

“People Eat Their Dinner, Just Eat Their Dinner...”:
Food Discourse in Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*
and Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*

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Abstract

The essay sets out to explore the functions of food discourse in the plays *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov and *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley. Based on the critically established continuity between the two plays, the essay looks at the ways the dramatists capitalize on food imagery to achieve their artistic goals. It seemed logical to discuss the alimentary practices within the framework of everyday life studies (Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schütz, Fernand Braudel, Bernhard Waldenfels and others), moved to the forefront of literary scholarship by the anthropological turn in the humanities. Enhanced by a semiotic approach, this perspective enables one to understand food products and consumption manners as performing a variety of functions in each play. Most obviously, they are instrumental in creating the illusion of “everydayness” vital for new drama. Then, for Chekhov, food comes to epitomize the spiritless materiality of contemporary life, while in Henley’s play it is predominantly used, in accordance with the play’s feminist agenda, as a grotesque substitute for the lack of human affection. Relying upon the fundamental cultural distinction between everyday and non-everyday makes it possible to compare representations of festive occasions in the two plays seen through the gastronomical lens of “eating together.” Despite substantial differences, the emphases on

alimentary practices in the plays serve to realize the inexhaustible dramatic potential inherent in the minutiae of quotidian life.

Keywords: drama, tragicomic, food discourse, alimentary practices, everyday life, constructing and overcoming “everydayness,” “poshlost,” “eating together.”

Introduction

This article owes its title to a much-quoted letter written by Anton Chekhov in 1887 and generally interpreted as his artistic manifesto, signaling the playwright’s radical departure from traditional dramatic conventions. In its full form, the fragment goes as follows:

The demand is made that the hero and heroine should be dramatically effective. But after all, in real life people don't spend every minute shooting each other, hanging themselves and making confessions of love. They don't spend all their time saying clever things. They're more occupied with eating, drinking, flirting and talking stupidities – and these are the things which ought to be shown on the stage. A play should be written in which people arrive, go away, have dinner, talk about the weather and play cards. Life must be exactly as it is. And people as they are – not on stilts.... Let everything on the stage be just as complicated, and at the same time just as simple as it is in life. People eat their dinner, just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives are being broken up. (qtd. in Hingley 233)

In his mature plays created in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, Chekhov consistently put this program into practice, distilling poignant universal drama from the humble everyday lives led by ordinary people. The same key words – “everyday life” and “ordinary people” – characterize theater pieces authored by Beth Henley, an eminent American dramatist of the 1980s and 1990s. Gerald Berkowitz describes her plays as being “generally about

ordinary southerners who turn out to have unexpected quirks or askew values, so that mundane events turn into bizarre adventures and bizarre adventures into unnoticed trivia” (200). This is no coincidence. Chekhov meant quite a lot for Henley as one of the literary and theatrical luminaries who lifted “the veils of the mind” (Henley “I Go with What I’m Feeling” 80). The Russian dramatist’s influence is most strongly felt in Henley’s play with which she had first made her name on the stage – *Crimes of the Heart* (1978/1982), sometimes alluded to as a work “haunted by the ghosts of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*” (Karpinski 229). As the American author reminisces, the exultation she experienced at a Chekhov production resulted in her having an “epileptic fit in the audience,” in “crying and screaming,” and in feeling euphoric because she understood “how things could be simultaneously tragic and comic and so alive and so real.” Henley also adds: “After that, I understood Chekhov, and I went on to write *Crimes of the Heart*, which is loosely based on *Three Sisters*” (qtd. in Burns).

It is but natural that, in their varied responses to Henley’s play, drama critics would not have missed the similarities and differences between the two plays discussing them at considerable length (see Gagen, Foster, Karpinski, Hargrove). “So powerful are the shades of Olga, Masha, and Irina that, whatever their later names may be, theater audiences will always remember that there were three of them,” Foster remarks (451). Incidentally, in Henley’s play their names are Leonora (Lenny), Margaret (Meg), and Rebecca (Babe). Alongside with many obvious resemblances in terms of the characters’ configuration, recurring motifs, certain analogous drama techniques, and, crucially, the plays’ “double mood,” that is, the striking “juxtaposition of the pathetic and comic” (Gagen 121), the critics also tend to mention “everydayness” (to use Bernhard Waldenfels’ term) as a feature common for them: “Both plays are full of the details of daily life, and what actually happens on stage is usually quite ordinary” (Gagen 120). It should be borne in mind, though, that Chekhov’s impact on Henley’s work was strongly mediated by the Southern gothic tradition and, in particular, by the influence of Tennessee

Williams, also a great admirer and even disciple of Chekhov (see Williams 40-41).

With everyday life studies having stayed in the spotlight of scholarly attention for several decades already, this essay sets out to explore one of the vital elements of everyday life structures, namely, food and eating, as represented in the two plays separated in time by about a century, but united in spirit by the kinship in their authors' views on what makes drama effective.

Food as an Everyday Life (Metaphoric) Structure in Chekhov's and Henley's Dramatic Modes

The concept of "everyday life" has by now become a catchphrase in the vocabulary of the humanities. Nevertheless, the consensus has not been reached yet about its definition – one reason for that being, probably, the fact that "'everyday life' and the categories with which it is described are constituted within specific cultural and historical contexts" (Eckert and Jones 15). Philosophers belonging to different schools of thought, sociologists, historians, practitioners of cultural and literary studies contribute to this discourse, taking the "world of ordinary experiences as their point of departure" (Eckert and Jones 15). Thus, one of the pioneers in the field, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, proclaimed our everyday life world to be "the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable" (48), while his follower, Alfred Schütz, looking at the problem through the prism of sociology, calls upon his readers to understand "everydayness" as "the sum total of objects and occurrences within the social cultural world as experienced by the common-sense thinking of men living their daily lives among their fellow-men, connected with them in manifold relations of interaction"(53).

For the purposes of this article, historian Fernand Braudel's broad description equating "everyday life" with "material life" may also be used as a working tool: "Ever present, all pervasive, repetitive, material life [...] run according to routine" (28) ... "Everyday life consists of the little things one hardly notices in time

and space. The more we reduce the focus of vision, the more likely we are to find ourselves in the environment of material life [...] (29). Discussing current in-depth interest in daily life professed by many disciplines, Waldenfels summarizes their differing approaches by stating that no matter what the chosen perspective, “in this kind of research subjective experiences are distinctly opposed to objective structures and processes, typical practical actions – to individual and collective feats, long-lasting rhythms – to unique epoch-making events, movable forms of rationality – to ideal constructions and exact methods” (39). The article relies on these approaches, too, for they give a vivid idea of quotidian life representations in fiction and drama.

In her perspicacious study of everyday life poetics in classical Russian literature, Kseniya Vorotyntseva hypothesizes that “as a rule, everyday life in literary narratives is presented through several binary oppositions: everyday life – being (in some instances becoming a tripartite structure “everyday life – being – non-being”), festivity – everyday life, and poetry – prose” (276). To prove her point, the scholar focuses on the first of them – everyday life as opposed to “being.” The corresponding words in the Russian language derive from the same root, and, therefore, sound very much alike (*byt* – *bytiye*), further emphasizing the contrast in their scope of meanings. But Chekhov’s case presents an exception. According to Chekhov scholar Aleksandr Skaftymov, the writer blurs the differences between *byt* and *bytiye*:

while in the pre-Chekhovian play of manners everyday life was outshone by the events invading life as something extraordinary, removing individuals from their ordinary emotional state, and by filling up the play ousting everyday life, in Chekhov’s drama, running against the grain of dramatic tradition, events are relegated to the periphery as short-lived occurrences, and the ordinary, neutral, daily, repetitive, habitual constitutes the main body, the main foundation of the play’s contents. (qtd. in Vorotyntseva 292)

Thus, in Chekhov's works, the existential drama of any individual life is transposed to the purportedly unexciting surface of things, whilst losing nothing in terms of its profundity and human appeal.

Narrowing the focus to specific gastronomical practices, from a semiotic perspective, they present, according to Roland Barthes, "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations and behavior," with all food serving "as a sign among the members of a given society" (21). It makes sense, therefore, to treat food as a semiological system or a code of communication, subject, as any other cultural system, to decoding. Concurrently, alimentary practices, being an essential premise for human daily existence, operate, both in life and in art, "as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity" (Montanari xi).

Since the practices of cooking and consumption of food play a vital part in constructing daily routine, Chekhov could not help drawing upon them in his plays where, as any other detail, they operate on two levels oscillating between their mundane function and their symbolic meaning(s). As Eve Jackson put it, "in exploring the psychic background of food we also begin to understand how the literal process of eating is affected by symbolic associations and metaphoric attributions, and by the constant interplay between conscious and unconscious" (9). As a result, representations of or talks about food, drinks and meals, on the one hand, take part in creating the "natural" backdrop for Chekhov's everyday life dramas, and, on the other, being woven into their highly connotative subtext, serve both to shape his characters and to model the overall matrix of contemporary Russian life as he saw it.

Since Chekhov's view of Russian life and institutions was highly critical, his commonly known "everydayness" often figures in his drama and short stories in its negative version defined in Russian by the untranslatable word "poshlost." "Poshlost" was one of Chekhov's lifelong moral and aesthetic arch-enemies. It is explained by Vladimir Nabokov as "banality, lack of spirituality, and sexual obscenity" (313). In this context, references to food and

drink help construct the discourse of “poshlost” as the scourge of Russian (provincial) life at the turn of the century, very much in line with Henri Lefebvre’s observations about the monotony of everyday life as a hallmark of modernity. According to him,

[t]he everyday is situated at the intersection of two modes of repetition: the cyclical, which dominates in nature, and the linear, which dominates in processes known as ‘rational’. The everyday implies on the one hand cycles, nights and days, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfillment, life and death, and it implies on the other hand the repetitive gestures of work and consumption.

In modern life, the repetitive gestures tend to mask and to crush the cycles. The everyday imposes its monotony. It is the invariable constant of the variations it envelops. The days follow one after another and resemble one another [...]. (10)

Among a “bewildering variety of interpretations” of *Three Sisters* discussed by Gordon McVay, this focus on everyday life as imposed monotony and banality correlates with a reading of the play as “a devastating indictment of the folly of inert gentility and vacuous day-dreaming” (138). Of particular interest in this context is the monologue about his frustrated illusions delivered by the three sisters’ brother Andrey (*Three Sisters*, Act 4):

... Our town has been here for at least two hundred years, it has a hundred thousand inhabitants, and there is not one of them in all that number who is not like all the others, not a single saintly fanatic either in the past or in the present, not a single scholar, not a single artist, not even a remotely noteworthy man who might awaken some envy, or the desire to imitate him... All they do is *eat, and drink*, and sleep, and then die... others are then born and they also *eat, and drink* and sleep, and so as not to become completely numb from boredom, they embroider their lives with disgusting gossip, with *vodka*, with cards, and deceptions, and the wives deceive their husbands, while the husbands lie to themselves, they give the appearance that they see nothing and hear nothing, and the oppressing, inescapable and degenerate

influence crushes their children, and the spark of divinity is extinguished in them, and they become just the same pitiful and mean corpses without life, all the same as one another, just as their parents were before them... (italics mine) (*Three Sisters*)

This excerpt resonates with a fragment from Chekhov's letter in which he expresses similar feelings about his native town Taganrog, in the south of Russia: "Sixty thousand inhabitants busy themselves exclusively with *eating, drinking*, procreating, and they have no other interests, none at all. Wherever you go, there are *Easter cakes, eggs, local wine*, infants, but no newspapers, no books" (italics mine) (Letter to N. A. Leikin, 7 April 1888, see Yarmolinsky 46). It can be assumed, therefore, that Andrey speaks here as a mouthpiece for Chekhov's beliefs. Further on, envisioning a happier future at least for his children, Andrey says: "The present is unbearable, but if I think ahead to the future, ah! how fine it is. It becomes so free and so spacious; in the distance the dawn is breaking, I see freedom, I see how I and my children will be freed from idleness, *from cabbage pickle, from roast chicken and vegetables*, from dozing after *dinner*, from crippling inactivity..." (italics mine). By negatively associating vital biological necessity and axiologically neutral food produce with the daily routine dulling mind and soul, Chekhov demonstrates the ease with which cozy and comforting "everydayness" can degenerate into deadening "non-being" when devoid of spiritual core and meaningful activities.

Unlike *Three Sisters*, where references to food and drink, though important, appear in moderation, reading or watching Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* leaves one under the impression that the characters, and, first of all, the three sisters, are eating and drinking non-stop. The opening and the final scenes of the play contain food images – cookies and cake, respectively. Candies and pecans, coffee and lemonade, coke and bourbon, and, finally, the gigantic cake (its consumption by the sisters crowns the story) seem to dominate the scene. When not actually engaged in the process, the sisters are either making something to eat ("fix us up some

popcorn and hot chocolate”) (Henley 39) or talking about it, no matter whether the situation asks for it or not: telling about her affair with a teenage Black boy, Meg mentions that he brought them cherry coke; fantasizing about her failed Hollywood career, she describes a non-existent cover picture featuring her “eating pineapples under a palm tree” (Henley 34); reminiscing about their mother’s funeral, the girls giggle at having had banana splits for breakfast that day. This preoccupation with eating is even lampooned in the play itself by the fact that Meg has to work, of all places, at a dog-food factory.

By way of explicating these gastronomical excesses, it can be argued that Henley intentionally reduces Chekhovian “everydayness” *ad absurdum* by heaping up actual and virtual victuals until they reach grotesquely immense proportions in the readers’ /viewers’ imagination. In doing so, she might have relied on the techniques of “intensification, acceleration, accumulation, proliferation to the point of paroxysm” (Esslin 191) adopted in some versions of the Theater of the Absurd. It seems all the more probable since, not unlike absurdist (or Chekhov’s) drama, her plays offer a mishmash of the tragic and the blackly comic. Of course, the Russian dramatist himself gave grounds for the parodically exaggerated images of the “daily bread” motif. According to many critics (see, for example, Gilman 148, 159), he had been a powerful inspiration for the Theater of the Absurd and a kind of latent pre-Absurdist himself long before the phenomenon took shape. In *Three Sisters*, the absurd effect of the age-old *quid pro quo* technique is showcased in the hilarious argument between Chebutykin and Solyony about a certain food product, with each of them meaning a different one:

CHEBUTYKIN. (*Going into the drawing room with Irina.*) And the meal was also a typical Caucasian one – onion soup, and for the roast, chexkhartma, a lamb casserole.

SOLYONY. Cheremsha is certainly not a lamb casserole. It’s a plant, rather like our garlic.

CHEBUTYKIN. That is not so, my dear boy. Chexkhartma is not garlic, but a casserole made from lamb.

SOLYONY. I can assure you – cheremsha is garlic.

CHEBUTYKIN. And I can assure you – chekhartma is lamb casserole.

SOLYONY. And I can assure you – cheremsha is garlic.

CHEBUTYKIN. Why should I bother to quarrel with you? You were never in the Caucasus, and you never ate chekhartma.

SOLYONY. I didn't eat it because I loathed it. Cheremsha smells just like garlic. (*Three Sisters*)

This technique is known to be a favorite with the Absurdist who resorted to it to make their point about the impossibility of human communication and the vacuity of language. Interestingly, in the play, Chekhov relies on food images to produce the effect of the nonsensical.

From a somewhat different perspective, the abundance of eating scenes in the play can be interpreted within the framework of its feminist agenda – denouncing the devastating effect of Southern patriarchy on women's physical and psychological well-being. Viewed in this light, the McGrath sisters' perpetual chewing lends itself to interpretation in the context of current alimentary discourse in American culture, which is rather ambivalent. According to Francine Prose, it exhibits "a schizophrenic attitude" towards plentiful eating:

One minute we're bombarded with images of food, advertisements for restaurants or the latest sweet or fatty snack, with recipes and cooking tips. A minute later, we're reminded that eating is tantamount to suicide, that indulgence and enjoyment equals social isolation and self-destruction. And someone is making money from both sides of our ambivalence about it and fascination with food, diet, gluttony, and starvation. (79)

Closely related to this dichotomy is a widespread notion that eating is a substitute for high-quality emotional life, a way to come to grips with one's sense of guilt or inferiority, or make up for lack of parental / conjugal / friendly affection, warmth etc. Since these are considered to be more frequently women's problems,

Sigmund Freud's ideas are sometimes enlisted to account for female inability to stop eating, namely, women's supposed congenital primal loathing of their female bodies (674). In one of the numerous books on the subject, Kim Chernin offers the following commentary to explain the insatiable hunger she was prey to in her youth:

What I wanted from food was companionship, comfort, reassurance, a sense of warmth and well-being that was hard for me to find in my own life, even in my own home. And now that these emotions were coming to surface, they could no longer easily be satisfied with food. I was hungering, it was true; but food apparently was not what I was hungering for. (4)

In her book, entitled meaningfully *When Food Is Love*, Geneen Roth argues that

the focus on weight provides a convenient and culturally reinforced distraction from the reasons why so many people use food when they are not hungry. These reasons are more complex than – and will never be solved with – will power, counting calories, and exercise. They have to do with neglect, lack of trust, lack of love, sexual abuse, physical abuse, unexpressed rage, grief, being the object of discrimination, protection from getting hurt again. (4)

Since the MaGrath sisters had suffered from nearly all the enumerated conditions, their avidity for food can be tackled as a metaphor for that other kind of “hunger” they have no way of satisfying.

Certain scenes in *Crimes of the Heart* are particularly eloquent in emphasizing the function of food as a substitute for human fulfillment and its close relatedness to the emotional sphere. When Meg and Babe realize that they have forgotten about their sister's birthday, they decide to make up for their negligence by ordering a huge cake for her. Their playful discussion of the imagined formidable size of the cake lends itself to reading it as a

metaphorical representation of the guilt they feel, and, simultaneously, as an allusion to an episode in Nicolay Gogol's *Inspector-General* where Khlestakov describes the gigantic watermelon he was once served (*Inspector-General*). Consequently, the cake in Henley's play is meant to act as a gastronomical substitute for their sisterly love. In a similar manner, Babe wanting more sugar in her lemonade after a distressing talk about their mother's suicide, is unconsciously trying to assuage her trauma by substituting the actual taste of sweet for missing psychological stability. A similar tactic, to use Michel de Certeau's term for individual appropriations of consumption strategies (xvii), is used in the scene when she goes to make herself a lemonade after an attempt on her husband's life. Arguably, this mundane activity aims at distracting her from the monstrosity of what she had done, and at "obliterating" this extraordinary event from the familiar fabric of everyday life. In a different situation, Meg demonstrates her permanent yearning for challenges by opening the pecans brought by Doc with her bare hands – her behavior in this scene "rhymes" with the emotional challenge she takes of winning him back in the midst of a rather painful relationship exacerbated by his now married state. Another romantic possibility, the one between Babe and Bartlett, is hinted at by the circumstances of their first meeting, when she sold him an orange pound cake at a bazaar. On the other hand, a negative example of using food to connote a tense relationship is provided by Lenny's sizzling rage at discovering that Meg had taken a bite out of each piece from the box of candies (Lenny's only birthday present). Her inadequate response to a trivial (and even funny) mishap seems a comical overreaction, but it is sufficiently accounted for by the elder sister's deeply seated sense of injustice and sibling rivalry seething in her since childhood – "she [Meg] always seemed to get what she wanted" (Henley 35). Curiously, an almost identical incident (registered in Karpinski 244) is discussed in *Three Sisters*:

TUZENBACH. (*Takes a box from the table.*) Where are the chocolates?

IRINA. Solyony has eaten them.
 TUZENBACH. All of them?

The motivation here, though similar, lies with the eater: Solyony (whose family name means “salty” in Russian) suffers from an overwhelming inferiority complex and tries to make up for it by “sweetening” his lot with candies while depriving the rest of the company of this pleasure (*Three Sisters*).

(Non) Eating Together: Feasts Enjoyed and Spoiled

Human culture rests, to a considerable extent, upon the awareness of the opposition between “everyday” and “non-everyday,” or between the daily and the festive. Waldenfels speaks about the ongoing production and overcoming of “everydayness” as the conditions *sine qua non* for social life. “Everyday” for him means “habitual, ordered and close at hand, while non-everyday is contrasted to it as non-habitual, out of order, and distant” (41-42). One of the markers of “non-everyday” has always been food and the manner of its consumption. In the culture of modernity, a festive meal shared by family and friends acquired significance as an important element of celebratory practices. “And since actions performed with others tend to forsake the simply functional level to take on a communicative value,” Massimo Montanari reminds us (93), our human socializing instinct has long attributed various religious and secular meanings to a shared meal. In *Three Sisters* and *Crimes of the Heart* the transition to non-everyday behaviors finds its reasoning in the family celebrations – Irina’s name day in Chekhov’s play, and Lenny’s birthday in Henley’s. In both plays, the “cake” operates as an artifact signifying a non-trivial event; in Chekhov’s play, though, it is an unwelcome gift from an unlikable off-stage character, and, consequently, offhandedly discarded by its recipient. On the contrary, as mentioned above, in Henley’s piece the cake comes to embody the sisters’ unity and indomitable spirit.

In both plays, festive occasions justify the inclusion of “eating together” scenes, though instilled with very different

moods. According to Montanari, “family and broader community [...] reasserts its own collective identity at the table” (94). A festive meal is the focus of Act I in *Three Sisters*, with the initial stage directions indicating that the table is laid for lunch. Inviting their guests to stay for lunch, the sisters express their total trust in them as almost family, while the gestation of mutual attraction between Masha and Vershinin is heralded by her decision to change her mind and stay for lunch as soon as she realizes that he is going to be a part of it. However, the festive lunch attended by family and friends ends in what prophesies ruin and disaster for their collective identity as aristocratic intelligentsia – Andrey’s proposal to Natasha. As Montanari argues in this context, “if the table is the metaphor for life, it represents in a direct and exacting way both membership in a group and the relationships defined within that group” (95). At the beginning of the scene, Natasha is definitely not a member of the group. We first meet her feeling nervous about being late for lunch, since it means so much for her. A petty bourgeois anxious to enter her small-town higher-class society represented by the Prozorov sisters, she is at last invited for lunch because their brother Andrey is enamored of her. Natasha’s not belonging with them is due not so much to her lower birth, but to her narrow-mindedness, trivial ideals and mercenary values. But the lunch changes this state of affairs. An infelicitous joke about thirteen people seated at table (in common lore, a sign that there are lovers among those present) precipitates events, making Natasha blush and leave the table in confusion, while Andrey rushes after her and proposes marriage, thus enabling her to break down the social barriers. As a result, a shared meal, instead of knitting the family closer together, triggers the intrusion of an unsympathetic outsider into the group, eventually contributing to the family’s disintegration. Moreover, in Act 2, Natasha confirms her function as a joy killer by directly forbidding the traditional Christmas celebration at the Prozorovs’ place involving mummers and treats. The further turn of events would also smite Tuzenbakh, who felt so happy during this lunch as he anticipated a blissful future with Irina. In the last act, this festive lunch is counterpointed with

another meal – an official event arranged by the city to say good-bye to departing officers. “The town council gave us a sort of lunch, we drank champagne, the dignitaries gave speeches; I ate something and listened, but my heart was really here, with you...,” says Tuzenbakh, emphasizing the contrast between a warm family gathering and a merely social event (*Three Sisters*). Soon he would leave the Prozorovs’ house forever to meet his death at Solyony’s hand.

Maybe, as an indirect allusion to that fateful lunch that had dramatically – and devastatingly – changed the direction of his life, Andrey dreams about a different mode of “eating together” – at a Moscow restaurant, in the amicable anonymity of a big modern city where he could be free from the obligations imposed by his far from satisfactory family life:

“I don’t drink, I don’t like the local inns, but how much I would love to be sitting now in Moscow at Tyestov’s, or at the Great Moscow restaurant [...] In Moscow you sit in a huge restaurant, you don’t know anyone, and nobody knows you, but all the same you don’t feel yourself to be a stranger. But here you know everyone and everyone knows you, but you’re a stranger, a stranger. You’re a stranger and you’re alone.” (*Three Sisters*)

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the final scene of cake eating performs the more traditional – positive – function of a shared meal, bringing the sisters together and making them forget about their predicaments, albeit for a short while. Opposed to eating unexciting everyday oatmeal porridge (the opening of Act 2), it serves to translate to life Lenny’s wishful vision for the three of them “smiling and laughing together,” at least for “just one moment” (Henley 63). By insisting on each getting a “whole rose apiece,” by declaring the icing “delicious” and the cake “delightful” (64), by laughing incessantly, Lenny, Meg and Babe assert their indestructible vitality and ability to withstand the vicissitudes of life. Henley’s neo-Gothic propensity for oddity and extravagance is emphasized in this scene by the feast’s unusual timing – the three women are enjoying it not in the evening, as custom dictates, but

for breakfast. As Berkovitz notes, in the play's ending "with the sisters laughing over the pleasure of eating birthday cake for breakfast," it is their "inherent innocence that guarantees them happiness" (201).

Conclusion

Drawing upon the above considerations, it would seem fair to conclude that looking upon the construction of food discourse in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* within the paradigm of everyday life studies is both expedient and productive. Enhanced by a semiotic approach, this perspective helps better understand the radical shifts in the 20th-century theatre language pioneered by Chekhov at the turn of the 20th century, and developed, among numerous others, by Henley at the turn of the 21st century. In the two plays under discussion, food products and consumption manners perform a variety of functions. Most obviously, they are instrumental in creating the illusion of "everydayness" vital for the new drama focusing rather on internal than external conflicts. Then, for Chekhov, food comes to epitomize the spiritless materiality of contemporary life, its basic "poshlost," while in Henley's play it is predominantly used, in accordance with feminist propositions, as a grotesque substitute for harmonious emotional life and human affection. Relying upon the fundamental cultural distinction between everyday and non-everyday makes it possible to compare representations of non-everyday occasions in the two plays seen through the gastronomical lens of "eating together" – in *Three Sisters* the name day lunch plays the fatal role in the plot bringing closer the imminent family collapse, while in *Crimes of the Heart* the birthday cake eating celebrates family ties as a major value. Even though one cannot help but agree with Jean Gagen's pronouncement that *Three Sisters* "has a much greater depth of vision, keener perceptions, and much richer, more complex and haunting resonances in its depiction of the human predicament" (128) than Henley's play, in both pieces the emphases on alimentary practices serve to realize the

inexhaustible dramatic potential inherent in the minutiae of the quotidian life.

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