,” revealing a distinctly savage side of Peter heretofore unknown (70). These gory images cause Marian to “realize with horror” that there is a “large drop of something wet…on the table near [her] hand” -- a tear (71). Best explained in phenomenological terms, Marian’s “body is [her] being-to-the-world and as such is the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated” (Grosz 87). What Grosz refers to as a body’s “explanatory powers” provide Marian a warning, an embodiment of the corporeal experience of blood and death her body associates with Peter, and gradually, food (vii). At no point in the text is her refusal to eat due to dissatisfaction with her body shape or size, although Marian is critical of other women’s bodies, noting their “overripe” figures and “ham-like bulge of thigh”
In fact, all evidence points to a visceral, involuntary trigger causing a “refusal of her mouth to eat” for which she begins to develop a “quiet fear” (166). After the incident with the steak, her body continues to reject meat in its unprocessed form, as noted, “Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind certainly, rejected anything that had an indication of bone or tendon or fibre” (165, italics mine).

Additionally, Peter’s photography obsession (72, 77), including the following explicit moment with Marian uncomfortably dolled up in a red dress, echo a hunter both scoping and objectifying his prey:

He raised the camera and squinted through the tiny glass window at the top; he was adjusting the lens, getting her in focus. “Now” he said. “Could you stand a little less stiffly? Relax. And don’t hunch your shoulders like that, come on, stick out your chest, and don’t look so worried darling, look natural, come on, smile…

Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn’t move, couldn’t move the muscles on her face as she stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn’t move… (254)

“Frozen” in the crosshairs of Peter’s camera/rifle, told what she must do and how she should behave, Marian’s body goes “rigid.” Even if Marian wanted to cooperate, her body does not let her. Then only pages later, repeating an earlier scene in the novel (74-76) she flees a party altogether, running like an animal that manages to free itself from a trap (270). Her corporeal rejection of meat, in conjunction with bloody hunting imagery, Peter’s fascination with photography, and Marian fleeing, all point to a body that fears being overpowered, hunted, and consumed.

Atwood revisits this hunter/hunted power dynamic in Surfacing, echoing the man’s domination over the female body. On a fishing trip, an outing designed to catch food, the friends pass a dead heron that they smell before they see. The description of
how the bird “was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied around its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wing fallen open (116),” suggests the regal bird hangs Christlike, but also recalls the vicious “gutting” of the rabbit by Peter in *The Edible Woman*, as he describes how he “whipped out [his] knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip” (70). In both scenes, Atwood focuses on the dominance of the hunter and the overpowering of its prey by securing it in a most vulnerable position—upside-down with feet tied; however, in *Surfacing*, the narrator notes with dismay, “It’s a heron. You can’t eat them,” calling out the pure brutality, whereas one can at least eat the distinctly female-gendered rabbit (117). Atwood includes this gratuitous display of aggression as a contrast to the care with which the narrator protects nature and feeds others, much like the power men have over the bodies of women in a patriarchal society. As part of their film *Random Samples*, David suggests they get some footage of the mutilated heron he crows, “looks so great, you have to admit” (117); it harkens to Peter’s attempt to ‘capture’ an image of Marian “by the guns” in her red dress—red like a piece of meat (254). This kind of “power imbalance…is rendered in terms of ‘symbolic cannibalism’ where men seek to assimilate and contain, devour and erase female individuality” (Bouson qtd. in Kijek 113). Their desire to capture these uncomfortable moments on film read like a hunter on the lookout for his prey. The presence of the dead heron also elicits an immediate corporeal reaction of disgust when “Ann [holds] her nose with two fingers” as they approach and Joe comments, “Shit…it really stinks” (117). Not only a needless killing, but the noxious odor of the heron’s decaying body inflicts nausea (a topic to be explored at length in the next section) on all those exposed to it, leaving an indelible,
multi-sensory impression on the narrator. Toward the end of the novel, as the narrator is hiding in the canoe, she “remember[s] the heron,” however, “now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons,” implying the heron’s carcass is transformed into food for new life (172). At the same time, she notes, “My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments…I multiply,” linking herself with the crucified heron (172). In doing so, the narrator reclaims some power; like the heron, she embodies the nutrition necessary to recreate and to “multiply.” Whereas earlier in the novel food is a means to create an external sense of control and order where there is none, now the narrator corporeally embodies the power she previously lacked; over the course of the narrative, a transformation takes place, and food manifests as an empowering element of the somatic self.

Section III. Vessels of Malnourishment

In contrast to the traditional presentation of women’s bodies as nurturing, Atwood creates negative, often damaging associations between women, their bodies, and food that belie the idealization of motherhood. In The Edible Woman, Marian’s college friend Clara is an example of the typical young woman of her time who left her college education behind to pursue marriage and motherhood; however, Marian describes her body as “so thin” and “bulgingly obvious” that “she looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon,” providing a comic, rather morbid, look at maternity (28). The image of Clara is of a woman no longer in possession of her own body, and Atwood harnesses food as the force that overwhelms her like a predator. All warm associations of a plump, pregnant mother with child disappear, replaced by a hard, cold-blooded cartoonish figure, left powerless to nourish a baby. Clara’s feebleness is equated to a
vegetative state; Marian watches as “[Clara] lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like a strange vegetable growth, bulbous tuber that had sent out four thin white roots and a tiny pale-yellow flower,” embodying plant life that might be harvested on Mars (28). Adams points out that meat, a referent for men, “represents the essence or principal part of something;” while vegetables, once considered “women’s food…represent the least desirable characteristics” (60, italics in original). Atwood’s “tuberous” portrayal of Clara is particularly striking when one considers Adams’ theory: “Meat is something one enjoys or excels in, vegetable becomes representative of someone who does not enjoy anything: a person who leads a monotonous, passive or merely physical existence” (60, italics in original). Clara’s languishing body and apathetic mothering reinforce this idea. The actual feeding of the baby is nothing short of robotic as he is “fed and exiled to the carriage” which is followed by an awkward feeding of a toddler who “evaded with spasmatic contortions of his body the spoonfuls of food Clara poked in the direction of his mouth” (32). Even the food itself, the “wizened meatballs,” appear malnourished, like the mother (32). Taken together, in this chapter food imagery is used as a sign of corporeal estrangement; food serves none of the functions one might expect, and it certainly does not nourish; here, “strange,” “tuberous,” and “wizened,” food is “bulging” and “poking” bodies. Instead of empowering, it drains power. To reinforce this point, after seeing Clara, Marian narrates, “My skin felt stifled, as though I was enclosed in a layer of moist dough,” providing an image of a woman feeling constrained and powerless by her looming prospects of being a wife and mother (35). The image of being smothered in not-yet-baked pastry illustrates Marian fears of a future like her friend’s, and as Sceats suggests, “a disgust with mature femaleness” (Food,
Consumption and the Body 97). Marian does not know what she wants, but her body knows that it is not that.

Atwood extends the notion of women’s bodies as malnourishing in Surfacing, again turning food against motherhood. Within the narrative, even as the protagonist relies on food to maintain order in the day, much else is often disordered, including memories, as seen in her initial recollection of a pregnancy that never came to term. In a disembodied memory of pregnancy, one “never identified as mine;” she explains, “It was my husband’s, he imposed it on me” (30). Significantly, in pregnancy she is removed from the corporeal experience, feeling “like an incubator (30),” in the same way Atwood describes Clara whose “own body seemed beyond her, going on its own way without reference to any directions of hers” (Edible 34). In each pregnancy, there is a disconnect between the woman, her body, and her pregnancy; additionally, food is embodied negatively in both, leeching power from the woman. The unnamed narrator claims her husband “measured everything he would let [her] eat,” demonstrating clear domination over her body and free will to feed herself, and in turn, the baby (30). She continues in condemnation, “he was feeding it on me” like a parasite, until the baby’s birth and she was of “no more use” (30). Much like Clara’s toddler who is “fed and exiled,” Atwood illustrates that a woman’s body is not necessarily nourishing, and food often does not equal love; however, the negotiation of power around a pregnant woman’s body is tenuous. She details the experience, explaining how “they tie your hands down and they don’t let you see, they don’t want you to understand, they want you to believe it’s their power, not yours,” noting a disconnect between women and their bodies caused by the medical establishment (79). Decrying hospital births, the unnamed narrator raises a
central issue of activism for second-wave feminists who focused their efforts on consciousness-raising, especially in women’s health, as “they struggled to position the female body at the center of women’s liberation” (Kline). The protagonist goes on to describe a woman’s treatment in the hospital as that of “a dead pig” -- a piece of meat--being manhandled by “technicians,” “mechanics,” and “butchers,” indicating her body is less than human and at their mercy, once again victim of patriarchal slaughter (79).

Atwood then harnesses food imagery in a final critique of hospital birth when she writes that “they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar,” mocking the sterility and sourness of the moment and reinforcing the lack of a woman’s control over her body, replaced by an image of the pregnant body as a powerless and valueless vessel. Instead of pushing a baby out with her own bodily strength, “a fork,” a tool that should feed, takes her agency away. Atwood critiques the objectification of women’s bodies while at the same time reimagining women’s associations with food.

Section IV. The Body’s Resistance and Self-discovery

Atwood’s characters make observations through a lens of food as a means of cataloging their own corporeal embodiment and finding agency. Throughout The Edible Woman Marian perceives that she cannot control her situation, in this case her impending marriage and her limited options as a young woman, and thus her body reacts. For instance, in the restaurant with Peter, once she has processed the implications of the origins of her steak, Marian’s gustatory response to the meat in front of her is one of revulsion: “She set down her knife and fork. She felt that she had turned rather pale,” and then she tries again, hoping that Peter does not notice, but “She picked up her fork, speared a piece, lifted it, and set it down again” (164). Although Marian wants control,
her body, specifically her gut, hand, and skin, controls the situation. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* that “the body is not a thing, it is a situation…it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects,” suggesting the body is far more than just a physical presence, as it certainly is here for Marian (34, italics in original). Merleau-Ponty goes further, proposing that “by reestablishing contact with the body and with the world…we will also discover ourselves, since if one perceives with his body, then the body is a natural myself, as it were, the body is the subject of perception” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 213). Given this, one can see that although Marian’s body may be entering a state of rebellion with food, it is also a state though which she will gain perception. Therefore, discovery of the self occurs through embodiment of one’s situation. In a discussion of Merleau-Ponty, Langer suggests that “the perspectival nature of perception…is a primary expression of our embodiment, involving as it does the articulation of both body and world through a ‘spontaneous synthesis’ of our senses” (qtd. in Williams 53). For Marian, unfortunately, her process of “spontaneous synthesis” occurs in a less than ideal manner, leading to her body’s refusal to eat. One can see how a phenomenological analysis of Marian’s corporeal experience has one “‘reflect’ upon the ‘unreflected,’…. *pre-objective*, primordial relationship we have to our bodies and the world, one which objective thought loses sight of” (Crossley qtd. in Williams 52, italics in original).

When she observes other women’s bodies, Marian gleans her future prospects and viscerally responds, leading to further alienation from women’s bodies, not just her own. Chernin suggests that “false blaming of the body” is central to Marian’s view of her condition, and the way she views other women, due to “her inability to liberate herself
from the impoverished identity that is troubling her” (*Obsession* 69). For instance, at the office Christmas party, the tables “heaped” with “salads and sandwiches and fancy breads and desserts and cookies and cakes” (176), Marian watches all the women around her, “the mouths opening and shutting” (180) and studies the bodies of the women, some “ripe, some rapidly becoming overripe, some already beginning to shrivel” (181).

Atwood provides an image of “the mouths” operating mechanically, and as with Clara, she conveys the corporeal experiences of the women as vegetal and detached from themselves. Chernin notes that Marian is so “alienated from nature” in the ways she distances herself from various mature female examples around her that she avoids the potential opportunities to get close to “the life process that brings her to maturity” (*Obsession* 69). I would argue, however, that Marian is not “alienated from nature,” but rather from societal expectations of women, as her bodily concerns are entirely organic, related to foodstuffs and the digestive process, less so human behavior and relationships.

Marian seems far more interested in what goes in and out of the body in the form of food and waste than she does the life cycle itself, as seen when “She examined the women’s bodies with interest, critically…What peculiar creatures they were; and the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage…” (181). Notably, prosaic items such as “potato-chips,” “grease,” and “tomato juice,” are given equal billing to “babies” and “milk,” devaluing women’s bodies as mere revolting factories of goo and matter.

Atwood provides a seemingly exhaustive list of loaded images, each representing part of a woman’s world and taken together, are just gross. Looking at the pairing side-by-side is
vomit-inducing: excrement and cookies, vomit and coffee, tomato juice and blood. And yet this is what Marian sees when she looks at a room full of women and considers, “At some time she would be-- or no, already was like that too; she was one of them” (181). A phenomenon among women, “as a consequence of their social alienation” they “experience their bodies as parts, ‘objects’ rather than integrated wholes” (Waugh 178). Marian does not see women’s bodies as powerful or positive in any way, but instead, they seem to provoke disgust, even nausea. She fears being “sucked down” into this suffocating “saragasso-sea of femininity” (181) and dreads drowning in the “moist congratulations and chocolate crumb enquiries and little powdery initiatory kisses” on the announcement of her engagement (182). Here, Marian’s coworkers engulf her body with their cloying, food-encrusted presence, reinforcing her already overwhelmed state. To better understand her embodied response, one may look to Sartre’s work in Being and Nothingness on nausea which claims that, although unpleasant, or “insipid,” nausea is nonetheless revelatory (338). In his discussion, Sartre refers specifically to taste; however, one can extend to the visual or olfactory experience:

A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness. Sometimes we look for the pleasant or for physical pain to free ourselves from this nausea’ but as soon as the pain and the pleasure are existed by consciousness, they in turn manifest its facticity and its contingency; and it is on the ground of this nausea that they are revealed. We must not take the term nausea as a metaphor derived from our physiological disgust. On the contrary, we must realize that it is on the foundation of this nausea that all concrete and empirical nauseas (nausea caused by spoiled meat, fresh blood, excrement, etc.) are produced and make us vomit. (Sartre 338-339, italic in original)

Sartre claims that when a person is up against a situation that they cannot control, the body can still react by being nauseated, and this experience will open the consciousness to parts of the self not previously known. According to Appelbaum, “One
result of this approach is that people might really be able to come to terms with
themselves and the beings they are by experiencing nausea” (135). More specifically, the
person experiencing this “insipid” nausea, embodies the “insipidity” but at the same time
is much more than that, and therefore “tells me what I am, and what my being is”
(Appelbaum 139). Toward the end of Surfacing as the narrator evades capture in the wild,
not wanting to be “mistak[en]…for a human,” she notes “the scent” of people “brings
nausea” since they carry with them “mouths lined with soiled plush, acid taste of copper
wiring or money.” She goes on to describe “their real skin above the collars” as a blend
of fur “like moldy sausages or the rumps of baboons” and their bodies “are halfway to
machine, the leftover flesh atrophied and diseased, porous like an appendix” (189-190).
Her recognition of this nausea coincides with a pivotal moment in the text, allowing her
to embody this “insipid” experience; as Sartre suggests, the nausea shows the narrator
who she is and she is then empowered to make her way back to her cabin and eventually
rejoin society. Marian’s visceral rejection of food in the novel is unmistakably in
response to her inability to confront her compounded situation and fear of consumption.
Sartre’s theory, therefore, would suggest her revulsion, a corporeal reaction, will lead to
insights about herself which prove to be correct, as Marian’s inability to eat leads to her
baking her own cake effigy for Peter to eat instead of her, and in the end, she devours the
“delicious” (298) woman, “tasting and chewing and swallowing again” (300). Laced with
contradiction, this final move integrates her body with her emotions and does so with “an
action which on the one hand is archetypically feminine, while on the other—is
stunningly subversive” (Kijek 122). In the end Atwood directs the embodiment of
Marian’s agency through her mouth, even if only for a few pages, and “it’s really good” (301).
Chapter III.

Joyce Carol Oates: Eat Me

Section I. Food as a Fraught Literary Element

It is no surprise Oates’ work puts food and eating to such scrutiny, given her own personally complicated relationship with food. According to biographer Greg Johnson, when Oates was in college, although she was quite thin by any standard, she worried that she was overweight, her weight fluctuated dramatically, and she often appeared “gaunt and pale”; all these signs point to anorexia, a condition with which she struggled for decades (67). Friends and colleagues report that as a younger woman Oates seemed completely disinterested in food: they witnessed her eat very little, and she was described as a terrible host, offering meager food and drink to her guests. Johnson explains that while being generally revolted by ostentatious displays of food (172-173), to Oates, eating is “a waste of time” (195), and she expressed a general “dislike of eating” because it takes away from more important things she could be doing like writing (175). However, even as she had no physical interest in food, creatively she believes, “In literature, eating and not-eating are always symbolic. Food always ‘means’ something other than mere food” (312); she maintains “That our deepest instincts are bound up inextricably with food as more-than-nourishment is so simple a truth it can be overlooked” ((Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities 311). Oates told an interviewer that she viewed herself as “mere vapor of consciousness” and confessed, “I really don’t identify with my physical self that much” (Oates qtd. in Johnson 175), revealing a key indicator of many anorexic women--she “has a shaky corporeal sense of herself” (Orbach qtd. in Johnson 175). Given Oates’ lack of interest in her own physical
consumption of food, it makes the presence of scenes of overindulgence and tables heaped with food in her work that much more intriguing and makes one even more curious about the “corresponding sense of nausea and vomiting” that many of them induce (Rutledge 1). In her writing, Oates often uses food, especially negative food interactions, as a way of exploring complex issues around how humans relate to one another. As she asks, “Without appetite, why live? — for life is appetite. That lovely flickering upright flame that, lacking other fuel, will consume itself” (“Food Mysteries” 28).

Section II. Controlling the Narrative with Food

Food is a controlling force in Oates’ work. When the reader first encounters Richard Everett of Expensive People, “one of Oates’ fabulous eaters” who sees the “entire universe in alimentary terms” (Bender 328), the self-proclaimed “child murderer,” reveals that he is “flabby” and “blubbering,” (3) confessing, “I am not well. I weigh two hundred and fifty pounds and I am not well, and if I told you how old I am you would turn away with a look of revulsion” (Expensive People 4). The reader eventually learns that Richard, who is writing this memoir at the age of eighteen, is binging and growing fatter and fatter as he “sink[s] into a slough of food” with the plan of suicide (195). He provides a first-person account of his empty life as a precocious eleven-year-old growing up in an affluent suburb with self-centered parents; his disgust with his family is revealed through food and will lead to murder. Oates employs Richard as an author-surrogate within the novel to play out this entire food-based narrative scheme. As he states, “This memoir is a hatchet to slash through my own heavy flesh and through the flesh of anyone else who happens to get in the way” (4). In addition to using images of food’s impact on
the body as a way of establishing the narrator’s twisted and mocking attitude, it also expresses his deep-seated pain, anger, and disappointment at childhood, and in turn, his parents. Richard vents to his reader: “You think children are whole, uncomplicated creatures, and if you split them in two with a handy ax there would be all one substance inside, hard candy. But it isn’t hard candy so much as a hopeless seething lava of all kinds of things, a turmoil, a mess” (23). Quite the opposite of the cool sweetness of “hard candy,” this “hopeless seething lava” of his childhood memory is biting and hot, and Oates lays a groundwork for the presentation of Richard’s parents in relation to food as well as Richard’s attempt to take control of a situation where he feels he has none.

Beginning with the introduction of his father who he claims does not “really sense anything” and whose IQ “was only 120,” Richard asks, “What accounts for his success, then?” He answers: “Good stomach juices, I think, and an acute apparatus for balance in his inner ear” (18). Characterized as lucky, gregarious, and highly flawed, Elwood Everett has an insatiable appetite for meat. Richard goes on to share that his father “liked steaks with mushroom sauce, steaks with garlic, steaks on boards, and steaks pierced through their bloody hearts on silver sticks” giving the impression that he sees his father as a bloodthirsty, animalistic, and over-the-top; however, only a few sentences later Richard demurs, acknowledging that “with his cheerful, sad brown eyes, always a little puffed, he looked like a bloated elf,” acknowledging a gentleness in him, undoing some of the cruelty associated with his father’s carnivorousness (19). His consumption of “steaks pierced through their bloody hearts” is associated with power and domination, invoking his experiences in the world of business. Oates critiques the emptiness of American capitalism by making Elwood Everett a character who seems like someone
powerful (a meat-eater) but is really just a “bloated elf.” His meat consumption, in addition to “lots of cheap doughy bread, and sweet, ghastly sweet, little pickles—baby midget gherkins he’d eat by the handful,” parallel his and his wife Nada’s consumption of material wealth in modern America, hence the novel’s title, *Expensive People* (19).

Richard makes it clear that both of his parents are insatiable, but it is his mother Nada who embodies relentless greed. One can see how the “seething hot lava” builds up in Richard as he sits mired in Nada’s disappointment that his genius IQ score is not a little higher; Richard says, “I watched Nada’s fine teeth bite off a piece of toast and chew on it, the way she was chewing on me” (55). Here, Oates experiments with food’s impact on the body and traditional maternal roles in relation to food: Nada is the one “biting off a piece of toast” exacting power, while Richard is in the position of powerlessness, feeling as though she is “chewing on” him. How Nada eats and Nada’s “greed” are recurring themes in the text. One sees this in the way Richard asks the reader, “Have I ever mentioned how Nada ate? She ate as if she expected a disembodied hand suddenly to pull her plate away from her, and if it had she would have continued eating, leaning over the table until she could no longer reach the plate. She was a hungry, greedy woman” (60). The suggestion that she is “hungry” and “greedy” implies that Richard himself feels like something is being taken from him, as though he is not getting enough from her because she only takes and never gives. Although both parents are portrayed as greedy, Oates makes gendered distinctions between Richard’s mother and father represented in the way each eats. These differences suggest food holds a sinister association when it comes to women; however, it is far more innocuous when it comes to men, as though this is a realm in which they are impotent and hold little power. As a
woman, Nada might be expected to feed and nurture her son, but she does not. By withholding, she asserts her power with food differently, by being “a hungry, greedy woman.” Conversely, even though there is the implication that Richard’s father has the meat-eating killer instinct of a businessman, his sloppy nature and the fact that his favorite food to binge is “baby midget gherkins,” suggests that he is a man emasculated by food.

Oates personalizes the experience of the creative process and intellectual work of the writer when Richard announces his “deliberate pun[s] and “elaborate scheme of symbolism,” involving food and digestion (75-76). Richard claims his memoir, like all art, “is an accident,” and through Richard, Oates’ machinations are on full display (72). For instance, he recounts in emotionally laden detail the ten “steps” he followed in writing his memoir, including, ironically, “hiding [his] hostility toward [his] readers,” while at that same time tipping his hand in a clear attempt to garner sympathy (74). He both contradicts his own claim that his art “is an accident,” and illustrates how the process itself is immersed in eating when he says works of literature are “like the products of violent seizures of nausea that overtake many of us after an arduous dinner” (72). Richard takes for granted that his reader will empathize with the “violent seizures of nausea” he experiences when eating too much, or in his case, as a metaphor for the creative process; this must figure, at least in some small way, into Oates’ “dislike of eating” (Johnson 175). One can see that creativity, and the writing processes itself, are bound up in thinking about how food interacts with the body. Richard explains his specific method at work here when he unpacks his own pun with humor in a direct address: “This chapter must at one time or another throw up its hands in defeat (“throw
up’ is a deliberate pun, part of a pattern of puns, my dear squeamish readers!), and as
good now as later” (76). As typical of Oates’ work, nauseatingly gross food references
are consistently part of Richard’s “elaborate scheme of symbolism;” the language used to
move the story, recall memory, and promote a somatic response. Additional focal points
of Richard’s narrative are the days he tests into and is kicked out of his pretentious prep
school, Johns Behemoth: the former a time when his “stomach once lost most of its
intake” vomiting his breakfast (73) and the latter “an event stored up ripe and rotting in
[his] memory” (29) when he “was vomiting over everything” in the school’s Record
Room (92). Importantly, here Richard is “summoning up…the most vile streams of fluid”
in his body, suggesting he is briefly empowered by this action (92 emphasis mine). Oates
leverages food as a narrative tool throughout the text, forcing Richard to “realize a
dizzying truth about human beings: they don’t care,” and one knows and feels this truth
phenomenologically, “tasting is with all your insides” (39). In these scenes and
throughout the work, Oates uses digestion and food and its impact on the body “as a
measure of personal autonomy; at the same time it is an index of individual helplessness”
(Bender 329).

The influence of Oates’ favorite childhood book, Lewis Carroll’s Alice in
Wonderland, is felt throughout her writing but most poignantly in Wonderland, impacting
color development and themes. Wonderland follows the adventures of Jesse Vogel,
who as a boy escapes the murder of his family by his father, only to be passed from one
relative to another, then adopted and disowned by the obese megalomaniac Dr. Pedersen.
Jesse is driven to be a passionate and successful medical student, then doctor, always
searching for knowledge, a father figure, and a personality of his own, changing his name
several times. Nicholson argues that food is “one expression of the struggle for power that organizes Carroll’s work,” and Oates echoes this struggle by using food as an exaggerated means of changing her character’s physical size (49). Like Alice who falls into the rabbit hole after chasing the White Rabbit and then grows and shrinks in the nonsensical Wonderland depending upon what she eats or drinks (Carroll 26, 68), so too, Jesse Vogel moves through the uncertainties of his life, also growing and shrinking again. In the same way Carroll establishes a pattern of food affecting the body when Alice “shut[s] up like a telescope” when she drinks from the little bottle with a “paper label with the words ‘DRINK ME’ beautifully printed on it, the embodiment of Jesse’s impending trauma manifests when he shrinks at the outset of the novel (31). The reader knows things are not well and Jesse’s body is revolting: “Yes, he is sick. He gags and chokes, his eyes closed. Tears stream out of the corners of his eyes. Hot, everything is hot, stinking… He spits into the toilet bowl trying to clean his mouth…Tiny particles of vomit, like particles of food. Slimy, clinging, a film inside his mouth” (11-12). Not only does rancid food leave his body reducing his size, but tears and sweat diminish him even more. This physical size will echo Jesse’s weakened state as he lives through the trauma of his family’s murder and moving from home to home until adopted by the Pedersens. Once a member of the Pedersen family, Jesse overindulges regularly in extravagant meals, noting toward the end of one meal that he… was surprised to find that he was still hungry…he recalled vaguely the night he had spent in the empty house outside Yewville—that empty house his parents had once owned—sleepless and weak with hunger. Now his stomach strained against his belt—since coming to live with the Pedersens he had grown through three sizes of clothing—but still he was hungry and thought it a good idea to eat. (91)
Again, following the pattern of Carroll and Alice, Oates makes Jesse grow large quickly, just as Alice does when she eats “a very small cake, on which the words ‘EAT ME’ were beautifully marked in currants” (33). Jesse encounters many “characters” along his way just like Alice in Wonderland; in both situations the protagonists find themselves in situations where they have little control, and the authors harnesses images of food to embody that instability. Like Alice who encounters the Caterpillar who suggests she nibble one side or the other of his mushroom to grow taller or shorter only to find her body growing in all sorts of strange directions (73), Oates makes food the catalyst of Jesse’s “buzz[ing]” and “trembling” body:

What was wrong? Jesse ravenously hungry, picked up another handful of food, then another…

He squatted there awkwardly and ate. Might as well eat. His mouth prickled with each handful of food—his tongue seemed to come alive, suddenly muscular. Evidently he had been very hungry and had needed food. There was something desperate in his throat that urged the food down and demanded more. What if he didn’t get enough? His stomach was an enormous open hole, a raw hole, a wound. He had to fill it with food. He had to stuff it. But could he eat fast enough…The food would never be enough for him. He felt weak, baffled. His jaw muscles ached from eating, even his arm ached from lifting food to his mouth, yet he was still hungry. His insides buzzed with hunger. He could almost feel the soft, frail, pulsating lining of his stomach trembling with hunger, demanding to fed. (173-174)

In this frenetic moment, Jesse is a prisoner of his body and powerless over the food that it is “demanding” of him; his body parts act of their own volition: “his mouth prickled,” tongue “alive” and “muscular,”” his throat “desperate” and “demanded more” and more food. Like Carroll, Oates uses the image of an out-of-control, enlarged body to tell Jesse’s story. He reaches his peak size in this scene at the end of Book I when he receives Dr. Pedersen’s letter pronouncing Jesse “dead” and telling him, “You do not exist” (176). The trauma of Dr. Pedersen’s rejection is manifest in Jesse as he quite
literally begins to disappear; the beginning of Book II of *Wonderland* shows Jesse in medical school shrinking as though he had sipped Alice’s “DRINK ME” elixir. Instead of the insatiable hunger of the previous period with the Pedersens, now “his throat closed up at the smell of food” (181) and he “he ate hurriedly at his desk, when he bothered to eat,” (182) entering a time when “He felt his body becoming mechanical, predictable, very sane” (183). Detached from his somatic self, Jesse focuses on the workings of his mind. Oates, through Jesse, suggests that once caught up in intellectual work, the body cannot eat—a potent symbol in the novel and a recurring theme in Oates’ own life as a thinker and writer. If one does not eat, one cannot live, and at the same time, if one always fears that giving in to hunger will interrupt the creative process, there can be no product of the mind. Here, Oates makes a starkly different claim about not eating than Atwood, suggesting differing approaches considering gender. For Atwood’s character, Marian’s not eating is as a woman in response to her engagement to Peter and her own fear of consumption, while Jesse’s inability to eat is as a man, focusing on his mind, as he makes a choice to pursue his career path and a future for himself. Interestingly, even as Jesse becomes thin, his mind grows; however, with Marian, one presumes as a woman there is nothing to gain by not eating.

Section III: When Too Much is Not Enough

Overindulgence permeates Oates’ work, often due to the fear of disappearance; that is, the belief that by consuming more, one will embody a more substantial emotional presence. For Richard, this manifests in his own overeating. He is overlooked by his parents which leads to disgust within himself, others, and his environment. In creating the setting for *Expensive People*, Oates invents a caricature of the overly indulgent fictional
suburb of Fernwood and does so with food and consumption as the vehicle for the joke. Fernwood itself embodies the same characteristics as Richard’s greedy, materialistic parents, and is ultimately understood as an environment that has an aura that is only fully- and cheekily--grasped through taste. Note first the narrator’s snarky tone describing the visual surroundings of lawns and estates, then the “odor of money,” which then builds up to the “tart” taste of “fine blue-green ink”:

Imagine Fernwood like this…thousands of acres of faultless green grass, not Merion Blue but the low creeping type used on golf courses, and an avalanche of trees everywhere!—and enormous stone houses, brick houses, fake Scandinavian houses, English, French, Southwest, Northeast houses, a sprinkling of “modern” architecture that never manages to look more than nervously aggressive in this conservative environment. And mixed in with the odor of lawns being sprinkled automatically on warm spring mornings is the odor of money, cash. Fresh, crisp cash. Bills you could stuff in your mouth and chew away at. My mouth is watering at the thought of that tart, fine blue-green ink, the mellow aroma of paper!

(Expensive People 27)

Although our narrator claims “his mouth is watering,” at the thought of all this money, his sarcasm contributes to the derisive tone of the work and is also an example of how “food has overwhelmed his sense of self” (Rutledge 2). Within the first few paragraphs of the novel, Richard is upfront about his revulsion for his “fat, heaving body” (5) due to his own overindulgence; however, he spends much of the novel projecting his disgust onto others as well, only getting into the specifics of his own excessive eating at the end of the work, claiming he has to “fight back an impulse to type out a list of the things [he] ate” so that the reader can “judge” the “depth of [his] degradation” (194). The tipping point of Richard’s “anguish” is what he calls becoming a “Minor Character,” which he describes as “a curious case of disappearance, like a snake swallowing itself” (194). One is reminded of Nicholson’s analysis of Carroll’s poem “The Hunting of the Snark” which examines the kind of snark that “causes one to disappear,” as well as Alice’s various
encounters in which she fears “vanishing without a trace[,] remov[ing] the bodily evidence that shows one ever was alive” (51, italics in original). Disappearance as a form of death creates an intense anxiety and seems “to have been Carroll’s special fear,” one that overeating may serve to counteract in Oates’ work, as gluttony is a common theme found in *Expensive People*, they, and *Wonderland* (Nicholson 51-52). For Richard Everett, knowledge that he is not “enough” for his mother is what makes “the hot kernel of fire burst in [his] stomach” (91) and ultimately causes him to stuff “everything” into his “voracious mouth from the time of [his] Disintegration until the time of [his] Death” (195). He confesses to binging on processed foods like, “Wong’s Chop Suey in the can…Teutonic Stewed Tomatoes, and canned spaghetti, crumbly cookies, greasy potato chips…and…and everything else,” as part of his “degradation” (194). As he continues to wallow in inadequacy, thinking of his mother, Richard laments, “A far cry from Nada to crumbs!” (194). Richard’s excessive eating functions as physical evidence of his being, as he comments in last pages of the book, “I sleepwalked my way through the years, and as I slept I ate, and as I walked I ate,” also indicating a final act of his “free will” (218-219).

In *Wonderland*, like *Expensive People*, Oates continues the theme of “suburban gluttony,” with food that “lasts for many pages” (Rutledge 6), as indicated by the following six-page luncheon of the Pedersen family:

A first course of chicken noodle soup: in large gleaming white bowls, with mushroom caps and rough, coarse buttered toast...The blueberry muffins were served hot, in a silver bowl, with a white napkin covering them...braised duck...with...cream sauce...and more muffins...The potatoes were passed around a second time...Rich, creamy mashed potatoes, with cheese and onion...a large platter of vegetables was being passed around—creamed cucumbers, green scallions on toast points, glazed carrot. And more mashed potatoes...another platter: a small roast
surrounded by boiled potatoes and onions. The platter of beef was passed around again. Jesse helped himself to another slice. He poured gravy onto his mashed potatoes, he helped himself to another serving of onions and carrots and cucumbers. More muffins were brought out... And now dessert was served: peaches and cream, and chocolate cake with a stiff, white frosting that had been shaped into tiny points like the surface of a stormy sea. (Wonderland 86-91)

The Pedersen family gathers for three formal meals each day as elaborate as the one above, a commentary on the “mindless indulgence” of Americans, suggesting that their “intake of food is meaningless, or at least unconnected to nutrition or pleasure” (Rutledge 6). There is consistently far more food than is necessary, or desirable, in this satiric depiction of dinner—in fact, that amount of consumption would physically hurt. In the case of Dr. Pedersen and his family, however, food is also a means of controlling others. Lavish mealtimes make an impression on Jesse: “The Pedersens sat at a dining room table in his imagination perpetually sitting, monumental and immense, towering in his dreams at a perpetual meal, at the center of which Dr. Pedersen sat weighty with judgement and patience” (76). These regimented meals, expected by Dr. Pedersen and implemented by Mrs. Pedersen and her maid, point to how mealtimes control people and their environs, recalling the narrator in Atwood’s Surfacing. The presence of mealtimes as a controlling feature of both authors’ work suggests that being a writer during the 1960s, not primarily a homemaker as many women were, impacts the female writer’s perspective in the inclusion of such elements. In the case of Wonderland, Oates gives heavy-handed control over the table and those who sit around it to Dr. Pedersen; however, recognizing that her power as a girl is limited, his daughter Hilda commands an internal rebellion against him with food, a reflection of Oates’ reality in the 1960s. Hilda’s violent war against her father’s control is centered inside her body, as she has no autonomy, as well as no external power to advocate for herself. While keeping the
tradition of the man as the head of the household intact, working within the norms of the
day, Oates repurposes food and its potential power within the body. Gendered
expectation around food may continue, but Oates suggests that change is imminent.

Food and eating in Oates’ early work is often linked to pain and even death,
typically as a means of exerting control over oneself or another. In *Expensive People*,
Richard lays out his plan to eat himself to death, eating until “the slick lining of [his]
stomach finally bursts,” attempting to reclaim control of his existence (4). Motivated by a
“grisly anecdote” told “more than once” by Nada, Richard draws inspirations from tales
of an uncle or bizarre distant cousin” who “committed suicide by overeating” (25) This
distant relative “decided to kill himself by forcing food down his throat and into his
bursting stomach, eating his way through a roomful of food” (25). In Richard’s twisted
logic, “suicide by eating” is a higher calling, one that he thinks will put him on par with
Nada’s family, and therefore Nada herself, and thus be good enough for her. Nada
expresses “melodramatic contempt” yet “pride” in the gluttonous behavior of her
relatives, and in this way Oates takes the mother-child relationship and turns it on its
head. Instead of the mother providing a legacy of sustenance to feed her child, such as
passing down a cherished recipe from a grandparent, to parent, to child, here, the family
tradition is to gorge until food “broke through the slippery, stubborn wall” of the stomach
(25). Richard’s misplaced desire to “eat [his] way out of this life like [his] noble
kinsman” (152) is his way of simultaneously embodying his own self-loathing and
delusions of grandeur, while also having “freedom” and “choice” (219). In this way,
Oates demonstrates that the physical control one takes of their own body by choosing
how and what to eat is their definitive sense of personal agency; it is this power that ultimately leads to life or death.

Section IV: Food to Hurt the Body and Numb the Pain

Recurring throughout Oates’ work are images of food that cause pain, but more often, the food is there to make the pain go away. This is not the soothing chicken soup of a loving mother hoping to cure her child’s cold; rather, so much food is eaten in grotesque scenes of misdirected self-soothing, that pain is passed to the point of numbness. In *Expensive People*, Richard, after reading his mother’s disturbing story, “The Molesters,” flees from the library “as if under a spell,” when he comes to the realization that “*Molester are all about us*” and thinks, “*What can I do to be saved?*” (151-152, italics in original). He comes to the conflicted conclusion that he admires the power of his mother’s writing, but that she, too, by nature of her greed, is a “molester.” With this realization, Richard goes on a diatribe about the “power of words,” and within this rant, he asks the readers, “You think all the food I devour (those disgusting bones over in the corner, those heaps of emptied tin cans!) means anything to me? Not at all, not at all—but to induce sleep and peace, nothing more” (152). He is fully aware that eating is a means of surpassing pain, a pain caused by the person who would traditionally be the one to heal, the mother. He claims, “Food means nothing but words mean everything!”; and yet it is his body that controls his actions, as confirmed when he “eat[s] [his] way out of this life, like Nada’s noble kinsman” (152). If a body ingests enough food to “induce sleep and peace,” it has the power to make all the pain disappears.

Two of Oates’ female adolescent characters, Maureen from *them* and Hilda from *Wonderland*, overeat as a means of masking pain due to trauma and to usurp control over
their being. In each of these texts the corporeal function of food is well beyond nutrition, as these young women suffer emotional and physical abuse at the hands of their fathers. *Them* follows Loretta Wendall’s family over a thirty-year period beginning in the 1930s in Detroit as she struggles against poverty raising her children, among them Jules and Maureen, who each contend with a brutal and dangerous world. As a young teen, Maureen turns to prostitution in an attempt to take control of her life, saving the money she earns to eventually rent her own apartment. When Maureen’s stepfather, Furlong, sights her in a man’s car and then finds her hidden stash of money, he “[bends] over to pound her flat on the back with his fists” and he beat her mercilessly until nearly dead (226). Maureen’s response to this physical violence is to eat, while at the same time withholding human interaction. She ultimately spends over a year in bed, not speaking, eating “everything [Loretta] makes for her” (231) and “put[s] on a lot of weight” (234). Oates highlights Jules’ and Maureen’s contrasting physical reactions to food: whereas for Jules it is a perfunctory act, for Maureen it is animalistic. When offered coffee cake by Loretta during a visit to the catatonic Maureen, Jules “shook his head no, feeling weak,” sickened by his sister’s changed appearance, while Maureen “greedily reached for it” and “quickly ate it,” which “increased” his weakness as he watched her devour the cake (237). For Maureen, food functions as a self-soothing replacement for the one empowering aspect of her life that she previously held. Whereas before she actively pursued men to feel empowered by her potential freedom, as she lays unresponsive in bed, “Food is something to fill up her entire body and keep it heavy and peaceful” (327).

Looking back to Marian in *The Edible Woman*, one recalls that it is her body alone making the choice not to eat—a physical reaction, not a conscious one, to food. Similarly,
in them, Maureen’s compulsive eating is a fully corporeal experience, separate from who
she is as a person, as indicated by the way “Her mouth waters,” a chronic autonomic
response because “She is hungry, hungry. A terrible hunger rises in her” (327). Oates
emphasizes Maureen’s somatic response to food, one that is purely physical and not at all
tied to social connection, by the repetition of “Her mouth waters” as she contemplates
picking up a cookie that has fallen on the floor; when she finally picks it up, “The flat,
bland taste of stale gingersnap awakens her. Her mouth waters for more” (327). Any hint
of food, whether anticipation of eating or tasting mediocre food cause her mouth to water,
giving her body something to do. By keeping her “headless body” (326) busy with
hunger and eating, Maureen “does not think” and protects herself from her own painful
memories, at the same time controlling those around her by not allowing them to change
her behavior (327).

Hilda Pedersen of Wonderland lives in the sheltered, strange world of her father,
Dr. Pedersen; he creates deep emotional wounds from which she actively defends herself
with food. Hilda associates eating with an out-of-body experience; therefore, the act of
putting food in her body allows her to dissociate with current circumstance. Oates uses a
third-person point of view to invoke a sense of distance from the self for Hilda as she
considers disconnected parts: “The jaws moved, the teeth ground and ground, there was a
course sinewy, dance-like motion to them. It was fascinating, that activity. The lips
parted, the mouth opened, something was inserted into the opening, then the jaws began
their centuries of instinct, raw instinct, and the food was moistened, ground into pulp,
swallowed” (118). When she eats, food enters disconnected body parts acting as a
physically detached, yet protective field. Even when it seems that Hilda is speaking of
herself eating, there is a disjointed, removed quality to it, as when she is performing at the mathematics institute and nervously thinks, “Ashamed, I cram my mouth with something—some chocolate,” one observes her lack of awareness of what she puts in her own mouth, and then she continues to explain, “I hardly bother to chew the chocolate in my mouth; it is my jaws, my perfect teeth, that do the work” (129). Once again, references to “mouth,” “jaws,” and “teeth,” the most primordial and violent aspects of eating, indicate an savage, elemental experience Hilda has when eating. That is, when she eats, part of her goes to another place where she is a fierce, animalistic force. Although she gives the outward appearance of being a compliant, good girl, the “deep private space beneath her heart” plots against the megalomania that dominates the family dining room (120). Dr. Pedersen recognizes her mathematical genius yet tells her she “lack[s]…courage” and “direction” (120) and accuses her of “trying to disappoint” him, leading to a loathing of her father, a desire to kill him, and an insatiable hunger (114). Oates envisions for Hilda an inner self, “a tiny sac inside her,” that has a “magical emptiness that could never be filled no matter how much she ate. It was the size of the universe,” (124), and this “magical emptiness” is part of her “secret self” that uses food to numb her pain but also dreams of hurting her father (120). Pinsker suggests that within their home, “food is strength, a way of equalizing oneself against Dr. Pedersen” (66, italic in original). One senses the pain Hilda experiences in the reciprocal torture she hopes to inflict upon her father with her plan of smashing a water glass and “grinding the glass down fine to put into his food, to kill him!” (120). She wants to wield power over her father in a permanent way, but her plot is mere fantasy, one that she does not go through with. Nonetheless, it demonstrates her desire to hurt him and overpower him.
with food, and this fantasy, along with her compulsive eating, serve to numb the pain she experiences as one with little agency. According to Foucault, “power needs resistance as one of its fundamental conditions of operation,” and within this relationship, “through resistance that power is disrupted” with food (Dreyfus et al. 170). After the traumatic experience of dress-shopping for a size 23 dress with her father in preparation for a mathematics demonstration, then eating both a sundae and a banana split as a reward for “being such a good girl,” Hilda “discovered that she was ravenously hungry,” and like Maureen of them, “[her] mouth watered with hunger” (123). Again, Oates focuses on the bodily response that is separate from the mind. Significantly, in the final moment of this section, when Dr. Pedersen tells Hilda, “It will go well tomorrow, my dear, don’t worry. You are my good, good girl.” Her response is a visceral one: “Her mouth watered like tears” (124). In this moment, “tears” imply both sadness and powerlessness, as Hilda is overrun by her father’s patronizing attitude, yet her body continues to protect itself with a gustatorial reaction. Maureen of them and Hilda of Wonderland, both adolescent girls who eat compulsively, do so because their bodies act on their behalf, protecting them with what they know and what is readily available to them, food.

Section V. Nausea and Response to Trauma

Perhaps the most telling of Oates’ corporeal statements with food is how the body rejects food in the face of suffering. Often, characters in her work become nauseated and vomit as a visceral reaction to uncontrolled violence and misery in their lives and come to newfound realizations as a result of their nauseating experiences. Sartre’s theory of nausea sheds light on our understanding of how emotions relate to nausea explaining, “it is a reaction against a situation that is outside the individual’s control;” that is, one may
not have the power to change the world, but one’s body can be nauseated by it (Appelbaum 139). Expensive People showcases a few pivotal moments of nausea and regurgitation that epitomize a corporeal reaction to conditions beyond Richard Everett’s control. In the following scene, for example, Richard is under the extreme stress of taking the Johns Behomoth entrance exam to please his impossible-to-please mother, Nada; he recalls both eating and then vomiting the enormous “mother’s breakfast” she prepares for him that morning:

Yes, Nada had made a lovely mother’s breakfast for her son, who was going to please her so that day: pancakes, orange juice, milk, tiny sausages. My stomach had cringed wisely at the smell, but eat everything I did while my mother watched over me, a little prisoner gorging himself on a final meal. As soon as she disappeared I dashed to the back bathroom and relieved myself of it, a big, hot, steaming mass of slop that had no resemblance to anything my mother could have prepare with her delicate hands. (38)

It is important to note that he ate the meal even though he “cringed wisely at the smell”—that is, his body knows not to eat it; however, he is a “little prisoner” and eats his “final meal” against his will to make his demanding mother happy. Interestingly, Oates manages to twist even the slightest suggestion of a positive maternal food experience of “pancakes” and “tiny sausages” made by a mother’s “delicate hands” into a repulsive spectacle. Richard’s recollection of vomiting this “big, hot, steaming mass of slop” earlier that morning occurs while taking the entrance exam and he describes feeling as though he is “trying to fly with wings soaked in sweat, feathers torn out and ragged, falling out” while at the same time on his shoulders “Nada rode with triumphant, impatient enthusiasm, her high heels spurs in [his] ribs…digging in her heels and cursing [him] on” (39). He spends hours suffering through the exam, alternating between nausea, panic, dread, exhaustion, hunger, and rage, complaining that his “mind bulged and nearly
“burst,” his brain echoing the explosive stomach of Nada’s relative he so admires and hopes to emulate in his own suicide (40). Although Richard places some blame for his “misery” on Farrels, the exam administrator, it is Nada who he sees as thoughtless, vain, and domineering, while he is the tortured and abused angel who must endure this senseless cruelty that induces physical nausea. It is this nausea that makes him, ultimately, confront “a dizzying truth about human beings: they don’t care” (39).

Significantly, Sartre is mentioned four times in the novel, so the notion that Richard experiences an existential epiphany via nausea is likely no coincidence. This scene reveals to Richard what Sartre calls his own “contingency,” or state of his being, which he has now come to understand by “knowing it, feeling it, tasting it with all [his] insides” (39, italics in original). During this overwhelming sensory experience, as he “threw up what remained of that breakfast between question nine and question ten” (Expensive People 40), “A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals [his] body to [his] consciousness” (Sartre 338). Not until he embodies this nauseousness does Richard fully understand his circumstances, and his gustatory reaction tells him who he is and what his being is, as he notes: “I think this experience was the beginning (39),” and specifically points to it as the date he “began to disintegrate” but also when he attempts to claim agency (41).

In Oates’ work, regurgitation of food from the body and nausea function as expressions of subversion and control in reaction to trauma. In a later and even more traumatizing vomiting episode from Expensive People, Richard Everett is breaking into the Record Room at Johns Behomoth, searching for the results of the IQ tests Nada made him retake because she was unhappy with his results—a mere 153 and 161, respectively.
When he discovers that his new IQ test result had improved, but she was still not pleased, he knew he would never be enough, “Then the hot kernel of fire burst in [his] stomach” and he was “vomiting over everything, summoning up from [his] depths the most vile streams of fluid that had ever graced any Record Room in history” (92). Although Pinsker claims, “this is not the sort of existential nausea Sartre had in mind” (100), one could argue that unable to control the situation, Richard’s body has a gustatory response, and with that embodied experience he describes the incident as “the best and happiest trick of all,” paradoxically allowing this repulsive moment to bring a subversive joy (92). The overwhelming corporeal experience that overtakes his digestive system, seen here in the form of regurgitation-- his body’s subversive voice-- is both revolt and revolting.

Later in the novel, when Richard is about to purchase a rifle, as he touches and smells guns in the shop he explains, “A rocking, nauseated sensation rose in me but I recognized it—it was familiar, it didn’t alarm me. It wasn’t a bad feeling. It was like coming out of a drug-induced sleep; waking is painful but you want it badly…Ah, if I woke I would do many things! I would grow into manhood and be a son worthy of my mother! If I woke…” (154). Once again nausea is the familiar, corporeal experience that allows a person to fully embody who they are. Interestingly, here, nausea is not given a negative connotation. Rather, as Richard puts it, “you want it badly.” Richard, of course, is terribly misguided and a wholly unreliable narrator, nonetheless, Oates associates the experience of nausea with the body’s innate desire to rebel.

Not only does Oates use vomiting as a reaction to trauma or a way to subvert it, but it also serves as a harbinger of future trauma, draining those who experience it of their power. In Wonderland, Jesse’s introduction in the “boys’ lavatory” at Yewville high
school during the Christmas assembly lets the reader know things are not going well: “he knows he is going to be sick” (11). Importantly, Jesse notes that he “has not been sick for year, so this is a surprise to him,” making it all the more apparent that something unusual is about to happen; this is a day unlike any other. Similarly, the day begins unusually, as he came upon his mother “being sick,” so the suggestion of regurgitation, and “the odor of vomit, a streak of vomit on her bathrobe” were already lingering in his mind, creating an “internal trembling,” “weakness,” and “panic” (12). Here, Oates again turns motherhood on its head by creating a situation in which “Their mother made breakfast for them,” like Nada does for Richard in *Expensive People*, and the outcome of both “mothers’ breakfasts” is a vomiting child (13). In neither case is the son well-fed, happy, or content with food provided by his mother. On the contrary, in Jesse’s case, “what he'd eaten was a cold hard ball in his stomach,” (17) only to become “hot, stinking” vomit later, which will serve as the early premonition of his family’s murder by his father (12). The other aspect of the harbinger of trauma that persists is the violence associated with Jesse’s father’s “redden muscular face, his cheeks bunched with food, his jaws moving with the effort of grinding up food—chewing, chewing, eating hungrily, eating fast, never getting enough” (17-18). Jesse’s father evokes images of brutality when he eats which have a direct impact on Jesse’s digestion, leading to his nausea and vomiting, but these images also foreshadow the carnage that will be inflicted upon the entire family later that day, leaving only Jesse as a witness to his father’s violence. In a discussion of representation of the human body in literature, Oates notes that “The wisdom of the body speaks in us” (*New Heaven, New Earth* 175). The truth of the body’s wisdom extends to the voice of suffering.
Unlike the idealized 1950s *Leave it to Beaver* homemaker who carefully and lovingly feeds her husband and children to nurture them, controlling what she can in the home, maintaining the status quo, Atwood and Oates use food in their writing in uncharted ways to suggest that it carries alternate, revolutionary meaning. With each presentation of food and eating, these authors push the boundaries of feminine expectation. Whether it be a scene of overindulgence to the point of violence in Oates, or the body’s rejection of food altogether in Atwood, these texts, published between 1968 and 1972, reflect an understanding of the change that is possible for women at the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement. By rewriting food’s role, making it a far more complicated, even menacing element at times, Atwood and Oates lay claim to its power for their own subversive purposes. Like Marian of *The Edible Woman* who involuntarily “found her mouth closing like a frightened sea-anemone” (174) and Richard of *Expensive People* whole felt as if someone else had charge of [his] stomach,” Atwood and Oates, demonstrate that the body acts when one does not have the agency to do so (125). In both authors’ work, embodied eating, that is, eating without conscious thought, or the purely animalistic experience one has with food, occurs in highly charged, emotional circumstances, when one has little or no control over a situation. When Atwood and Oates use food as a structural or narrative element to frame aspects of their work, they claim ultimate control; it is their way of saying: *I, too, control food, but I do*
so for unconventional purposes, rewriting what you think you know about women and their roles. Additionally, throughout their novels, over-the-top scenes of food and eating make it clear that food’s impact on the body has little to do with nutrition and much to do with getting other needs met, from managing trauma to coping with vulnerability, always attempting to reclaim some semblance of agency.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates, both women who themselves worked outside of the home, took a cultural fantasy of woman as homemaker and nurturer to new places: out of the kitchen and into their fiction and turned it on its head. Food that typically sustains and soothes the body is launched into unexpected, often uncomfortable, directions. They take this conventionally feminine vehicle, something well-known to any woman who cooks and feeds her family and use it to create alternative realities based in the physical world.

One demonstrates self-care by eating well. Sharing a meal may create an intimate connection, while cooking for another can be an act of love. These simple notions, quite the opposite of negotiating for power, are glaring omissions from Atwood and Oates’ novels published over fifty years ago; their depictions shake up idealized images of womanhood regarding food and eating, causing one to consider, what are the implications of such portrayals? Like it or not, the female body continues to be associated with the feeding of another, suggesting a woman’s definitive sense of power is as fundamental as what she holds within her physical self. As a revolution is unfolding, and women seek social power, do they claim their influence through food, and if so, do they continue this trend of embodied eating and abuse of food, using it for ill and as a mechanism for control? Or instead, perhaps for them food yields its intended purpose: to nourish.


