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What food do we feed girls as artists upon? Food, artistic and gender equality in children's literature

Introduction

“Now what food do we feed women as artists upon?” asks Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (2020: 64)¹. In the essay the relationship between food and literature is shaped and reshaped from a female standpoint. In particular, addressing how the artistic development of women artists and their material conditions are intertwined, Woolf focuses on food as a symbolic, but also concrete, part of this process of emancipation. Woolf takes at least three steps in this direction. First, she claims that food, in its ordinary and prosaic dimension, was not at all a literary subject, as the male-centered literature of early twentieth-century seldom spared a word for describing what is eaten at luncheon parties. She challenges that tradition describing a rich dinner which she attends in the male wing of “Oxbridge” – a term that, according to the writer, stands for the prestigious Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and, more generally, for the intellectual life of the higher classes. A second conceptual leap is taken when Woolf states that food could be not only a literary subject but also the creative engine of literature, generating “the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse” (Woolf 2020: 17). It is this creative engine that inspired the famous quote: “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (Woolf 2020: 26). Third, and most importantly, Woolf connects food to women's issues and, in particular, to female artists' material conditions. If women do not write, or write less than men, is it due to a lack of nourishment? In line with this question, food becomes a metaphor for the support of both the body and soul, a fundamental part of female writers' growth in terms of social recognition and self-affirmation. Hence,

¹ The essay was first published in 1929.

each step leads to a new positioning of food within literature. Not only literature should deal with it, but it is also a pre-condition for women who strive to become writers. Striving for an artistic role and starving for food to nourish creativity are two linked issues investigated in this article.

While Woolf focuses on mainstream literature, the topic of food is of a great relevance in contemporary education and children's literature because food experiences are "part of the daily texture of everyday child's life from birth onwards" (Keeling, Pollard 2009: 10) and also because, as Peter Hunt points out, children's books are "overtly important educationally and commercially – with consequences across the culture, from language to politic" (Hunt 1999: 1). Therefore, food addresses educational and social issues that children's literature highlights and investigates, especially in coming-of-age stories where food is connected to the young protagonists' development. For those reasons, Woolf's question should be transformed into: what food do we feed **girls** as artists upon?

Theoretical framework

Thereby, my research aims to re-read girls' coming-of-age stories under the light of food as a symbol for the achievement of artistic and gender equality. In children's literature food is multifaceted because it appears as both nourishment and deprivation. This aspect has been investigated by other scholars (Carrington, Harding 2014), showing how the extreme variety of feast-and-famine related writing reflects the pervasiveness of food's dualism in prose and poetry for children.

Accordingly, I draw from Nodelman's (2008) interpretation of children's literature as a binary construction; although even mainstream literature can develop its plots in opposite situations, there is one binarism that seems to emerge from a primal scene – "an adult with the mission of writing specifically for an audience of children" (Nodelman 2008: 339). Nodelman highlights how the cultural idea that childhood is different from adulthood affects the narrative forms and characterizes children's literature. Hence, I investigate how the abundance of food and the contrary situation, the lack of sustenance, are strictly connected to the child-adult opposition.

There is also another binarism to take into account in dealing with the impact food has on children's growth, namely the mind-body opposition. Thereby, in western tradition the creative and intellectual development is linked to the mind, which is intended as separated by the body (Fraser, Greco 2004). As discussed by Grosz (1994), the mind-body dualism can be traced back to antiquity, for example in Plato's *Cratylus*, bringing forward a tradition in which Cartesio's philosophy is also a milestone. Nevertheless, contemporary studies of the body and the embodiment point out the fallacy of this division; in particular, the Eighties (Turner 1984) are the starting point of a new sociology of the body, rethinking the role given to the body by

society. As pointed out by Maria Nikolajeva (2016), the material turn or the return to the body is also a recent trend in the scholarship on children's literature.

Investigating the role food plays in children's literature, and particularly in stories that are about girls striving to be writers, means to dismantle the rigidity of the mind-body binarism which can be connected to the childhood-adulthood's contraposition, and at the same time, to girls' artistic development. Firstly, the adult body represents the norm, while children's bodies are empty vessels that have to be filled with cultural values, skills, thoughts, and emotions (Kokkola 2017: 2). From this point of view, food is one of the means adults use to control children's bodies.

Secondly, in contemporary works for children and young adults there is a consistent increase of the attention towards the body (Hager 2011; Harde, Kokkola 2017). In this perspective, the creative and intellectual development is not only connected to the mind, but also to the body and its need of nourishment. Accordingly, writing is not purely abstract, on the contrary, it is influenced by material aspects of life, such as food.

I have chosen to get these oppositions in relation to feminist *Künstellromans*, namely novels of artistic development, stories about a female artist's journey to maturity, which can be distinguished from *Bildungsroman*, where the protagonist comes of age as an adult without a gender connotation. As Roberta Trites (1997) underlines, the feminist *Künstellroman* within children's literature "demonstrates the growth of a child whose identity is consistently formed by her desire to be a writer" (Trites 1997: 64). Therefore, I explore how the feast-or-famine situation affects the young characters in their relationship with adulthood, and specifically with those role-model figures they have to refer to in their artistic journey. In fact, the educational system which surrounds them – family, social community, school – plays an important part in their growth; it is something the protagonists are forced to relate to, choosing to adhere or to subvert it.

Starting from these assumptions, it is possible to summarize the heroines' journey as a road with two paths which can have at least two different results. First, I analyze the educational background in which the writer-to-be grows up, shedding light on whether or not she is hungry for life and art, in a situation of poverty and deprivation, or if her creative flame is nourished by a culturally or socially rich environment. Then, the heroine's role-models emerge, as well as the roles they play in her artistic development, and if and how they change her path. Finally, when the apprenticeship is completed, I verify if hunger remains as an engine to the creativity or if the young girl has finally obtained the right to a place at the table with adults or to participate in her community's feast.

Literary corpus

My literary *corpus* is composed of five contemporary works about female writers. Three of them are fictionalized biographies about outstanding English writers, such as Louisa May Alcott (Masini 2019), Emily Dickinson (Bonfiglioli 2017) and Virginia Woolf (Ballista, Carrer 2017). The other two are novels about modern young heroines in a literary apprenticeship, narrated by David Almond (2012), and by the Dutch writer Annet Huizing (2018).

The selection is based on two criteria. First, the relevance within the contemporary Italian publishing market for children and young adults, in terms of translations, awarded authors, and wide representation of readers of all ages. Second, the sharing of literary genre conventions. Regarding the first criteria, all of the works are available for Italian readers and they have been published in the last decade. On the one hand, Alcott, Dickinson and Woolf's biographies have recently been written by prestigious and awarded Italian authors and illustrators, such as Beatrice Masini (awarded with, among others, the Andersen Prize), Benedetta Bonfiglioli (Castello Prize), Serena Ballista (member of the Italian Virginia Woolf Society) and Chiara Carrer (awarded with the Andersen Prize and mentioned at the Bologna Children's Book Fair Prize giving). Although they are not translated into English yet, these works stress the enduring relevance of English classical literature. On the other hand, Almond and Huizing's novels have been translated into Italian and widely appreciated by Italian readers. More specifically, David Almond, winner of the Caldecott Medal and the Hans Christian Andersen Award, is a well-known author in Italy, and *Come ho scritto un libro per caso* [How I found myself writing a book] by Huizing was a finalist for the 2019 edition of the Strega Prize for Children, one of the most important Italian awards for children's literature.

Moreover, the selected works refer to a wide range of readers: the picturebook *Una stanza tutta per me* [A room all of my own] by Ballista and Carrer addresses preschoolers, while the other novels can be appreciated by several levels of readers, from children to young adults.

I have also chosen works that can be related to the feminist *Kunststrollromans'* framework, following the genre's conventions that Trites (1997: 65) has identified for Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964), which is considered a prototype for this literary tradition². It emerges that the protagonist accepts language as fundamental to her self-creation, as if without words she would be powerless, experiencing the correspondence between world and writing.

Thus, the selected works present young heroines who recognize their agency through writing, trying to balance their individuality and connection to society.

² Francis Molson (1977) analyzes children's novel about developing writers such as: Louise Fitzhugh, *Harriet the Spy* (1964); Irene Hunt, *Up a Road Slowly* (1968); Jean Little, *Look through My Window* (1971); Eleanor Cameron, *A Room Made of Windows* (1971); Mollie Hunter, *A sound of Chariots* (1972). Nevertheless, he does not underline the fact that all the protagonists are female.

The protagonists of these novels share some characteristics with Harriet. First, they tend to define themselves as different from other people, being divergent, lonely, or even strange. Second, they all feel an urgency to write as a means of self-expression, so that their thoughts can find a way out, a concrete representation. Third, their lives are filled with obstacles which take the shape of, on the one hand, ostracism from their community or, on the other hand, the loss of a family member. In the latter case the grieving process coincides with the artistic development. Finally, in certain cases the writers-to-be are not completely alone, because they are guided by a mentor who inspires their art.

In analyzing the characteristics that influence the writers' lives, I have also taken into account how food helps them to emerge as artists.

Storia di May Piccola Donna – a voracious child

In *Storia di May Piccola Donna* [May Little Woman's story] the Italian writer Beatrice Masini imagines Louisa May Alcott's childhood when her family move out of the city to spend a year far from civilization, in a utopian community called "Paradise". Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a transcendentalist philosopher who wanted to create a place where people could live off the land. In the novel food is connected to this philosophy: it is simple, picked out from the ground, like zucchini, pumpkins or corn, and eaten directly in contact with nature; it is also exclusively vegan, responding to the ideal of freedom to grow for all the living being. This is the material condition and the cultural environment Alcott grew up in and which is an inseparable part of her artistic development.

The novel is narrated in the first person by May, who writes to a friend living in the city. In the letters the young girl shows her desire to tell stories, making her ordinary life a work of fiction. Hence, since the beginning, her voice shows an authorial point of view. She does not only describe her ordinary life but also interprets it, trying to defend and understand her father's transcendental philosophy. Therefore, food is described artistically, using various figures of speech; for example: food is personified, or "childified", when zucchini flowers are depicted as babies who get offended or scared. In this way, the girl looks at the natural world she is surrounded by with an artistic eye, creating metaphors and connections.

Another element which reveals the writing consciousness is the relationship with the truth. May tends to affirm and deny at the same time, using adversative clauses, hypothetical structures or even reported speech that do not seem to really fit the girl's opinion. For example, talking about zucchini, she says: "You have to leave them in the ground even if you're hungry" (Masini 2019: 13³).

³ Unless noted otherwise, translation was prepared by the author of the article.

Hence, food and hunger are not merely background themes in the novel; they are an instrument to measure the maturation of her own idea of the world, which can conflict or subvert that of her father. May finally realizes that if she wants to become a writer she has to be truthful with herself, writing about the world that surrounds her just in the way it is, in order to better understand it. “Things come to life when you write them, they exist better, they exist more” (Masini 2019: 163).

The setting of the story is challenging for the protagonist because “Paradise” is not as heavenly as its name suggests. While sustenance becomes scarce and providing food is a constant struggle for adults, at the same time children get hungry and May has a voracious appetite. During one episode, the girl goes to visit the “Beautiful Lord”, a character inspired by Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century American philosopher, who lived isolated from society in the midst of nature⁴; just like Little Red Riding Hood, she carries a basket of scones with her to his cabin in the forest. In the end, she is no longer a naïve child anymore and she subverts every expectation, herself turning into the hungry wolf of the fairytale. “I pounced on the scones and devoured three. Then I licked my lips well so as not to leave even a crumb” (Masini 2019: 39).

Thereby, as it emerges from these lines, the girl is metaphorically fed with peace, intimacy, love, but also more literally with scones and raspberries: “Anyway, now I think this is how life should be. A summer day doing nothing at the lake; the flute of the Beautiful Lord all for me; and something small and good to put in your stomach. If they are not scones, never mind. Even raspberries will do just fine” (Masini 2019: 40).

Talking about food, the heroine has the chance to gain awareness that ideas and philosophies are just as important as hunger and the most material aspects of life. For that reason, May’s artistic journey can be considered a path to truth, where the young girl still has to form an opinion about the world in order to mature as a writer. Food, in May’s story, could be considered as an abstract concept, because it is connected to a very specific philosophy, namely transcendentalism; it is also an obsession, since its lack engenders recurrent thoughts about it, becoming part of the story narrated in the novel. Food even becomes subversion, when used by May to represent her true self, as a girl who is not satisfied with frugality and wants more from life. Food is one of the instruments the girl uses to subvert the world and discover her artistic truth. She becomes a writer when she accepts her need to satisfy her hunger.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) grew up mostly in Concord, Massachusetts, influenced by great philosophers and writers of that time, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In 1845, Thoreau constructed a small cottage near Concord’s Walden Pond. He carried out his quest to live as simply and mindfully as possible, as he grew his own food, rambled through the woods, and read philosophy. He spent two years in the cabin and wrote about his experience publishing *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* in 1854.

In attesa di un sole – containment and fasting

In attesa di un sole. L'amore immaginato di Emily Dickinson [Waiting for the sun to rise. Emily Dickinson's imagined love] is a fictionalized biography about Dickinson, by the Italian writer Benedetta Bonfiglioli (2017). The work follows the poet during the year she really did spend in a puritan boarding school between 1847 and 1848, imagining her falling in love with a mysterious boy. This narrative choice is controversial in the context of Dickinson's private life, because despite the fact that many of her poems are passionately addressed to someone she cares about, this person is still unknown. As Bonfiglioli states in the final note (2017: 233–234), she was inspired by the mystery in Dickinson's life and works and this fact shows the fascination evoked by the poet in the readers of all times.

In this novel, the theme of hunger is linked to that of the punitive deprivation Emily has to suffer because she cannot follow the strict rules which are imposed by that specific school system. For example, it is forbidden to go outside the school to take a simple walk nearby; given that the young girl cannot get used to it, she secretly sneaks out and comes across Nathaniel, a boy who she eventually falls in love with.

The adult world the heroine has to deal with is represented by the refectory of the school, one of the symbolic places of female education, understood as submission and containment. As it is stressed by Christensen and Harde (2017: 213–226), in nineteenth-century stories for girls female bodies are controlled by adults in the attempt to provide girls appropriate social roles. In this way, food takes oppressive characteristics, being intimately connected to gender and social construction.

The novel by Bonfiglioli, which is set in nineteenth-century, presents a strong recurrence of containment and negation terminology; these lines are an example of that: "I will remove. I will demolish. I will make it deserted. Razed to the ground because it was inadequate. Not up to par. So, is this what has to happen?" (Bonfiglioli 2017: 73).

Through fasting or eating bland food, Emily makes amends for her sins, being deprived of the joy of life; though she is intimately subversive, and states that even her hunger is irreverent: "I have an irreverent hunger that doesn't care about mourning, my stomach growls in contempt of silence, it doesn't know how to pray except for a piece of bread, the salvation of the soul with which it shares my body is completely indifferent to it" (Bonfiglioli 2017: 27).

The young writer is hungry for life and she cannot be metaphorically satisfied with a crumb of bread: her artistic perspective, just like May, embraces everything, from the most apparently insignificant details, such as a spider's web or a maple leaf. Her own hunger, like a fire that burns within her, is a symptom of the scandal, which ultimately coincides with the poetic vision.

Nevertheless, it is not only fasting that is used as a control tool. Even biscuits given as a birthday gift are an opportunity for oppression, another warning provided by the ethics of deprivation. Thus, inside the box of biscuits, Emily's father has inserted an essay on obedience. For this reason, more and more isolated, at school and in the family, she becomes "hungry for everything, for light, for heat, for an hug" (Bonfiglioli 2017: 123). In response to all of this, the heroine adopts a personal philosophy whereby what is alive has value, like, for example, the scent of the jam she has prepared with her sister and that seems to contain the essence of happiness. If the bland-tasting food is a metaphor for the puritans' God (Bonfiglioli 2017: 186), Dickinson is devoted to the Creator who has made nature colorful and joyful.

Her artistic development is concluded painfully with the loss of her beloved one, which also ended her hope for freedom. She does not obtain the right to a seat at the table with adults who condemn her for being indomitable. Emily's story is an enduring destiny of starvation; nevertheless, she has gained the awareness that she cannot neither accept nor quench her thirst of writing. She never questions her artistic striving.

My name is Mina – tasting words

In *My name is Mina* David Almond represents a heroine who is not able to fit common social expectations. Having renounced school, she is free to give form to her thoughts, keeping a journal with an explicit declaration: she refuses every order in writing, thinking that her art should follow the stream of thoughts as well as the stream of nature, flying like owls, flickering like bats and slipping like cats (Almond 2012: 11). In this way, she is able to recognize the interplay between mind, body, and nature. Hence, Mina's writing can be seen from the embodiment theoretical framework's point of view (Harde, Kokkola 2017). In particular, Eve Tandoi (2014), in an interesting article on *My name is Mina* and the use of typography, underlines how the girl's philosophy is deeply rooted in the body, connecting herself both to the animated beings and inanimate objects that surround her, and that she can experience. Following these remarks, we can say that in Mina's writing words are not just words, since they give her a sort of physical pleasure, they are in a certain way alive, and at the same time, they make her feel alive: they are something the girl can play with, something she can even taste. On the one hand, she nourishes her writing with words that are like food; on the other hand, food becomes one of her most recurring subject in her journal. In this way, the mind-body dualism is dismantled by the act of writing itself.

This is also proved by the fact that Mina's meals have a great relevance in the novel. They are described as joyful feasts and the girl often focuses on the names of foods, as if she is actually tasting them along with the food itself. One example is "spaghetti

al pomodoro”, an expression which is underlined by a different and larger font that makes her travel with her mouth and mind.

Mina grows up in a supportive environment where food, among other things, like nature and animals, is considered a source of inspiration. In Almond’s novel, the adult world is multifaceted because there is Mina’s mother who takes care of her with all of her means, attending to her homeschooling with an effort which is both intellectual and financial; but on the contrary there is also the school, defined as a cage, and the teachers who do not understand divergent children.

In her artistic journey, the protagonist has to balance her exceptional individuality with the need for friends and human connections, but, despite the difficulties, she never lacks the support of the fruitful world which surrounds her. This is demonstrated by one of the final scenes of the novel, the feast at the Italian restaurant: it comes at the end of a long walk Mina has taken with her mother, in which she reflects on her growth, accepting her fragility but also learning to embrace even the questions that cannot be answered. Finally, Mina’s artistic journey has developed in line with the *Künstelroman* theory; Almond presents a maturation tale to his readers whose protagonist “opens herself up to the possibility of writing through the body and re-inscribing herself as a subject through her journal” (Tandoi 2014: 9). Mina’s writing is grounded in a fulfilling joy for life that means experiencing everything with pleasure, including food.

Come ho scritto un libro per caso – grieving and accepting the lack of food

Come ho scritto un libro per caso [How I found myself writing a book] by Annet Huizing, reflects the protagonist’s narrative efforts. Hence, thirteen year old Katinka is trying to learn how to become a writer; she is helped by Lidwen, her neighbor, who is a famous writer. Creating a meta-narrative effect, the novel is built on the girl’s writing exercises, which in the end make up the book that tells the girl’s story.

Katinka lost her mother when she was little, so, during the novel, she tries to feel closer to her, collecting details and memories of her from her father, the neighbor and family friends. The fact that she is motherless has a relevance in terms of food: therefore, her mother’s death corresponds to a lack of care in eating. For example, she explicitly says that the story she wants to write should be about the loss of her mother and how her father falls in love for the second time, but also about the fact her family never eat at the table, often consuming pizza on the couch. In addition to that, the family’s car is full of garbage because they throw their food waste in the passenger’s seat, significantly that of her lost mother.

The patriarchal culture symbolically put mothers in charge of providing food (Daniel 2006), representing caring as a gendered work (DeVault 1991; Glenn, Chang, Forcey 1994). Women as wives and mothers take the responsibility for feeding children, making them behave and teaching them etiquette. According

to the child-adult dualism, childhood corresponds to the concept of an uncontrolled body which has to be regulated by adults' minds (Lupton 1996: 39–43).

Stereotyped representations of mothers as caring figures who provide food are also present in children's literature (Diekman, Murnen 2004), even in best-selling trade picturebooks (Fraustino 2009). In these works, food, both literally and metaphorically, tends to lock "women into biologically determined social roles" (Fraustino 2009: 58), highlighting the enduring presence of the good mother stereotype (Thurer 1994). Nevertheless, Huizing disrupts this paradigm because the protagonist's mother has passed away, being replaced with other two crucial female figures – the writer Lidwen, and Katinka's father's new girlfriend, Dirkje – who present different, non-stereotyped models of providing food to the young girl. Both women are divergent from cultural expectations: Lidwen is in contact with the natural environment and she gives writing lessons drinking tea in her garden, surrounded by trees and flowers. In fact, it is the tea that drives the girl's imagination as it becomes the witchy element that characterizes her neighbor. Hence, Lidwen is presented as a good witch due to her strange behavior, her love of nature, along with her subtle rebellion against social rules since she enjoys spending her time with a young girl who herself prefers an old woman's company to that of her peers. Dirkje embodies a divergent role-model too, because she does not try to change the family's habits and she embraces their tradition of dining on the couch.

In this way, what could be perceived as a lack of maternal care, is transformed into a chance of growing, something that deeply characterized the heroine's identity. Therefore, Katinka's literary apprenticeship coexists with her grieving process, which comes to an end in the final pages of the book.

My mom is dead, but she came back to me. [...] My mom came back to me and that's enough. She doesn't need to raise me; she doesn't need to teach me anything. I collect surrogate mothers everywhere; I know I'm very good at this. But my mom simply has to exist. And she exists. She exists for me. One day I'll write to her (Huizing 2018: 152).

The young girl is now aware of the nature of her relationships with the two other women in her life. While both of them give her inspiration and feed her artistic flame, they are not her mother. They are just surrogates, because when she writes, Katinka is addressing her mother, who she perceives as a living presence despite her death. In the end, she accepts the loss, along with the lack of food. This awareness becomes a base for writing and helps her process her condition and the world around her.

Una stanza tutta per me – social recognition and independence

My final point regards the analysis of *Una stanza tutta per me* [A room all of my own], a picturebook which presents Virginia Woolf to preschoolers, and tries to define what a writer is from a feminist standpoint. Chiara Carrer's pictures depict the writer as a spider, recalling the metaphor used by Woolf herself in *A Room of One's Own*:

women's writing is something real and corporeal which can be compared to a web hidden in the corner of a room; when it is pulled away or "torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures [...] and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (Woolf 2020: 52) – and, we can add, they are also connected to the food women eat.

Intertextuality here seems to come directly from the texture of the illustrator's marks; this effect is visually realized by Carrer drawing the spider's web with the same lines and hatchings of the ground on which Virginia lies down, and which is very similar to a written page (fig. 1).

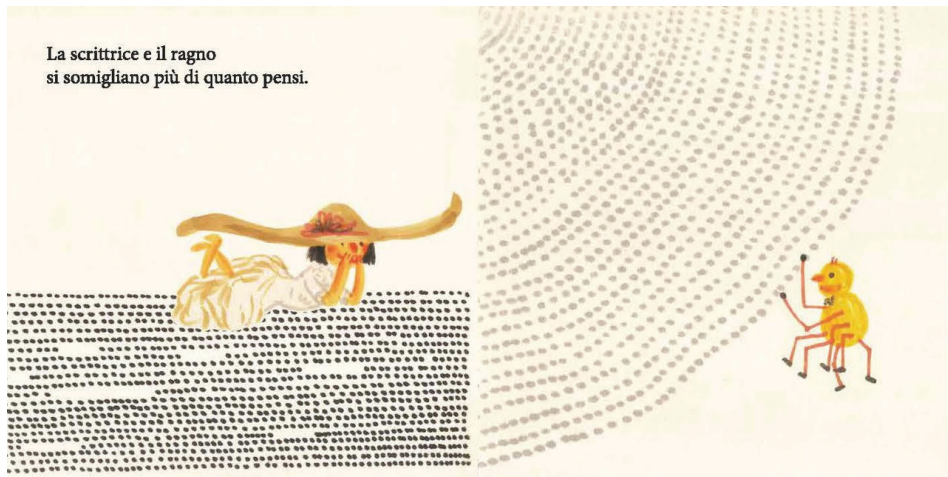


Figure 1. Ballista S., Carrer C., 2017, *Una stanza tutta per me*, Cagliari: Settenove

The writer-spider relation reaches an end in the final picture, in which the two characters sit down with a child at the same table to eat together. The child possibly symbolizes the implied young reader (fig. 2).

Thereby, children are involved in the narration that provides them a role-model; writers-to-be can experience what a writer is and what independence in writing means. The picturebook ends with two plain pages where readers are invited to draw their own room.

In this way, the picturebook enlightens Woolf's thought mentioned in the introduction, as it addresses the theme of the food in the writer's development. The final feast, enjoyed with the spider and the reader, could be considered the downside of the concept of "a room of one's own". Therefore, we could say that independence is nothing if your work is not recognized by society – namely the dinner in which you take part with other people – but also that no female artistic production can be recognized without independence – symbolically, but also concretely, the room of one's own.



Si divertono in compagnia, come te.

Ma costruiscono e inventano
in una stanza tutta per SÈ.

Figure 2. Ballista S., Carrer C., 2017, *Una stanza tutta per me*, Cagliari: Settenove

Hence, there are two opposite aspects in female artistic development, independence and social recognition, which have to be balanced. The embodiment framework, using interdisciplinary approaches, stresses the existence of a link between food and the social context where it is eaten. Drawing attention to the difference between individuality and community, Falk (1994) draws a distinction between an “open” body and a “closed” body. The “open” body is typical of “premodern” societies, in which the ritual of eating is considered a shared practice for the whole community. In this perspective, food in its social dimension contributes to make the individuality disappear into the community’s feast; at the same time, the shared meal gives the individual his or her own place in the world. The “closed” body instead, is typical of modern western societies that establish boundaries between the outside world and individual’s intimate self-expression; in this context, “the role of the meal as a collective community-constituting ritual has been marginalized” (Falk 1994: 25). The modern body is also “civilized” because, in its individuality, it is “tightly contained, consciously managed, subject to continual self-surveillance as well as surveillance on the part of others” (Lupton 1996: 22).

Ballista and Carrer’s picturebook tries to reconnect the individual, and more specifically a woman, through the collective dimension, using two metaphorical pictures: the spider that stands for unique and individual work, and the feast that means sharing and taking part in something bigger than oneself. Significantly, in this work the female artist is no longer a young writer in apprenticeship and at the end of her journey she is represented as having accomplished a balance between independence and social recognition.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I focused on the relationship between food and artistic and gender equality throughout the key opposition feast-or-famine. The analysis has shown how food impacts young writers' coming-of-age stories in the interplay with adulthood and, as for Virginia Woolf, it has presented one example of accomplishment.

Most of the young heroines grow with a lack of food which is portrayed in the philosophical ideas in Louisa May Alcott's story, religious containment in Emily Dickinson's experience of the puritan boarding school, and as the family condition Katinka experiences due to the death of her mother. The condition of deprivation means that the educational background does not provide a sustenance and recognition for their artistic striving; at the same time, the struggle the girls go through is the creative engine that moves their writing. Therefore, the three mentioned characters deal with the famine metaphor in different ways but reach similar conclusions: May bravely chooses her own truth regarding life, even if it means conflict with her beloved and valued father, although this does not cost her the acceptance of her family. Emily on the contrary, fails to be appreciated for her extraordinary and divergent individuality, even though she is strong enough not to give up writing. Then, Katinka finally understands how the loss of her mother, along with the lack of food, is something which she can consider precious for her artistic growth. In the end, May, Emily, and Katinka find their way to pursue writing as the very essence of their being, despite the obstacles they face. Food, even when it is lacking, is an essential material aspect of life. The three characters have to face the deprivation there are suffering, placing it at the center of their artistic growth. In this way, the lack of food itself becomes the subject of their writing efforts.

This inevitable striving for writing is also shared by Mina, who on the other hand, grows up in a fulfilling environment in which she has everything she needs to develop her creativity and unicuity. The joyful meals she has in the novel follow her development, representing the attempt to bring her exceptionality and need for human connection together.

In connection to the latter, in *Künstellromans* (Trites 1997: 69) the relationship with the community cannot be separated from one's self-affirmation as a writer. This concept is also summarized by *Una stanza tutta per me* [A room all of my own] where the artistic fulfilment reached by the grown-up writer coincides with a feast, enjoyed by Virginia and others.

All the five characters experience writing as something which is closely linked to one of the most concrete aspects of life, because food is a primary literary subject. Their minds and bodies are not in opposition, but work together to form literary works.

It is, in any case, challenging to answer Woolf's question directly, because girls are not always completely fulfilled, as they often have to deal with their hunger.

Nevertheless, from this lack of nourishment, they can find the spark of their talent. As seen in the five analyzed works, the feast-and-famine binarism can be considered a literary subject addressed by the writers-to-be: accordingly, food feeds the poetic eye even when there is none.

In conclusion, food in coming-of-age stories with girl writers as protagonists can be tackled in contrasting ways and seen as a bridge between the writer and the world, also shedding lights on what educational background means and provides young female artists, namely sustainment or containment.

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Summary

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* builds a strong connection between food and the material conditions of women writers. From this point of view, food can be considered a metaphor for the achievement of both artistic and gender equality. Hence, my paper aims to outline the relevance of this under-investigated topic in children's literature, focusing on feminist *Künstlerromans*, namely stories about a female artist's journey to maturity. Drawing from Nodelman, I investigate two opposite narrative situations: famine and feast. In the first one, the lack of food represents the struggle in the artistic development, often caused by a hostile educational environment, while, in the second, nourishment can be interpreted as fruitful sustainment for the body and soul. My hypothesis seeks to underline how food

and girls' development as women and artist intertwines, figuring out a possible answer to Woolf's question.

Keywords

children's literature, gender equality, artistic development, *Künstellroman*, food, feast-and-famine binarism