Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 114

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 114

Twentieth Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

Excerpts from Criticism of Various Topics in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys of National Literatures

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
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William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (AMS, 1987), 65- 91; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 94-105.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Food in Literature
Introduction 1
Representative Works 2
Food and Children's Literature 2
Food as a Literary Device 14
Rituals Involving Food 33
Food and Social and Ethnic Identity 45
Women's Relationship with Food 91
Further Reading 132

Postcolonialism
Introduction 134
Representative Works 134
Overviews and General Studies 135
African Postcolonial Literature 153
Asian/Pacific Postcolonial Literature 172
Postcolonial Literary Theory 178
Postcolonial Women's Writing 213
Further Reading 238

Revising the Literary Canon
Introduction 240
Representative Works 240
Overviews and General Studies 241
Canon Change in American Literature 285
Gender and the Literary Canon 339
Minority and Third-World Literature and the Canon 359
Further Reading 384

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 387

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 473

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 481

Food in Literature

INTRODUCTION

Eating is a fundamental human activity, an activity that is both necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. Eating habits and rituals, the choice of dining companions, and the reasons behind these behaviors are fundamental to fostering an understanding of human society. Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that eating practices are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in defining family, class, and even ethnic identity. Although food and related imagery have long been part of literature, psychological theories have led to the examination of food and eating as a universal experience. Themes related to food are common among all types of writing, and they are often used as a literary device for both visual and verbal impact. For example, food-related images in the theater are commonly used to create a mood or convey an idea. Food is also a significant theme in literature by and about women and in children's literature.

A common setting related to food in children's literature is teatime. Usually employed to dramatize states of harmony or disharmony, teatime is used to great effect in such works as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1866), in which Alice learns to come to terms with the world around her via her experiences at the Mad Hatter's distinctly uncivilized tea party. Food and order images are also used liberally in such tales as Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1961), where food denotes coziness and plenty. In addition to reflecting social order and civilization, food is often representative of the limitations imposed upon a child's world, blending well with the idea of excess as a key element of childhood fantasy. For example, Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* (1963) uses food as a vehicle to express strong childhood emotions, and, like many other children's texts, uses rituals of eating as a metaphor for the power struggle inherent to family dynamics.

Food offers a means for powerful imagery in adult literature as well. Visual images in the works of such authors as Katherine Anne Porter and Margaret Atwood are often used to increase the realism in their writing. Details about food in such collections as Porter's *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1935) create a powerful sense of richness and convey the indefinability of human experience, representing an external and physical manifestation of human complexity. Likewise, food and drink play an important role in drama, especially on stage. In his essay on Sam Shepard's work, Charles G. Whiting notes that the playwright often makes eating and drinking an important and significant activity, something that is not only used to achieve realism but also to accentuate the action on stage. Whiting notes that Shepard's staging in particular uses food to create spectacle as well as visionary mythic imagery. In the same way, food is used in poetry as a sensual and sensory object. Specifically focusing on the role of fruit in poetry, Carol E. Dietrich notes that it often represents nature, offering the poet an objective symbol of the presence of God. Among fiction writers, Ernest Hemingway was noteworthy in his ability to create a particular mood though his fictional accounts of food. Hemingway often had his expatriate characters eat native foods, allowing them emotional access to the world they were inhabiting.

Dining rituals often provide a framework that both reflects and expresses human desires and behaviors. Many authors, Edith Wharton primary among them, have used the ritual of dining to present the powerful conflicts that simmer underneath the surface of order. Additionally, food metaphors are often used to characterize people and their status in society. This is especially evident in the works of such authors as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, who often use food images to explore the struggle for an African-American identity. Food has been acknowledged as a key indicator of ethnicity. In their essay on the role of food, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Claude Fischler demonstrated that the domain of food includes appetite, desire, and pleasure, but also serves as a reference point for society's structure and world vision. In his analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), Paul Outka notes that her memoir, using stories, recipes, and reminiscences, portrays the transcultural writer as an exile from both Chinese and Western cultures. Her attempts to enunciate a self that is both enduring and dynamic are revealed in her passionate concerns with food, as she learns to resist both physically and psychologically the message of Chinese patriarchy that women are nothing more than bodies, unworthy even of nourishment.

Food and its related concerns with feminine identity and domesticity have been given a central place in many works of women's literature. For example, authors such as Margaret Atwood have used food and eating disorders to address issues of gender, language, and sexual politics, as well as social dislocation. In her essay on *The Edible Woman* (1969), Tracy Brain notes that in this novel Atwood uses anorexia to explore women's strategies to develop alternative languages. For feminists, the kitchen has symbolized the marginalization of women. In contrast, however, many Hispanic women writers have used the domesticity of women, as symbolized by the kitchen, as a vehicle for their creativity and for promoting female solidarity. In her essay on *Como aqua para chocolate* (1989; *Like Water for Chocolate*), Janice Jaffe examines Laura

Esquivel's novel from this perspective, noting that in contrast to the view that considers women's confinement to the kitchen restricting, Esquivel has reclaimed the kitchen in her novel, affirming it as a woman's domain.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Alessandra Arachi
Briciole [*Crumbs*] (novel) 1994

Margaret Atwood
The Edible Woman (novel) 1969
Lady Oracle (novel) 1976

Emily Brontë
Wuthering Heights (novel) 1847

Anita Brookner
Fraud (novel) 1992

Lewis Carroll
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (novel) 1866

Laura Esquivel
Como agua para chocolate [*Like Water for Chocolate*] (novel) 1989

Kenneth Grahame
The Wind in the Willows (novel) 1961

Ernest Hemingway
The Sun Also Rises (novel) 1926
A Farewell to Arms (novel) 1929

James Joyce
"A Painful Case" (short stroy) 1914

Maxine Hong Kingston
The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (memoir) 1976

A. M. Klein
The Second Scroll (novel) 1951

Toni Morrison
The Bluest Eye (novel) 1970
Sula (novel) 1973
Song of Solomon (novel) 1977
Tar Baby (novel) 1981

Gloria Naylor
Linden Hills (novel) 1985

Flannery O'Connor
The Complete Stories (short stories) 1982

Katherine Anne Porter
Flowering Judas and Other Stories (short stories) 1935

Gianna Schletotto
Una fame da morire [*Starving to Death*] (novel) 1992

Maurice Sendak
In the Night Kitchen (picture book) 1963
Where the Wild Things Are (picture book) 1963
Higglety Pigglety Pop!, or There Must Be More to Life (picture book) 1967

Sam Shepard
Cowboy Mouth (play) 1964
4H Club (play) 1964
The Rock Garden (play) 1964
Fool for Love (play) 1983

Edith Wharton
The Age of Innocence (novel) 1920

FOOD AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Wendy R. Katz (essay date Winter 1980)

SOURCE: "Some Uses of Food in Children's Literature," in *Children's Literature in Education,* Vol. 11, No. 4, Winter, 1980, pp. 192-99.

[*In the following essay, Katz presents an overview of the theme of food and its uses in children's literature, focusing on such texts as* Alice's Adventures in Wonderland *and* The Hobbit.]

When Lewis Carroll's Dormouse begins his story about the three little sisters who lived at the bottom of a well, Alice breaks in almost immediately to ask "What did they live on?"[1] Carroll's narrator, accounting for this curious interruption before the Dormouse's answer of "treacle," tells us that Alice "always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking."[2] The scene is the mad tea-party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* and questions of eating and drinking, against such a backdrop of tea and bread and butter, appear perfectly natural. Yet Alice, as we know, is a prototypical hero of children's literature, and her concerns are echoed by other children's book heroes. Children's literature is filled with food-related images, notions, and values: hospitality, gluttony, celebration, tradition, appetite, obesity. Food comes to play, for reasons as fascinating as they are obvious, a unique and significant role in this literature. Understand the relations between the labourer and the means of production, says Marx, and you understand the workings of society; understand the relations between the child and food, I suggest—and only half-facetiously—and you understand the workings of the world of the young. This perspective of children's literature yields a sort of sociology of childhood; an examina-

tion of what's eaten, by whom, when, and where gives one a portrait of children's manners, problems, and preoccupations. Food may be, in fact, the sex of children's literature, and if one considers briefly the variety of sexual concerns and activities apparent in adult literature, from the crassly calculated to the sensitive and intelligent, one has some idea of the possible analogies to be drawn. M. F. K. Fisher, explaining why she writes about food in her book *The Gastronomical Me,* has this to say:

> It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it . . . and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied . . . and it is all one.[3]

This somewhat transcendental view of food takes us away, momentarily, from the earthbound reality of most of children's literature, but its spirit is one that pervades and can be heard above the noise of ingestion and digestion in the best of the literature to which I refer.

In the most general terms, a child's attitude to food is an index to that child's emotional stability. The practice of using meals as a measure of the child's adjustment to the social order, the child's observance of social requirements, is especially pronounced in English children's literature. The extent to which tea-time in particular is used to dramatize states of harmony or disharmony is remarkable to a North American reader. The example of Alice again comes to mind, for Alice is nothing if not civilized, and the Alice books are in part about her coming to terms with a world around her that is not so, a world whose rules are either always changing or so backwards that they are impossible to perceive or follow. In fact, discussion at the Mad Hatter's tea-party is largely about civility. Alice sits down at the table, seeing several empty seats, after being told there is "no room." She is offered wine which she doesn't see, and the exchange of witty insults begins:

> "There isn't any," said the March Hare.
>
> "Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," said Alice angrily.
>
> "It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited," said the March Hare.
>
> "I didn't know it was *your* table," said Alice; "it's laid for a great many more than three."[4]

The rest of the party is filled with similar squabbling on the theme of civility. Alice is accused of being rude because she declines taking *more* tea when she's had none, and she is frustrated by the absurdity of the situation to the point of actually being rude to the Dormouse. After suffering a final insult from the Mad Hatter, Alice has had enough. She rejects them all entirely and walks off. Significantly, it is only after this episode that Alice finds her way into the elusive garden she has been trying to enter ever since finding herself at the bottom of the rabbit hole. This, I suggest, is a reward for her conduct at the party.

In that other classic of English decorum, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows,* we find more tea consumed and more judgments passed upon matters. *Wind* is an exceedingly domestic tale, and food as a sign of cosiness, plenty and cheer is much in evidence. The initial meeting of Mole and Rat is soon followed by a spirited afternoon picnic. Rat's picnic hamper throws the Mole into ecstasies, and it is during this picnic that Rat unwinds sufficiently to tell Mole all about the society of the river bank and the wild wood, the detail of social order being of prime importance in this book. Breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners abound here, good fellowship and good food being synonymous. The atmosphere is very "clubby" and very male, with the animals sitting around the fire exchanging bits of gossip, having eaten till "each felt that his skin was now as tight as was decently safe."[5] But the key scene involving food, and for many the key episode in the book, occurs when Rat goes home with an emotionally overwrought Mole, who is literally driven to return to his home, what Grahame calls the "anchorage in one's existence."[6] Rat and Mole share a modest supper with a group of field mice carollers—the season is Christmas—and, amid sardines, biscuits, German sausage, and ginger beer, Rat gets a chance to show his great loyalty as a friend.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* Tumnus, the good faun, takes Lucy home for tea almost immediately upon their meeting, thereby establishing himself not only as a friendly and courteous animal, but also as one of the virtuous in Narnia, a land under the White Witch's spell. Tumnus' cave-house reflects the good taste of a discerning, civilized animal. It is clean, dry, and snug, complete with books and a photograph of an old grey-bearded faun over the mantelpiece. Tumnus tells Lucy about the happiness of former days, about Silenus and Bacchus, who would visit in the summer "and then the streams would run with wine instead of water and the whole forest would give itself up to jollification for weeks on end."[7] Sadly, these agents of joy—the gods of comedy, too—fled with the coming of the White Witch. At the opening of the book Narnia is in a state of permanent winter, but winter with a difference: Christmas never comes. When Peter, Edmund, and Susan arrive in Narnia with Lucy, virtue again appears in a hospitable form with the Beavers, who immediately serve the children dinner. Later on, proof of Aslan's power is offered by the arrival of Santa Claus, yet another nurturing figure who, after distributing magical and restorative tools for the coming battle, produces virtually in the middle of no-where "a large tray containing cups and saucers, a bowl of lump sugar, a jug of cream, and a great big teapot all sizzling and piping hot."[8] After the battle against the White Witch, Aslan himself feeds his victorious army miraculously in similar style: "How Aslan provided tea for them all I don't know; but somehow they found themselves all sitting down on the grass to a fine high tea at about eight o'clock."[9] And so they travel on and on, marking the days by tea-

time, until they get to Cair Paravel, the seat of the new royal queens and kings.

It is fitting, then, for Tolkien to use the ceremony of tea in *The Hobbit* as a way both of introducing Bilbo Baggins to the dwarves who will be his companions in adventure and of satirizing Bilbo's middle-class hobbitdom. Expecting the wizard Gandalf for tea, Bilbo finds himself instead greeting dwarf after dwarf after dwarf, until all thirteen arrive. By the time Gandalf appears, the order of Bilbo's house has given way to a chaotic orgy of eating:

> "What's that? [said Gandalf] Tea! No thank you! A little red wine, I think, for me."
>
> "And for me," said Thorin.
>
> "And raspberry jam and apple-tart," said Bifur.
>
> "And mince pies and cheese," said Bombur.
>
> "And more cakes—and ale—and coffee, if you don't mind," called the other dwarves through the door.
>
> "Put on a few eggs, there's a good fellow!" Gandalf called after him, as the hobbit stumped off to the pantries. "And just bring out the cold chicken and pickles!"
>
> "Seems to know as much about the inside of my larders as I do myself!" thought Mr. Baggins, who was feeling positively flummoxed, and was beginning to wonder whether a most wretched adventure had come right into his house.[10]

When Bilbo sets off in the morning to join the adventuring dwarves, he revealingly leaves "his second breakfast half-finished and quite unwashed up."[11]

The North American child hero lacks the conventional breeding of either Alice or her literary offspring. Anne Shirley, the Canadian hero of *Anne of Green Gables,* certainly aspires to it and readily takes up Marilla's suggestion that she invite Diana Barry to tea, wishing to use the special tea set for the occasion. But the chapter title for this episode is called "Diana is Invited to Lunch with Tragic Results," these results being a tipsy Diana, overcome by currant wine. Similarly, when the minister and his wife come to tea, Anne mistakenly flavours a layer cake with anodyne liniment. Anne is an untutored waif who needs "bringing up," and we are meant to approve of her spirited untamed state as well as her later surrender to convention. The American child hero—and the prototype here is Huck Finn—is an uncivilized and active savage. Huck, a child who is confused, cramped, and made quite wretched by the Widow Douglas' attempts to "sivilize" him, particularly dislikes the time-bound regularity of meals, the prayers that go with them, and the food that is eaten:

> The widow rung a bell for supper and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them—that is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better.[12]

Since the rules governing the selection, preparation, and eating of food are largely based on social rank, these untamed orphans of Prince Edward Island and Missouri, respectively, are clearly the legitimate progeny of New World democracy.

Contemporary adolescent rebels, descendants of Anne and Huck, confront problems more aptly described as psychological than social. Managing these problems can mean autonomy rather than either submission or escape. In this context, there appears yet another food-related phenomenon of children's literature—the fat child. Being fat or thin has long been used as a metaphor for social relations in adult literature, and the function of such a metaphor is usually quite obvious: witness Falstaff. In recent times, Margaret Atwood has twice used the metaphor successfully, once with the main character of *The Edible Woman,* who suffers a case of self-starvation very close to the clinical *anorexia nervosa,* and again in *Lady Oracle,* the problem here being that of overweight. In both of these books the characters are in glorious disharmony with their surroundings. In children's books, compulsive eating sometimes signifies a failed or strained relationship between child and parent. In Louise Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change,* for example, eating is a nervous habit indulged in by a psychologically disturbed child; being fat, in other words, is only a symptom of other problems.

Emma Sheridan, Fitzhugh's fat child, is black as well as female and overweight. She is also strikingly intelligent. Her parents, having progressed from a New York ghetto to a world of private schools and housekeepers, want, somewhat presumptuously, to direct their daughter along a similar path of success. When Emma declares her intention to be a lawyer, her father rules the plan unacceptable for a girl. Emma-the-food-junkie engages her parents in battle, and it is through this battle that she learns to control her appetite. During the course of her awakening, Emma joins the Children's Army, a group of children dedicated to dealing with authoritarian adults. By way of a passport, Emma is requested to bring a box of cookies to her first group meeting, and the scene at the delicatessen where she searches for the right sort shows us the nervous, anxiety-ridden adolescent that is Emma and indicates both the humour and the intelligence of the book:

> Emma went to the cookie section. She pondered the boxes. Personally she preferred Mallomars, but what did revolutionaries eat? It would be awful to appear holding some kind of reactionary cookie that everyone had stopped eating years ago, like those pink puffs there looking a bit like Zsa Zsa Gabor, obviously capitalist cookies. . . . Chocolate grahams looked stodgy little Wall Street men all lined up. European cookies? The powdered-sugar German ones would never do, no

> sir, not in the Anne Frank Brigade. French? Too decadent, possibly, too reminiscent of "Let them eat cake." Let them eat cookies. . . . She grabbed a box of Mallomars. Two? Should she take two boxes? Had he said bring a *box* of cookies, or had he said bring *cookies?* Better not take two, they might think she was some rich snot, better to be poor than rich in this group.[13]

Nobody's Family Is Going to Change is a rather subversive book, and the conclusion that Emma comes to, her battle strategy in the domestic war, as it were, has disturbed many readers. It is an impressively mature Emma who decides that she and others like her have to stop waiting for their parents to change, even stop wanting them to change. As Emma develops some control over her relationship with her parents, especially with her father, she manages to conquer her appetite. In the last scene, appropriately enough, the dinner meal, Emma's success with her father is associated with her newly curbed appetite:

> That night, at dinner, Emma waited until dessert was served to make her announcement.
>
> She waited patiently. . . . She watched her mother being nervous. She watched her father retreating more and more into silence, eating faster and faster. She watched her mother watching her father.
>
> When Martha placed a piece of chocolate cake in front of her, Emma pushed it away and said, "I'm going to be a lawyer when I grow up."
>
> "Oh, for Christ's sake! Can't we have a peaceful dinner around here?" said her father loudly. He jerked his cake closer to him and shoved his fork down into it.
>
> "Stop saying things just to upset your father!" said Mrs. Sheridan.
>
> "Women lawyers are idiots! They're the laughing stock of any group of lawyers. I think any woman who tries to be a lawyer is a damned fool!" Mr. Sheridan glared at Emma.
>
> "That," said Emma, "is your problem, not mine." To herself she added, And frankly, Daddy, I don't give a damn.[14]

Surely the mock-serious inversion of that most famous of Rhett Butler's lines from the film *Gone with the Wind* soars over the heads of all but the most Emma-like and sophisticated of Fitzhugh's readers. Those who know it are invited to view Emma's new-found strength as permanent. Those who don't are not likely to miss the rude and isolating behavior of Mr. Sheridan, the distress signals given off by his pushing and stabbing of food; nor will they miss Emma's assertive and independent act.

In conclusion I should like to make one further point and suggest that the evocation of food and food-related images in children's literature is the most comprehensive way—for the experience of food is universal and its psychological and social implications rich and generative—of objectifying abstractions necessary for vigorously imaginative work. The same can be said of the evocation of sex and sex-related images in literature for adults, where the sexual relationships formed by characters often mark the characters' development, provide keys to motivation, and stamp the moral values of the work. One example of a character whose development is directly related to her interaction with food is Jennie, the hero of Maurice Sendak's *Higglety Pigglety Pop!*

In *Higglety Pigglety Pop*! Jennie is a well-fed, well-cared for dog who is unhappy with the mere material satisfactions of her life. She believes there must be more, and she complains to the potted plant, who tells her she has everything—two windows (the potted plant has only one), two pillows, two bowls, a red wool sweater, eyedrops, eardrops, two different bottles of pills, and her master's love. Jennie agrees that this is true but insists on leaving home anyway: "I am discontented," she says, "I want something I do not have. There must be more to life than having everything!"[15] What is striking about the book is the way in which Sendak uses the metaphor of hunger to underline Jennie's voracious need for something more in life. Once out in the world, for example, Jennie meets a small pig who is giving sandwiches away, and she devours five in succession—a tuna on rye, a ham, Swiss cheese, and Russian dressing on pumpernickel, an anchovy, tomato and egg on toast, a turkey, bacon and mayonnaise, and a salami. The pig is wearing sandwich boards advertising for a leading lady for the Mother Goose Theatre company—experience necessary. So Jennie goes off to get her experience. On the way she devours the contents of a milkman's wagon—eggs, cheese, yogurt, and milk, both regular and skim—and when at last she reaches her destination, she tricks the parlour maid into whipping up a batch of buttermilk pancakes. Her experience is to be a nurse for a baby who won't eat; she is to feed baby or be fed to a lion in the basement. Jennie gets her experience, finally, by putting her head in the lion's mouth in a heroic effort to save baby, and she is rewarded with the desired job: "Now Jennie has everything. She is the finest leading lady the World Mother Goose Theatre ever had. Jennie is a star. She performs every day and twice on Saturday. She is content."[16] Even her hunger is satisfied; writing to her old master from the theatre company's home in Castle Yonder, she speaks confidently, even serenely, of her new-found happiness:

> As you probably noticed, I went away forever. I am very experienced now and very famous. I am even a star. Every day I eat a mop, twice on Saturday. It is made of salami and that is my favorite. I get plenty to drink too, so don't worry. I can't tell you how to get to Castle Yonder because I don't know where it is. But if you ever come this way, look for me. Jennie.[17]

Higglety Pigglety Pop! is witty, intelligent, and unexpectedly moving. Rarely does a children's book deal so successfully with yearning, desire, sacrifice, and fulfillment; equally rare is the children's book that endorses assertiveness and can distinguish this from aggression. Jennie's initial hunger is anarchistic, chaotic, and grasping. By the end of the story, it is under control, and there is a certain