

Chapter 6

Purity and power at the Victorian dinner party

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Jameson discusses etiquette manuals of the late nineteenth century in relation to dining. Both the active social uses of eating rituals by individuals and the use of dining to legitimate whole social groups are discussed. The dinner can be shown to be structured by an increasingly complex code which separates the diner from foods of different character. The foods themselves and the utensils are arranged to produce contrasts and relationships. Yet there is no static generalised code (e.g. cooked/uncooked) since how food is treated depends very much on the precise condition of the food as it arrives on the table. Individuals were able to establish themselves in the new middle class, based now on industrial and administrative positions of influence, by the social use of the dinner party. Etiquette and etiquette books are attempts to redefine the basis of social ranking through a widened notion of 'gentility'. Through time the complexity of the meal increased as notions of 'good society' were based on the greater separation between culture and nature, pure and impure, and on the need to maintain differences eroded by emulation. Equally, the concern with purity at the dining table can be linked to a concern with the control of women within the family. The Victorian dinner does not reflect social categories but creates them through the expedient actions of individuals within a particular historical context.

The first part of this essay describes a particular social ritual in the late Victorian period: the dinner party.* It is hoped that this descrip-

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Note: certain etiquette manuals were anonymous. These are listed in the bibliography under their titles.

tion will highlight the relationship between food, material culture and symbolism, and there will be a brief theoretical excursus on this relationship. Emphasis will be placed upon how an individual was expected to act within this social setting, and how, through the proper or improper use of material culture and codes of conduct, he might affect his place within that society.

The second part will concentrate on an explanation of how this behavior, which played such a crucial part in the negotiation of an individual's position within a social group, was used by that group as a whole to define and justify their social status (Hodder 1982b, 1982d).

Much of the information used in this discussion comes from late-Victorian etiquette books. However, there are various difficulties involved in using examples of dining etiquette from the instructive manuals of the day. One cannot be sure of how accurately they depict the reality of late-Victorian table manners. They were intended to convey information which, if followed, would prevent the reader from committing any grave social error. Hence, they may well err on the side of caution. Undoubtedly, any sensitive person would have been able to adapt or ignore parts of the etiquette described, in accordance with the particular occasion. Although at times I will stress the formality expected at most dinner parties, I am not suggesting that they were always approached with reverence and a consciousness of awful social responsibility. Rituals do not have to be solemn to be significant. The most successful hostesses were those who entertained amusingly an inter-

esting and complementary mixture of guests. However, as will be shown, amiable participants were not enough.

A problem that should be mentioned is the difficulty of ascertaining the type of people for whom the books on etiquette were written. Assumptions by the writers concerning numbers of servants and other indicators of wealth seem to put their market firmly in the middle- or upper-middle class, although, for reasons discussed later, the actual market may well have included lower social categories. It should be remembered that, while we may talk usefully of a 'middle-middle' class and an 'upper-middle' class, they are of necessity rather crude classifications, and give no hint of the various groups encompassed by them. It should be pointed out that this essay cannot consider at length those people who rejected the etiquette of their day, although I will discuss briefly some contemporary criticism of it.

The source concentrated on as an example of instruction in late-Victorian dining etiquette is a book published in 1897 by a certain Mrs Humphry. She was a regular writer for the periodical *Truth*, and she published some dozen books, mostly about etiquette and cooking, of which *Manners for Men* (which I refer to regularly) and its companion volume *Manners for Women* were the most successful and widely read (Michael Levien, personal communication). I also refer to various other books on etiquette published between 1870 and 1902, details of which may be found in the bibliography. These manuals contain sections on many aspects of expected behaviour; I will be concentrating on the particular demands of dining etiquette.

The dinner party

From the very beginning of her description of manners at the table, Mrs Humphry emphasises the dinner's importance in the construction of social relations: 'Dinner stands alone as an institution sacred to the highest rites of hospitality', she proclaims (Humphry 1897a, p. 56). Indeed, its pre-eminence as a social ritual cannot be exaggerated. An explanation for this will be offered later, but for the moment we may let the *Manners and Rules of Good Society* (MRGS) (written rather coyly by 'a member of the aristocracy') offer an example of the numerous repetitions of this point: 'Dinner giving is perhaps the most important of all social observances' (p. 95).

Related to this are the warnings, repeated throughout the etiquette guides, never to fail to arrive at the dinner party once the invitation has been accepted. With his tongue slightly in his cheek, Devereux warns that 'Death or infectious disease is, it is said, the only justifiable excuse for failing one's host and hostess' (1902, p. 52). More bluntly, Mrs Humphry warns that for a guest 'to absent himself would be a gross rudeness' (1897a, p. 56).

Having arrived at his host's residence the guest takes part in preliminary introductions in one of the reception rooms and is then guided to the dining room. Upon being seated, his very first action is to place a napkin across his knees. This signals a formal entrance into the dining ceremony. From this point onwards, a series of rules governs his actions, many of which relate to the proper use of eating and drinking utensils arranged before him in a predetermined manner.

The first course consists of the *hors d'oeuvres*. These 'small morsels of various kinds' were not quite regarded as part of the main meal. They were more a kind of gastronomic gateway to the courses that followed. There are no strict rules as to how one eats them. If they are recognisably fish, a fish-knife is required, but many, as Mrs Humphry notes, are not easily classifiable (Humphry 1897a, p. 70).

Soup is the first major course, and here it will be noted that there is a choice between the thick soup and the clear. This selection of one of two contrasting main elements within a course is a feature which appears at various stages of the meal, and which helps to distinguish the dinner-party from the rather humbler family dinners.

During the meal, the diner is distanced from certain foods (particularly those cooked in liquid- or semi-liquid form) by the method of consumption and the use of selected utensils: 'The table-spoon is for the soup, which must be eaten from the side of the spoon close to the point' (Humphry 1897a, p. 63). That is, the spoon should not be placed inside the mouth. The spoon only becomes a proper mouth-entering implement when it is used for a food which is both liquid and solid. It is perhaps worth pointing out that there is no functional need to eat soup with a spoon: in earlier English society it was drunk straight from the bowl. At the Victorian dinner-party this possibility is denied by the rules of etiquette. If possible, one should avoid touching the bowl at all. If the bowl is tilted by the diner, this should be done 'so that the soup collects at the furthest point from him' (Humphry 1897a, p. 72), but never tilted towards him. By tilting the bowl away from him, the diner emphasises that he is eating, rather than drinking, the soup.

During the course described above, one should 'draw the liquid from the spoon to your mouth without making any sound' (Devereux 1902, p. 58). At other stages of the meal, similar pre-occupations are apparent, and here it is worthwhile to take a short detour from our progress through the meal, to see what general directives Mrs Humphry offers in the eating of all types of food. It quickly becomes apparent that it was regarded as extremely bad manners to draw attention to any of the physical processes involved in eating. The mouth, Mrs Humphry warns us, 'should be kept closed while mastication is going on' (Humphry 1897a, p. 68), and she underlines this imperative with the rider that it is 'a very important matter'. In reference to the socialisation of children, she warns mothers that they should teach their children 'never to speak while food is in the mouth and never to drink until it is quite empty' (*ibid.*).

One is tempted to point out the possible symbolic importance of not confusing the categories of liquids and solids during consumption. (This is the first instance of a general concern with that which is in the process of entering the body.) Mrs Humphry prefers what at first sight appears to be a firmly functional explanation: 'who would not be mortified if he were to choke ignominiously at the dinner table?' (*ibid.*). Note that the real horror is not with any danger to health, but with the context in which the choking would occur. At a carefully composed and ordered dinner-party, an uncontrollable physical reaction, possibly entailing the expul-

sion of material from the mouth, would be a threat to the very structure of the dinner.

The fish course follows the soup and it is almost invariably eaten with bread. Within the courses where bread is provided, there are strict rules as to how it may be consumed. 'In dealing with bread, use neither knife nor fork', the diner is instructed (Humphry 1897a, p. 67). Furthermore, it should never be eaten by biting pieces off. It must be prepared by being 'broken with the fingers' (Humphry 1897a, p. 67). Because bread is dry and cereal, it may be touched. Even then, though, the method of transport to the mouth is regulated. The hand is an implement. It must divide the bread into manageable pieces before consumption.

Furthermore, one should 'never use both hands to carry anything to your mouth' (Beeton 1876b, p. 28). Bread must not only be eaten with the fingers, but with the fingers of one hand. It is the simplest, blandest food offered. As such, it forms a datum-line from which to build more elaborate methods of consumption. Analogously, it will later be seen that certain simple dishes are restricted to being eaten with the fork alone.

The fish course offers an interesting example of how the material culture surrounding a course elaborates over a period of time. The first change was the decision to use only silver or silver-plated implements, to avoid tainting the delicate flavour of sea-food. Then, in the 1876 version of the Beeton's etiquette book, we find fish 'eaten with a silver fork, assisted by a piece of bread held in the left hand'. Here bread is being used as a sort of neutral buffer to protect the food from contact with the hand. This was not enough, however, and for a short while it became fashionable to use two silver forks together (MRGS, p. 115). By 1897 Mrs Humphry reports the use of purpose-built knives and forks (1897a, p. 72). Thus we see first the adaptation of existing cutlery through different use, and eventually, after a series of stages which elaborate the method of consumption, the culmination of the process in the production of a specialised set of tools for the course. It should be noted that these changes would have been adopted at different rates among different social circles. There were specialised fish knives in existence before the middle of the century, but they were not widely adopted until much later.

If vegetable, entrées are eaten solely with the fork. Any other entrées should be eaten with the fork if at all possible. One exception is the curry, a very popular entrée dish, which was something of an anomaly amongst entrées through its exotic history and nature. It reflects this by being eaten with a spoon and fork, a combination of implements normally reserved for desserts. Mrs Humphry comments upon this oddity that it 'is the only meat dish that is eaten this way' (1897a, p. 68).

The joints, game, or poultry are accompanied by a variety of vegetables, gravies and sauces. In the earlier courses, one had a degree of choice regarding such accompaniments. This, however, is the main course of the meal, and 'no-one would commence upon a slice of roast beef or mutton without potatoes or gravy, nor upon a piece of pheasant without browned breadcrumbs or bread sauce or gravy' (Humphry 1897a, p. 73).

Thus, in this main course, the importance of assembling all the constituent elements upon the plate before eating is stressed.

In order to understand the structure of the meal, it is essential to see how the nature of the food items within a course is used to define the course as a whole, and how the courses are used to define the meal. To clarify this point, a brief reference to one recent theory about meal structure may be useful.

Mary Douglas has published some pioneering work on the symbolic use of food in contemporary Britain (Douglas 1975, 1982) and in the process she has revealed some interesting patterns. As she herself acknowledges, such patterns are group-specific and should not be regarded as transferable. Douglas analysed food structure within a particular group in contemporary Britain. She characterised certain combinations of food by contrasts between their elements. Each course of a meal could be shown to have a particular nature dependent upon its constituents. The constituents defined this nature through the contrasts and similarities of their inherent physical properties, for example, sweetness and sourness, hotness and coldness, wetness and dryness. The number of elements within a course was also important. For instance, the meat course could be elaborated by increasing the number of accompanying vegetables. The meal itself was defined by the number and type of its courses. Thus, the meat course is dominated by the savoury, the second or pudding course by the sweet. In both of these, the liquid dressing is poured onto them, whereas in the later consumption of biscuits and tea, the liquid and solid are kept quite separate. Progressions, as well as contrasts, define the meal, and these form a link between the courses. The custard is thicker than the gravy and the biscuit is kept entirely free from direct dressing, and it represents the final stage in desiccation. The number of elements within each course becomes progressively smaller. The exact details of Douglas' analysis are not relevant here; what is important is the relationship she indicates between the constituents of a course, the courses themselves, and the meals that they ultimately form. Thus, the Sunday lunch is an elaboration of the ordinary main meal of the day, distinguished by an increase in the subsidiary elements of the main course.

Returning to the Victorian dinner, we immediately note its pre-eminence amongst the other food-eating rituals of the day. 'Luncheon', Mrs Humphry tells us, 'is a comparatively informal meal' (Humphry 1897a, p. 91), and it generally has a much simpler course structure than the dinner. Though not usual, at the end of the nineteenth century it might have been permissible to provide a cold luncheon; this was certainly not the case with the dinner. In providing nothing but cold food, one immediately debarred the manipulation of hot/cold contrasts, and thereby limited the complexity of the structure of the meal. Five o'clock tea had become quite an event by the turn of the century. It certainly played an important part in the fostering of social relations, particularly among upper-middle-class women. Again, though, the types of food and the material culture that accompanied them were limited. Savoury foods were generally cold, and the emphasis was on confectionery: 'cream, and cakes or muffins' (Humphry 1897a, p. 94). Also, we see a separation of the liquid (in the form of tea, for example) from the solid. This is reflected in the material culture, with separate kinds of container for liquid and solid (e.g.,

cups and plates), and the use of either the knife or the fork, rather than both together.

Within the Victorian dinner we can see an interesting relationship between the types of food presented in the courses and the material culture used in their consumption. Throughout the dinner, different courses vary according to the method of preparation of the foods and how the foods are served. As has already been seen in the earlier courses, this variety is accentuated by the stress laid upon the methods of consumption: the soup is eaten with the spoon which does not fully enter the mouth, the bread is held with the fingers in a set manner, and the fish with an increasingly specialised pair of implements. The entrées and removes may occasionally be eaten with a knife and fork, but whenever possible, only a fork is used. If vegetable, 'entrées are always eaten with a fork' (Humphry 1897a, p. 69). Indeed, throughout the minor courses 'it is a safe rule never to use either knife or spoon if the fork will do' (Humphry 1897a, p. 70).

When we arrive at the main course, however, this rule is reversed. The knife and fork should be used together and with care. Whereas in other courses one 'begins at once' (Humphry 1897a, p. 71), the meat, the vegetables, the sauces, gravies and other addenda are arranged on the plate before one may commence. Previous courses have been limited in the number of items constituting the course, and in the possible contrasts of character between the items. They have often been cold, a characteristic that lessens the distinction between cooked and non-cooked. Their major components have been fish, vegetables or individually prepared portions of meat. Only in the central course (or courses) is there a real dominance of hot cooked meat shared out among the guests. Only here is there such a multitude of subsidiary vegetables. While there may have been a great variety of entrées, these had to be selected from, not combined, to form the course. Arising from this is the use of knife and fork together as a strict rule.

Emphasising the importance of this course, we have a choice between contrasting meats. A minimum of two was always on offer; at least one red, and one white, meat. A point of interest arises when we are dealing with the main meat courses. It is mentioned in one book of etiquette that unmarried women and the younger married women are not expected to indulge too heavily. They are warned against the very rich, strong, gamey offerings, and encouraged to eat lighter meats (chicken, for example), while, apparently, 'middle aged and elderly ladies are at liberty to do pretty much as they please without provoking comment' (MRGS, p. 116). Constitutions rarely grow stronger with age, and it is difficult to provide a functional explanation for the above advice. Perhaps we might see some connection between it and the nature of game, with its darker, stronger-tasting flesh, and its association with wildness and male sport. It could be that some symbolic danger attached to game made it undesirable to be consumed by women whose social status was not yet fully established. Still, it would be wrong to over-emphasise this passage. While the point is intimated in other manuals, it is nowhere else made quite so explicit.

Rather than concentrate wholly on the combinations of foods where sets of cutlery are deemed indispensable, it may be

wise to examine those foods or courses where implements are considered optional or are actively discouraged. The example of bread has already been considered. Mrs Humphry states that 'biscuits, olives, asparagus, celery and bonbons are the forms of food that may also be touched with the fingers' (Humphry 1897a, p. 69). Though this sounds authoritative, it is not a definitive list, as will become apparent. However, it is a sound enough selection to show that most minor courses may contain an item of food that can be touched. The exception is the main meat course (or courses) where, as I have made clear, the knife and fork are always adhered to.

Asparagus was a very popular dish when in season. It featured prominently as one of the removes, which provided a counterpoint to the main meat dishes. Its delicate flavour suited simple preparation and, in contrast to the major courses, it could be served plain, without dressing. Furthermore, it could be cooked whole and presented in such a way as to stress its character as a vegetable. The nature of this course is reflected in the way in which it is consumed. In the etiquette books of the 1870s, the advice is that one always eats it with one's fingers. Mrs Humphry, quite a traditionalist in many ways, recommends this manner of consumption in the 1890s as well. She does note, though, that if it has been cooked to over-softness, it 'may be eaten with the fork' (Humphry 1897a, p. 74). She states categorically, however, that even in this circumstance it 'must not be touched with the knife' (*ibid.*). Traditionally, the simply prepared and presented asparagus is treated like a raw vegetable. Its cooking places it in a slightly ambiguous position, however. Perhaps it renders it particularly vulnerable to the tendency to elaborate eating practices, for by 1902, another etiquette writer offers somewhat different advice. 'In eating asparagus, some elderly gentlemen still adhere to the fashion of their youth and hold the stalks in their fingers, but the younger generation cut off the points with a knife and fork' (MRGS, p. 117). Likewise, Devereux (1902) notes an increasing objection among young people to the use of fingers in eating asparagus. The minutiae of how one ate this vegetable may seem a rather obscure topic, even in a study of dining etiquette. However, it provides a trivial but illuminating example of the evolution of eating practice, particularly, I hope, in the relationship posed between the type of food and its amenability to an increasing separation from the diner by the use of dining implements.

Not only asparagus was placed in a rather ambiguous position with regard to the method of consumption. The artichoke suffered from a similar problem. It was a popular alternative to asparagus as a remove or entrée, and like asparagus it was served whole. In *Manners and Rules of Good Society* we find that young ladies are entreated to avoid eating them if possible. Rather earlier in this chapter, when the warning to avoid game was discussed, it was suggested that this might have something to do with the nature of the meat. The artichoke, though exotic in appearance, is nonetheless a simple vegetable. Here the problem lies not in the foodstuff itself, but in the impossibility of eating it in a clean and orderly fashion. Served whole, it necessitates the use of, first, a knife, and then the fingers in a particularly messy operation. We have seen in other courses the stress laid on the correct use of eat-

ing implements. In the curious case of the artichoke, one might suggest that where it is difficult to use implements effectively to control one's contact with food, those not absolutely secure in society are advised to avoid the course altogether. For the diner to leave out a course was quite acceptable. It need hardly be said that the available food went beyond nutritional demands. Indeed, only the most robust guests could regularly have indulged in it to the full.

In the sweet course, the rule is to use the fork wherever possible. Looking carefully at the utensil specified with each food, we may see a general rule that cold sweets are eaten with the fork, and hot sweets (particularly, but not exclusively, those served with liquids) are eaten with both a spoon and a fork. It is worth noting here that, though of course there are functional reasons why dishes served with liquids are more easily dealt with by spoons, functional reasons do not provide the full story. Dishes with heavy syrups could be eaten with forks, and most are quite manageable with a spoon alone. In households lower down the social scale, a spoon would have been deemed adequate for all sweets, though the mechanical problems remained basically the same. Instead, one might argue that the eating implements are used increasingly where there is the greater need symbolically to guard the food's entrance into the mouth, by exerting a greater control over the act of consumption. This emphasis becomes more or less acute according to the nature of the food concerned.

The cheese course provides a short example of how this affects the treatment of food within a course (Humphry 1897a, p. 74). The food items which constitute this course are small savouries, cheese with dry biscuits, and uncooked salad plants. The savouries are varied, but are generally strong-tasting, often containing fish or meat, and often hot. When they are handed around, they must be eaten with a fork, even if they appear to be more suited to a spoon (*ibid.*) The cheese, sometimes bland, sometimes strong, often with a powerful aroma, is best not touched. On the other hand, it does not comply with the usual strict rules for use of cutlery (for example, it is not meat, hot, or at all liquid). The advice is to use the knife to place the cheese on a bit of biscuit, which being a dry cereal equates roughly with bread. Such inert foods as biscuits or bread may be used in this fashion as an informal implement, successfully acting as a barrier between the fingers and the food and the mouth, without threatening the patterns of implement use we have seen enforced throughout the meal. The uncooked cold and solid vegetable food is the last part of the course. Celery and watercress are most commonly mentioned, and as we may expect, these are eaten with the fingers. These foods are the base of a three-tiered eating system: the savouries, often fish- or meat-based, have to be eaten with an implement; the cheese, prepared but cold and solid, should be eaten using fingers and biscuits; raw vegetable matter requires no implement at all. Contrasts in the characters of food types effect a parallel use of material culture and eating practice.

The fruit course was apparently the source of some trepidation for the inexperienced. There is no extreme taboo on touching fruit, although knives and forks are used whenever possible. Certain types of food are not the easiest items to deal with without the risk of making a mess. Devereux's remarks on the subject of

tackling an orange are written tongue-in-cheek, but they are echoed by most etiquette books of the period in one way or another. He writes that 'it requires long experience, a colossal courage and any amount of cool self-possession, and a great skill to attack and dispose of one without harm to yourself or your neighbour' (Devereux 1902, p. 61). In view of what has been intimated before, it at first seems a little strange that implements are required in order to eat uncooked fruit. The reason seems to be that the fruit is the only food that has to be prepared in any way by the diner himself. Bananas, oranges, and even 'apples and pears are peeled with the knife and fork' (Humphry 1897a, p. 76).

Strawberries, grapes and other fruits which do not have to be peeled or cut, may be carried to the lips with the fingers. With filberts and Brazil nuts, the knife and fork are again used. Walnuts, however, which 'are too intricate for anything less wonderful in mechanism than the human hand' (Humphry 1897a, p. 77) are liable to be 'prepared before being sent to the table' rather than risk using that hand at the table in the process of preparation. The point is strengthened by Mrs Humphry's observation (*ibid.*) that nuts which always arrive at the table shelled (e.g. almonds) 'are carried to the mouth in the fingers'. The rules governing whether a type of food ought to be touched by the hand, or prepared and transported to the mouth by cutlery, thus depend on the precise condition of the item at that point in time. Strawberries might be presented by the hostess in three ways. The more traditional form was still on the stalks, with the option of sugar; in this case they were brought to the mouth by the fingers. If served in the same way, only with the option of cream, a spoon and fingers were allowed. If, however, they were de-stalked and eaten in a bowl with cream (the most common method now, but then referred to as the 'American way') they must be eaten with a spoon and a fork (MRGS, p. 107).

Certain fruits could not easily be prepared beforehand and did not lend themselves to peeling or coring using cutlery at the table. The best example of these are grapes. After the flesh of the grape has been swallowed, 'the skin and seeds have to be expelled as unobtrusively as possible' (Humphry 1897a, p. 76), necessitating the use of the hand. The problem for the diner is that the substances to be touched by the hand and placed back on a plate have been inside the mouth. They have entered into the process of ingestion, and have crossed one of the entrances to the body. This point will be discussed in greater detail below. For the moment, it is only necessary to point out the symbolic danger surrounding that which has crossed or confused boundaries. The procedure Mrs Humphry recommends is designed to minimise the risk involved in such an action: 'the forefinger is curved above the mouth in a manner which serves to conceal the ejection, and the skin and seeds are in this way conveyed to the plate' (*ibid.*). Having completed this action, the hands need cleansing, and Mrs Humphry tells us that the fingers should be 'wiped with the napkin' (*ibid.*).

Alcohol formed an important but subsidiary part of the meal at the late-Victorian dinner-party. It has been said of drinks (with reference to contemporary Britain, at least) that 'they are not invested with any necessity in their ordering' (Douglas 1975, p. 255). In the period under discussion, the validity of this state-

ment varied widely. In association with food there was a tendency for certain types of alcohol to become linked to the various courses, in correspondence to their sweetness, dryness and strength. This tendency becomes more relaxed as the century draws to a close, together with an increased emphasis upon the fact that one does not have to drink at all, if that is one's preference. Even so, one writer recalls with some distaste a succession of wines linked to courses (Devereux 1902, p. 56): Sherry with soup, Chablis or Sauterne with fish, Hock or Claret with the entrées, Champagne, then Sherry again with the sweets, and lastly, Port, Claret or Sherry with dessert. Most of these wines had their own specially shaped glasses.

The complexity of cutlery and dinner services needed to provide clean plates, containers, glasses and implements throughout the dinner, was as immense as may be imagined. Furthermore, these had to be placed on the table according to preconditioned patterns, 'so that in this nineteenth century almost as much consideration and thought is required to lay a table for dinner as to place and arrange an army on a field of battle' (Lady Colin Campbell 1893, p. 131). Luckily for diners, 'as a rule knives, forks and spoons are laid in the order in which they will be required' (Devereux 1902, p. 57). Indeed, great stress is laid on using everything for the course or function for which it was intended. The table becomes a stage where an exact routine is followed: 'the different courses are placed on it and removed in proper order; but no dish should be taken off the table until all the plates have been previously removed; neither should one be placed on the table while any belonging to the former course remains' (Lady Colin Campbell, pp. 145-6). This stricture applies even to the less ostentatious dinners. In dealing with his food, the diner is warned not to confuse food categories upon his dish, even within a single course. He must never 'eat incongruous and unsuitable things from the same plate' (Beeton 1876b, p. 62).

Every communal dish must have its own server. Use of personal cutlery is restricted to the individual's plate. If communal dishes are touched by an individual's cutlery, they are contaminated: 'to take butter or salt with your own knife is an abomination' (Beeton 1876b, p. 61). For a guest to use his fingers, even with lumps of sugar, as might seem convenient, is regarded in the same light (*ibid*). Foods that within a personal sphere may be touched with the fingers do not have the same property while within a communal setting, such as in a serving bowl. Serving bowls are transported by the servants, and each has its own implements. Thus, contact with anything but the diner's own portion is kept to a minimum.

Any item in regular demand, for instance dressings, or salt and pepper, should be provided in separate containers for at least each pair of guests. Every guest has, in effect, his own dining space, and guests should 'never attempt to leave their seats to go in search of what they need' (Lady Colin Campbell 1893, p. 146). This concern is mirrored in the general advice on how to act while at table. Leaning to one side, putting one's elbows on the table, gaping and restlessness all threaten the invisible territories created around each diner, and they 'are to be avoided as heresies of the most infidel stamp' (Beeton 1876a, p. 30).

The concern for the preservation of the course structure is shown most clearly in the turning point of the meal, when the savoury foods give way to the sweet. Before service *à la Russe* became overwhelmingly accepted, rendering such care less necessary, *Beetons Complete Etiquette for Gentlemen* notes that 'it is well to have dishes of meat and vegetables and the condiments removed, and the plates and knives removed for the dessert. These matters may seem unimportant, but they are not' (1876a, p. 28). Before dessert, the table is cleared and any crumbs remaining from previous courses are swept away. Sometimes, accessory table cloths or slips would have been used during the savoury course, and these too would be removed in preparation for the sweet courses, leaving the table clean and white underneath. These preparations emphasise the new phase the dinner is about to enter, effectively setting the stage for the finale. They also ensure that none of the material culture that has been used for meat remains to confuse the installation of the new set of dishes and implements which contain and accompany the dessert. In the early courses, the cutlery and plates are all arranged for the diner in a set. When we reach the dessert course, the knife and fork are brought in, and before dessert is handed round 'one must place the dessert-knife and fork at right and left, respectively, of one's plate' (Humphry 1897a, p. 75). A finger-glass also arrives at this point, and in the 1870s *Beetons Complete Etiquette for Gentlemen* tells us that 'it is usual to dip a corner of the napkin in the water and wipe the lips; also to dip the fingers and wipe them on the napkin' (1876a, p. 28). The fingers and the mouth are cleaned and purified using the cloth. By the 1900s it was not generally thought decorous to dip the napkin in the water, and it was used dry. It is interesting to compare the use of individual finger-bowls to the communal washing-bowl of the previous century; the significance of this and other changes is discussed below.

The smooth running of the dinner-party was dependent upon the attention of servants. Good service was essential to the success of the meal. A common theme running through the etiquette books is that a hostess who mounts a dinner-party of too great a size or elaboration for her servants to cope with will not be regarded as a successful entertainer, and may be mocked. A perfection of service is described as one where the courses are presented promptly, and the arrival and removal of dishes and plates is smooth and efficient. This is a welcome thing for any group of hungry people, no doubt, but it is vital if communication between servant and guest is to be kept to a minimum 'One barely discovers that one needs bread when it is presented at one's elbow' (Humphry 1897a, p. 66). Instructions to servants are kept as brief as possible, and speaking to them is avoided if gestures will suffice. Choices of wines may be signified by drawing the glass forward 'or by a nod; sometimes by a shake of the head' (Humphry 1897a, p. 65). The servants are functionaries, not participants, and their actions must be mechanical and predictable. Even so, they are a potential intrusion into the dining ritual, and contact with them is reduced to basic signals which restrain interaction to the most limited level. Furthermore, concern is shown over any area of the meal where servants come into close contact with the material culture used to contain and control food: 'the servants should each be



Fig. 6.1. A dinner party to aspire to . . . The picture is dated 1890. (BBC Hulton Picture Library, Graphic 26/4/80)

furnished with a clean white napkin with which to handle the plates of the guests' (Beeton 1876a, p. 28).

The style of service employed by a hostess was in gradual but almost constant evolution throughout the nineteenth century. During the early 1800s, service *à la Française* became almost universal. Its course structure formed the basis of the meal I have just catalogued, and it differed most particularly from the earlier English manner in the emphasis placed on the finer separation of the different stages of the meal. It resulted in a growth in the amount of material paraphernalia accompanying a meal, as well as an increase in the number of attendants required to serve it. This style was itself superseded by service *à la Russe*, which could be found at fashionable parties in the middle of the century, and which became increasingly widespread as the century drew to a close. The main difference of service *à la Russe* was its reduction of the amount of food preparation and sharing actually performed at the table. The degree of this change depended upon the individual hostess, but it usually meant that at least the carving could be performed away from the table. In it can be seen an increase in the tendency towards individualisation of the diner, and an underlining of the separation of food during its ceremonial consumption at the table.

The growth of service *à la Russe* had an indirect but important effect upon the appearance of the dinner table. As the number of dishes retained on the sideboard, or even in the kitchen, increased, so there opened up a vacancy in the centre of the table. This, and the fact that table-cloths were now not generally removed before dessert, led to a tremendous growth in the opportunity for table decoration. Table decoration was a particularly important part of the hostess's duties, and it is difficult to exaggerate the amount of care and attention lavished upon it. In *Manners and Rules of Good Society*, the writer sees the major difference between a social dinner-party and one *en famille* as being 'the extent of the display made as regards flowers, plate and glass' (1902, p. 103). In the chapter on table decoration in *The Book of Household Management* (Beeton 1892, p. 1344) it is said that some hostesses spend almost as much time on floral decoration as on the food itself. This chapter gives a good description of the art. However, to show just how exotic table decoration became, I will turn to two examples from books of the same period which, while perhaps too intricate to be typical, give a reasonable idea of the lengths a hostess might go to to make her dinner-party a social 'event'.

The first is from Lady Colin Campbell's *Etiquette of Good Society*, where she says that 'one favourite is perhaps . . . [where]

a plateau of plate-glass occupies the centre of the table. On its surface here and there are small china water-fowl or water reptiles holding or supporting bouquets of flowers. The edges of this miniature lake are closely bordered with bright-coloured flowers or green ferns, which are placed in long glass troughs' (1893, p. 138). Furthermore, this would only be the centrepiece, and it was undoubtedly flanked by subsidiary articles. One senses a high degree of competition in such things at society parties, and this must have been present only to a slightly lesser extent at most dinner parties of the upper-middle class. By the turn of the century there was a proliferation of people whom the busy (and rich) hostess could employ purely to decorate her table.

An unavoidable consequence was Mrs Humphry's observation in *Manners for Women* that 'a common fault in table decoration is to overdo it' (1897b, p. 74). One only begins to form an impression of the horrors such elaboration must have produced when this preacher of austerity embarks on a description of a table she holds up as a model of taste, and before which Lady Colin Campbell's example pales. 'Down the centre . . . was a drift of rose pink and silver gauze . . . It was bordered with long trails of smilax which passed under miniature arches of holly and mistletoe. In the centre of the table rose a small ivy tree, hung on all the branches with peals of tiny silver bells, which tinkled with fairy music . . . Trails of smilax hung from candelabra to candelabra, all down the table, tied with pink ribbon. The small vases at the corners were filled with pink roses and brown ivy, and at the plate of each diner lay a "buttonhole" consisting of a rose and an ivy spray' (Humphry 1897b, p. 81). The sideboard would have been similarly festooned.

Epergnes were fading out of use at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were succeeded by a variety of centrepieces. The later nineteenth century is remarkable for its use of fine flower arrangements as table decorations. 'One of the most original developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the evolution of elaborate, composite glass centrepieces, intended primarily for the display of flowers' (Morris 1978, p. 149). The vases themselves were often shaped like flowers or entwined with leaves and other natural symbols. Rustic styles became quite fashionable for certain types of ornament, culminating in popularity in the early 1890s. This 'garden' type of table decoration often formed a rampart down the centre of the table, to the extent of obscuring one half of the table from the other. One popular method of brightening the table was to strew flowers along the centre and around the ornaments. Together with the trailing of green climbing plants (like the smilax above) the effect was representative of a wild garden, often populated by exotic animals depicted on the ornaments, and in all providing a strange and contrastive scene in which to act out a highly ordered and formalised dining ritual.

The dinner-party explained

Arnold Palmer wrote in 1952 (p. 60) that 'the formal dinner-party, as we know it or knew it, is barely a hundred years old'. To understand how the dinner party of late-Victorian times evolved, it is essential to place it within a social and historical context. Perhaps the two most important facets of Victorian society for the

present discussion are the rise of the middle class and the Victorian attitudes towards women and the home. They also happen to be two topics that have been undergoing a large amount of reconsideration in recent years, and they are still the subject of some controversy.

From forming a relatively small proportion of the population in the eighteenth century, the middle class grew distinctly in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Geoffrey Best (1979, p. 101), writing of the period 1851-70, notes that the years of mid-Victorian prosperity were marked by a disproportionate increase in the number and incomes of middle-class people. It is important to realise that this 'middle class' was far from homogeneous, and the term may be used to encompass people from a broad spectrum of society. Branca (1975) has highlighted how our stereotyped idea of the middle-class Victorian woman cannot easily be applied to the role of the lower-middle class housewife, who was restricted in her ambitions by her husband's limited income. The type of lavish dinner I have described above may well have been read about by these women, but it could hardly have been attempted by them, except in an extremely abbreviated form. Branca notes too that 'as yet no-one has clearly defined what is middle class' (1975, p. 17). Indeed, this is hardly surprising when we consider that throughout the nineteenth century this class was continually redefining itself. Being middle class was no absolute state. Membership of it was conferred upon a person by his peers after examination of certain credentials. The credentials consisted of an amalgam of material and moral criteria, which were commonly referred to at one end of the middle-class scale as 'respectability', and at the other end as 'gentility'. While they covered a wide spectrum of rather differing values, the concepts have one most important factor in common. They could not be inherited, and they could not be conferred for life. Indeed, they were in a state of continual reaffirmation.

The growth of a part of the population made wealthy and powerful exclusively through profiting from increasing industrialisation and trade is, of course, particularly evident in the nineteenth century. The emergence of such 'new men', and the establishment of their positions within society, are of relevance to this essay. However, the stress is more fruitfully laid on the general change in the means of status establishment. Possession of landed estates, and connections with the higher nobility, remained important. However, hereditary claimants are by definition limited, and the number of estates cannot easily be increased. Banks (1981) has recently modified earlier views by outlining an argument that sees a reorganisation of the governing classes as more important than the rise of individuals from the lower classes. It does seem to be increasingly apparent that we should not exaggerate the role of the 'new man' in the upper tiers of Victorian society, at least until towards the end of that century. Even in the period from 1870 onwards, the increasing social acceptability of those positions within society which did not rely directly upon ownership of land may well have come from a shift within the established class towards industrial and administrative positions of influence, as much as from true 'social mobility' or 'pressure from below'. The basic point is that the changing economic and social patterns within late nineteenth-century Britain gradually changed symbolic value sys-

tems centred on unacquirable hereditary claims and possession of land, into the more elastic justification of possession of restricted knowledge. In her book *The Best Circles*, Leonore Davidoff describes very fully the changes in Victorian society, and how these affected social behaviour. She notes that an outstanding feature of the nineteenth century was the way in which 'essentially middle class patterns of behaviour were grafted onto the honorific code of the aristocracy or gentry to produce the widened concept of "gentility"' (Davidoff 1973, p. 36). She tells us that even in the second half of the century, entrance into society by first-generation manufacturers was problematical. One means of overcoming this (for the parvenu's family, rather than for himself) was to send one's sons to the rapidly expanding public schools, where they could not only rub shoulders with the 'old guard', but would be exposed to the increasingly standardised mode of behaviour expected of an English Gentleman.

As the century progressed, the process continued. Inherited status was still immensely important and carried great advantages, but it was no longer an exclusive criterion, and Davidoff tells us that 'by the 1880s the basis of London Society membership was beginning to widen' (Davidoff 1973, p. 59). It is important to understand that this was not in any way a loosening of the hierarchical structure of the social system, nor the mark of a relaxation in the degree to which individuals within the system competed for status. Indeed, in many ways, the changes described may have had the opposite effect. The extension of the criteria for entrance into the higher social groupings, and most particularly the consequent blurring of the division between the upper-middle class and the gentry, seem to have heightened concern for allotting status. Davidoff believes that the publication of the *Book of Precedence* in 1881, which listed positions in society, 'indicates an uncertainty about social ranking at this period' (1973, p. 47).

The etiquette books themselves are some indication of the extent of concern with social rank, and are an implicit acknowledgement of the growing importance of acquired knowledge in the negotiation of social position. The nineteenth century does not have a monopoly of such manuals, but, to judge by the number of titles and editions, it is unique in the scale on which they were produced.

Recognition of the importance of correct observance of social etiquette, and of the harm one may do oneself in the estimation of others if it is ignored, are, predictably, constant themes within the books. Among regular social interactions, the dinner is given an importance which directly corresponds to its function in establishing the social hierarchy. The oft-quoted Mrs Beeton summarises her views with excellent clarity when she writes: 'the rank which people occupy in the grand scale may be measured by their way of taking their meals, as well as by their way of treating their women' (1861, p. 905, and 1892, p. 1331).

Establishing this recognised place was not only of concern to the upper-middle class. This preoccupation permeated into the lives of the class as a whole. The competitiveness of social life was openly discussed at the time, and such writings are particularly concerned with those attempting to make a social transition. Normally, they are indignant or contemptuous towards those

wishing to rise socially, but in an interesting piece from *Fraser's Magazine*, a Mrs William Grey speaks caustically, not only about those who attempt the climb, but also about the goal they aspire to. She is well aware that such a social battle, once entered, is never won, for every level of society lives in wonder of the one immediately above. She pities the 'vast multitude of nobodies' who attempt to enter society's 'charmed circle, by anxious imitation of its dress, and manners, and social forms' (March 1874, pp. 4-5). Such passages are no real guide to the amount of 'new' people moving up (and down) the social scale, but they are indicative of a degree of social concern about such movement, and are a rough guide as to how it was attempted. Imitation of those perceived to be socially superior, in order to strengthen or just to stabilise an individual's social position, is particularly apparent (as one might expect) in social etiquette. Indeed, manuals of correct behaviour may be seen as tools to facilitate this. Mrs Humphry wrote partly to provide a guide for those already within a class but inexperienced enough to be nervous at certain social observances, and partly for the 'thousands of young men in London alone at this very moment who are longing to acquire the ease and aplomb of good society' (Humphry 1897a, p. 9).

An effective relationship may be drawn between the adoption of modes of behaviour used by an individual who seeks to improve his personal social standing, and the consequent general emulation of higher social groups by classes below them, although no actual change in the relations of the classes is effected. 'The process of emulation thereby results in items changing their symbolic association, and in new items being adopted, in a dynamic process, that proceeds quite apart from any actual change in the principle of hierarchy or even in the relative positions of the respective groups' (Miller 1982, p. 89).

At the dinner table we can see this process at work in the introduction and spread of service *à la Russe*. Originally adopted by the upper classes in the middle of the century, it represented a further stage in the elaboration of the meal and the separation of courses, as has been outlined above. In its original form it required a large retinue of servants. This did not stop its use in essence, though no doubt with compromises, by lower social groups as the century progressed. By 1892, Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* could state that 'Dinners à la Russe . . . are now . . . so common that we find them even in the houses of people of very moderate incomes' (1892, p. 1339).

If the suggestion has been that those groups within nineteenth-century society that sought to promote their social standing did so partly through the adoption of codes of conduct associated with those set higher in the social sphere, then what of those whose status was of the highest? Of course, even the social standing of the greatest was not absolutely assured (consider the Tranby Croft scandal). Even so, a relative safety may explain the observation in *Manners and Rules of Good Society* that, though there are a number of people who affect a 'few eccentricities of manner', these eccentricities 'are only really indulged in by those whose position in society is secure' (p. 113). The aristocracy obeyed the rules of etiquette as a class, but within this class there were individuals who might flout them with impunity (though one suspects that this

impunity decreased as the century wore on). If we view the middle to upper tiers of Victorian society not as a two-dimensional, homogeneous 'class', but as a deeply complex set of interlinking groups and individuals, each pursuing (according to the degree of social ambition) a *perceived* ideal of society – and hence the correct material and moral path towards higher social standing – it may help us to understand the role of the dinner party. For a dinner invitation constituted the final stage in the evolution of a social relationship between one person and another. It did not imply absolute equality, but it was recognition of membership of the same social group, and all that signified about common values and interests. It was 'the highest compliment, socially speaking, that is offered by one person to another' (MRGS 1902, p. 95).

Holding the dinner-party in a special room within the house increased the party's significance in comparison to social interactions held outside the home, or within it in multifunctional areas. The house held a particular importance for middle-class Victorians. It was an area owned and controlled completely by its principal occupants – the family. It was a secluded haven, and between its walls, order could be created and maintained. No doubt the point can be exaggerated, but in a sense 'the Victorians deified or at least ascribed spiritual properties to the home' (Wohl, 1978 p. 10).

If the house had 'spiritual properties', then the dining room on the night of the dinner ceremony might be called its 'sacred area'. The success of the evening depended upon the creation of a sense of order and correctness. Just as the ritual is begun when the master of the house enters the dining room with 'the lady of highest social importance' (Humphry 1897a, p. 62), so it is completed with 'the man of highest social position leaving the dining room first, the host last' (*ibid.*, p. 80). As the gateway to the dining room is opened, it is guarded by him who holds superior status, and closed only by his social equivalent, the host. Even as the boundary between the dining room and the rest of the house is crossed, it is being culturally reinforced. Young men are overtly warned never to be the first to make a move towards the drawing-room.

At this point it may be wise to outline briefly the importance of the sexual, as well as the social, division of Victorian life. By the last years in which we are interested, feminism had embarked on many of its greatest battles. However, although important changes were under way, these were limited until after the turn of the century in their effect on the majority of women.

Branca (1975) has criticised the rather stereotyped view of middle-class women as weak, repressed, asexual creatures playing a seemingly useless or idle part in society. Her criticisms particularly apply to women of the lower middle class, but I suspect that they also apply, to an extent, to the rather over-caricatured image of middle-class women generally. When reading of the nineteenth-century hostesses and the part they played in creating social relationships, Rosaldo's suggestions seem to be very pertinent. 'While acknowledging male authority, women may direct it to their own interests, and in terms of actual choices and decisions, of who influences whom and how, the power exercised by women may have considerable and systematic effect' (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, p. 21).

Even so, it would be wrong to ignore the difficulties and contradictions which male-dominated Victorian society sought to

rationalise in its relations with women. While charges of hypocrisy may be exaggerated, there did exist a double standard of the type outlined by Thomas (1959) whereby male liaisons outside the marriage went relatively unpunished, while female liaisons invoked the full wrath of society, and could lead to divorce. Much has been made of the number of prostitutes, and other evidence of immorality committed by men, but the more interesting side of the coin is the methods used to control the sexuality of women (at least, when they were wives) through various means, ranging from the legal and financial to the encouraging of an image of pale asexuality.

By the end of the century, attitudes to women had changed a great deal, and much discriminatory legislation had been abolished. Even so, Fraser Harrison's remarks in *The Dark Angel* are still valid. 'At a time when it was possible for unprecedented numbers of people to accumulate personal wealth on an unprecedented scale, marriage attained a profound significance through its ability to guarantee the provision of legitimate offspring to whom a husband could leave his property and wealth' (Harrison 1977, p. 3). There was a significant anxiety that a woman who publicly acknowledged or displayed her sexuality might produce a false heir. Fear of the bastard explains 'the hysteria aroused by even the faintest suspicion of sexual unreliability' (Harrison 1977, pp. 11–12).

Throughout Victoria's reign, there was an emphasis on the purity and innocence of women. Their spirituality was regarded as a fount of well-being within the family. In the equation of respectability and purity, and in the reason (fear of the wrong heir) suggested for this concern with purity, one can perhaps see a parallel between this aspect of Victorian life and the use of dining etiquette by the same class, as described above. It is important to stress here that this is a parallel relationship, rather than one of cause and effect. It would be wrong to suggest that a concern with sexual purity necessarily leads to a concern with eating etiquette. However, both phenomena demonstrate the use of purity, cultural order and categorisation, particularly in public life, in order to effect social control. Women had a powerful position as the link between these domains.

Throughout the first part of this essay a detailed description was given of the creation of a highly structured way of eating food. This involved combinations and separations of different forms of food and the complementary use of specialised dining tools and containers, to form distinct methods of consumption. These methods of consumption formed a hierarchy in the complexity of the implements used. This was related to the strength of the taboo regarding use of the hands, which itself corresponded to the particular type of food being consumed. The basic concern seems to be a desire to construct and maintain elaborate controls over the way in which foodstuffs enter the mouth. This concern is mirrored in similar rituals concerning how food is carried to the table, how it is served, and how anything that has contacted it should be dealt with. Likewise, control over how guests enter the dining room, has been briefly described. Mary Douglas' work concerning attitudes about that which crosses the boundaries of the body (particularly those put forward in *Purity and Danger*, 1966) forms an obvious foundation to any account of such social behaviour.

Douglas' work is most useful in its general explanation of how symbolic meaning can gain power from its structure. However, to understand why such symbolic structures are used within particular societies, we have to look at the specific contexts in which they are manipulated by social groups in the pursuit of certain goals, as has been attempted in this chapter. In such an inspection, the greater the time-depth of the study the better. The length of this article has limited the period I have been able to look at in detail, but it is interesting to note the attempts made by authors of etiquette manuals to place their advice in a historical setting.

When Mrs Humphry tried to explain or justify the dining etiquette she espoused, she did not find the historical precedent a very happy one. She notes that in the past, meat bones might have been picked up – there was no strict taboo on the handling of food. She rationalises this with the functional argument that this occurred when 'table cutlery was far from having been brought to its present condition of perfection' (Humphry 1897a, p. 69). Here we see a functional explanation used to obscure a shift in symbolic strategy. That such changes are a relatively recent phenomenon is recognised by Lady Colin Campbell in her introduction. There is an amusing passage showing an awareness that manners at the table had become radically stricter, and it notes that 'even since the last century, manners have altered strangely. The great freedom then permitted, both in words and action, is no longer allowed' (1893, p. 10). Overall, etiquette writers have some difficulty explaining how and why behaviour necessitating their intricate instructions arose. Not a few seem to find it 'difficult to believe that fingers once did duty for forks' (MRGS 1902, p. 113). This incredulity arises from a contradiction of knowledge. The writers knew that before the nineteenth century, modes of behaviour were indulged in by the leaders of society that within the context of their own time would only have been practised by the most unrespectable. Of knives and forks, Mrs Humphry assures us that it is 'only in the lowest grades of society that they are found inadequate' (1897, p. 69).

Within these writers' own social context, a position within society could only be gained by observing an etiquette designed to preserve a symbolic purity. This concept of purity formed a boundary encompassing and defining members of genteel society, and it kept them safely distinct from those who had not the means and knowledge to comply with its demands. No doubt, not everyone within a set economic group conformed with these social expectations, but they were necessities for any individual negotiating status within the mainstream of upper-middle-class society. In etiquette books dire warnings are regularly administered to young men and women intent on making an acceptable impression, that ignorance of the codes of conduct will result in ostracism. They would not be invited again. One must not only possess information necessary to justify inclusion within a social group, one must also display it.

What we have seen at the Victorian dinner-party is just such a display. One's very presence is a public recognition by the host of one's membership of a certain social group. Throughout the dinner-party, proof is offered to all those assembled of one's right to membership through the demonstration of personal purity by the use of symbolic strategies which focus on methods of eating.

The symbolic dichotomies of pure and impure are used by this social group as a powerful tool to mould their ideology. The growth of a concern for separation and categorisation within the material world by the upper classes can be seen in other spheres outside the dining room, and it originated well before the nineteenth century. One can see that 'the substitution of handkerchiefs for fingers or clothes for nose-blowing, the control of spitting, the wearing of night clothes, the introduction of wash-basins, portable bath-tubs and soap' (Stone 1979, pp. 412, 413) by the 'quality' are all different manifestations of a fundamental symbolic strategy.

Undoubtedly, too, each different facet of body symbolism was combined with symbolism in different areas to multiply the power of meaning in each individual act of ordering and categorisation. It may be unnecessary, even wrong, to search for a primary cause for such a movement. Particular symbols have no absolute relation to that which is symbolised, and they may be used in entirely different contexts through coincidence, convenience or, more usually, the manipulation of symbolic meaning gained through previous association, to say something quite different. It would be peculiarly difficult to attribute what one might call 'boundary concern' to any single feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history, and to state this conclusion with certainty.

It seems quite plausible to suggest instead that the use of symbolic boundary maintenance within particular social arenas is used to transfer and multiply symbolic power from concerns in other spheres, past and present, via the common underlying theme of purity and pollution. It may be possible, in the Victorian context, to argue that throughout the dinner ceremony, behaviour which is based upon boundary concern and played out through actions with relation to the body, food and material culture, maintains a condition of symbolic purity which gains power within this context from its significance within others, for instance sexual control.

The symbolic power generated was used to strengthen the definition of a social group, membership of which now depended upon values which were in the process of changing from relatively static land and hereditary claims, towards the more elastic concept of limited knowledge. Acquired knowledge would limit membership, but would allow the addition of new-comers. Interestingly, it would also allow the retention of those within the upper classes who had begun to take advantage of the growing opportunities within industry and the professions.

This discussion has highlighted the relationship between material culture and symbolism. The one cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of the other. Furthermore, neither can be usefully studied without exploring the context in which it appears. It may even be misleading to refer to a single context, as if one could freeze social relations to facilitate their study. To regard the formal Victorian dinner-party as a ritual, concrete in its actions and static in the definition of its performers, would be an attitude which the society that produced it would find entirely congenial. Indeed, it was the very illusion that the dinner-party and other forms of justificatory behaviour were designed to produce. To understand why this was the case, and how it was effected, one needs to regard the dinner-party as active rather than representative, and to see its participants as creative in the formation of a social group, rather than as employed in its service.