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Starvation in Culture: Food and Social Criticism

Food symbolism has been used to further themes of love, religion, culture, and many other important aspects of literature. While food can be representative of many things, it can be used to more deeply portray a kind of starvation in social justice and cultural issues in literature. Nobel Prize winning authors, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyen, John Steinbeck, Naguib Mahfouz, and Yasunari Kawabata all focus on important social issues in what they put their characters through and what they choose to present in their works. Each author uses food symbolism to further reflect their social concerns addressed in their novels.

One author who uses a heavy amount of food symbolism to emphasize his social concerns about the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Soviet Union is Solzhenitsyn in his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. His main character, Ivan, goes through an entire day of his life in great detail. Food appears in many different ways: as a source of dignity, as a bribe, and as a commodity. All three of these things subvert the goals of the communist government that aimed to put everyone on an equal playing field, making them out to be a hypocritical and corrupted government. Through Solzhenistsyn’s portrayals of food in this way, he is commenting on the failure of the government even within their prison camps.

First, mealtime is a place of etiquette and enjoyment that becomes a source of dignity for the prisoners. During breakfast, readers see that, “Spitting the bones out on the floor was thought bad manners” (Solzhenitsyn 11). Shukhov, the main character, also has his own set of table etiquette when eating. At breakfast, he “took his cap off his shaved head—however cold it was, he would never eat with it on…. He ate the eyes too when they were still in place, but when they’d come off and were floating around in the bowl on their own he didn’t eat them. The others laughed at him for this” (13). Shukhov followed his own rules and revealed his own concerns with appearance and also what was undignified to eat. In this way, food serves as a means of gaining social standing and respect, not only from others but also for one’s own personal identity. Shukhov finds a way to be unique and to follow his own code even in the little spaces of freedom they are given. This goes against the idea of the soviets with the concentration camps. Their goal was to take away all sense of identity from the prisoners, bringing them to nothing. However, even in the smallest of places the prisoners can be seen to find unique elements of identity through the way they eat, a practice that is necessary and cannot be withheld from them without completely killing them all. This shows how the government failed to keep their failed system in place while still managing to damage their people.

Food was also a commodity for the prisoners, which reflected the soviet government in all its aspects of corruption and bribery. Although they aimed to take away money and to leave the prisoners with nothing, which reflected not only how they ran the camp itself but also the nation outside, the system that was set up allowed for bribery at every level. First, the guards took fatback in from gang leaders within the prison in order to give them better working areas and “wages”. “The boss needed a lot of fatback to slip the people in the PPS and still have enough left over for his own belly. He didn’t get any packages from home, but he was never short of fatback. It was always handed over to him right away by anyone in the gang who got some” (22). If a boss provided enough fatback, the gang would be in a warmer spot and they would not have a job such as digging trenches in permafrost. The social standing of the gang depended on these bribes from their leaders to the guards. Because of this system, the structure of the camp itself defies the wishes of the government that everyone should be at an equal level in the camp. Solzhenitsyen reveals this corruption through the bribery he portrays with food at the camp.

Another way that food becomes a commodity in the novel is the way it is used as money in exchange for other goods. “The guy with the package had to give some to his warder, his gang boss, and the trusty in his barracks…Then you had to pay off the people who’d help you get it” (127). The package had many luxuries that other prisoners desired. In order to even be able to keep a package, the prisoner had to pay off a lot of people with the food inside. Shukhov goes on in his explanation about how the package was used to pay for everything from the barber to the guy who washed his clothes to the doctor who could give him a sick day in bed. Food was used for everything, and it paid many prisoners’ ways to certain luxuries other prisoners could not afford. Food in this way was also a source of greed, as the guards would frequently steal from the packages and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Both the guards and the people used this commodity for their own greed and desires in the face of a corrupt and decrepit prison camp where food is limited, revealing the evils of the government that had established the weak system. “In both cases, the hunger emanates from an incompetent government, as this commercial equation based on food (physical and emotional) exchange embodies the complete breakdown of the sociopolitical apparatus” (Edwin 44). The set up of the prison camp and the corruption of the guards allowed for this system to take place, reflecting the corruption and the lack of care the Soviets had for their own people, something Solzhenistyn was concerned with.

Food is also the center of the day for the prisoners. It is what their schedules revolve around, and it is what they look forward to. There is not much else provided in the camp for hope or comfort, so the prisoners take everything they can get. Shukhov always saves his bread for his next meal, showing how he is always looking ahead. “He always brought this much with him to work and never touched it before the meal break. He always ate the other half at breakfast, but today he hadn’t…He felt a great hunger pang and wanted to eat it right away… There were still five hours till the meal break” (38). Hunger is a main problem in Shukhov’s day. Because the prisoners are half starved, they are trained to rely on the meager meals they receive. This starvation also trains the prisoners to learn how to survive by hiding food in various ways. It is the only way to survive the fierce schedule of mealtimes. In this way, the scheduled meal times reveal the problem of government failure once again to take sufficient care of their people. They inadvertently teach the prisoners to become survivors, creating a sort of social Darwinism structure, a “survival of the fittest” system. This system is the opposite of what the government proposes, revealing their irony and cruelty in forcing their citizens to fend for their own survival. Through Solzhenitsyen’s use of food symbolism in his novel, he portrays the corruption and disparity in the system of the Soviet Union. In this way, the government camp is shown in all its hypocrisy and corruption.

Another author who uses food as a way of social criticism is John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this novel, food is used in three distinct ways: as a way of bringing people together, as a need that drives people forward, and as a source of anger that fuels people to revolt. First, food is used as something that brings people together in communities across America as they face hardships in their various journeys. When the grandfather of the Joad family dies, they make sure to feed the family that was with them when he passed. “When the pork and potatoes were done the families sat about on the ground and ate, and they were quiet, staring into the fire” (Steinbeck 145). This is just after they had buried the grandfather. The two groups end up merging together to help one another out in their journey across the country toward what they hope will be their future. Steinbeck captures this image of families coming together where he says, “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families become one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream” (193). All of these families became one in their great migration westward, and at dinnertime when they stopped they all ate and merged together, sharing important ideas and creating a community they could not find anywhere else. The food that they were striving after became a source of conversation and community. “Food tropes, metaphors, and images serve as figures of speech which depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation, and critique global capitalism” (Gardaphe 5). This united them against the people who were trying to bring them down, who were trying to separate and starve them. Food became a source of connection in this way, bringing the people together in the face of hardship and loss. Because of their resilience, they were able to face down the enemy as a group. This shows Steinbeck’s critique of the government in the way that they forced people together in times of desperation. It is also a message saying that nothing can truly keep people apart.

Another way food is used in the novel is as a need that drove the people on. The Joads were going out West because they needed money for food. It was the same reason that everyone else was headed out West. The government had created this gaping need when they allowed the banks to take full control of the farms and fields, and also when they allowed the injustices to happen in California. One family that Tom Joad encountered admitted to selling their car, their only source of transportation, for food. “We sol’ our car. Had to. Run outa food, run outa ever’thing. Couldn’ git no job. Fellas come aroun’ ever’ week, buyin’ cars…An’ if you’re hungry enough, they don’t hafta pay nothin’ for it. An’—we was hungry enough” (293). No one could find any work, so they sold whatever they had in order to get money for food. The need to feed their children was a constant pressure; everyone was doing anything they could in order to get food and nourishment. “The threat of starvation unleashes the migrants' imaginations. The yearning onetime farmers sometimes contemplate sharing property and collectively owning machinery in the future” (Zirakzadeh 611). The people tried to take over fields and work together, but the people of California stopped them at every chance. Food became the end goal once they saw the realities of California—not luxuries or even a place to live. Food meant they could live another day. Steinbeck uses this food as representing a basic need that drove people on to portray the inhumane crimes of the government in starving their own people for money and land.

One other point that food represents is food as a source of anger that fueled the people to rebellion. Steinbeck describes the waste of the fruit because there is an overabundance and no profit to be made. “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success…And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange” (349). Fruit is dumped and wasted on the side of the road, and it is burned so that people cannot eat it. This shows how the government truly did not care for the livelihood of its people—it careed only for a profit, and if there was not one to be made, then no one was allowed to eat. This kind of greed is horrific. And it is certainly not lost on the people, as Steinbeck concludes the chapter by saying, “In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage” (349). Food here represents greed, gluttony, and selfishness that goes beyond description. In this way, Steinbeck criticizes the government for their greed and lack of care for their own people that they exploited for a profit while reaffirming the idea that the people cannot be held back forever. Through all of these uses of food in his novel, Steinbeck portrays the cruelty of the government as they greedily took advantage of the impoverished and left them to starve while at the same time reinforcing the idea of community in the face of hardship.

Another author who uses food symbolism for social criticism in his novel is Naguib Mahfouz in his novel *Midaq Alley*. He uses food to praise and also condemn various aspects of Egyptian culture. First, food is used as an aesthetic object that represents an appreciation of life as seen through the eyes of one of the few good characters in the novel. The owner of the sweets shop, Uncle Kamil, is described as a large man. However, “in spite of his portly build, Uncle Kamil could not be considered a glutton, although he was very fond of sweets and extremely clever at making them. His artistry was completely fulfilled in making up orders” (Mahfouz 30). He enjoyed sweets for the art of making them rather than for their delicious taste. His views on food are reflected even as he eats his everyday meal with Abbas: “Uncle Kamil…is slow and chews each piece of food laboriously until it almost dissolves in his mouth. He often says, ‘Good food should be first digested in the mouth’” (30). He is one of the only characters to stop and appreciate good things, making this scene with the food important. The fact that the one man thought to be a glutton actually is not reflects the idea that not all is as appearances would first suggest. The greater appreciation for food and the art of making food shown through a man who goes deeper than his appearance connects to one of the greater themes in the novel of an appreciation for old, cultural life and the beautiful things in it over the face-paced materialism of the new world that seem only to hinder and even hurt the lives of the Egyptians.

Another important aspect of food symbolism in the novel is food as a symbol of status. Two materialistic characters, Hussain Kirsha and Hamida, capture the image of the desires of youth to be free of the old culture and to be a part of the new, materialistic western world. When Hussain has money from the war that the British brought, it is said that he “delighted in eating meat, which he considered a luxury reserved especially for the rich” (33). Hamida reemphasizes this idea later in the novel when she is about to go pursue the life of wealth that she thinks awaits her. “It wasn’t that she disliked lentils, but she knew they were a staple food of the poor. Not that she really knew anything about what rich people ate, except that it was meat and meat and meat” (203). Hamida and Hussain’s pursuits of money and wealth through their appetite for meat reflects the greater theme of the youth going after things of material value that the westerners put forth. Neither of them really knew what the wealthy did, as seen in Hamida’s reflections, but both blindly follow what rumors they have heard rich people doing, showing how desperate the characters were to be a part of a higher society they knew nothing about. They, like many of the youth that Mahfouz seems to be portraying, cast aside their old heritage too quickly in favor of fame and fortune. “In literature we have met many characters who spurn their ethnicities through disavowal of ethnic foodways. This particular expression of self-loathing is often engendered by the racist culture that degrades ethnic foodways as filthy and unhealthful, and the association with filth predictably gestures toward immorality” (Gardaphe 6). They both become completely immoral in their pursuit of the new world of food. Neither of them had ever really eaten meat before, so it would follow that they would logically not care for it. However, they abandon all of their old sense of culture for the new world. In this way, the meat of the wealthy represents illogical desires on the part of the youth in their desperate pursuit of wealth.

One other important aspect of food symbolism in the novel is that of food as a ritualistic item. Salim Alwan, an important businessman in the alley, eats a bowl of green wheat ritualistically every day in order to enhance his sex life. “The bowl of husked green wheat had a story behind it, which the entire alley knew…He would have it for lunch, then drink tea every two hours afterward. Its magic effect began at night and lasted for two full hours of sheer delight” (67). The green wheat that he eats represents overindulgence in pleasure and a lack of regard for his wife. As their relationship continues to deteriorate, readers see how he desires Hamida as a new, young wife because his current wife is not happy with the “green wheat experiment”. His pursuit of a new, younger wife for his own pleasure is his way of forsaking he old and traditional, his wife, for the new and lustful, Hamida. While he never does achieve this, his indulgence in his sexual experiments and his continued lack of care for what the alley people think of his green wheat shows a sin of gluttony in a new way. When he deteriorates into a vicious old man after his heart failure, his descent into selfishness is complete, revealing how indulgence and selfishness and greed lead to ultimate failure in life. Contrasting this would be Uncle Kamil’s appreciation of life and the art of food that he enjoys, and how he enjoys things simply for the sake of doing them, which gives him a peace of mind that is unattainable through any kind of sin. As Mahfouz uses food to symbolize greed and indulgence of the materialistic, he criticizes the sins of the people in turning to Western culture and abandoning the values of their old culture.

Another work of literature that uses food symbolism to support social criticisms in the novel is *Thousand Cranes* by Yasunari Kawabata. He uses the tea ceremony to symbolize the fallen nature of the culture surrounding the ceremony itself, as he says in his Nobel Prize speech, “I must say in passing, that to see my novel Thousand Cranes as an evocation of the formal and spiritual beauty of the tea ceremony is a misreading. It is a negative work, an expression of doubt about and warning against the vulgarity into which the tea ceremony has fallen” (Kawabata Nobel Lecture). Tea in this way is used to represent the fallen nature of a beautiful ceremony that has become susceptible to the quickly modernizing world around it.

First, tea is used to represent the formal, traditional world in the very first tea ceremony of the novel when the Inamura girl makes tea for Kikuji. “Unaware that she was on display, she went through the ceremony without hesitation, and she herself set the tea before Kikuji” (Kawabata 19). The Inamura girl performed the ceremony perfectly and “without hesitation,” which should have made her the ideal candidate for Kikuji. If he had followed what was expected of him, and had he followed custom, he would have ended up marrying this traditional girl. Kikuji, however, is not a man of tradition. His resulting rejection of this girl reflects his ultimate rejection of his traditional culture in favor of a more modern lifestyle, one where he finds more loneliness than anything else. This loss of a traditional ceremony of drinking tea also represents a loss of community. The tea ceremony was a way of gathering with others. “Consumption of food is considered an opportunity to share and a tool that fosters and strengthens already existing social and political ties and networks” (Edwin 49). Through his rejection of the girl and her flawless tea ceremony, he is rejecting a ceremony that not only connects him to his roots, but also to the people in his culture around him. He loses a very important aspect of his own community.

Kikuji furthers this idea of new culture over old culture when he attempts his very own tea ceremony later in the novel. “He had not thought of making tea… Keeping his father company, he had often been through the tea ceremony. He had never been tempted to take up the hobby himself, however, and his father had never pressed him…There was a smell of mildew. The mats too seemed to be damp” (Kawabata 52). Kikuji’s lack of concentration in this scene reflects his lack of care and precision for the sacred tea ceremony. He boils water, but does not diligently watch the kettle, as he should have. He misses certain steps without even realizing it. He even admits that he was not thinking about making tea as he had entered the hut. And because he points out the dampness, it reflects the unfavorable setting of the scene and how the very attitude he has toward the tea is fairly damp. All of these factors point toward the loss of care for his old culture as he is more concerned with modern problems.

The final tea ceremony in the novel wraps up this theme of tea as a symbol of lost culture that has sunken into “vulgarity.” Fumiko is attempting to make tea for herself and Kikuji, but memories of her mother make the process difficult. “When she started to make tea in her mother’s Shino, the whisk rustled against the bowl. She stopped. ‘It’s very hard’…Once she had stopped, there was no making the whisk move again. ‘Mother won’t let me’” (142). Fumiko cannot even finish the ceremony, reflecting a break in the tradition. Her mother has tainted everything for her, all the way down to the tea she drinks. Because she says that her mother will not let her finish the ceremony, this shows how she had corrupted everything with her mistakes and had become as broken as the tradition the next generation no longer participated in. Because the final tea ceremony in the novel is never finished, it reflects the theme of a truly corrupted ceremony that will never be right again. In this way, Kawabata portrays the true loss of ancient culture to the new and modern world through his representation of tea in the novel.

Through each author’s works, food is used to represent important issues and social concerns in the novels. Without the use of food, the deeper concerns presented would not have been as meaningful. People understand the importance of food in everyday life; by using this common necessity the authors bring issues to light that hit home in every reader. Whether a lack of food is used in a novel to represent the failing system of government, as Steinbeck and Solzhenitsyn did, or whether it was used to represent a loss of culture to the modern world, as Mahfouz and Kawabata did, food is used as a critical part of culture and literature to connect to readers across any time period or society.

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