

Sexually Stimulating and Tastefully Titillating:

The Epigraph of Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

Laura Esquivel's debut novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, published in Spanish in 1989, explores deep themes of human power and sexuality. In essence, the work functions as an allegory for the turbulent political situation of Mexico during its early twentieth century revolution. The lives of Tita De la Garza and her sisters are ruled over by the authoritarian Mama Elena, though over time the distribution of authority shifts. Myriad other motifs and devices, such as reversal of gender, food, tradition, and magic realism work to further this image of rebellion. Despite the fact that it is overlooked, one discovers many of these aspects simply by reading the often overlooked epigraph of the novel: "To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid" (Esquivel 1). In these succinct two lines, Esquivel perfectly describes the ideas of power, sex, and dichotomy so integral to her argument that women inhabit a truly dominant role within society.

The structure of this epigraph alone is responsible for much of its gravity as a part of the work. The slant rhyme established by "bed" and "bid," in conjunction with the approximation of meter (with somewhat alternating stressed and unstressed syllables) within both lines suggests a sing-song incantation, evocative perhaps of the ubiquitous magic realism in the novel. The parallelism of this meter and the number of syllables in both lines gives them equal importance and a rigidity which further conveys power and order. In looking at the audience of the epigraph, one sees too the hint of authoritarian command wielded by Mama Elena, as well as an aphorism similar to the many traditional sayings within the text. Though much of this can only be

discerned after having read the novel, one can see what form alone may imply to the reader (Esquivel 1).

Next one must look to analyze the meaning of the epigraph, though it bears many interpretations. As suggested, the pivotal power struggle of this novel is displayed through the command form (“You must”) used in the epigraph (Esquivel 1). Mama Elena’s own edicts, never questioned and always obeyed, are called to mind (Esquivel 11), as is Tita’s necessary control of the kitchen, as, following the death of the maid, she alone is the best acquainted of the De la Garzas with the family recipes (Esquivel 48). Her “domain” of the kitchen and her submission are therefore established in the call to “table” (Esquivel 7). However, the coming “to bed” suggests that she must also present herself to those such as Pedro Muzquiz, who desire her sexually (Esquivel 1). Even before her first “legitimate” sexual encounter, in which Pedro “[throws] himself upon her” in a dark room (Esquivel 158), her flesh has been transformed from “chaste to experienced” by the very desire of his lecherous gaze (Esquivel 67). Both cases characterize Tita as an object of desire to be possessed, due in large part to the fact that the former instance occurs in a manner [initially] akin to rape.

Inherent in this image of power is also the dichotomy which guides much of the novel. Although Mama Elena bars Tita from marrying Pedro, instead providing her sister Rosaura as a worthy substitute, Tita manages to circumvent this (Esquivel 15). Because of her puissance in the kitchen, she is able to both express her emotion to and sexually stimulate Pedro. The most direct instance of this occurs when she cooks an aphrodisiac quail in rose petal sauce: through this, she “penetrate[s] to the farthest corners of his being” (Esquivel 52), the diction establishing Tita as a phallic and dominant force. However, this is not the only effect: the dish also causes her sister Gertrudis to act as “medium” for her passion, the effects of which cause her to burn a shower

stall and attract a young man with whom she makes a sexualized escape from the ranch on horseback (Esquivel 52-55). Through the magic realism inherent within her food, Tita effectively manages to control the rest of her family in a similar way. Even Mama Elena must eventually submit to being fed by Tita after she suffers from paralysis: as Tita “firmly [holds] her gaze, Mama Elena [lowers] hers” (Esquivel 129). Though in this case Tita is not expressly attempting to convey emotion through her food, she still gains strength from her requirement to come to “table,” and in essence reverses the command: others must bow to her authority in the kitchen (Esquivel 1). Even Gertrudis, leader of a rebel trope and sexually liberated, is not as adept as Tita in this territory (Esquivel 193).

As the novel progresses, one sees Tita take a much more active role in guiding her sexuality and passion. While she finds in a nearby doctor, John Brown, a warm, gentle love, she appears to find his love as “bland” as the food she tastes at his house (Esquivel 109). Despite this, she initially refuses to renew her love for Pedro after she sees him succumbing to “weakness”, “going away and leaving her” at the behest of Rosaura and Mama Elena (Esquivel 139). Despite her conflicting emotions about the men, with time she becomes self-determined. When reprimanded by the spirit of Mama Elena who attempts to dissuade her from continuing her affair with Pedro, she obstinately tells her that she “has the perfect right to live her life as she pleases” (Esquivel 199), dispelling the phantom and perhaps affirming her love for the man. Though John Brown provides stability and safety, Pedro alone confers upon her the “explosion that lights one of the matches” which are said to be within her body, “[nourishing] the soul” (Esquivel 115). She herself decides which man she shall bed (Esquivel 252), and in the face of Pedro’s marriage to her sister Rosaura (Esquivel 237). She is able to determine her life for

herself, despite being considered an indecent demimonde by her mother and sister (Esquivel 199).

A new interpretation of the opening epigraph again comes forth. As with the “table,” Tita herself is the one who calls others to her “bed” (Esquivel 1), taking on a generally masculine role. Her “pregnancy” by Pedro is soon dispelled (Esquivel 200): by escaping this common consequence of pregnancy, she opens herself up to the life of uninhibited intercourse which is available to men. Further, unlike Gertrudis’s sex, depicted as almost salacious, and Rosaura’s, depicted as impersonal and shallow, Tita’s first experience with intercourse becomes a magical display of “phosphorescent colors” (Esquivel 159). This extreme sexuality gives her a level of power outstripping that of her sisters on the ranch – and somewhat without, as evidenced by John Brown’s infatuation with her. Her sexual prowess is, by novel’s end, shown in stark display when it is utilized in conjunction with her mastery of food. The chiles she cooks cause all the guests of Esperanza’s wedding to make “mad passionate love” in myriad positions (Esquivel 242), displaying not only a control of her own sexuality but also that of others. Further, this instance finally displays her true choice of Pedro as a mate, for whom her sexual impulses go “right through [her] skin and [come] out in the form of heat and a distinctive smell” of which John becomes embarrassingly aware (Esquivel 242). This perceivable love takes on a hot sensuality reminiscent of cooked food, further enmeshing both “table” and “bed” with one another (Esquivel 1). This singular gift puts her in a position to determine her fate, though, as her mother’s backstory attests, so many of her ancestors were unable to ever follow their desires: rather than living a life of “frustrated love” as her mother did, she decides in this way to “never renounce love” (Esquivel 137-138).

The final demonstration of Tita's unexpected sexuality and power is seen in the closing of Esquivel's work. Not only is she able to cast off all stealth and secrecy but excites Pedro's passions to dangerous levels (Esquivel 242). However, only she is able to restrain herself from "a climax so intense that her eyes glowed": Pedro, on the other hand, dies from the experience, spent by Tita's immense passion (Esquivel 243-244). Without "the candles" which he would provide to light her matches, she realizes that she must stimulate herself in order to reach the climactic ecstasy which will carry her to the afterlife (Esquivel 244-245). It is here that Tita fully takes on the mantle of masculinity by eating candles to light her fire: within the confines of this novel's magic realism, the act becomes one of autoeroticism (Esquivel 245). Thoughts of Pedro help her, but Tita reaches her orgasm through her own, unique will (Esquivel 245), contrary to the depiction within literature of autoeroticism as a typically masculine endeavor.

These numerous interpretations all stream from the wellspring of Esquivel's epigraph. With this, one comes to see that Tita is not merely a slave to the demands of her mother, family, and lovers, but the final master of all. Rather than remaining within the general roles of cook and womb so often foisted upon women, she inverts these designations in order to use them to her advantage. This is only apparent, however, once one has read and analyzed both the epigraph and the text. Without a full understanding of both, the former may simply come across as was expressed initially: Tita must live in conformity. The irony – that she is the one who bears control of the ranch – may be lost if one does not understand the various and dichotomous ways in which the epigraph may be interpreted. Upon final inspection, Tita inhabits the realms of both masculinity and femininity: though powerful and sexually liberated, her instinct to nurture and mother rings strong, as evidenced by her behavior with her nephew Roberto and niece Esperanza (Esquivel 77).

Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* depicts many cases of conflict. Different parties appear to be in charge of life on the De la Garza ranch, magic realism causes mayhem, and struggles for power and sex come into play on numerous occasions between all the inhabitants. Yet Esquivel's intent becomes much less opaque in looking at the simple epigraph "To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid" (1). The novel does feature an analogous situation to the Mexican Revolution, but the setting places it the realm of common people and their issues – the epigraph's aphoristic nature speaks to this. Therefore, as seen through various examples of Tita using her roles at the table and in bed to gain authority on the De la Garza ranch, Esquivel argues for an extension of the perception of women's roles within a society in which they are so often oppressed. Within a short epigraph, Esquivel hints at the power, sex, and dichotomous nature of *Like Water for Chocolate* to posit that women play a much more dominant role in society than that which they are afforded.

Works Cited

Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*. Trans. Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen. New York: Anchor Books, 1995. Print.

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