Why Must it Always be Tomato Soup?: Dinner Parties in the Work of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf
Molly MacVeagh, Class of 2015

Shortly before publishing Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, “I should like to investigate the party consciousness…where people secrete an envelope which connects them and protects them from others” (Woolf qtd. in Langbaeur 192). Like Woolf, I began the summer with an interest in parties. In a Modernism seminar last year I was surprised by the number of scenes where people came together to share food. I was interested in the tension between the Modernist dictum of “make it new” and the deeply conventional etiquette of British dinner. What would a close reading of these scenes reveal about class, sexuality and empire in early 20th century England? To answer this question I planned to read a mix of critical theory, Woolf and Mansfield’s fiction, and the history of English food. I hoped to finish the summer with a strong groundwork for an eventual honors thesis.

This project has evolved a little bit from the original proposal. While I had planned to read some big name critical theorists in more depth—Barthes, Foucault, Bakhtin—I ended up focusing on figures from the social sciences. In contemporary anthropology and sociology I found references to authors more closely related to my project—writers like Bourdieu, Mauss, and Levi-Strauss. I also found a body of work unembarrassed by its edible focus. In these books (as well as in some more recent literary criticism) food is treated as a legitimate subject instead of as a point of access for “serious” intellectual pursuits. It is a position I hope to maintain throughout the year.

After reading sociological studies of modern dinner parties, I shifted focus to Victorian etiquette and menus. I now have a solid understanding of things like the order of dishes, the types of food, the types of servants, and the changing trends at the turn of the century. Primary sources like Mrs. Beeton’s Household Management and secondary ones like Bourgeois Consumption: Food, Space, and Identity in London and Paris 1850-1914 both helped me to understand the types of entertaining typical to the era. Diane McGee’s Writing the Meal provided a model for applying this historical context to literary texts. To some extent, McGee answered my initial question about the connection between dining conventions and modernism’s sense of rupture. In her convincing analysis of Mansfield, Woolf, and Chopin, McGee argues that the lack of real communion at communal meals echoes the general alienation of the time. The dinner parties in these books expose the difficulties of navigating women’s roles after the First World War. They revalorize the skill and labor that go into creating social moments.

I was both gratified that someone else thought my question worth addressing and frustrated that it had already been addressed. I felt, though, that questions of empire hadn’t been sufficiently treated. After some tangential wondering about how one writes pertinent and responsible literary criticism in a post-theory era, Professor Briefel pointed me towards surface reading, specifically Elaine Freedgood’s Ideas in Things. Freedgood uncovers the “fugitive meanings” of objects in Victorian novels. I was excited by her approach—here, it seemed, was a way to get at the lingering questions of empire. Looking at the economic and cultural histories embedded in the ingredients of dinner made the Woolf and Mansfield stories come alive again. I was struck by the proliferation of tropical fruit, the hybrid origins of beef stew, the insistent emphasis on home production.

It is with this tighter focus—taking food as food in order to trace its colonial implications before returning it to the context of the novel—that I will move into the academic year. I’m grateful to the Martha Reed Coles Fund and Professor Briefel for supporting such a fruitful summer of research.

Faculty Mentor: Aviva Briefel
Funded by: The Martha Reed Coles Summer Fellowship Fund