

CULINARY CHRONICLES: UNRAVELLING THE TAPESTRY OF FOOD SYMBOLISM IN BRITISH LITERATURE THROUGH THE AGES

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ABSTRACT:

Writers use food as a narrative tool to elucidate cultural dynamics, including acceptance, resistance, and tradition, revealing historical narratives, relationships, customs, and consumption patterns. Different representations of food provide readers with insights into ancient traditions and their daily impact. This study explores the pervasive use of food in British literature from the Middle Ages to the Victorian Era, seeking to uncover the social and economic conditions of those historical periods. Additionally, the research investigates how food imagery skillfully exposes cultural identity, ethnic traditions, and gender roles during that time.

Keywords: historical narrative, resistance, cultural identity, ethnic tradition, gender roles.

INTRODUCTION:

For centuries, employing 'food' in literature to represent something either symbolic or utilitarian has been a widespread practice. This is because the food choices depicted in literary works play a crucial role in conveying various attributes related to food. The taste, appearance, and naturalness of a dish serve as reflections of real-life social practices and customs prevalent during a particular era. Writers leverage the availability and cost of food to portray the economic conditions of characters, providing commentary on their living conditions. Furthermore, food serves as a lens through which the safety, healthfulness, fairness, and environmental impact of a meal can be understood.

In their research article titled "Socio-cultural Influences on Food Choices and Implications for Sustainable Healthy Diets" Eva Monterrosa, Frongillo, and their collaborators emphasize that "ideational pathways, such as identity, gender, religion, and cultural prohibitions, exert their influence on food practices" (Monterrosa, et al.). To support their theory, they employ a multilevel socioecological framework illustrated as concentric circles to depict the determinants of food choice:

At the inner-most circle, our food choices are influenced by biology...The second circle deals with interactions between the individual and their food choices and relates to familiarity and learned safety, conditioned food preferences and conditioned satiety...In the third circle are the intrapersonal determinants (eg, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and values, personal

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meanings, knowledge and skills), social and cultural norms, and interpersonal determinants (eg, family and social networks)... The fourth circle brings in broader environmental and societal influences of food choices, many relating to the food supply, marketing, and societal food and nutrition policies and programs. (Monterrosa, et al.)

The fusion of food and fiction, a timeless narrative, has been a source of inspiration for writers across numerous years. Beyond serving as a mere plot device, food in literature often serves as a medium for social commentary on characters' eating and drinking habits. This practice spans various genres, including novels, poems, and plays. Within English Literature, an abundance of food, extravagant banquets, and opulent buffets are frequently linked to ample resources and elevated social status. Conversely, scarcity of food conveys wretchedness and impoverished social conditions. "As the Elizabethans believed in hierarchy in all areas of life and thought, the majority believed in a hierarchy based on blood quality" (Lee 147). This hierarchical association between food and lineage becomes a logical extension of their values. As the Renaissance unfolded, food gained heightened significance in Shakespearean works, often employed to delineate distinctions between the aristocracy and the plebeian class. The present research seeks to delve into these dynamics and elucidate the profound impact of food on literature.

SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCE IN FOOD CONSUMPTION:

When literary works, whether novels, poems, or prose, incorporate visual depictions of food, it transcends mere illustration. Instead, it serves to unravel intricate connections between the body, subjectivity, and social structures. The historical portrayal of food in canonical literary pieces becomes a means of offering social commentary on the patterns of food consumption. The impact of food can be traced from ancient scriptures, with Pope Gregory the Great notably emphasizing 'gluttony' as a key sin in the 'Seven Deadly Sins,' a theme echoed in Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, particularly in the first part, "Inferno."

Geoffrey Chaucer, regarded as the father of English Literature, masterfully employs vivid food descriptions in his renowned work, *The Canterbury Tales*. The narrative unfolds the social diversity among the pilgrims, shedding light on the interplay of status, occupation, and religion. In the work, the Monk is associated with 'gluttony,' as described, "The character presents him as belonging to the world of officialdom, but then deconstructs it completely by describing carnivalesque behaviour such as the excessive food consumption and the savouring of delicacies such as swan" (Du Preez 33). In a carnival space, the theme of food emerges multiple times, with banquets serving as a backdrop for laughter, mysteries, and rituals. The presence of food in this context adds a humane touch to the theme. The recurring theme of food is evident through the character of Harry Bailey, who promises to provide free food to any pilgrim sharing the best tale at the tavern. Chaucer's works thus illuminate the differences between the wealthier individuals, priests within the pilgrimage, and the poor men, showcasing the official sphere and religious structure of the period. The presence of segregation within religion is also highlighted as a prominent feature within the culture.

English Literature thrived during the Elizabethan Renaissance, and Shakespeare's role in the movement is pivotal. In *Twelfth Night*, when Sir Toby poses the question, "Does not our lives consist of the four elements?" (TN), Sir Andrew's response, "Faith, so they say...but I think it rather consists of eating and drinking" (TN, II, iii, 7ff), sheds light on the Elizabethan belief "that the composition of the elements did not only influence your appetite, but that food and drink would influence the composition of the elements, and therefore the humours in your body and therefore your passions" (Biewer 17). In 'Taming of the Shrew,' as part of the trick played on the drunken beggar Christopher Sly, whom his servants try to convince was a wealthy lord, he is offered expensive wine, food, and clothing. When the poor tinker is offered these luxuries, he begs the Lord for a pot of small ale. Sly's response, "I ne'er drank sack in my life; and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef" (Taming of the Shrew, I, ii, 156) reveals his unfamiliarity with aristocratic food, as he simply desires a modest preserve of ale and beef. In another of Shakespeare's plays, "Henry VI," when Cade takes over the London Bridge, he declares, "I will make it a felony to drink small beer" (Henry VI, Part 2, IV, ii, 66-67). Being of common origin, Cade understands the impact of ale and wine on the blood of individuals. Therefore, by vowing to banish these food items, he aims to improve the health and living standards of all the people living there.

Shakespeare frequently employs food as a metaphor to highlight human nature, social hierarchy, and the complexities associated with power, nationality, and spirituality. In his works, deliberate connections are established between food, cultural norms, and rank, creating dramatic tension. "Hospitality expressed through food is central to *Macbeth*, with the hero first hosting a feast to celebrate Duncan's victory over the rebels and later attempting to cement his own kingship through the banquet at which Banquo's ghost makes its unwelcome appearance" (Knowles 2). Banquets serve as symbols of power, and the hosting of such feasts is crucial for a leader:

"The coronation marks the symbolic transference of power onto the new king, but it is the hosting of the feast –proving his ability to provide abundance of food for himself and his followers, demonstrating that he, unlike the lowly Sailor's wife, is in a position to be bountiful – that will mark him as a truly powerful leader" (Knowles 9).

While banquets are generally seen as a merry festival, for *Macbeth* it turns into a dark ritual and resurfaces the horrible atrocities he has committed against the people of his kingdom. In "The Winter's Tale," Shakespeare provides insight into the typical shopping list of an average Elizabethan person. The sheep-shearing feast, a notable event in the play, is elevated with the inclusion of luxurious ingredients such as sugar, rice, mace, dates, ginger, raisins, and saffron. Through the use of food, the play serves to depict the cultural background and history of the characters. Furthermore, these examples highlight the origins of various foods, showcasing delicacies like jellies and junkets. Notably, the Spanish influence is represented through the raspberry pyramids enjoyed by Sir Falstaff.

In the 1790s, Charlotte Smith and Hannah More voiced their objections to dietary inequalities, with Smith's novel "Desmond" underscoring the imperative for radical social

changes to ensure widespread access to sustenance and prosperity. Jane Austen, too, tackled the prevalent social issue of hunger in Britain in her works. She also knows how to use food's social and cultural meaning to strengthen her plot and character building. In *Pride and Prejudice* the character Bingley's elaborate discussions about white soup, a French delicacy, serve as an indicator of his affluent social standing, particularly evident in his plans to serve the dish at his Netherfield ball. Maggie Lane discerns that, "...white soup and ragout are fashionable and fancy dishes that usually appear at the privileged class's table, and they may imply Austen's patriotism and sarcasm of the pursuit of French taste" (WEI 29). Austen's use of food in her novels extends beyond mere symbolism, serving as a narrative device that propels the plot forward. As observed, "In her mature and complete novels, Austen characterizes her men and women with the help of food allusions. It is in her long and complete novels that Austen attributes the discussion of food consumption to characters with a sense of morality or vulgar behavior" (WEI 29).

As the Victorian Age approached, Charles Dickens' portrayal of food in his works tended to emphasize physical hunger, a theme also addressed by the Bronte Sisters. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens linked the characteristics of the foods depicted with the reinforcement of social bonds. Novels like *Oliver Twist* vividly illustrate the stark class divide, exposing the relationships between individuals and the exploitative nature of parental figures or guardians, shedding light on the deplorable living conditions of the impoverished in Great Britain. The poignant line, "Please, sir, I want some more" (OT 38), stands as one of the most heart-wrenching phrases in literary history, underscoring the daily hardships faced by Oliver. Despite gruel being an unsatisfying meal, the children in the orphanage lacked access to lavish food, making the porridge a precious sustenance for them. Similarly, Dickens draws attention to the act of "buttering bread" in *Great Expectations*, as depicted by Pip's sister. Through his novels and other works, Dickens aimed to convey the harsh living conditions of children in England, urging readers to comprehend the plight of the poor. Consequently, numerous English writers have utilized food in their works to critique social class, aristocracy, and prevailing inequality in their respective societal contexts over the years.

GENDER ROLES, FOOD AND LITERATURE:

The portrayal of food in literature is intricately intertwined with historical context, gender roles, religious influences, and the perpetual struggle for survival. Certain foods throughout history have been linked to specific gender norms. Examining the works of Shakespeare allows us to discern potential dietary practices of the era. In dietary literature, the consumption of meat has often been extolled as healthier than a vegetarian diet. Bacon, deemed more suitable for laborers engaged in strenuous physical activity, contrasts with the perceived flavorful nature of chicken. Dietary author William Vaughan went as far as stating that certain meats are "fitter to be eaten of sick men, then of them that be in health" (Fitzpatrick, 2). Diane Purkiss explores how robust, dark meat has symbolized masculinity, with William Bullein advocating the benefits of consuming deer lungs. In ancient writings, breast milk is frequently valued for its perceived medicinal properties. Elizabethan beliefs

frowned upon daytime sleep, as evident in "King Lear" when the Fool ominously declares, "And I'll go to bed at noon," (KL, III, vi) conveying a foreboding message to the readers. The consumption of food in literature thus reflects not only dietary preferences but also societal perceptions tied to gender, health, and cultural practices throughout history.

In "Taming of the Shrew," the character of Katharine embodies the shrew, and post-marriage, Petruchio takes on the vow to tame her and mold her into a dutiful wife, reflecting the social structure of England. Petruchio employs tactics such as sleep deprivation, mental abuse, and starvation to assert dominance. This aligns with societal expectations for women to eat sparingly and maintain a lean physique compared to men. The interplay of food and culture is a recurring theme in Shakespeare's works, as seen in "Cleopatra" and "Othello." The connection between sexual and food appetite is highlighted, depicting Cleopatra initially as Antony's "Egyptian dish"(Antony And Cleopatra II, vi, 126). However, the dynamics shift, and Cleopatra "turns from being the morsel and object of male sexual desire into being the devourer of Roman men" (Hamamra, 221). Similarly, in "Othello," Desdemona is portrayed as a commodity consumed by Othello. The words of Emilia vividly describe the plight of women in Venice, emphasizing their perceived role:

This not a year or two shows us a man:

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,

They belch us." (Othello III, iv, 97).

This portrayal underscores the unequal power dynamics and objectification of women in these societies, using food as a metaphor to highlight the exploitation and consumption of women by men.

Across various cultures, gender hierarchies are often rooted in access to food, leading to women having less access than men. This trend is evident in the works of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte, where heroines grappling with intense emotions often abstain from eating and endure starvation. In the Victorian era, societal norms dictated that women should maintain a slender physique to improve their appeal and prospects of securing a husband. Consequently, to accentuate their emotional turmoil, female characters in novels of the period often forsake food. In "Wuthering Heights," Catherine purposefully emphasizes her self-imposed starvation as a potent metaphor, symbolizing not only self-destruction but also her defiance against societal expectations and her assertion of autonomy over both her body and mind. This vivid portrayal serves as a poignant demonstration of how the theme of food remains a powerful tool in literature, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges and expectations imposed on women within the societal framework of that era.

FOOD IMAGERY, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ETHNIC TRADITIONS:

The incorporation of food in literature takes on various forms, often reflecting invented food identities shaped by cultural traditions and nationalistic perspectives. Across many cultures, storytelling has been a means of passing down traditions and cultural identity through generations, intimately entwined with culinary practices. Food becomes a lens through which childhood memories and familial connections are recollected.

Even in the works of Shakespeare, though not exclusively ethnic, traditional English food practices are highlighted. Characters like Sir John Oldcastle, or Falstaff, exhibit a love for anchovies, capons, and sack, providing insights into the culinary preferences of the broader Elizabethan population. During the 15th and 16th centuries in England, entertaining neighbors and building social connections were integral parts of tradition. Shakespeare's plays contain numerous references to food, from 'funeral baked meats' in *Hamlet* to the recurrent mention of cakes and ale in *Twelfth Night*.

Literary writers consistently weave the theme of food into their works to establish connections with their contemporary audiences. These instances serve as windows into virtues, sins, and various other factors. For instance, the notion of 'funeral baked meats' in *Hamlet* suggests that Hamlet's mother is serving leftovers from his deceased father's funeral banquet at her wedding. Charles Dickens, a true Victorian, meticulously depicted the traditional Christmas meal popular in England in works such as *A Christmas Carol* detailing a lavish feast with turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, sausages, mince-pies, and plum-puddings. Dickens aimed to make these descriptions relatable to both the upper and lower classes, reflecting the culinary pleasures enjoyed in Victorian society.

While ethical food practices vary globally, this study specifically focuses on the food habits of the British population. In exploring food in literature, writers not only convey cultural and societal norms but also create a shared experience that resonates with readers across diverse backgrounds and time periods.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, this research provides a compelling narrative of the integral role food plays in British tradition, tracing its influence on literature from the Middle Ages through the Victorian Era. A consistent theme emerges, revealing that wealthier individuals tended to consume more protein-based foods, including meat and fish, with specific meat choices reflective of social status. The exploration also delves into the nuanced dynamics of gender roles and ethical practices, shedding light on societal expectations for women to maintain a slender figure. The study critically examines the issues and societal standards prevalent in England, offering insights into the broader cultural landscape. Notably, it emphasizes the significance of British practices during funerals and Christmas, illustrating how literature captures and reflects the cultural and ethical dimensions associated with these events.

Throughout, the research engages with the complexities of British dietary habits, providing a comprehensive account of the types of food consumed by different segments of the population.

In unraveling the intricate relationship between food and literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and ethical dimensions embedded in British traditions. It highlights how literature serves as a mirror reflecting the diverse culinary practices and societal norms that have shaped the British experience over centuries.

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