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Eating Away: Women's Relationship with Food in Literature

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EATING AWAY:
WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD IN LITERATURE

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Eating disorders disrupt the lives of thousands of women each year. While treatment of these diseases is usually successful, prevention is not. The question, then, becomes why do women destroy themselves with food?

As usual, literature reflects reality and gives us several insights into the causes behind eating disorders. Three contemporary novels, The Edible Woman, by Margaret Atwood, Quartet in Autumn, by Barbara Pym, and The Fat Woman's Joke, by Fay Weldon, demonstrate the problematic relationships women often have with food and eating. While the manifestations of the disorders are very different, the causes behind them are quite similar in all three novels.

First, all three of these novels indicate major events, or times of conflict, where the women's eating disorders begin. After this conflict, all three of the protagonists fear a lack of control over the direction of their lives. Finally, all three women find their senses of self or their identities in their social structure changed or threatened in some way. This factor is the most significant in bringing on the eating disorders from which these women suffer.

Of the three women, one does not survive. Marcia, in Pym's Quartet in Autumn, starves herself to death. The other two women both overcome their disorders, but only after intense struggles with the issues of control and identity. Once each woman has reclaimed control over her life and re-established her own identity in her social structure, she begins to recreate her sense of self and only then can she resume normal eating habits.