**Heartburn: A Recipe for Nourishing a Hungry Soul**

*Heartburn, n. A form of indigestion felt as a burning sensation in the chest. Caused by acid regurgitation, fatty foods, and cheating husbands.*

Published in 1983, Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn* tells the story of Rachel Samstat, a plucky pregnant protagonist whose quick wit, humor, and love of food creates the perfect recipe for how *not* to cope with betrayal, anger, pain, and loss. Ephron not only peppers *Heartburn*’s pages with food innuendos and “sinfully delicious” recipes, but also explores the larger, more fundamental question, *what nourishes the body and the soul?* When Rachel discovers that her husband, Mark Feldman, has been having an affair with Thelma Rice (a too-tall woman whose surname is a bland and tacky starch), she delves into cooking as a source of comfort and way to digest the pain. Despite the considerable comfort and confidence that food provides her, however, cooking up a storm and perfecting both her vinaigrette and four-minute egg cannot fully offset the emotional deficits in Rachel’s life and marriage. By examining the psychological impacts of emotional distress and betrayal through the eyes of a food enthusiast, Ephron explores the problems that can result from failing to confront a relationship turned sour, highlights the delicate balance between physical and psychological health, and underscores the importance of nourishing the soul.

From the novel’s inception, Ephron does not shy away from Rachel’s faults, flaws, and considerable insecurities; rather, she introduces and confronts them in an honest, lighthearted, and uniquely comedic way that both elucidates Rachel’s low self-esteem and ties her self-worth to food. After learning of her husband’s affair, Rachel initially expects Mark to apologize. Instead, he surprises her by declaring, “I am in love with Thelma Rice,” and, “[s]ome time later, after going on saying all these lovey-dovey things about Thelma, and after saying he wouldn’t give her up… he said that he nonetheless expected [Rachel] to stay with him” (13). Mark’s “lovey-dovey” declarations, juxtaposed with the assertion that he nevertheless expects Rachel to stay with him, are risibly absurd. That one would choose to stay with a cheating spouse who has just declared his love for someone else is laughable. However, instead of reacting with the anger, hurt, and betrayal that one might expect in response to such farcical declarations, Rachel recollects:

I sat there on the couch with tears rolling down my face and my fat belly resting on my thighs, I screwed up my courage, and when Mark finished his sixteenth speech about how wonderful Thelma Rice was compared to me, I said to him, “You’re crazy.” It took every ounce of self-confidence I had.

“You’re wrong,” he said.

He’s right, I thought. I’m wrong. (13)

After listening to speech after speech from her husband lauding his mistress, “You’re crazy” is not exactly the retort one might expect from a writer like Rachel. Rather, Rachel’s response, which is neither angry nor eloquent, reveals her lack of self-confidence and considerable difficulty expressing and articulating her feelings. Not only does it take Rachel’s “every ounce of self-confidence” and courage to tell Mark these two simple words (which amount to an amusingly obvious observation), but Mark makes Rachel question and recant her assertion a moment later simply by telling her that she is wrong. The ease with which Mark is able to change Rachel’s mind reinforces Rachel’s inability to express herself confidently or adequately within her marriage, and highlights just how curdled and unbalanced their relationship has become.

What Rachel lacks in emotional self-confidence and expression, however, she makes up for with confidence in her cooking. Creating the perfect recipe, like maintaining a healthy relationship, requires finding the right combination and proper balance of ingredients. While Rachel excels at such balancing skills in the kitchen, she clearly struggles with transferring this skill set to her love life. As Rachel reflects upon her crumbling marriage, she muses, “Even now, I cannot believe Mark would want to risk losing that vinaigrette. You just don’t bump into vinaigrettes that good” (14). With this flippant remark, Rachel appears to find the idea that Mark would risk losing her vinaigrette recipe much harder to swallow than that Mark does not give a fig about losing Rachel. Through this ridiculously misplaced concern, Ephron demonstrates Rachel’s pride in her culinary skills and effectively ties Rachel’s self-worth with her ability to cook. Even Rachel sardonically admits, “I always thought cooking was part of the package: Step right up, it’s Rachel Samstat, she’s bright, she’s funny, *and she can cook!*” (135). Despite her good-natured quips, Rachel clearly views her culinary prowess as one of her most redeeming and attractive qualities. Unfortunately, this high food-esteem, mixed with Rachel’s already low self-esteem results in an unhealthy mishmash that generates heartburn.

Given Rachel’s love of food and confidence in the kitchen, it is hardly surprising that Rachel turns to cooking as a distraction and source of comfort as she deals with her crumbling marriage and husband’s infidelity. After leaving Washington and retreating to New York, Rachel reflects, “The little dance my heart was doing as I looked out the window of my father’s apartment was not exactly a polka, but at least I was where I wanted to be. If I couldn’t have Mark, I could finally be back making sorrel soup” (35). Rather than confronting the emotional turmoil in her life, Rachel uses food, humor, and distance to mask her pain. Her suggestion that sorrel soup could act as a replacement for her husband, while silly, shows that Rachel has not only achieved physical distance from her problems by returning to her father’s apartment in New York, but also, by focusing on food, has begun to achieve some emotional distance as well. Even when Rachel finds herself faced with her typewriter in the small room she uses as an office, she thinks to herself, “I must write all this down… Someday I may write something that’s not a cookbook, and this will all be grist for it. But I couldn’t. To write it down was to give it permanence, to admit that something real had happened. I walked around the room trying to pretend that nothing had happened. I thought about potatoes” (119). When given the opportunity to confront the cause of her heartburn directly, Rachel continues to avoid the reality of her situation by focusing on food. The abruptness with which she switches from ruminating about her life to thinking about something as arbitrary as potatoes is humorous, and also indicative of a deeper denial and imbalance. Moreover, Rachel characterizes the events that have transpired in her life as “grist” for a future non-cookbook; this labeling of events as the essential grain used to make flour further reinforces Rachel’s reliance on food for much more than just physical sustenance. Whether Rachel simply is in denial, cannot voice her feelings, or is not ready to confront the problems in her life and marriage is unclear. What is clear, however, is that Rachel uses food and humor as an unhealthy emotional crutch to sustain her through her hardships and avoid confronting the realities of her marriage.

As the novel progresses, Rachel slices and dices her way into oblivion as she begins to rely even more heavily on food, using cooking not just as a diversion, but also as a vehicle to communicate words and feelings that she otherwise lacks the courage and confidence to express. Looking back, Rachel muses, “The infidelity itself is small potatoes compared to the low-level brain damage that results when a whole chunk of your life turns out to have been completely different from what you thought it was” (64). Even in brief moments of reflection, Rachel adopts the language of food. That Rachel must rely upon a food metaphor to express something as simple as disbelief at her husband’s infidelity further bolsters the emotional imbalance accruing in Rachel’s life.

As *Heartburn* draws to a close, Rachel finally begins to exhibit emotional maturity and growth. She first acknowledges “…how complicated things get when food and love become hopelessly tangled…” and, later, realizes, “I loved to cook, so I cooked. And then the cooking became a way of saying I love you. And then the cooking became the easy way of saying I love you. And then the cooking became the only way of saying I love you. I was so busy perfecting the peach pie that I wasn’t paying attention” (135). In this moment of clarity, in which Rachel traces her journey from loving to cook, to cooking with love, to over-cooking that love, Rachel finally gains insight into her emotional deficits and faces the problems in her life and marriage that may have precipitated Mark’s affair. Unsurprisingly, an overemphasis on food -- the very respite in which Rachel has immersed herself throughout the novel -- is at the root of the cause. By allowing herself to replace and entangle verbal expression with food, Rachel unconsciously has created a psychological deficit, fixating on physical nourishment while inadvertently starving her soul. It is not until the novel’s climax, when Rachel sheds her denial, that she can finally begin to recover from her spoiled marriage. In this cathartic, culminating moment, Rachel reflects:

I looked at the pie sitting right there in front of me and suddenly it began to throb… If I throw this pie at him, I thought to myself, he will never love me. And then it hit me: he *doesn’t* love me. It hit me with a shimmering clarity: that was all there was to it. It didn’t matter if he was crazy. It didn’t matter if I was innocent or guilty. Nothing mattered except that he didn’t love me. *If I throw this pie at him, he will never love me. But he doesn’t love me anyways. So I can throw the pie if I want to.* I picked up the pie, thanked God for the linoleum floor, and threw it. (175)

Rachel's decisive act of throwing the pie at Mark represents a significant change in her character from the novel’s beginning to end. Up until this point, she has used food to avoid confronting the real issues in her relationship. Previously, Rachel likely would have focused on the perfection of her key lime pie to distract herself from her marital woes. But now, the physical throwing and destruction of her culinary masterpiece mirrors the literal and metaphorical destruction of Rachel’s food crutch. Here, at the novel’s climax, Rachel finally faces the reality that her marriage is over and that no amount of humor or gourmet food can rescue the spoiled relationship. This final, physical act of release enables Rachel to let go of her hurt, anger, and bad marriage, and to “get on with it” (177). With such an important step toward Rachel’s emotional maturity, Ephron concludes *Heartburn* on an optimistic note, leaving us hopeful for Rachel’s future.