

Food and eating in Leonora Carrington's short stories: 'flesh-eaters' and 'cookies-and-green eaters'¹

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Abstract

Most of the artists that belonged to the Surrealist movement considered women the central object of their works, their muse. However, that was almost the only role women were left to perform in the movement. This way, those female artists who wanted to take active part in it, had to find their own voice; and they did so, by introducing new images that intended to subvert those that their male counterparts used. That is exactly what Leonora Carrington tries to do in both her short stories and paintings, by taking food and cooking images and using them to present a special picture of both women and men. This way, and, following Sonia Assa's article 'Gardens of Delight

or, What's Cookin'?' Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen'², Carrington's characters can be subdivided in 'flesh-eaters' and 'cookies-and-green eaters'. Thus, taking all this into account, in this article, I am going to deal with the way in which food, eating and cooking are present in Leonora Carrington's depiction of characters in her short stories. Besides, I will finish by referring to the treatment given to this topic in some of her paintings.

Key words

Surrealism, Leonora Carrington, short stories, food, eat, cook, Sonia Assa, 'flesh-eaters', 'cookies-and-green eaters', smells, colours.

¹ The terms 'flesh-eaters' and 'cookies-and-green eaters' are taken from Sonia Assa's article 'Gardens of Delight or, What's Cookin'?' Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen' in *Studies in twentieth Century Literature*, Summer 1991, vol. 15, Number 2: 213-227

² From *Studies in twentieth Century Literature*, Summer 1991, vol. 15, Number 2: 213-227

La comida en las historias cortas de Leonora Carrington: 'Comedores de carne' y 'Comedores de verde y galletas'

Resumen

La mayoría de los artistas que pertenecían al movimiento Surrealista consideraban a la mujer el principal objeto de sus obras, su musa. Sin embargo, ése era prácticamente el único papel que las mujeres podían tener dentro del movimiento. Así, aquellas artistas que querían tomar una parte más activa dentro del Surrealismo tenían que encontrar su propia voz; y, para ello, introdujeron nuevas imágenes que pretendían subvertir las que usaban sus compañeros. Esto es exactamente lo que Leonora Carrington intenta hacer tanto en sus historias cortas como en sus cuadros, al tomar imágenes relacionadas con la comida y utilizarlas para presentar un retrato muy especial de los hombres y las mujeres. De esta manera, y siguiendo el artículo de Sonia Assa «Gardens of Delight or, What's Cookin'? Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen», los personajes de Carrington se pueden dividir en «comedores de carne» y «comedores de verde y galletas». Con todo esto en mente, en el siguiente artículo se hará un estudio sobre cómo se utiliza la comida, la forma en que se come y se cocina para presentar a los personajes en las historias cortas de Leonora Carrington. Además, se hará referencia, para terminar, al trato que se le da a este tema en algunos de sus cuadros.

Palabras clave

Surrealismo, Leonora Carrington, historias cortas, comida, comer, cocinar, «co-

medores de carne», «comedores de verde y galletas», Sonia Assa, olores, colores.

Introduction

'Era un grupo [the Surrealists] compuesto esencialmente por hombres que trataban a las mujeres como musas. Era muy humillante. Por eso no quiero que nadie me llame musa de nada. Jamás me consideré una *femme enfant* como André Breton quería ver a las mujeres. Ni quise que me entendieran así, ni tampoco intenté cambiar a los demás'³. (Orgambides, 30)

These are Leonora Carrington's own words concerning how she felt about the Surrealist movement. It is true that Surrealist male artists had the woman as one of the central objects of their works, she was idealized, she was their muse. However, just as it can be inferred from Carrington's quotation, that same idealization of the 'feminine' was 'a most insidious agent of the exclusion of women' within that movement, according to Rachel Carroll (Carroll, 154). In other words, in the works of male Surrealists, there were women, but these women were depicted as mothers, muses, flowers, the *femme fatale*, the *femme enfant*...

³ It was a group made basically by men who treated women as muses. It was very humiliating. That is why I do not want anybody to call me muse of anything. I never considered myself a *femme enfant* such as André Breton wanted to see women. I neither tried to be understood as such, nor tried to change the others. (author's translation).

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never as the source of the creative art themselves (Orenstein, 66).

Because of all this, the women who wanted to take active part of the movement were left in a difficult position. Susan Rubin Suleiman puts it this way:

'A woman Surrealist (...) cannot simply assume a subject position and take over a stock of images elaborated by the male imaginary; in order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images —different from, yet as empowering as the image of the exposed female body, with its endless potential for manipulation, disarticulation and rearticulation, fantasizing and projection, is for her male colleagues.' (Suleiman, I, 164)

That is, they had to find their own way, to find their own language to express themselves and this unavoidably means to find a fresh new set of images that suited them. In addition and, again following Suleiman's words, in order to try to fit into the movement, one of the strategies that women Surrealists made use of to help them to create these images consisted in giving an exaggerated and parodic self-representation, based on 'male stereotypes about femininity' (Suleiman, 2003: 5). Lots of instances of this can be found in Leonora Carrington's works, both in her paintings —like the ladies in *The Meal of Lord Candlestick*— and in her short stories —Virginia Fur, Drusille, Panthilde...

Interestingly enough, almost all of these women from Carrington can be somehow connected to food and cooking —as Sonia Assa puts it, in fact, food elaboration and consumption is central in most of Carrington's short stories (Assa, 213)— and there are also many of her paintings constructed around them. To me, since

the connection is not always 'natural' or, to put it other way, 'socially acceptable', this constant presence could be considered a further development of the strategy mentioned above; in other words, women have been traditionally and culturally associated to the kitchen, so, why not presenting us with a set of women in a parodic an exaggerated relation with it? Hence, taking this into account, in this article, I am going to deal with the way in which food, eating and cooking are present in Leonora Carrington's depiction of characters in her short stories. Thus, I will begin by dividing the female characters in two groups depending on what they eat; then, I will go on by speaking about the male characters; and, finally, I will comment on the treatment given to this topic in some of Carrington's paintings.

Food and eating in the short stories

'Dinner was served, as usual, on the terrace of the weeping willows. (...) Dominique prowled around the table (...) serving delicate dishes, a plump fat chicken with stuffing made of brains and the livers of trushes, truffles, crushed with sweet almonds, rose conserve with a few drops of some divine liqueur. This chicken, which had been marinated —plucked but alive— for three days, had in the end been suffocated in vapours of boiling patchouli: its flesh was as creamy and tender as a fresh mushroom'. (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 39)⁴.

⁴ All the quotations from Leonora Carrington's the *Seventh Horse and other Tales* belong to the E. P. Dutton edition from 1988, translated into English by Katherine Talbot and Anthony Kerrigan and will be inserted in the text accompanied by the title of the story they belong to and the number of the page.

The previous quotation, from the story *Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, serves us as illustration of how rich and detailed food description can be in Carrington's writings. As it has been already mentioned, in these short stories, according to Sonia Assa, 'food is usually sickly abundant, seldom eaten and always interrupted' (Assa, 213). Besides, it does not come as a surprise that, in many instances, the kitchen seems to be the central room of the house — Igname declares his love to Virginia in the kitchen (*As they Rode Along the Edge*, 8) and she gives birth there (*As they Rode Along the Edge*, 10), Elizabeth shows Margaret her filthy kitchen (*Waiting*, 63)... Furthermore, concerning the paintings, first, as we have already mentioned, there are many whose central image is connected with this topic — for instance, *Lepidopterus*, *the Butterfly People Eating a Meal*, *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen...* —, in fact, as Sonia Assa notes, many of them 'show a predilection for esoteric scenes in kitchen interiors' (Assa, 222); in addition, most of the images that appear in Carrington's paintings belong to the alchemist tradition and, as Bettina Knapp notes, cooking and alchemy are intrinsically related, since, for instance, the kitchen, being the place where transmutation (from raw to cooked) takes place, symbolises the alchemist's athanor (Knapp, 529).

Female characters

Coming back to Carrington's short stories, we find that we can even classify their characters according to what they eat. This way, following Sonia Assa's words, we have two types of female characters, which correspond to the two optional role-models that young girls were presented at the time: the 'flesh-eaters', who eat voraciously and who are unlady-

like — Virginia Fur or Juniper, for instance —; and the 'cookies-and-green eaters', who tend to offer food instead of eating it and who sometimes may become food themselves — Elizabeth, who claims to 'only eat at banquets' (*Waiting*, 64), Drusille, the nameless narrator of *White Rabbits...* (Assa, 218).

In addition, and following Rachel Carroll's suggestion that there is a relationship between what these women eat and their speech, these later are also many times narrators or passive observers of the action, whose speech 'drains away into dissolution and emptiness'; whereas the others lead the action and 'all the discursive negotiations' (Carroll, 163). Moreover, the existence of a connection between food and speech is also supported by Sonia Assa, who claims that women have historically made use of food to communicate, first, because women were the ones assigned to prepare and provide food; and then, also because, women were more inclined to eating disorders (Assa, 218) and, as Joan Jacobs Brumberg maintains, as quoted by Carroll, the anorexic uses 'both her appetite and her body as a substitute for rhetorical behaviour' (Carroll, 163). In addition, according to Carroll herself, Carrington's narrators, who may end up disappearing physically as well — like, for instance, Eleanor —, follow or imitate the decline of an anorexic and, consequently, they behave like them and they are doomed to the same end that anorexics many times have (Carroll, 163).

Furthermore, it is a fact that Carrington's own life was marked by rebellion against convention. In fact, Annette Shandler Levitt claims that Carrington 'has achieved the «superior revolt of the spirit» against family, against society, against a world in chaos' (Levitt, 74); then, it does not come as a surprise that her works present

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a high degree of rebellion as well. As Sonia Assa puts it, the subdivision of the female characters commented above seems to be a way of mocking the upper-feminine decorum, as well as the medical ideas of the delicacy of the feminine stomach (Assa, 220). Moreover, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, quoted in this case by Assa, speaks about the fact that this last aspect could be taken as subtext of the Victorian popular culture, according to which, women were supposed to feel uncomfortable with food, specially meat, since it meant heat and stimulated blood and fat production and, of course, passion (Assa, 220). In fact, it is true that voracity is many times associated in Carrington with passion itself, as it is shown in the following quotation from *The Sisters*, in which the reader may doubt if the image depicted is that of a cannibalistic scene or of merely a banquet:

'Drusille, naked to her breast, had her arms around Jumart's neck. The heat of the wine warmed her skin like a flame, she gleamed with sweat. Her hair moved like black vipers, the juice of pomegranate dripped from her half-open mouth.

Meat, wine, cakes, all half eaten, were heaped around them in extravagant abundance. Huge pots of jam spilled on the floor made a sticky lake around their feet. The carcass of a peacock decorated Jumart's head. His beard was full of sauces, fish heads, crushed fruit. His gown was torn and stained with all sorts of food.' (*The Sisters*, 49).

Besides, a further aspect that contributes to this critique to society in Carrington's short stories is also implied in the treatment of the topic of food: according to Lévi-Strauss, as quoted by Sonia Assa, the raw stands for the natural, the uncivilized, whereas the cooked means the complex, human culture; thus, cooking symbolizes

that passage from nature to civilisation (Assa, 214); it comes as no surprise, then, that in *The Three Hunters*, Mchooligan, the cook, is called 'the Abomination of the Forest' (*The Three Hunters*, 31). However, in Carrington, cooking sometimes, also as Assa notes, does not necessarily mean the passage to 'civilisation', but exactly the opposite, as it happens with Virginia Fur who cooks her own offspring as funeral feast for Ignose's death (Assa, 214).

Male characters

Up to now, we have just spoken about female characters, but, what about male characters? Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément speak about the fact that, in philosophy, men have been considered the active ones, whereas women, the opposite (Cixous and Clément, 64). However, Carrington subverts all this, so that most of the male characters that appear in her short stories even present many features proper of the 'cookies-and-green eaters' from our previous subdivision; namely, they eat very little, they are highly concerned with their physical aspect and they are pretty much lady-like than many of their female counterparts. To illustrate this, Monsieur Cyril de Guindre is a very good example: he complains because his wife was 'lacking in delicacy' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 36); he calls Dominique 'succulent plant' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 37), as if plants were eatable; he kisses his own reflection in the mirror (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 37); and his description and Thibaut's, as delicate carefully dressed and perfumed men (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 34,35), stand in opposition with Panthilde's, who is shown as a kind of 'wool-legged' savage of 'perverse beauty' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 38). Hence, according to Susan Rubin Suleiman, it seems that this parodic male depiction, this 'male masquerade'



is intended to place female and femininity in contrast (Suleiman, 2003: 159). In other words, the feminine is not exclusive of the females and the other way round, that is why we can have unlady-like females, such as the 'flesh-eaters' mentioned above.

In addition, I would like to add a further aspect that I have found very remarkable; coming back to Monsieur Cyril de Guindre, he seems to play a high emphasis on smelling good: 'Monsieur Cyril de Guindre sighed in his halo of perfume' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 34); 'He [the Abbot] always scented himself with bitter almonds' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 37); [t]he final detail of Cyril de Guindre's toilet were a few drops of opium essence behind his ears' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 37). However, in the final scene, when Panthilde arrives for the second time, his last words are: 'That smell, (...) I feel sick' (*Monsieur Cyril de Guindre*, 41). Besides, we also find that Célestin and Jumart have the same worries, whereas many female characters —specially the 'flesh-eaters'— do not seem to so much. This might be just another feature of the 'flesh-eaters', who do not seem very keen on hygiene and another 'feminine' characteristic of those we have just spoken of the male characters; but, there might also be some more irony behind it, since, according to Cixous and Clément in their depiction of the witches, good smells were typically associated to the diabolical, while bad smells were said to be therapeutic (Cixous and Clément, 37). This way, as the 'flesh-eaters' have also many features that could have made them pass for witches —their undone hair, their cannibalism, their spitting... (Cixous and Clément, 32-38)— it might be that the witches, in spite of being so, are not the evil ones, but those who pursue them.

Food and eating in paintings

I would not like to finish without commenting on the treatment that Leonora Carrington gives to the topic of food in her paintings, since, as it has been already mentioned, it is also a central image in them. Concerning this topic, Georgiana Colvile claims that, as opposed to her writings, 'in Carrington's paintings meals seem to consist uniquely of fruit, herbs and vegetables, the Goddess' peaceful gifts' and to illustrate this, she provides *Edwardian Hunt Breakfast* and *Lepidopterus, the Butterfly People Eating a Meal* (Raaberg, 167). This is true of course about these paintings, but there is at least another painting which does not fit in this comment, *The Meal of Lord Candlestick*. I personally find it highly significant, since we are shown a group of ladies enjoying a meal that consists of children, as if they were the witches that Michelet, as quoted by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, speaks about in *The Witches Hammer*: 'certain witches, going against human instincts and even against the nature of animals, (...) habitually dismember and eat children' (Cixous and Clément, 32). Besides, it cannot be forgotten that there is also cannibalism in Carrington's short stories: animals, such as the rabbits from *White Rabbits* or the mice in Saint Alexander's garden; and people, for instance, Virginia Fur, who 'several days per week (...) was forced to live on lost sheepdog, and occasionally mutton or child' (*As they Rode along the Edge*, 4). Thus, it seems that the ladies of the painting can be counted among the group of the 'flesh-eaters', already spoken about; reinforcing, then, the revolt against society already commented on.

In addition, in spite of Colvile's quotation and, concerning *Lepidopterus, the*

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Butterfly People Eating a Meal, the colour red of the meal they are eating should not be obviated. The reference to blood seems almost unavoidable, since, as Gloria Fernan Orenstein puts it, the food in the painting is red in reference to the Britons of Stone Age who painted food for the dead that colour to invoke blood and rebirth (Orenstein, 74). Moreover, blood is a very symbolic element inside different cultures and traditions — alchemy, the Caldeans... (Knapp, 529). Besides, it is also very present in the short stories: directly, as there are people who drink blood or at least blood-like substances — like Panthilde or Juniper —; and indirectly, in the sense that the colour red is very present, connected to the 'flesh-eaters', whereas the colour green will be more linked with the others.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to insist on the fact that Leonora Carrington, like the other Surrealist female artists, had to find her own way to be able to express herself within the boundaries of the Surrealist movement. It seems that, Carrington took the topic of eating as one of the ways to do so. Hence, it is present in her short

stories to the extent that we can subdivide female characters in two groups, whose behaviour will be completely different, according to what they eat: the 'flesh-eaters' and the 'cookies-and-green eaters'. In addition, apparently, there is a close connection between eating and speaking, so that these are usually narrators of the action, whereas the others take a more active part in it. Concerning the male characters, there is not such division, but rather a general agreement on their femininity and delicacy, in spite of not being female. To finish, it cannot be forgotten that food is also very present in Leonora Carrington's paintings; this way, we have scenes of people eating fruit and vegetables, but also of others eating flesh, even children, and, most importantly, there is also a profusion of the colour red, symbolizing blood, among other things. Thus, and as deduced from what has been previously mentioned, it seems that we can say that Carrington communicates through cooking, just like traditionally women were supposed to; but, showing us a new way to do so: by putting it through the filter of writing and painting.

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