

The Gender Politics of Eating in *To the Lighthouse*

Yoshie Onishi

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) criticized “the novelist’s convention not to mention” “what was eaten” as if it was “of no importance” in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) (*A Room of One’s Own*, 12 – 13). It seems that writing about what is eaten is valuable for her experimental writing. Food plays a significant role, especially in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). She wrote in her diary that “let the Lighthouse simmer, adding to it between tea and dinner till it is complete for writing out” and treated the novel as if it was a dish (*Diary III*, 19). She also commented that the “dinner party the best thing I ever wrote” in her letter after she had finished *To the Lighthouse* (*Letter*, 37). There are two types of meals in this novel, namely maternal and paternal meals. Mrs. Ramsay serves delicious dishes in her dinner party. Mr. Ramsay gives his children sandwiches in the ship. Meals are attached to their affection for their children. The relationship between food and mental growth of children obeys psychoanalysis theories. Furthermore, the gender role also influences on the mental growth. The meanings of food are different for men and women in this novel and gender politics may negotiate these differences. Accordingly I attempt a political reading of *To the Lighthouse* in this paper by analyzing the role of food in generating meaning in the novel.

2. Fertile Dishes

Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party is not suitable for men in *To the Lighthouse*. It separates them from their "work" which is more valuable for them (97). So they think that it is "waste of time" (97) and "not worth" their energy on attention (96). The "sterility of men" is displayed at the beginning of her dinner party (91).

Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy — that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing — ladling out soup — she felt, more and more strongly, outside that eddy; or as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room (she looked round it) was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking — one, two, three, one, two, three. (91)

Mrs. Ramsay tries to "merge" and "flow", to "create" connections in people for whom "the sterility of men" dominates (91). Through her dinner party she attempts to make "a coherence" and "a stability" (114) and give color in "the sterility of men" which robs of color, has no beauty, and gives nothing. So this dinner party "remains for ever" (114) in the diners' minds.

The success of Mrs. Ramsay's dinner depends on the rich and delicious dishes which are served there.

Thus brought up suddenly into the light it seemed possessed of great size and depth, was like a world in which one could take one's staff and climb up hills, she thought, and go down into valleys, and to her pleasure (for it brought

them into sympathy momentarily) she saw that Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit, plunged in, broke off a bloom there, a tassel here, and returned, after feasting, to his hive. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them. (105 – 106)

Augustus Carmichael “feasted his eyes on” the colorful and fertile “plate of fruit.” Looking together “united” Mrs. Ramsay and him (105 – 106). So food is used as a kind of semiotic system. The main dish, “Bœuf en Daube” (90) is also served in her dinner.

...an exquisite scent of olives and oil and juice rose from the great brown dish as Marthe, with a little flourish, took the cover off. The cook had spent three days over that dish. And she must take great care, Mrs. Ramsay thought, dividing into the soft mass, to choose a specially tender piece for William Bankes. And she peered into the dish, with its shiny walls and its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bay leaves and its wine, and thought, This will celebrate the occasion — a curious sense rising in her, at once freakish and tender, of celebrating a festival, as if two emotions were called up in her, one profound — for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death; at the same time these lovers, these people entering into illusion glittering-eyed, must be danced round with mockery, decorated with garlands. (109)

E · M · Forster (1879 – 1970) suggests that “Bœuf en Daube” plays an important role in this novel because by eating it diners who were remote before “see the best in one another” and Lily Briscoe, the artist “carries away a recollection of reality” (Forster 246 – 247). He comments “like William Bankes, generally so hard to please, we are satisfied” with the dinner (Forster 246 – 247). So the “Bœuf en Daube” which the “cook had spent three days over” (109) is a symbol of success for Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party and brings eaters happiness.

3. Edible Women

However, our readers cannot eat the “Bœuf en Daube” with perfect satisfaction. This dish, served to “celebrate” the engagement of Paul and Minta, bears “in its bosom the seeds of death” which shows the cruelty of the marriage (109). Patricia Moran points out that the “Bœuf en Daube, a “confusion” of meats and spices cooked together, becomes both an image of marital union and the object of the feast” and calls the engagement which is celebrated here “metaphorical cannibalism” (Moran 143). Although Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party is apparently a very feminine one, she is nonetheless a protector of patriarchy. Lily thinks about her as follows:

There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible. Always she got her own way in the end, Lily thought. Now she had brought this off — Paul and Minta, one might suppose, were engaged. Mr. Banks was dining here. She put a spell on them all, by wishing, so simply, so directly, and Lily contrasted that abundance with her own poverty of spirit, and supposed that it was partly that belief (for her face was all lit up — without looking young, she looked radiant) in this strange, this terrifying thing, which made Paul Rayley, the center of it, all of a tremor, yet abstract, absorbed, silent. Mrs. Ramsay, Lily felt, as she talked about the skins of vegetables, exalted that, worshipped that; held her hands over it to warm them, to protect it, and yet, having brought it all about, somehow laughed, led her victims, Lily felt, to the altar. It came over her too now — the emotion, the vibration of love. (110)

Lily recollects that Mrs. Ramsay “led her victims”, the diners “to the altar” of the marriage by putting “a spell on” them through her dinner (110). The meal sanctifies the relationship as a sacrifice: what marriage itself celebrates. “Some winy smell” “intoxicated her” and forced her to make a marriage (191) as she remembered her dinner. Lily looked at “Minta being charming to Mr.

Ramsay at the other end of the table” and “flinched for her exposed to those fangs” and felt “the heat of love, its horror, its cruelty, its unscrupulosity” (111). She remembered that Mrs. Ramsay had tried to arrange her marriage to Mr. Banks (113) and she “had only escaped by the skin of her teeth” (191). So women, in some sense, function as food eaten by men in this novel.

Mrs. Ramsay displays ravenous masculine greed as a kind of social hunter, gatherer, and leads “her victims,” women, “to the altar” of a male marriage feast (109). However, her energy is sucked by men and she ultimately becomes their victim. Tansley criticized the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, saying “Ramsay had dished himself by marrying a beautiful woman and having eight children” (98). Mrs. Ramsay gave him too much sympathy, “dished” him, exhausted her power and ended to death. Mrs. Ramsay is described as an edible woman who is eaten by men.

Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely, folding her son in her arm, braced herself, and, half turning, seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again), and into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare. He wanted sympathy. ... She laughed, she knitted. Standing between her knees, very stiff, James felt all her strength flaring up to be drunk and quenched by the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy. (42 – 43)

The images of eating and sex are mixed up in this scene. Mr. Ramsay’s “fatal sterility of the male” “like a beak of brass, barren and bare” “plunged” “into this delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life” which Mrs. Ramsay poured

(43). The “beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male” (43) suggests penis and being “drunk” (43) and “quenched” (43) by it implies copulation. That James who looked at this is “standing between her knees, very stiff” (43) is associated with erection. This shows James’s unconscious sexual desires for his mother. He hated his father and thought that had “there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father’s breast and killed him, there and then, James would have seized it” (8). So his Oedipus complex achieves climax in these scenes.

4. The Relationship of Eating and Mental Growth

The change of the relationship with James and his father after he overcame his Oedipus complex is shown by the descriptions of eating. James hates his father even when he goes to the lighthouse with him (199, 202, 203). However, the lunch which they eat in the ship relieves his Oedipus complex. On one hand, Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner is a maternal food; on the other, Mr. Ramsay’s sandwiches are paternal food.

Mr. Ramsay opened the parcel and shared out the sandwiches among them. Now he was happy, eating bread and cheese with these fishermen. He would have liked to live in a cottage and lounge about in the harbour spitting with the other old men, James thought, watching him slice his cheese into thin yellow sheets with his penknife.

This is right, this is it, Cam kept feeling, as she peeled her hard-boiled egg. Now she felt as she did in the study when the old men were reading *The Times*. Now I can go on thinking whatever I like, and I shan’t fall over a precipice or be drowned, for there he is, keeping his eye on me, she thought.

(221 – 222)

Mr. Ramsay “opened the parcel” and “shared the sandwiches” with his children

and sailors (221). He had demanded sympathy and gave nothing in return. However, he shows affection for his children by sharing the sandwiches with them. He praises James, saying “Well done” (223). James relieves his hate for his father by being praised by him. In this way he can overcome his Oedipus complex. As Elizabeth Abel notes, his mental change appears through his changing view of the lighthouse (Abel 49). He shared the fantastic world with his mother by looking at the lighthouse as “a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening” (202). However, after her death, his view of the lighthouse is different. He begins to pay attention to the facts, look at things truly, and recognize things as his father does by analytic eyes. He recognized that the lighthouse “was barred with black and white”, he “could see windows in it” and “he could even see washing spread on the rocks to dry” (202). “It satisfied him” that he “shared that knowledge” with his father (220).

Cam also grows up mentally by getting affection from her father. She feels that it is right to be given the sandwiches by him and realizes his affection. She accepts food which symbolizes the affection of her father and grows up mentally. So she becomes a woman who eats. However, she eats only food which is labeled feminine. She refuses to eat the sandwich which her father and sailors share and receives “a gingerbread nut” which is given as if it is handed by “a great Spanish gentleman” who is “handing a flower to a lady at a window” (222). So she is a slave to her gender role and obedient to her father and her brother as a daughter and a sister.

5. The Relationship of Eating and Woolf's Aesthetics

Lily was also required to be obedient to men by Mrs. Ramsay during her lifetime. However, after her death, Lily can be freed from the restraint of her

gender role. She refused to give sympathy to Mr. Ramsay who was like “a lion seeking whom he could devour” (170). Her independence is shown by her preparing coffee for herself and drinking it (159–160). Dodd argues that “we see that the only characters who are actually described as eating anything are men; and while the hostess, Mrs. Ramsay, is ever present helping her guests to tender morsels, she is never seen to consume the food herself” (Dodd 152). While male characters in this novel function as eaters, female characters serve as servers; they are hostesses and preparers. So eating seems to be a masculine act in this novel. However, Lily becomes not a server, a hostess, or an edible woman, like Mrs. Ramsay, but a woman who consumes food without being prepossessed with the gender role. She is androgynous because she can share both masculine and feminine views.

Lily could finish drawing her picture after Mr. Ramsay and his children go to the lighthouse. Her androgynous aesthetics are influenced by both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. Dodd suggests that Mrs. Ramsay is an “artistic hostess who can create order out of chaos, whose decision to place Lily nearer to Mr. Banks in the future, in order to promote a harmonious arrangement between them, corresponds to Lily’s decision to place the tree more in the center of her picture, in order to strike a better artistic balance; both are artists, in different mediums” (Dodd 152). Lily is fascinated by Mrs. Ramsay’s artistic sense to “create order out of chaos.” Mrs. Ramsay’s meal is also a colorful and creative one, but the vision which is shown by it is an evanescent one.

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realising it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape

against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it — a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (118)

The pictorial vision which this dish of fruit gave “united” Mrs. Ramsay and Carmichael (105 – 106). However, this vision was fragile because “a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing” (118).

Lily wanted Mr. Ramsay to complete her vision. She thought that she needed “a miracle” and “an ecstasy” which occurred through Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner and “ordinary experience” “to feel simply that’s a chair, that’s a table” (218) to complete her picture. That table is associated with the “kitchen table” which symbolizes Mr. Ramsay’s work as Ferrer suggests (55). Unlike Mrs. Ramsay’s table which is full of colorful dishes, this “uncompromisingly plain” table is “visionary, austere”, “bare, hard, not ornamental” and has “no colour” (170). However, it has an “unornamented beauty which so deeply impressed her” (170). Ferrer suggests that ordinary experience is needed to realize a reality and “a reality” is “articulated by the Symbolic, under the paternal authority” (Ferrer 55). She also points out that ecstasy is attached with the Real, and the Real is influenced by the mother (Ferrer 55). To complete her work Lily should “integrate” “ecstasy” with “reality” and “find compromise between stability and break-up” which is an aspect of the ecstasy (Ferrer 55). So she shares the masculine view represented by Mr. Ramsay’s “kitchen table” and a feminine view which is shown by Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party. By combining these two views she can make an androgynous pictorial vision. Abel indicates that the picture she completed is “an androgynous work of art” (Abel 82).

Lily’s aesthetic is linked with Virginia Woolf’s process of writing novels. Hugh Kenner calls Woolf’s style “undifferentiated verbal soup” (Kenner 23).

Just as “undifferentiated” “soup” retains its form as liquid, so her stream-of-consciousness style retains its form as language but one which resists any gesture of re-differentiation. She expresses the feminine in language which is considered a symbolic masculine tool. Virginia Woolf considered the ideal writers’ mind as androgynous in *A Room of One’s Own*, and the text which written by her is equally androgynous.

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