**LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE**

**NOTES**

1.   **Magic realism:** A style of telling a story by infusing magical elements into mundane everyday situations, conditions and practices. The idea is to reveal *essential* aspects of human relations imbedded in everyday activities.  
In *Like Water for Chocolate*, the principal medium of magic realism is food. It accentuates Tita’s virtues as a nurturer. It also reveals the incapacity of some characters (e.g., Rosaura) to appreciate the factors that sustain life and enhance the experience of life.

**Examples of magic realism:**  
      a. Ghosts and spirits.  
      b. Tita, a virgin, nursing Roberto.  
      c. The knitted blanket of Tita’s sorrows.  
      d. The salt in the tears shed at Tita’s birth.  
      e. The bath house fire set by Gertrudis’ passion.  
      f. The soldier’s ability to smell Gertrudis’ passion.

**2.  The organization of the book:**

The novel is based on a Nineteenth Century tradition in Mexican women’s literature. This literature mixed recipes and stories about domestic life with admonitions to young women about moral virtues, calendars of church holy days, etc.  
This was a way to integrate the private (home) and public (church) spheres of life open to women in traditional Mexican society. The novel follows this outline, but uses it to offer a radical feminist perspective in place of the conservative patriarchal and religious perspectives of the Nineteenth Century literature. (Janice Jaffe, "Hispanic American Women Writers’ Novel Recipes…."   *Women’s Studies*, March 1993 v22 n2).

**DISCUSSION**

***The Political Allegory: The De la Garza Ranch as Dictatorship***

The primary setting is the De la Garza ranch. Most of the action takes place there.  
Some characters (Tita, Rosaura, Pedro, and Gertrudis) wander away, but they always return.  Even when they are away (except for Gertrudis), their focus is the ranch.  
Most of what we know about John Brown is revealed at the ranch or in response to   
Tita as she attempts to deal with her life at the ranch. The ranch is the domain of ***Mama Elena***. She is the dictator. She makes the rules.

She rules by the force of her own personality: *personalismo*.

When her fiat is not enough she resorts to "respectability" and "tradition." We are never sure whether the "tradition" is real or one of her own invention.

She has risked respectability (her affair, from which came Gertrudis) and flagrantly violates the traditions she doesn’t like: e.g., she is a woman running a ranch in an otherwise patriarchal society.

The rules apply to everyone else, not to her.

The other characters, although they have personalities, all symbolize roles played by subjects of a dictatorship.

***Rosaura***: The ideological conformist.

1. She has no will of her own. She takes all of her ideas and motivations from the dictator. She marries Pedro because that is what Elena wants her to do, not because she loves him, and despite knowing that he wants to marry Tita and that Tita wants to marry him.

2. She is "soulless." Her matches are all "damp." She has no passion or imagination. She is empty. She cannot respond to the things that could make life delightful (Tita’s food). She is humorless.

3. She is incapable of love, only obedience.

4. She has no authority of her own. She is unable to control events without drawing on Elena’s (the dictator’s) authority. This works pretty well while Elena is alive or Elena’s spirit haunts the unconscious of her former subjects. But this derivative authority dissipates when the subjects consciously reject the ideology on which the dictatorship rested.

5. She is incompetent. She has no skills. She can’t cook. She can’t knit or sew. She can’t care for her children. For her survival, she is dependent on the competencies and skills of others.

6. But her life *appears* to be successful. She marries, has children, and lives comfortably with others to serve her.

***Gertrudis***: The rebel

1. She is the product of the dictator’s indiscretion. She *shouldn’t* be on the ranch. (When Elena gets a chance, she tries to obliterate any trace of her.)

2. She is a misfit, a "sport of nature." She loves dancing and has a "natural rhythm," whereas her mother hated dancing and her (supposed) father couldn’t dance. In other words, she came out of nowhere: there is no precedent that can explain her emergence.

3. She responds to, and is the vessel of, the passion of others.

4. She is not constrained by traditional definitions of gender, race, class, or any other hierarchical notions of one’s "proper place" of "role." (She becomes a general.)

5. Her motivation is honesty rather than utilitarian silence, which she sees as self-censorship and a distortion of oneself.

6. But she is a "social" rebel. She does not rebel in ways that are self-destructive. Rather, she joins a movement of rebels. She is not a theorist; she has not arrived at her rebellion through reason. She simply *must* rebel.

***Pedro***: The selfish conformist

1. Pedro has only personal ambitions. He has no desire to contribute to the common good. All he wants is as much as he can get. He can’t get Tita directly, so he takes Rosaura in order to be near Tita. He sees his own good only in terms of satisfying material or physical desires: enlarging his fortune by marrying into a prosperous family, sex, respectability as a family man, etc.

2. He, like Rosaura, has no imagination. Presented with Elena’s choices, he chooses the one she prefers, arguing that it is better than nothing. He tries to satisfy his ambitions and desires within the parameters provided by the prevailing system. But *unlike* Rosaura, he does not believe in the rules or the rule-makers. He merely accepts them because he lacks the imagination to think of alternatives. He also lacks the will to fight the rules head-on, so he merely tries to cheat, i.e., to break them in secret.

3. He accomplishes nothing on his own, and leaves no legacy except some genetic material. But that genetic material, Esperanza, is shaped by the much more powerful cultural legacy she inherits from Tita, and by Tita’s example as a talented and creative provider for others.

4. His love for Tita is impure, since it is motivated by jealousy and lust (the desire to possess) and does not comprehend her more essential qualities as a bearer and innovator of culture, a nurturer, and a liberator. He is not interested in being liberated. He just wants to satisfy himself. He wants Tita as the object of his desire, not as his companion.

He also has no conception of the kind of love Tita has for him. He thinks she is motivated by the same physical longing he is. His love does not transform him, as her love for him transforms her. He remains just as he was before he fell in love.

5. In short, Pedro is an "ordinary middle-class citizen," someone looking out for himself, uninterested in politics, incapable of self-criticism (his failure to obtain what he wants is someone else’s fault), and unappreciative of what others do for him.

He has no idea of contributing anything, and, in any case, has never bothered to develop the competencies and skills by which he might contribute. He basically shows up for work and defines himself by what he has, not by what he does.

***Dr. John Brown*** is "everyman," the composite of everything that is good in human beings.

1. He is an amalgam of ethnicity: his grandmother was a Native American; he is a white man but lives in two cultures, speaks (at least) two languages fluently.

2. He combines traditional and modern medicine in his practice. He is also familiar with the myths of past generations, and he is able to infuse these myths into modern life.

3. He wants nothing for himself. His life is selflessly dedicated to the welfare of other. For example, he wants what is best for Tita even if it means the ruination of his dreams.

4. He is comfortable with everyone: men and women, rich and poor. He is, in a sense, androgynous. Although a man, the way he practices medicine is more nurturing than intervening.

5. He can love his opponents, even Pedro, because he sees them as human beings not merely as obstacles to his personal objectives.

6. But he is never fulfilled. He doesn’t "get the girl." (But his son does!) He is never "finished." He is never truly satisfied. When he delivers Esperanza, he saves the mother and the baby, but Rosaura cannot have another child. When his son marries and is accepted at Harvard, the son moves away. (He is clearly miserable at Alex and Esperanza’s wedding.) He gives up Tita so that she will be happier with another man, but she dies out of dedication to a man who doesn’t appreciate her.

In short, John Brown, like humankind in general (rather than a single individual human), is engaged in a struggle of discovery and self-invention that is never "completed." He is fundamentally "good"; he reflects the wisdom of the ages; he is competent in modern science; he serves the best interests of humanity in general, etc. But he cannot achieve all that he aspires to, nor can he overcome the barriers to fulfillment presented by the world he inhabits. He is in the world, not master of it.

He is "good" in terms of skills and morality, but he is not perfect.

***Tita*** is "woman"

1. She grows up accepting and conforming to traditions that define and stereotype women. She finds some satisfaction in these traditional roles, i.e., she excels as a cook, at nurturing the innocent and vulnerable, her hands are constantly busy and productive. She is supremely competent in these roles, for which she receives compliments and encouragement from those around her. Less competent persons are sometimes also jealous of her achievements.

2. But she is also diminished by these traditions. Her natural passion and imagination are acceptable only within the limits of activities proscribed by a traditional feminine role. She wants so much more.

3. She is not a natural rebel. She is submissive to authority.

4. Her first escape from the oppressiveness of her subordination is madness. She cannot rebel. She is trapped by her socialization, her feminine sense of duty. Her only escape is to abandon everything she does well. She even loses the capacity to speak, to communicate. She can only put herself at the mercy of others, as others have relied on her for nurture.

5. She is brought back to her senses by the natural, uncomplicated generosity of Chencha. She finds security and acceptance with John Brown.

6. But as soon as she returns to the ranch—i.e., is returned to the repressive world from which she escaped through madness, and takes up adult responsibilities—she finds herself once again diminished by her traditional role. She is rebuked by the traditions that have outlived the dictator. The spirit of patriarchy, ironically promulgated by a woman, literally haunts her.

7. Only when she speaks vile words, words completely out of character for her, can she dismiss the recriminations she has internalized from the past.

8. No man is worthy of her. No man can combine ferocious passion with tenderness and mercy as she does, not even John Brown. No man could be worthy of her desire or affection.

9. But she, like John Brown, is ultimately unfulfilled. The moment of her fulfillment is thwarted by the ignorance, stupidity and greediness of the man on whom she has fixed her passion.

She does, however, leave something behind. She records her passions and her transformation for future generations through her art and nurturing. She does not live to see the results of her most important work. But she has contributed to a world in which women need not be bound by traditional, limiting roles. She has also made those traditional roles less confining by leaving a legacy of creativity and caring. She has not only transmitted culture but also transformed it.

**ELABORATION on SPECIFIC ISSUES**

*Tradition*

1. Tradition (a basic element of culture) is absolutely necessary in every human society. It is a fundamental basis for the shared understandings we require for daily life. Without them, we would have to invent a meaning for each new situation. We would not be able to communicate (language is based on tradition) or even decide what clothes to put on in the morning. Tradition determines our roles, how we greet friends and strangers, and how we view our prospects in the world.

In this sense, tradition is "enabling." It normalizes social relationships and encounters so that we do not have to invent our relationships and ourselves every minute. It provides useful lessons from the past that help us interpret circumstances we have not previously encountered.

2. Tradition limits choices by defining social relations and acceptable behavior. We figure out who we are and what we can do in terms of traditional definitions that apply to the social settings we inhabit.

In this sense, tradition is "inhibiting." We automatically discard certain alternatives, even if we can imagine them. When societies rapidly change, some traditions can become encumbrances. They can limit our capacity to respond with imagination to both hazards and opportunities.

3. But tradition also has a dynamic quality. It is not unchanging. It is adapted to current conditions by people who live in a changing world. The current generation might not get the same message from a tradition as previous generations did. Sometimes parts of traditions are altered in order to make them seem appropriate to contemporary conditions.

4. The message of *Like Water for Chocolate* is that we must not accept tradition at face value but constantly evaluate it. It can teach us well only if we interpret it in terms of real existing conditions and possibilities. For example, the medical knowledge of Brown’s Kikapu grandmother had to be reinterpreted and adjusted in order to help Tita treat Pedro’s burns. And Brown himself was trying to find a way to use that traditional knowledge in the context of modern medical practice.

***Authoritarianism/Dictatorship***

1. Dictatorships rely on obedience, not commitment. The subjects of dictatorship need only conform to rules, not believe in the rules or the rulers.

2. Nonconformity (failure to obey) is dealt with brutally. There is not generally a serious attempt to persuade nonconformists that the dictatorship serves their interests. Criticism of the dictator is not permitted. When Tita volunteers the opinion that Elena was responsible for Roberto’s death, Elena’s response is swift and cruel: she hits Tita in the face with a wooden spoon and snarls that no one has ever disobeyed her before and no one is going to start now.

3. Traditions are selected for their service to the interests of the rulers (or ruling class). Those traditions that encourage disobedience or reflection are eradicated. If appropriate traditions are not available, "new traditions" are invented. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Mama Elena invents such a tradition to enslave Tita. There is no attempt to get Tita to believe in the tradition. All Tita must do is obey it because it is what the dictator (Elena) expects of her.

4. Authoritarianism works the same way. The emphasis is on order as prescribed by those in authority. The motto seems to be, "Do it this way because I said so." And, of course, one is not supposed to think about alternatives: "This is the way it’s always been, so this is the way it will remain." Change is abhorrent and intolerable.

5. Dictators and authoritarians usually do not consider traditions, rules, and conventions of propriety to apply to them. Mama Elena is rude to the monsignor, even belittling the church and men.

6. When the dictators have broken the rules they want their subjects to obey, they have the power to cover up their indiscretions. Elena tells Tita at one point, "I have done everything you are thinking of doing." But Elena’s rule-breaking does not make her sympathetic to Tita. Furthermore, she sees no reason to hold herself accountable to anyone for what she did in the past.

7. Dictators have an Achilles heel, however: they think they are invincible. They are so used to being obeyed that they expect it as a matter of course.

In a similar vein, dictators often do not see trouble coming. They believe in their power: might makes right, and their might is unsurpassed in their own minds. Consequently, dictators (and authoritarians more generally) are inflexible when something out of the ordinary occurs. When banditos invade the ranch, Elena shoots off both barrels of a shotgun, leaving her with no protection against people who do not recognize her authority. She simply expected to be obeyed. She did not recognize the banditos as threats.

***Food as a Metaphor***

1. Food is the central metaphor in *Like Water for Chocolate*.

2. It is not simply a matter of food sustaining life. Food nourishes not only the body but also passion. It transmits emotions and sustains culture.

3. Tita’s special character as nurturer is revealed through the food she prepares. She also provides food from her body for Rosaura’s baby, despite never having given birth. But her food does not merely sustain physical life. It transmits her emotions and carries the culture forward, even into the next two generations.

***Strong Women: the Feminist Perspective***

1. It is implied that women carry the culture from generation to generation.

2. The men are weak, insignificant, stupid, unimaginative, and unaccomplished. Even John Brown, for all of his skill as a doctor, cannot cure people as well as Tita can. Although he knows his grandmother’s techniques, it is Tita who successfully applies them when Pedro recovers from his burns.

3. It is women who shape other people’s lives. Elena is the dictator. Pedro is a slave to his passion for Tita.

John Brown is the only man who comes off looking fairly good, but he does not have the culturally transforming power of the women. He is good mainly because he is nearly androgynous, not macho. But he does not transform other people as Tita and Gertrudis do. In fact, he seems to be away from the scene when he is most needed.

4. Women are both keepers and destroyers of tradition and, more broadly, of culture. They maintain society, which in turn revolves around them.

***The Significance of Setting***

1. In Mexican culture, the Mexican Revolution represents the moment of the creation of a nation to be proud of. It was a time of enormous change, a break with outmoded traditions. In that sense, it is regarded as a liberating experience for the whole nation.

2. Mexican intellectuals regularly use the Mexican Revolution to underscore their points.

3. Like Tita’s love for Pedro, it did not achieve its ultimate consummation. That is, it remains, for many, an *idea*, a goal to be worked towards.

It did increase the possibilities for future generations and shaped the destinies of future generations. Many Mexicans believe that a new Mexican Revolution needs to be undertaken but the principles of the new revolution would be the same as those which drove the first one.