Food as the Representation of Social Conventions in Victorian Female Novel

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Abstract
The aim of the paper is to analyse the idea of cooking/eating in two Victorian novels: *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot. Both works present the idea of food as one of the major points of reference in human relationships. One of the aspects worth analysing is family eating. The meetings are preceded by careful preparation of meals (e.g. preserves by Mrs. Tulliver or Nelly’s dishes). The food often becomes the major topic during these meetings, showing in this way the gender roles in the nineteenth-century England: females are irreplaceable in preparing food but men very often ignore the final product of cooking. This idyllic space of collective eating (according to M. Bakhtin) can be frequently destroyed by refusing; men refuse to eat either because of sadness (Mr. Earnshaw) or being fussy (Linton); women do not eat due to the fact they are busy taking care of men (Cathy) or are more interested in reading (Maggie). Both sexes are aware of the demands society poses on them. Both Cathy and Maggie are not allowed to read books, but expected to be mindful about meals.

Keywords  
Victorian novels, family eating, asymmetrical gendered relations to food

Introduction
Eating is the process supposed to create a particular contact among people. In Victorian England it was significant and there existed rituals connected with preparing and eating meals. Eating together connected people and created fixed forms defining time of the meals, subjects of conversation by the table as well as the order of the meals (Gottwald & Kolmer, 2009, p. 12-13). These conventions and habits connected with food preparation and eating can be found in numerous Victorian novels. Two of them, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Mill on the Floss* constitute a great example of table etiquette mixed with gender roles. Food becomes in these works a central point significant for creating human relationships as well as the evidence of the nineteenth-century social habits. It is worth analysing the novels according to the following division:  
1. Preparation of meals and preserves versus gender roles.  
2. Shared eating: idyllic picture of a family.  
3. The destruction of idyll.  
4. Metaphorical meaning of food and eating.
Preparation of meals and preserves versus gender roles

Cooking was regarded in Victorian era as a totally female domain. But, as Draznin claims (2001, p. 59), this sphere of domestic duties was not only limited to preparing meals; the job included menu planning, marketing, and preserving food for future consumption, tasks which the advice manuals assured her were her responsibility whether she did the cooking or not. In this way, the society made women preoccupied with their duties not allowing her to be interested in the activities perceived as male. In both discussed novels preparing meals was equally important, although it was realized in different ways. In Wuthering Heights it was Nelly who was held responsible for eating, as the family was rich enough to have her as a help. In The Mill on the Floss the author presents a middle-class family in which a wife herself was taking care of food preparation. Nelly was responsible for making tea and carving (Brontë, 1994, p. 263) and she defined herself as indispensable at table (Brontë, 1994, p. 263). For her, it was not only a job; it was kind of elevation; she felt needed. She treated her job seriously and even did not let Joseph serve the food:

After it was cooked, my fellow-servant and I began to quarrel who should carry some to Mr. Hindley; and we didn’t settle it till all was nearly cold (1994, p 82).

The author of The Mill on the Floss strongly emphasises preparing food and dedicates to it a lot of space. First of all, Eliot highlights the omnipresent subject of food and eating, which together with the atmosphere of the mill, constitutes for Maggie a totally separate world from her outside life; the meal [was] forever pouring, pouring (1998, p. 29) in the house, it was present everywhere. One of the signs of this strong position of food-preparation was a kind of competition among the members of Tulliver and Glegg families. Mrs. Glegg paid great attention to the meals and the rituals connected with eating. She did not omit any occasion to criticise Mrs. Tulliver with regard to food preparation:

“Well, Bessy!” said Mrs. Glegg, with a bitter smile and a scarcely perceptible toss of her head, “I should ha’ thought you’d known your own sister better. I never did eat between meals, and I’m not going to begin. Not but what I hate that nonsense of having your dinner at half-past one, when you might have it at one. You was never brought up in that way, Bessy.”

“Why, Jane, what can I do? Mr. Tulliver doesn’t like his dinner before two o’clock, but I put it half an hour earlier because o’you” (Eliot, 1998, p. 55).

Mrs. Glegg seems to take great care of the rituals, as she sees in them the quintessence of Victorian housekeeping and lifestyle. Draznin confirms the way Victorians used to be mindful about eating, saying:

The method of serving meals in the Victorian home involved a very convoluted eating etiquette: what food to prepare for whom, when the meals were to be served, and where, and how, and who ate or did not eat with whom were all closely
regulated matters—and not only in the homes of the wealthy. There were the ordinary meals for the man and wife, special meals served for guests, meals to be served separately for the help and not necessarily from the same menu, meals prepared for the children that were not only different from those eaten by the adults but also served separately, and at a different time, and not ordinarily eaten in the company of their parents. Dinner, in particular, constituted a complicated social ritual (2001, p. 63).

In portraying Mrs. Glegg’s attitude Eliot uses irony, underlining her preoccupation with very small details of preparing dinner. She used to boast not only about her food but also about other accompanying things. Meal becomes in the novel a motif that plays a crucial role in the space of the Tullivers’ house. Eating together is usually a kind of celebration and there are always a lot of people present. The important events in the characters’ lives are accompanied by eating. The way food is prepared becomes the indicator of being a good housewife. For Mrs. Glegg, one of the most important elements of good cooking was a proper consistency of cakes as well as consistency of jam (1998, p. 122). Any exceptions to the rule of proper shapes and size of homemade food were treated by aunt Glegg as grave negligence. During Christmas the ideally-shaped plum pudding and delicious desserts appear on the table in the Tullivers’ house. These elements influence the Christmas atmosphere, because Mrs. Tulliver’s sisters intently observe and comment on her dishes (1998, p. 153-154).

Shared eating- idyllic picture of a family

Eating is a motif of so-called idyllic space of the house. Bakchtin defines a range of motifs typical for idyll and food constitutes one of the major motifs, especially if it is connected with the presence of children (1982, p. 450-451). Idyllic space is always connected with a house, and in the case of the Tullivers it also includes family meetings, discussions and arranging different things. A table becomes the meeting point of all the members of the family. The Tullivers discuss such questions as: Tom’s education, inheriting and bequeathing wealth to wives and children. For Mrs. Glegg, these family meetings are one of the most essential elements of life; she wants to cherish the tradition that makes all the members of the family arrive at the same place at the same time. For her it is an indication of respect towards the others (1998, p. 129).

In Wuthering Heights eating together was also an important part of everyday life. One of its indispensable elements was praying. Joseph used to dedicate a quarter of an hour’s supplication before meat (1994, p. 82) and sometimes he also added a special prayer if something worrying was happening in the house. It is worth noticing that a meal becomes also a background for the conversation
between Nelly and Mr. Lockwood, during which the guest starts to become familiar with the history of the house and its inhabitants. While accompanying the guest in eating supper, Mrs. Dean began to tell stories of the house. There was a tradition in the Wuthering Heights to dine together, so Catherine used to eat with her father, brother and later with her sister-in-law. Heathcliff's position was important here; he was present at the table while the family was having dinner although he was not totally accepted by some members of the family and treated as an outcast. For him, nevertheless, it could be elevation and a clear indication that he is perceived as equal.

**The destruction of idyll**

In the Tullivers' house shared dining is not only the indication of idyllic landscape but it can also refer to the destruction of idyll. Bakhtin pays attention to the fact that it is typical for the nineteenth-century novels to present the destruction of family life, being a contradiction with the idea of idyll (1982, p. 456-457). Among the elements of the destruction of idyllic space Bakhtin distinguishes, among others, the failure of idealism in the context of the capitalist metropolis, as well as degeneration under the influence of materialistic treatment of moral rules and family relationships (1982, p. 459). In Dorlcote Mill shared eating is accompanied by the examples of the destruction of family life. When aunt Glegg expresses her opinion on lending money, Mr. Tulliver cannot restrain his anger; in such situations the idyllic atmosphere is undermined. Another time, after Maggie's father lost his possessions, the family meeting takes place and the strategy of help is being worked out. This situation also creates the destruction of idyllic atmosphere, because according to aunt Glegg, Mr. Tulliver dishonoured the family that often clashes on this basis. Nevertheless, even on such unpleasant occasion, Mrs. Tulliver tries to fulfil tradition and does her best while preparing the house and the dishes. Maggie does not participate in the preparations, as she prefers reading books (also those perceived as improper for females). She is not only the witness of the destruction of the idyllic space but she also takes an active part in destroying it by refusing to fulfil her gender role in the house. Nevertheless, both for Maggie and Tom, the mill was a support full of peace and warmth. Unfortunately, their parents are criticised by aunt Glegg; she tries to persuade them that they should be humble and obedient to the rest of the family in order to deserve their help.

The destruction of the idyllic landscape may be noticed in *Wuthering Heights* as well. One of the reasons is refusing to eat together. This is a definitely male behaviour caused either by simple fussiness or by a deep feeling of being despised. While young Linton, Heathcliff and Isabella's son, is being served a meal in Wuthering Heights, he expresses his strong disgust:
Joseph returned bearing a basin of milk-porridge, and placed it before Linton; who stirred round the homely mess with a look of aversion, and affirmed he could not eat it. I saw the old man-servant shared largely in his master's scorn of the child; though he was compelled to retain the sentiment in his heart, because Heathcliff plainly meant his underlings to hold him in honour.

'Cannot ate it?' repeated he, peering in Linton's face, and subduing his voice to a whisper, for fear of being overheard. 'But Maister Hareton nivir ate naught else, when he wer a little 'un; and what wer gooid enough for him's gooid enough for ye, I's rayther think!' 

'I shan't eat it!' answered Linton, snappishly. 'Take it away.' 

Joseph snatched up the food indignantly, and brought it to us.

'Is there aught ails th' victuals?' he asked, thrusting the tray under Heathcliff's nose.

'What should ail them?' he said.

'Wah!' answered Joseph, 'yon dainty chap says he cannut ate 'em. But I guess it's raight! His mother wer just soa - we wer a'most too mucky to sow t' corn for makking her breead.'

'Don't mention his mother to me,' said the master, angrily. 'Get him something that he can eat, that's all. What is his usual food, Nelly?'

I suggested boiled milk or tea; and the housekeeper received instructions to prepare some (1994, p. 180-181).

The Linton's aversion to eat porridge seems to confirm the popular view that children do not like eating it; but it also has another meaning in the context of the relationship between the two families. The Lintons used to look down on some inhabitants of Wuthering Heights. That is why what is good for Hareton – Hindley's son and Cathy's nephew – cannot be good for Linton or his mother Isabella. Joseph's words expressing the thought that Isabella despised their family traditions prove that the Lintons will never accept the Earnshaws as equal.

Earlier, Edgar Linton and his wife Catherine decided not to eat together after they had had an argument. Edgar, being aware of the fact that Mrs. Linton and Heathcliff stay in a close relationship, tells her to choose between him and her friend. As a consequence, Edgar despairs eating alone and Catherine decides to die of hunger (1994, p. 110-111). It is another example of the idyllic landscape being destroyed by family members.

Undoubtedly, the most complex picture of the destruction of family idyll can be noticed in the context of the relationship between Heathcliff and the rest of the Earnshaw family. Throughout the whole story, Heathcliff, although treated as a member of the family, is frequently perceived as an intruder. While being a young boy, he often used to quarrel with Hindley; there was a kind of
competition between the boys; Hidley did not want Heathcliff to be perceived as an equal and full inhabitant of Wuthering Heights. Hindley provoked Heathcliff to a fight and as a result, Heathcliff threw hot apple sauce on the heir. As a result, Mr. Earnshaw locked Heathcliff in his chamber. After this incident, the dinner seemed to regain its proper character, according to Nelly’s words:

The little party recovered its equanimity at sight of the fragrant feast. They were hungry after their ride, and easily consoled, since no real harm had befallen them. Mr. Earnshaw carved bountiful platefuls, and the mistress made them merry with lively talk. I waited behind her chair, and was pained to behold Catherine, with dry eyes and an indifferent air, commence cutting up the wing of a goose before her. ‘An unfeeling child,’ I thought to myself; ‘how lightly she dismisses her old playmate’s troubles. I could not have imagined her to be so selfish.’ She lifted a mouthful to her lips: then she set it down again: her cheeks flushed, and the tears gushed over them. She slipped her fork to the floor, and hastily dived under the cloth to conceal her emotion. I did not call her unfeeling long; for I perceived she was in purgatory throughout the day, and wearied to find an opportunity of getting by herself, or paying a visit to Heathcliff, who had been locked up by the master: as I discovered, on endeavouring to introduce to him a private mess of victuals (1994, p. 62-63).

Nevertheless, the situation at the table was not ideal, as Catherine suffered because of her friend’s treatment. This event will later gain its mirror image, after Catherine’s death. As Nelly reports, Heathcliff had not dined with the rest of the family for almost a week; he must have been fed by the angels or his relatives (1994, p. 153). Refusing to eat was an open manifestation of grief and sorrow. The death of his beloved woman made Heathcliff become more distant from the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights than ever. He used to disappear at night and come back in the morning. He almost completely resigned from shared eating, or eating at all but Nelly put the dishes on the fender to keep them warm for him (1994, p. 271). The idyllic picture of family is destroyed by Heathcliff and helps to emphasize his individualism.

Metaphorical meaning of food and eating

In both novels food is not only the reflection of family and social life in the nineteenth century, but it is also a source of symbolism. In The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot presents the process of feeding in the context of gaining knowledge. Tom’s teacher, Mr. Stelling, used to call the brain an intellectual stomach (1998, p. 140) and he believed in the theory of feeding students’ minds with classics and geometry which are the most crucial branches of science. But, according to the narrator, this method should be criticised; it is impossible though to feed everybody with the same products. In Tom’s case this food is totally improper.
The narrator aptly notices that Tom’s feeding process looks *as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it* (1998, p. 139-140). This is clear criticism of the attitude according to which young minds are very similar one to another. This tendency to perceive young people can lead to the destruction of individuality and creativity.

Another metaphorical representation of food in the novel by Eliot can be seen in the creation of the mill and products used in it. The narrator underlines the fact that *Maggie loved to linger in the great spaces of the mill, and often came out with her black hair powdered to a soft whiteness that made her dark eyes flash out with new fire* (1998, p. 29). Omnipresent flour covers Maggie’s hair making her similar to a typical Victorian woman with fair hair – but it is just deceptive; this *soft whiteness* does not make the girl seem milder and obedient but on the contrary – it highlights her unusual and beautiful dark eyes. Maggie still remains a very individual and intelligent girl that is ready to express her own opinions.

The metaphorical meaning of food gains the importance in the comparison between the two lifestyles in the novel *Wuthering Heights*. During the conversation between Nelly and Mr. Lockwood, the guest expresses his opinion about the pleasures of living both in the countryside and in the city. He is almost sure that here, in Wuthering Heights one can feel love for life. Mr. Lockwood compares living in the countryside and in the city to dinner:

*One state resembles setting a hungry man down to a single dish, on which he may concentrate his entire appetite and do it justice; the other, introducing him to a table laid out by French cooks: he can perhaps extract as much enjoyment from the whole; but each part is a mere atom in his regard and remembrance*” (1994, p. 65; note: it is worth noticing that French style of cooking was very popular in Victorian England. As Stephen Mennell claims, French cooks were also appreciated earlier, nevertheless, *French culinary hegemony across the Channel was greatly strengthened by several of the greatest names working in England after the Revolution*, 1987, p. 150).

Living in the countryside is like eating one dish by a hungry man, while living in the city is similar to a lavish dinner party. Both meals though, give a man the same pleasure but with one difference: a modest meal lets a man relish and value it while the dinner party will not remain in his mind for a long time. Mr. Lockwood’s conclusion seems to be obvious: real life can take place only in the peaceful countryside, where people are able to cherish what they possess.

**Conclusion**

Eating habits in Victorian England are presented in the discussed novels on different levels. First of all, it is worth noticing that in *The Mill on the Floss* the author concentrates more on what is eaten while in *Wuthering Heights* the fact of
dining together seems to be emphasized. Nevertheless, both works focus on the presentation of food in both literal and metaphorical sense. They discuss the idyllic picture of a dining family as well as the factors that make the idyll be destroyed. In a metaphorical sense, food becomes the representation of educating people, of their characters as well as of the whole process of existence.

References

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