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# IMAGES OF FOOD AND EATING IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVELS

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## Introduction

It's [death] one of the great themes of literature, along with love, war, nature — and what else? Meals, perhaps. There are a lot of meals in my writing. Meals are more precise than deaths.<sup>1</sup>

Images of food and eating, symbolic and concrete, are important in Margaret Atwood's — the distinguished Canadian author, Booker prize-winner — production. In my work in progress — my dissertation — I examine the images of food, eating, symbolic hunting and symbolic cannibalism in Margaret Atwood's ten novels from *The Edible Woman* (1969) to *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

In my dissertation, I study what food and eating represent in the novels. What do the images of food and eating tell of the characters? What is their importance to the narrative? These images are gendered. What do they tell of the narrator's views of gender: what is female characters relationship to food? What is typical for male characters in terms of food and eating? What part power plays in these images? Who has the power and what do they do with it? Who suffers, who wins, who eats whom?

Characters's eating, cooking and the food they eat are portrayed, sometimes in detail. The heterosexual romances of the novels, which are usually failed romances, are narrated with images of symbolic hunting and symbolic cannibalism. Characters hunt each other in order to get sex, marriage or pregnancy. They may feel trapped or they are portrayed as meat in the butcher or meat-eating plants and eggs. The images of food, eating, symbolic hunting and symbolic cannibalism are intertwined in the novels: sometimes an image includes them all, sometimes only one of these aspects.

In my dissertation, I argue that in Atwood's novels food is a way to portray things, which might otherwise be silent, would lack words or would be too banal when put in words: feelings like fear, depression, and experience of power, powerlessness or pleasure. It is also a tool of depicting the often-violent sexual difference.

The importance of images of food in Atwood's production is asserted by several writers, but examined in depth only by few<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Atwood and Beaulieu 1998, 120.

Discussion of food is an important aspect of psychoanalytic and sociological theory. Also literary theory has considered food as relevant theme to study. Sociological studies usually focus on the practices of eating and on the significance of food in society, food cultures. Sociological studies, like Lupton 1996, give a description of food practices in several contexts. What do people eat? What does nationality, class, gender, religion have to do with food and eating? How do people build their subjectivity with certain dietary habits? Psychoanalytic scholars often consider the mother-infant relationship as the essence of questions of nourishment. The nature of this first relationship gives the basis to person's development. If infant's needs are not met problems arise in emotional level. Literary theory is interested in food and eating as symbols and metaphors in fiction. Sarah Sceats argues that "if anything could function as a universal signifier; it would surely be food"<sup>3</sup>. The images and metaphors of eating and food express much more of than one would think at first.

In this presentation, I discuss shortly some theory of food and show examples of my reading of Atwood's eighth novel *The Robber Bride* from year 1993. I start with a short introduction of the writer.

## Margaret Atwood

Canadian Margaret Atwood is a prolific writer: she has written poetry, short-stories and eleven novels. Her work is appreciated by critics, scholars and readers and she has been awarded several literary prizes. Her books have been published in almost forty countries. Her production includes multiple genres and literary fields: from popular literary criticism and critiques to plays and opera libretto. She has written to several readerships: to children and academics. She has even drawn and written a political cartoon strip for a Canadian magazine *This Magazine* under the pseudonym "Bart Gerrard."<sup>4</sup> The cartoon introduces "Survivalwoman", "a superheroine who defends Canadian culture against Canadian bureaucrats and the United States"<sup>5</sup>.

Margaret Atwood is often described as a political writer, who raises questions and criticises inequality. She is a member of Amnesty International and writer's organisations such as P.E.N and Canada's Writer's Union (of which she is a founding member). Labels like feminism, human rights, nationalism and anti-Americanism (Americanism used here as a symbol meaning colonialism, over-consumption, value system that is based on money and profit, etc., not simply a nation or its citizens) are often used to characterise her writing and activities. She herself is not willing to portray herself with "isms" but seems to think that political commentary is a given part of being a writer.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholson 1987, Parker 1995, Sceats 2000 and Wilson 1989 have concentrated on the motifs of food and eating. Sarah Sceats discusses food and eating in Atwood's fiction in a chapter called "Sharp appetites: Margaret Atwood's consuming politics", in her book *Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Among other writers she examines are Doris Lessing and Angela Carter. Sceats sees food and eating as having complex implications in Atwood's novels: "her extensive symbolic use of food and eating (...) highlight themes such as the commodification of women, the duplicity of sexual predation or the negative power of the victim". She stresses that Atwood language of food concentrates on the issue of women and responsibility. Parker and Nicholson concentrate in their articles on the aspect of power in eating in Atwood's novels. Sarah Wilson examines the elements of fairy tale and symbolic cannibalism in *The Edible Woman*.

<sup>3</sup> Sceats 2000, 1, 8. Sceats does, of course, remember the cultural specificity of all signs.

<sup>4</sup> Oates 1992b, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Stein 1999, 1.

Some themes and issues repeat themselves throughout the Atwoodian canon<sup>6</sup>: female identity, female body, interest in the “gothic sensibility” of romance, the fear and desire between sexes, the complex relationships between women: mothers and daughters, other relatives such as aunts like Aunt Lou in *Lady Oracle* and sisters like Iris and Laura in *The Blind Assassin*, and female friendship. Important themes are also the concern for the nature and love for the Canadian “bush”, flora and fauna.

Atwood uses skilfully different genres “with vengeance”, with her own modifications: she puts a woman in the centre of story, a place reserved traditionally to the masculine protagonist. As Rachel DuPlessis puts it, Atwood does “rectify narrative by major attention to muted stories”<sup>7</sup>.

Food is an issue of politics. Atwood has written the following: “By ‘politics’... I mean who is entitled to do what to whom, with impunity; who profits by it; and who therefore eats what”<sup>8</sup>. This sentence politicises several senses of eating: the symbolic eating and the “real” eating of everyday level.

Next I will introduce some thoughts of food and eating.

## Food and Eating

Food is something we all share: we all have a relationship with food and an attitude (or attitudes) towards food. As Deborah Lupton crystallizes: “Food and eating are central to our subjectivity (...) the meanings, discourses and practices around food and eating are worthy of detailed cultural analysis and interpretation”<sup>9</sup>. To Sarah Sceats

Eating is a fundamental activity (...) the first thing we do (...) the primary source of pleasure and frustration (...) What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why — even who they eat — are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society.<sup>10</sup>

It is a common phrase, even a cliché that a person is what he/she eats. In this context food is seen as a part of identity, something that makes or strengthens what you are.<sup>11</sup> Food can also be seen as something that weakens your identity and is stronger than one’s self. For instance Julia Kristeva says that food is crossing our borders when we eat, vomit or defecate and thus it can be seen as threatening our idea of bodily soundness and integrity<sup>12</sup>. Food interferes our vision of our bodies as clean: preparing and eating are dirtying practices and there is always the danger that food is or becomes rancid. Food is the other and it becomes a part of us. Even though food can be a source of distress and abjection, it also gives us immense pleasure.<sup>13</sup>

By eating or avoiding certain edibles we aim to have a certain effect in our body or mind. Some theoreticians see food as an object, some see it more like a strong subject, which is capable of changing and even frightening us. Food is closely connected to control and power: for instance butchery, definition of edible and inedible and preparation of food are areas bound with power issues. The questions like who prepares for whom, who eats and what, where and how, who pays et cetera are all connected with status and power. Several

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<sup>6</sup> The term “Atwoodian canon” comes from Stein 1999.

<sup>7</sup> DuPlessis 1985, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Atwood 1982, 394, Stein 1999, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Lupton 1996, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sceats 2000, 1.

<sup>11</sup> For instance Pöysä 2001, Koistinen 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Kristeva 1993, 199, 206-207, Sceats 2000, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Lupton 1996, 3, Sceats 2000, 1.

feelings are closely bonded with food, for example “hunger, greed, shame, disgust and pleasure”<sup>14</sup>.

According to Mary Anne Schofield, food

articulates in concrete terms what is oftentimes vague, internal, abstract. (...) Food cooked, eaten, and thought about provides a metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life.<sup>15</sup>

The images and metaphors of eating and food express much more of human life than one would think at first. Gender, nationality, ethnic origin or identification, class, race etc, can be seen as linked with food: what, where and how one eats. For instance Kim Chernin sees femininity, femaleness and food intertwined in many aspects. She argues that the problematic relationship with food is more common than exceptional among women and sees early experiences of nourishment, eating and food central to the formation of one’s identity. Love and food are intertwined and mixed in early childhood and effects of this early interaction are influential also in later life.<sup>16</sup> Women are often the ones to buy and prepare food, at least in families and in daily basis, in everyday level. They can also be thought as “food” in the time of possible breast-feeding. As Lupton puts it: “food and eating are feminine and embodied”<sup>17</sup>. Men often do rise cooking to a different sphere: they are famous chefs or the Sunday dinner makers.

In cultural sense gender can be produced in terms of food eating: you are a (typical or some specific kind of) man or woman if you eat or cook certain things. This can be seen as humoristic or not, for instance girls are made of sugar and boys of frogs.<sup>18</sup> Boxes of candy and sweets and chocolate bars often have feminine names like Marianne etc. The chain of association of food and edible is complex and rich. Women are associated with something sweet and tasty, men are more the eaters. Of course we do have stereotypical images of greedy female ogress and male ascetic.

Also the concepts of abject and grotesque can be attached to the theme of eating. According to Julia Kristeva, abject is something thrown out from the symbolic order; it is horrible and disgusting. It is closely connected to the body, femininity and maternal. We are afraid when confronted with maternity and death; we are afraid of dissolving into them; disappearing, losing our individuality. This facing with strange, unfamiliar, uncanny, causes horror in us: death, maternal and femininity remind us of our own frailness, the frightening aspects of our corporeality.<sup>19</sup>

Eating can be described as grotesque activity. An overweight woman eating greedily in public can be seen as grotesque. A person who burps and eats messily is considered to be an unpleasant sight. Gluttony can be seen as disgusting, especially from a point of view of an anorexic. An anorexic body and excessive fasting is grotesque and frightening in the eyes of others. “Improper” eating — from dirtying your face with sauce to bingeing — can make us feel like abject (fragmented, disgusting), especially if we have restored feelings of guilt springing from our childhood.

In the following, I will read the images of food and eating in Atwood’s novel *The Robber Bride*.

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<sup>14</sup> Probyn 2000, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Schofield 1989, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Chernin 1985, xi-xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Lupton 1996, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Pöysä 2001, also Koistinen 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva 1992, 188, 191, 196, Kristeva 1993, 189.

## **The Robber Bride**

In *The Robber Bride*, three main characters — Tony, Charis and Roz — have all an obsessive attitude towards a fourth character, Zenia. In the course of the novel, the three women remember their lives and their painful pasts and the happenings including Zenia, whom they have all met while studying in the same university in Toronto. The story begins with three women having lunch and seeing Zenia whose funeral they had attended earlier, thinking that she had died in Middle East bombing.

All three women have been betrayed by Zenia in their past and Zenia has seduced their partners: Tony's husband West, Charis's boyfriend and the father of her child Billy, and Roz's husband Mitch. West has returned to Tony, but Billy left Charis with Zenia and she hasn't heard from him ever since. Roz's husband Mitch has died, probably committing a suicide after Zenia had left him.

Tony is a war historian in the University of Toronto, married to West who composes music. Tony's narrative starts and ends the story, giving the women's relationship to Zenia a colouring of a battle and war. The story is contextualised and problematised in Tony's thoughts: what is truth? Can it ever be told? Can a personal view of the other ever be correct or even near?

Charis is a single mother of an adult daughter August, a student in her early twenties. Charis works part-time in a lifestyle shop that offers alternative things like crystals. Her narrative stresses the spiritual side of life; things like astral body and aura recur in her story. Roz is a successful businesswoman who has taken over the family business after the death of her father. She is mother of teenager twin girls and son Larry, a twenty two year old.

As Karen Stein has noted, "[t]he three women are also three aspects of the personality: Tony the mind, Charis the spirit, and Roz the body".<sup>20</sup> Zenia herself has no story of her own; her stories have existence only through other women's perspectives.

I divide my reading in two chapters: first one, *Food, Eating and Character Qualities: Practical, Ethical, Sensual and Cunning Eater* discusses the novel's main characters and their relationship to food. The second one, *Food and Aggression*, concentrates on the violent edge of the novel's images of food and eating.

### ***Food, Eating and Character Qualities: Practical, Ethical, Sensual and Cunning Eater***

In *The Robber Bride*, all characters eat in a way fitting to their qualities: Tony is a practical eater, fuelling herself in order to work and live. Charis tries to live in harmony with her body and nature and is a vegetarian, interested in products that promise health and balance. Roz comforts herself with food and it gives her pleasure. On the other hand, she is trying to eat healthily and tries diets, although she is critical of them. Roz's character implies slight confusion in front of the media images that govern how to eat and how to look like. She appears to desire those images but is also partly satisfied with herself. Zenia, who has no

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<sup>20</sup> Stein 1999, 99. More of the related myths and mythic women who might be connected with the characters see Stein 1999, 100. (Charis: the maiden Kore, Roz: Demeter, mother and practical one, Tony: crone Hecate and Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom and war.)

narrative of her own, but many inside the narratives of the other women, is a cunning and deceptive eater. For instance she claims that she stopped eating vitamin C in order to convince Charis that she has cancer.

Tony wants things to be out in the open, not hidden or shuffled. This characteristics of her is shown in her attitude towards meat eating:

The French liked to make dishes in the shapes of the things that were going to be served in them; when it came to eating they rarely beat about the bush. Their menus read like a vegetarian's nightmare — hearts of these, brains of that. Tony appreciates this directness. (RB, 13.)

Tony's character is portrayed well in her attitude to food. She wants to speak of things in their own names (except of Zenia with her husband West); she isn't a hypocrite or a snob. She refuses to use euphemisms or to make things look prettier than they are; she isn't trying to please anybody. She is a war historian who isn't shy of speaking about the atrocities. On the contrary, she finds it annoying when people circle around issues. But she is silent of certain things, like the painful memories of her mother and Zenia. She is also a recluse, a loner: she has made a language of her own and would like to be alone in her own world, which she wants to surround with "a moat (...) drawbridge and crocodiles" (RB, 18). Tony mixes her wine with water, she is "wary of alcohol" (RB, 29), a person who likes to be in control of herself.

Charis wants to eat balanced meals and offers them also to her ungrateful daughter, Augusta. Charis's breakfast, after her yoga exercises, is muesli, fruits and yoghurt — a very recommended breakfast by nutrition experts. She read, as a child, *The Save Your Life Cookbook*, which advised her to "visualize what any given piece of fat would look like in her stomach" (RB, 45). She can't forget this; she even seems slightly obsessed with healthy eating, and especially the fat content of her food and how it appears inside of her. Her interest in food is commented ironically, with a grotesque degradation: "she sees everything on her plate in the guise of a future turd" (RB, 45). Her principles are warmly ridiculed and put into their place by connecting them with the outcome everybody has, with or without healthy eating: the excrement.

Even though Charis likes hamburgers, she doesn't eat them. She even says that a hamburger is an emotion, wiped away at will. This implies that a hamburger maybe strongly desired, an object that you want but doesn't do you good. Like other emotions, Charis thinks that hamburgers, desire for them, can be controlled — showing that Charis's diet demands willpower, even though she doesn't seem like a very controlled person. Eating meat would be crossing a border that Charis has made. It would be inviting in something she has thrown out of her life, something abject. She has even abandoned Christianity, because "the Bible is full of meat" (RB, 63), and she criticises the Bible's God for not accepting the vegetable offering Cain made. Charis doesn't drink coffee or ordinary tea, just herbal tea, and of course has never smoked.

For health reasons, she even thinks of eating something that culture has marked inedible and disgusting: dirt, because she knows that wise women, grandmothers, maybe even her own, have done it. This behaviour would make Charis grotesque in the eyes of others, a transgressing spectacle<sup>21</sup>.

The cunning eater Zenia gets Charis's sympathy and attention by claiming that she has cancer and other people try make her eat animal protein against her own will:

"He tries to get me eat... mounds of food, steak and butter, all those animal fats. They make me nauseated, I can't, I just can't!"

"Oh," says Charis. This is a horrible story, and one that has the ring of truth. So few people understand about animal fats. (...) She is troubled, she is on the verge of tears; above all she is helpless. (RB, 221.)

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<sup>21</sup> See Russo 1995.

This argument of “forced” meat eating, due to Charis’s childhood experiences, has equally shocking impact on her, as is Zenia’s claim that her boyfriend physically abuses her. This is a good example of how Zenia’s character is portrayed to be: cunning and abusive knower of everybody’s weak and soft points, their painful experiences. Also the use of alcohol is being put to boyfriend’s bad influence on Zenia. Charis’s reaction seems to be equal concerning both cancer and eating animal fat: she sees these two strongly linked. Her horror of animal fat (and in elsewhere, her worrying of eating white sugar <sup>22</sup>) seems excessive. It is both surprising and vaguely funny, but also extraordinary. It separates Charis from the crowd, the so-called normal people, and the repetition of her strict ideas of food and drink make character vulnerable to label of a “nut”, as Roz’s husband Mitch politely calls Charis behind her back. When Charis’s eating habits are compared to Tony’s, who has importantly the voice to start and end the novel, Charis seems neurotic and over-concerned and Tony a mixture of cynic and realist. This description of Charis’s attitude towards food and eating is a big part of her structure as a character: she is a mixture of healthy and admirable habits, but also scariness of life and fear of being an ordinary person, the one she used to be: the abused and hurt Karen <sup>23</sup>.

The way Roz’s character eats, treats, buys and thinks of food is coloured by her good financial status and the various knowledge of healthy eating and proper weight from the glossy women’s magazines (she is an editor of one). Roz needs strong coffee, and makes it with upper class style: grinds beans and has an Italian espresso maker. She isn’t a good cook and eats often out: “why did God make restaurants if he intended her to cook” (RB, 357). This remark is typical of Roz’s character. She tries not to feel guilty of not being “the angel of the house” type of a mother and thinks that if she has money she should use it too. She often talks of or to God, because of her strict Catholic upbringing, but in a secular and comic manner, degrading God by connecting him into very down to earth issues. The above quotation is a good example of the humorous, even funny style of Roz’s narrative.

Roz is often on a diet, especially in the earlier days she remembers during the novel: “Grapefruit ones, bran added to everything, all-protein” (RB, 79). She has learned from the magazines that “weird diets are bad for you” (RB, 79), and seems to have ambivalent thoughts about her weight, starts a diet in a breakfast, but stops it during the same meal, thinking: “Why punish the flesh?” (RB, 80). She also smokes.

On the other hand, she is trying to eat less, but on the other hand, she is satisfied with herself: “It’s not as if she’s fat, anyway. She’s just solid. A good peasant body” (RB, 79). Nevertheless, her body appears in her dreams, as a shameful, even grotesque: “big slack raw embarrassing body” (RB, 72). Zenia, in Roz’s mind, is always on a diet: “you don’t get a waist like Zenia without hard work” (RB, 80). Being a woman of men’s dream, the model of magazines, is depicted to be unnatural and demanding state. You will have to “stint the body” and deny it the pleasure of eating and food.

Roz fills herself with food: “She gets hugely, cavernously lonely, and then she eats. Eats and drinks and smokes, filling up her inner spaces” (RB, 91). Overeating can be an effort to fill the feeling of emptiness inside and suppress negative emotions <sup>24</sup>. Roz is greedy and sensual eater, who sometimes (only alone) licks her plate avariciously. When Roz finds out of Mitch’s current lover, in her retrospective narrative, she eats “chocolate mud cake” (RB, 300). When she feels rage because of Zenia’s return, she eats chocolate and when she mourns for her late husband Mitch, she eats again. She is described as eating automatically: “she finds herself holding an empty plate and wondering why there is no longer anything on it” (RB, 292). When she is nervous, she eats and drinks — eating is a way of dealing with her emotions.

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<sup>22</sup> The beggars on the street have “swollen, sunken faces of those who eat too much refined sugar” (RB, 197), in Charis’s narrative. Instead of money, she would like to give them “her home-grown carrots” (RB, 197).

<sup>23</sup> Karen has renamed herself, like all the women in the novel, to Charis.

<sup>24</sup> For instance Epstein 1987, 29.

### ***Food and Aggression***

Tony has a three-dimensional map, which is made of flour and salt, where she stages the battles she is currently interested in. The men, soldiers and ordinary people, are represented by “kitchen spices”: cloves, dill, chocolate sprinkles et cetera (RB, 111). They appear to be a feminine comment on war: a mixture of kitchen, cooking, tangibility and waging war. The people on the map are all edible, so is the whole map, suggesting their vulnerability and momentariness — they will disappear, they will die. They are delicious and interesting, but easy to erase. An army of cloves or green peppercorns is also slightly amusing, funny, a degradation. In this representation, something so fundamental in humanity and masculinity as war is diminished into spices. Tony even eats one of the cloves: “It is a bad habit of hers, eating parts of the armies on her map; luckily there are always replacements” (RB, 113, see also RB, 463). Thus Tony plays a goddess above her own kingdom. This appears to be ironic, degrading, even crude commentary, and it is connected with the actual lives of actual soldiers: “the dead soldiers would have been eaten too, one way or another”. The men are victims and there are always new ones who are killed and eaten — a realistic statement of war with a grotesque colouring.

Tony thinks that Zenia’s voice is like “glazed chocolate, with a soft, buttery, deceptive centre. Sweet, and bad for you” (RB, 131). Zenia is seductive and pleasurable like chocolate, with a surprise inside of her. She is addictive and arouses one’s desire and need, but may be bad for you: chocolate’s effects are under dispute. On the other hand, it is told to be comforting and diminishing stress, on the other hand it is considered to include too much fat. When Charis, following Zenia, sees Zenia with Roz’s son Larry, she is horrified and thinks: “Larry might as well be drinking liquid drain cleaner” (RB, 198). Drinking drain cleaner is a suicide attempt. The substance is very dangerous, possibly destroying your mouth and throat, deadly poison. It is also a very painful way to die. This opinion of Zenia as a cleaning liquid is funnily incongruous and very exact if we consider three women’s experiences of her: Zenia is beautiful and, for a while, does good for the men she uses, makes them feel better about themselves. But, she also appears as a destructive force, a painful medicine or an agonizing lesson.

In Tony’s childhood memories, her parents are in war during dinners: her father asking cunning questions in order to make the mother fall in to a trap and her mother’s eyes “narrowed a little, as if aiming” (RB, 147). When Tony moves in with West, she is happy and they “share tidy breakfasts and sweet, kindly nights” (RB, 180), a life without aggression. Their breakfasts are tidy and nights sweet, not messy and destructive. The breakfast’s tidiness is a sign of their compatibility and of a life suitable for Tony.

But then Zenia reappears, lamb blood drips on the floor of the food Tony is cooking and she thinks of sticking a skewer into Zenia’s chest — a scene reminiscent of sacrifice ritual: images of blood and killing.<sup>25</sup> Zenia tells West and Tony that they are two “kids on along picnic, playing sand castles at the beach” (RB, 182), clearly trying to undermine their happiness, saying it is an illusion and temporary: picnic doesn’t last forever; it is a treat on a holiday.

Roz takes care of Tony when West runs off to Zenia, feeding her “baby food”: “canned chicken noodle soup, caramel pudding, peanut butter and banana sandwiches, grape juice” (RB, 187). Food is shown to be a comfort and a part of healing process. Roz is feeding Tony in order to make her feel better or at least keep her in shape in order to live again, after the “illness” fades. Charis and Tony feed lovingly Roz, both in their own way, after her husband’s death, and this appears to be giving without demands, loving care.

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<sup>25</sup> More of the connection with Zenia and blood, see Sceats 2000, 118.

When Tony is better and starts working again, she avoids proper meals, eating only cheese and crackers, as if the real meals alone would be too painful, underlining the fact that the other isn't sitting across the table. This behaviour is reminiscent of a recently widowed person, who finds it uncomfortable to eat in a table she shared with the loved one. Also Roz sees eating alone sad and uncomfoting: "Food should be shared. Solitary eating can be like solitary drinking — a way of dulling the edge, of filling in the blanks. The blank; the empty man-shaped outline" (RB, 390). Eating seizes to be a happy event when you mourn and miss for somebody else. It is filling time, filling pain, an effort to stop negative emotions inside by suppressing them with food, trying to satisfy oneself with eating when there isn't what one would really need. Eating alone is an ambivalent thing: although it can comfort during difficult times, it is enjoyable only when loneliness is chosen.

When West returns, as a wreck, Tony starts cooking "small dinners, to boil breakfast eggs" (RB, 190). She loves him and wants him to feel better, but she is suspicious: will all her care taking lead only to a similar incident? When West is better, will he leave again? It is suggested that Tony is afraid of being only a medical tent where the torn soldier comes to be made new again in order to leave the nurse who fell in love with him. Even in the present tense of the novel, Tony wants to own West, as if he was "a liquor bottle" (RB, 183) to which she could put a sign saying "No Trespassing" on her own, reverse language. Comparison of West to drink suggests that West (and Tony) has aged from the time that she felt he was water, and that Tony would like West to be something so easy to possess and control as a bottle of alcohol (although they say that you have to careful with liquor).

In Tony's narrative, the narrator uses food to illustrate the difference between Tony and Zenia in Tony's mind:

Zenia (...) was raw (...) raw sex, whereas Tony herself was only the cooked variety. Parboiled to get the dangerous wildness out, the strong fresh-blood flavours. Zenia was gin at midnight, Tony was eggs for breakfast, and in eggcups (...) (RB, 406.)

Zenia represents forbidden and seductive elements: raw meat is delight for some and scary for others, it is a walk on the wild side. It is considered to be possibly bad for you, causing problems to your digestion, even giving worms. Eating raw meat, or seeing somebody eating can cause abjection. It is also is a part of rituals and a sign of different desire, a desire outside the proper order of cooked and raw. Gin is strong alcohol, giving you strong intoxication but also a heavy and painful hangover — a very precise image to describe Zenia's presence in the lives of the characters of *The Robber Bride*. Tony is the opposite of Zenia in terms of food and propriety. She is boiled and cooked, implying civilisation and good manners; she has even a touch of prudishness with the eggcups. No spontaneity and sudden impulses with Tony — these images suggest. Zenia is the pleasure and wildness of midnight and Tony is the awakening and sobriety of the morning.

Seven-year-old Charis, then Karen, visiting for the first time her grandmother (who is reminiscent of the grandmother in the fairy tale Red Riding Hood) in her farm, understands the connection between animal and meat and decides to give it up. The bacon she has been devouring is a pet and a friend, how could she eat a friend? That would be immensely abject: eating a cadaver of someone you know, the cadaver being the ultimate source of abject — blurring our borders and reminding us of our own eventual death<sup>26</sup>. Some might take it as a holy ritual, where the powers and qualities of the eaten one would transfer to the eater, but not Charis. Her mixed feelings about her grandmother get another aspect: she is a killer. The grandmother is a powerful healer and a wise woman, and the closest to loving parent Charis ever had, but nonetheless a killer. The grandmother tries to convince Charis to eat meat by claiming that if you don't eat them, they will eat you, but Charis has set her mind up. She appears to have a more benign view of the world and its power relations, believing probably to the slogan live and let live, not live and let die. Meat is also connected to the

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<sup>26</sup> Kristeva 1982, 4.

sexual abuse Karen suffered: Uncle Vern smells like “rancid meat” (RB, 262), and his face looks like “uncooked beef” (RB, 261). In the later side of the novel, Charis dreams of Billy, who has a face of “raw meat” (RB, 399), implying that some part of Charis connects Billy with the other abuser of her life, Uncle Vern. Her excessive disgust of animal fat and meat is explained with the connection to abuse she has suffered. Meat is (sexual) abuse in Charis’s book.

When Zenia is dead, the three women want to have a ceremony where they disperse Zenia’s remains, the dust to the lake from a ferry. Food is a part of this ceremony. During the ferry ride, Roz thinks hungrily of eating: “because death is a hunger, a vacancy, and you have to fill it up” (RB, 467). In funerals people usually eat and are often hungry. The abjection of death is thrown away, pushed back with eating. Food makes us feel stronger and healthier and comforts us: we aren’t the one who died. We are still alive. Food and eating is a mark of our living, food is life to us.

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