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## THE ARTISTIC AND RELIGIOUS NATURE OF FOOD IN "CHRIST IN THE HOUSE OF MARTHA AND MARY"

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### Abstract

A.S. Byatt's short story "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary", based on Diego Velázquez's painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, revolves around the relation of a young painter and a young cook. Food is thus associated with art, and, the subject matter of the artist being of a religious nature, with religion. The young painter discerns a fellow artist in the young cook, Dolores, who is not happy with the reception and appreciation of the food she cooks. She complains that her food is not noticed, not completely consumed, played with and even fed to the dog. The painter, however, has a simpler view of food: "Like life ... We eat and are eaten". (Byatt 227) Notwithstanding, he elevates food by asserting that when painting eggs, fish and onions, he is indeed "painting Godhead." (Byatt 226) Accordingly, the fish and eggs are associated with Jesus and Resurrection, in that they symbolise life. Furthermore, it is stated that "the letters of Christ's name make up the Greek word for fish". (Byatt 226) Besides, the garlic, Dolores uses in making a sauce called *alioli*, is an aphrodisiac and connotes sexual desire and power and is thus associated with life since sex is the very source of life. Finally, the meal at the end of the story, which is reminiscent of the Eucharist, depicts food as knowledge. The initiation of the young cook, as an artist, is at last complete. That the enlightenment has been mutual and that Dolores has also contributed to the art of the painter, especially with her observation and command of her senses while cooking, can be noticed for it is not only the painter who provides for the meal. While the painter provides wine, Dolores provides a spicy tortilla, replacing the wafer in the Eucharist.

A.S. Byatt's short story "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary" (1998), which is taken from her collection of short stories titled *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, is based on Diego Velázquez's painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (c. 1618). A detail of Velázquez's painting is provided as a sort of epigraph before the story itself. The detail displays the lower right-hand corner of the original painting with two heads of garlic, one of which is half-skinned, one paprika, four fish on a chipped earthenware plate, two eggs and a spoon on another chipped earthenware plate. This latter plate is in front of a wine pitcher. They are all laid on a brown kitchen table against a wall of a darker shade of brown. The painting itself is supposedly finished at the end of the story

by a young painter and the two women being portrayed in the foreground are respectively Concepción, an elderly cook and a friend of the painter, and Dolores, a young cook.

The story revolves around the relation of the painter and Dolores. The young painter, whose name is not mentioned in the story, pointing to his Godhead, discerns a fellow artist in Dolores, the young cook, whose name is one of the titles of Virgin Mary – Maria de los Dolores, meaning “Mary of the Sorrows” in Spanish. Hence, they are both attributed the quality of creativity as God is the creator of the universe and everything in it and Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ. Given that God made it rain fish and manna to feed the Israelite in the desert in the Old Testament so that they would not starve, Dolores, too, assumes a God-like role as a cook providing nourishing meals. Food is thus associated with art, and, the subject matter of the artist in question being of a religious nature, with religion. Given the metaphorical readings of the raw ingredients and kitchen apparatuses used in the painting and the story, food is further associated with reproduction, with resurrection, with desire, with sexuality and thus with life. As the reception and appreciation of food come under scrutiny, food is also associated with knowledge and with companionship.

The painter praises Dolores “for her good nose for herbs, for her tact with sugar and spice, for her command of sweet and sour, rich and delicate” and calls her “a true artist [...] gesturing with his fork.” (Byatt 223) Pointing a fork, as Sarah Sceats maintains, “is not quite as nakedly aggressive as pointing a knife, [although] it is certainly threatening”. (140) The painter here, accordingly, assumes some superiority and authority over Dolores as he is one of the guests while she is a servant waiting on them. Concepción too believes that Dolores “had an extraordinary fine nose for savour and spices, and a light hand with pastries and batters ... She could become a true artist, if she chose, she could go far.” (Byatt 219) It is the acute senses, crafty hands, imagination, creativity, sense of harmony and/or discord and aesthetic judgement of Dolores that is being acknowledged and praised by both an artist and a senior cook. Correspondingly, Kant maintains that “The judging of an object through taste is a judgement about the harmony or discord concerning the freedom of play between imagination and the law-abiding character of the understanding, and therefore, applies only to the form of judging aesthetically (the compatibility of the sense perceptions.)” (213)

In the hands of Dolores, even the “shining copper pan” (Byatt 220) turns into a mirror in which she studies her complexion. It should be noted that the spoon in the detail discussed above is merely a minuscule form of the pan when it comes to connotations because they both are containers of food and both have a shiny reflective surface. Dolores, holding the mirror-like pan, is reminiscent of the Platonic definition of the artist as the mirror holder; therefore, she draws attention to the connection between food and art. The painter, being a friend of Concepción, borrows some utensils such as “a pitcher, a bowl, a ladle” and raw ingredients such as hooked hams, fish, eggs, plaits of onions and garlic, “to sketch them over and over.” (Byatt 220) Alongside the chipped earthenware plates and the wine pitcher in the above-mentioned painting, all these utensils, used in the process of cooking, being containers of various sizes, are suggestive of the womb and hence signify reproduction. They are also suggestive of the cauldrons in Celtic mythology and of the Holy Grail, possessing the power of regenerating. Consequently, they associate food with reproduction and regeneration and thus with life.

The painter has given Concepción one of his paintings with “shining fish and white solid eggs, on a chipped earthenware dish” (Byatt 221) which echoes the detail presented as an epigraph at the beginning of the story. Although Dolores cannot quite figure out why she is so moved by that painting, it is because the painter has achieved to “make eggs and fish more real, when they were less so” (Byatt 221) and to “reveal light and beauty in eggs and fishes that no one had seen” (Byatt 223). Art, at its best, has the power to render ordinary objects even more real and out of the ordinary. That is why, the works of the painter enable Dolores to view things that she either has not been aware of or has grown accustomed to, with a fresh look. Dolores herself, however, is not happy with the reception and appreciation of the food she cooks. She complains that her food “went out of the kitchen beautiful and came back mangled and mashed”. (Byatt 223) It is not noticed, not completely consumed, but played with and even fed to the dog. Yet, according to the painter, since everything is transitory, it is not how long the work lasts but the understanding that “persists, for a time.” (Byatt 227)

There is a remarkable resemblance between the works of the painter and those of Dolores. She is depicted “working in a kind of fury [...] grinding the garlic in the mortar, filleting the fish with concentrated skill, slapping dough, making a tattoo of sounds with the chopper, like hailstones, reducing onions to fine specks of translucent light.” (Byatt 220-21) Dolores paints a picture of a synaesthetic combination of sound and sight while making her pre-cooking preparations in the kitchen. This is further emphasised by the images of mortar and pestle used in grinding garlic, which connote copulation, birth and life. Dolores, like the artist, unveils the familiar objects (raw ingredients) to produce unfamiliarity (new meals and fresh tastes) when she fillets the fish, shapes the dough and chops the onions. Moreover, like the filleted fish, the half-skinned garlic in the painting discussed above is also indicative of the artist’s trying to reveal the essence of things in nature.

Similarly, the painter argues that:

“The cook, as much as the painter, looks into the essence of the creation, not [...] in light and on surfaces, but with all the other senses, with taste, and smell, and touch [...] by studying freshness and the edges of decay in leaves and flesh, by mixing wine and blood and sugar into sauces.” (Byatt 225-26)

According to the painter, Dolores, being a cook, makes use not only of sight, like the painter does, but also of taste, smell and touch. This renders her a better observer than the painter and her work worthy of more appreciation, not to mention that she is acknowledged as a fellow artist by the painter. Kant too differentiates between the senses dividing them into two groups: “The first three senses [touch, sight and hearing] are those of perception (of the surface), while the other two [taste and smell] are the senses of pleasure (of innermost sensation).” (210) Dolores, as opposed to the painter, uses her senses “of innermost sensation” as well beside those “of the surface” while creating.

Dolores’s fury, which can be traced in the chipped earthenware plates in the painting mentioned above, is carried onto the dinner table when she serves “with an ill grace [...] not cast[ing] her eyes modestly down, as was expected, but star[ing] around her angrily” and when she eventually “put[s] a hot dish of peppers in oil down on the table with such force that the pottery burst[s] apart, and oil and spices r[u]n into damask cloth.” (Byatt 222) This scene with oil running over the tablecloth is also indicative of paint on canvas and thus associates food once more with art. The hot dish and the peppers, like the paprika in the

fore-mentioned painting, represent the fury of Dolores stemming from her discontent with her class and gender and with lack of acknowledgment.

Sceats discusses “the exercise of power through food” and avers that this might as well surface while serving the food: “Within the various power displays and struggles can be detected a plethora of personal motivations, assumptions and prejudices, as well as revelations concerning class, culture, gender and value.” (142) Dolores is mostly concerned with class, gender and value. Firstly, she is not content with being a servant and believes that it is merely an “unfortunate accident” (Byatt 219) that she was born into a servant family. Secondly, she is not content with being a woman or with the story of Martha and Mary for that matter. She thinks that being born a daughter of servants, she lacks any such choice of contemplation over work and criticises Christ for disregarding the obvious gender trouble by saying, “There speaks a man, for certain.” (Byatt 224) Actually, Dolores is a combination of the Biblical sisters Mary and Martha while Concepción represents merely Martha, slaving in the kitchen to serve Christ and complaining to him about her sister Mary who sits there listening to him instead of helping her. That is to say, Dolores, as opposed to Concepción, manages to combine contemplation (Mary) and productivity (Martha). Lastly, she is not content with the reception and appreciation her food receives as stated above.

Despite the fact that Dolores’s fury might be destructive at times and almost causes her dismissal, it is, nevertheless, creative. The painter, accordingly, expresses that her “frown is a powerful source in itself” (Byatt 227) and paints her like “a kind of goddess wielding spit and carving knife instead of spear and sword.” (Byatt 228) Thus he once again owns her superiority, this time in terms of power of creativity, as he is depicted either gesturing with a fork or using a pen and/or a brush while painting, all of which is considerably harmless and powerless against a spit or knife Dolores uses in the kitchen.

The painter, unlike Dolores, has a simpler view of food: “‘Like life ... We eat and are eaten’”. (Byatt 227) Notwithstanding, he elevates food by asserting that when painting eggs, fish and onions, he is indeed “painting Godhead.” (Byatt 226) Accordingly, in classical Egypt “onion was regarded as a deity.” (Brothwell, Brothwell 108) The fish and eggs, portrayed in the painting in question, are associated with Jesus Christ and resurrection, in that they symbolise life. Furthermore, it is stated that “the letters of Christ’s name make up the Greek word for fish”. (Byatt 226) Sceats expresses that “the use of the Greek word for fish” is “a mnemonic by early Christians” which represented the words Jesus Christ God’s Son Saviour<sup>17</sup> and she dwells on “the widespread featuring of fish both literally and in parables in the New Testament” as well (134).

Moreover, Joseph R. Gusfield underlines the fact that “food is a system of signs and symbols that can be read for their meaning – for what they denote as well as what they connote”. (80) Dolores, for instance, serves her dish of elvers with *alioli*, a sauce made of garlic, egg and olive oil and served with fish. Garlic is an aphrodisiac and connotes sexual desire and power and is thus associated with life since sex is the very source of life. It is

<sup>17</sup> Each letter of the Greek word for fish ἰχθύς, capitalized ΙΧΘΥΣ, represents respectively the first letter of the words Ἰησοῦς (*Iesus*), Χριστός (*Christos*), Θεοῦ (*Theou*), Υἱός (*Huios*), and Σωτήρ (*Soter*), meaning Jesus, Christ, God, Son, Saviour. Hence, the use of fish as a Christian symbol representing Jesus Christ.

also used as a cure, which further stresses its connotations with life. Delmer Davis points to the Bible Christian Church’s use of garlic and wine as a remedy for “convulsion fits” and adds that, garlic, when rubbed at one’s feet at night, would supposedly “ease fever and promote circulation”. (181-82) Sceats illustrates that “the egg represents rebirth, new life, the containment of future possibilities. In its very essence embryonic, its unbroken state none the less suggests completion and wholeness.” (127) Dolores, then, in line with the connotations of the egg discussed above, manages to create something anew (*alioli*) out of this raw ingredient (egg), which is ironically also indicative of completion and wholeness before it is broken. As the painter experiments with the colours to discover new colours or new shades of the same colour so does Dolores experiment with raw ingredients to originate new tastes. Sceats explains further that “Out of their shells, raw eggs are slippery, slimy, semi-liquid but lumpy, suggestive of all that is antithetical to the cool shape of the unbroken whole.” (127-28) This also resembles the slippery, silvery, shining fish the painter draws and Dolores cooks. Elver, for instance, is a snakelike and slimy fish resembling the slippery and slimy nature of the broken egg.

Finally, the meal at the end of the story, which is reminiscent of the Eucharist, depicts food as knowledge. The initiation of the young cook, as an artist, is at last complete. As Dolores has partly anticipated when she has first seen the painter’s works so has the painter endowed her with “some similar patch of light in darkness to treasure.” (Byatt 221) That the enlightenment has been mutual and that Dolores has also contributed to the art of the painter, especially with her observation and command of her senses while cooking, can be noticed for it is not only the painter who provides for the meal. While the painter provides wine, Dolores and Concepción provide salad greens and a spicy tortilla, replacing the wafer in the Eucharist. Sceats draws attention to the fact that “Bread has connotations of intimate communion too; [... since] ‘companion’ means someone with whom bread is consumed (Latin: *com*=with; *panis*=bread).” (131-32) Gusfield notes the examples of the “breaking of bread” or “the use of the wafer in the Eucharist” “as a symbol of solidarity”. (82) Carolyn Korsmeyer, likewise maintains that “Among those who acknowledge their community, eating together, whether in ceremony or informally, can serve to strengthen or renew the bonds of fellowship by bringing commonalities to the forefront of awareness.” (200) The tortilla, representing the wafer since it is made out of the same ingredients with bread, heralds the beginning of a companionship and further emphasises the commonalities of the painter and Dolores.

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## FOOD AND BODY POLITICS IN WILL SELF'S *HOW THE DEAD LIVE*

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### Abstract

Will Self's 2000 novel *How the Dead Live* centers around the afterlife of Lily Bloom in an imagined necropolitan London. This fictional necropolis enables Will Self to reflect on the state of the human mind and body after death. Lily Bloom is a middle-aged woman who dies of breast cancer and immediately after her death the readers are taken into her inner questionings of the state of her body before and after death. The readers are also presented with a vivid description of how the dead 'eat'. The dead in Will Self's novel eat, drink and smoke just like the living people, but it is not the way they consume food which makes us think on the function of food in our lives, but the relation between eating and our bodies Will Self portrays in his novel. Shortly after Lily Bloom dies, she finds out to her great astonishment that she has to put up with the constant presence of her excess body fats that she had lost when she was on diet in her life. This is a striking example which shows how eating and food can create a feeling of guilt in a middle aged woman. The aim of this proposed study is to reflect on the relation of food and eating and body politics in Will Self's novel. It will be argued that the kind of self-starvation on the part of women in the nineteenth century, which is evident in Charlotte Bronte's novels *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* for example, exists in the twentieth century as well.

A single scene from Will Self's 2000 novel *How The Dead The Live* highlights its focus on the issue of eating, especially from a woman's point of view. In this scene, the main character of the novel, Lily Bloom, a middle-aged woman who dies of breast cancer is shown in her apartment in Dulston, part of an imagined necropolitan London where she was supposed to live her 'death'. The interesting thing is that she is not alone in that apartment; during her death she was put in a position in which she had to bear the constant existence of three 'Fats': embodiments of the fat Lily Bloom lost and regained during her lifetime. These fats were 'disgustingly obese versions' of Lily Bloom, "all wobble and jounce, huge dewlaps of belly dangling to their knees" (Self 2001: 179). What is most tragic and ironic in this scene is the striking way in which Will Self depicts a middle-aged woman being haunted by the results of her life-time dieting after her death. This single scene offers us sufficient ground in which one could discuss a woman's dissatisfaction with her body, her putting herself into a self-inflicted control of her diet, her problems with food and similar themes as depicted in Will Self' novel.



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15-16 NOVEMBER 2007

İSTANBUL KÜLTÜR UNIVERSITY

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Önder Öztunalı Conference Hall  
Ataköy-Istanbul

## PROCEEDINGS

Edited by  
Dr. Zekiye Antakyalıoğlu

İstanbul - 2008

**Representations of Food in British  
Literature**

İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi Yayını

**Kitap No : 86**

**Baskı Tarihi : Mart 2009**

**ISBN : 978 – 975 – 6957 – 87 – 5**

**Baskı**

**G.M. Matbaacılık ve Tic. A.Ş.**

100 Yıl Mah. MAS-SİT 1.Cad. No:88 Bağcılar-İST

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