

Flavoursome Plot Devices Employed By O Henry

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Abstract

Food has always been an important part of literature. From Enid Blyton's picnic lunches with jugs of the cool, refreshing lemonade and food baskets brimming with treats and sandwiches, to the disagreeable and meager meals Rukmani and her family are made to survive on in Nectar in a Sieve; food has always been an important part of the narrative in any literary work, across different ages, cultures and languages. Food has often indicated the social status or financial conditions of a character, while revealing the personal tastes of the character in question. However, recent interests in the field of culinary studies that focus upon metaphorical meaning of food in a text has opened up a new discussion about the relationship between food and literature, in the course of human history. One often looks and deliberates upon the connection between food and culture, through the medium of documentaries, books or articles, specifically dealing with the theme in question. It is however, through the newer lens of postmodern culture that food images in literature are being viewed as a metaphor that represent either a deeper meaning or is a means to establish a complex idea, often being an integral part of the plot itself.

This paper intends to trace the relationship between food, human needs, relationships and their priorities in the world of short stories by O Henry, through focus on the stories *Springtime a la Carte*, *The Third Ingredient* and *Witches' Loaves*. The world of O Henry is a complex one, with powerful human emotions, suffocating atmosphere that is constantly bustling with people along with food being a primary concern.

Keywords: Emotions, food, metaphor, relationships, symbolism

William Sydney Porter, or, O Henry was an American writer; a typical American man, he had extraordinary sense of humour that revealed itself in the humorous tone of his stories with unusual language. His short stories bring out the reality of the modern world, through realistic characters and gripping plot twists. Born in 1862, he grew up in the post-Civil war depression that enveloped the Southern states. He did various odd jobs before rising to fame as a New York newspaper writer, with millions of readers being enthralled by his flood of stories-he is

supposed to have left three hundred of them at the time of his death-that had the surprise ending that became the hallmark of his style.

Food despite being an integral part of societies and cultures across the globe was never considered an important aspect in the literary field up until recently. It is only recently that the critics have started noticing that “when authors refer to food they are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on.” (Fitzpatrick, Pg 122) Food studies have their origin in Sociology and Anthropology, but this interdisciplinary field in literature, looks at the symbolism, importance and representation foods have in literary works. In the short stories *Springtime a la Carte*, *The Third Ingredient* and *Witches’ Loaves*, food or the need of it is central to the plot, connecting the characters together or simply being the driving force behind their actions, this paper intends to explore these varied functions of the seemingly plain food in these stories.

Springtime a la Carte deals with Sarah who “was a free-lance typewriter and canvassed for odd jobs of copying.” (Henry, Pg 51) Sarah is introduced to the readers, while she is crying over her bill of fare and the narrator permits the readers to guess the reason for these tears in assumptions such as the cause being lobsters were all sold out, she had sworn to give up ice-cream during Lent, she had ordered onions or that she had just come from a Hackett matinee. The narrator then assures that these theories are all wrong. In the very beginning of the story, it is made clear that food is important to the plot of the story, as Sarah has made an agreement with Schulenberg’s Home Restaurant to supply them with newly typed, neat menus, for each meal of the day, whenever needed, for the twenty-one tables in the restaurant, in exchange for three meals per diem. Food here is an important medium of payment in exchange of services. One afternoon, Sarah looks out of the window, thinking of the delayed spring and reminiscing about her two weeks long visit to Sunnybrook Farm, last summer; where she had fallen in love with Farmer Franklin’s son Walter, they were to marry in the early spring. As she sat down to type the bill of fares, she notices a food item listed that was dandelions with egg. This food has a metaphorical meaning in the text, as Walter had woven a crown of dandelions for Sarah’s hair, praising the way they complement her hair, while proclaiming her his bride. This food here is a reminder of that token of love which she now fears is lost. When the same dish is served to her that day, she leaves it untouched in her plate as this dish is to her an altered form, a ruin of the love she fostered. She later hears the bell ringing at the

front door, Sarah jumps at the sound of the visitor and beholds Walter. In a plot twist, it is revealed that in the first menu she typed, Sarah wrote, “Dearest Walter, with hard-boiled egg.” (Henry, Pg 55)

Here the food item, dandelions with hard-boiled egg, is the reason for Sarah and Walter finding each other. Metaphorically, this is a dish that people prefer during springtime, spring is the season of new beginnings and here, this dish symbolizes a new, fresh start to Sarah and Walter’s relationship. However, food is central to the short story as the mode of payment that the restaurant offers to Sarah is food and her need to work there is the same as well. Highlighting, the sordid, prevailing poverty of New York, in O Henry’s times. Not to mention, the title of the story has a la carte in it, that is “according to a menu or list that prices items separately.” (Webster) And Sarah and Walter picked spring; something that the dandelion represents as it grows in the said season. The simple dish is also representative of the plain life an average New Yorker lived; the spirit of a home restaurant in the city, with its humble customers is best captured through this dish that is central to the story. What is important to note, however, is the origin of dandelions and one feels the need to trace their journey, to the states. Dandelions are said to have originated in Europe and it is from here that they travelled to America. Nevertheless, these humble plants, though initially enjoyed popularity, gradually came to be considered weeds; they were eaten by people during great depression and are now all-together out of fashion as a dish. Of course, the author must have been unaware of the state dandelions would be reduced to, considering this work was published in 1906, way before the terrible fate of dandelions reached an all-time low. But the plant was always popular among poorer sections of the society, therefore it is only just that the author used this plant to highlight the singularity of Sarah and Walter’s love, at the same time it represents both their humble love story and the underpaid people of New York, rather effectively.

The next short story, to be considered in similar light is O Henry’s *The Third Ingredient*; published in 1908, the story deals with a woman, called Hetty Pepper who recently got fired from her job at the Biggest Store because she slapped a customer who misbehaved with her at work. Hetty’s name itself has a food reference; her last name is ‘Pepper’, representing her fiery nature and upfront, bold attitude that is rather apparent throughout the course of the story. Hetty Pepper does not blend in the crowd, which was the main attribute of hers, that

got her a job in the Biggest Store-a grocery store; a food reference again- but it also led to her being fired from her job. She lives in the Vallambrosa Apartment-House. "Among the Vallambrosa's roomers are stenographers, musicians, brokers, shop-girls, space-rate writers, art students, wire-tappers, and other people who lean far over the banister-rail when the door-bell rings." (Henry, Pg 288) This complex setting finds a medium of expression through food in the story. Hetty, upon being fired within thirty minutes and with one dime and a nickel in her purse, that she later bought a beef rib of \$3.50 with; finds her way back to the apartment. She goes straight to her earthenware closet and then looks around for a potato or onion.

"There was neither a potato nor an onion. Now what kind of a beef- Stew can you make out of simply beef? You can make oyster-soup without oysters, turtle-soup without turtles, coffee-cake without coffee, but you can't make beef-stew without potatoes and onions." (Henry Pg 289) It is this line and Hetty's craftly ways to source the rest of the ingredients that the reader could associate the story line with the European folk story of "the stone soup". The story talks of poor visitors travelling, without anything to eat with only an empty cooking pot at hand. They stop by a village to ask for food, but the villagers are reluctant to give them any. The visitors then, make a plan; they fill the pot with water from a nearby stream and drop a large stone in it. They then place it over fire. Upon being questioned by the villagers for their antics, they respond that they are making stone soup, which tastes wonderfully well, but their soup is missing a little amount of garnish, which would otherwise, make their soup delicious. The villagers then add various other ingredients such as carrots, onions, cabbages, peas, celery, meat, tomatoes, etc. This reference, reminds the readers of European influence on America and at the same time, reduces Hetty to the state of those hungry travelers, on a quest to find food, that would satiate their hunger. The above mentioned quote also treats beef like stone in the stone soup; something irreplaceable in the name of the food item, but rather unimportant in the recipe itself.

When Hetty goes to fill water in her pan from the taps at the third floor hall, she meets a painter running a studio on the top floor. Hetty realises that this woman is peeling the new Bermudas (a type of potato that should be scraped and not peeled). She helps her out and offers to combine the potato and beef, in order to make stew. The artist-later revealed to be Cecilia- is overjoyed and consents. What is important to note here, is the value the said potatoes have. Cecilia states, "I have only these potatoes for my dinner. But they aren't so

bad boiled and hot, with a little butter and salt.” (Henry, Pg 290) The potato is a food for the poor but is a metaphor for being something inexpensive yet important in the beef stew, just as Cecilia was not rich but like other artists, was important to the hustle bustle of New York. The two girls walk back to Hetty’s apartment wishing to find an onion; here, Cecilia beaks down by looking at the picture of a ferry-boat. She is reminded of her suicide attempt, three days ago, when she was saved by a kind looking man, who saved her and begged her to tell him her name or address but, he has not found her yet as she did not reveal her identity to him. Hetty consoles her and starts lamenting her own lack of ingredient. The author describes the stew as, “The beef and potatoes bubbled merrily, exhaling a mouth-watering savor that yet lacked something, leaving a hunger on the palate, a haunting wistful desire for some lost and needful ingredient.” (Henry, Pg 292) In the conversation following this, the two women often confuse onion with the man and sure enough Hetty finds a man with an onion, who is later revealed to be Cecilia’s savior. This young man who claims to be preparing to eat the onion raw, is convinced by Hetty to join in as he is the onion man. In a series of confrontations, the onion man’s identity as the savior is revealed to Hetty and she states, “Potatoes is in there, waiting. Go on in, Onions.” (Henry, Pg 296) Here, it is these ingredients, especially the third one that completes the beef stew and consequently, fits in this puzzle of incomplete lives presented by the story. These ingredients are a metaphor for not just the people, but they join the whole narrative together, in a string. The last line of the story; “But it’s us,” she said, grimly to herself, “it’s us that furnishes the beef.” (Henry, Pg 296) Further underlines the fact that the people and not ingredients are the ones that complete this stew of a story, reemphasizing the idea of sharing that was a moral of the folk story as well. Here, food represents human relationships.

The third story is, *Witches Loaves*, in this 1904 story, a lonely forty-year-old woman, Martha Meacham, runs a bakery. She is clearly lonely and desperate to find love. In her attempt to find a husband she infatuates about a customer at her bakery, who comes there often to buy two loaves of stale bread. Martha assumes he is an underpaid, poor artist who cannot afford anything else, by looking at his paint-stained fingers. She confirms her suspicions by placing a bad painting she owns at the counter and when the man states that the perspective is wrong, she believes her suspicion to be true. She starts talking to him, changes her apron and applies a paste on her face to improve her complexion in order to woo him. She

does all of this assuming her own superiority, she believes, “What a thing it would be for art and perspective if genius were backed by two thousand dollars in bank, a bakery and a sympathetic heart to-” (Henry, Pg 338) in this assumption she attempts bribe this man by slathering his stale bread with a generous amount of butter, one day.

Later, this man, along with his friend lands up at her bakery and yells at Martha. Calling her a “Dummkopf!”, “Tausendonfer!” and “meddingsome old cat!”. This abuse shatters Martha. The friend calms him, following which this friend reveals to Martha that the man is Blumberger, and works as an architectural draftsman, who had a competition to design the new city hall for which he has been working since past three months. An architect rubs his pencil designs with stale bread and Martha’s blunder had caused Blumberger’s design to get ruined as the butter smudged the design. Following this revelation, Martha goes back inside her store, removes the apron and throws away the face pack she made. Symbolically, throwing away her hopes of ever finding love, ever again. In this story, food is a medium for Martha to express her love for this man and was a medium to both connect and divide the two.

In all these short stories, food forms the basis of human connection by being either a medium to reconnect or to establish a connection, making it an integral part of the relationships all these characters have with each other. Here, food is a metaphor to represent who these characters are, where they come from, what are their motives and to shed light on the world they live in; through a common setting i.e. New York and a common strata of society. Even if Martha happens to be a lot more stable from the rest, she is just as vulnerable. Not to mention, Blumberger is definitely richer than her and thus, she does not really have the superiority, she assumed she had. Specifically, in *The Third Ingredient*, food is such an integral part of the plot that it almost replaces the characters. In this story, it seems as if it is not the characters but the stew that is central to the story, consequently, making Hetty just a means to complete the stew and therefore, give meaning to the plot. Despite, the characters meeting each other because of the stew, here the food is central to the storyline and binds the narrative together. In *Springtime a la carte*, however, the characters have a history, the love story has already begun but the food is a medium, a mere pawn to unite the two lovers. These varied functions of food not only reaffirm the importance of food in these works, but also reinforces the idea of food having a deeper, metaphorical and intellectual

meaning in literary works by all that it represents in the storyline. This importance is rather apparent by the setting of these stories and the want that these characters have in their lives, due to their subjective experiences. It is through food that these characters find a medium to connect, not only to each other in their respective story lines, but even the reader is drawn towards them and made a part of their world.

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