

Food – Lit- Kid – Connect – A Treatise on Food in Children’s Literature

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Literature is to the mind what food is to the body. Literature is a means of sustenance to the human soul, an instrument of expression as well as aspiration. While literature satiates the emotional pangs, food gratifies the immediate physical need of hunger. The origin and the gradual crescendo of research on food and its position among subjects like social sciences, culture studies, arts and the humanities is in itself an interesting study (Keeling and Pollard – Critical Approaches to Food in Children’s Literature). Compelling and forthright arguments are brought out to establish the concept of food in literature. Researchers from Anglo – American countries have stated that food is a “powerful and complex signifying force” in literature (Keeling and Pollard Pg 13). Hence on any studies on Literature, Food can have a unique connotation and connection. Scholars have unearthed how cooking recipes connected to literary characters can eventually signify “a form of literary cannibalism”, wherein one is a slow product of what one eats (Jodie Slothower and Jan Susine –

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236720504_Critical_Approaches_to_Food_in_Children's_Literature_review

There is also a two-sided feminist notion on Food and Literature. One, who sees food and kitchen as a constraining force on women empowerment and two, who view food as a right endowed to all females and the superiority of women in culinary skills as compared to men. There lies yet another connect too where food in literature is connected to so-called feminine characteristics of cooking, serving, eating and nurturing(Girls, Mothers, Children)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236720504_Critical_Approaches_to_Food_in_Children's_Literature_review by Nikola von Merveldt](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236720504_Critical_Approaches_to_Food_in_Children's_Literature_review_by_Nikola_von_Merveldt) .

Interplay of food, ethnic studies and historical identities over a geographical milieu to include Asian, Mexican and Brazilian literature in addition to Anglo – American literature is also set forth as an engaging penultimate chapter by the same author. The gradual building up of character ethic from verdant childhood to ripened adulthood with food playing a constructive and deconstructive role is also discussed in depth.

There is an interesting connection between Children's Literature and food, as food is an instant source of gratification for Children. Establishing the Food – Literature – Kid Connect is not Terra Neo – an untrodden path. Seibert sees literature particularly children's literature as an integral part of the larger poetic system, rather than a pedagogic subsystem of literary genres. He ropes in Austrian literature to augment his argument. Carolyn Daniel views food as a trump card to gradually blend in cultural and social values in children.

It is at this critical juncture that study on Children's Literature and Food, stands. Three world-renown and tremendously popular authors – Enid Blyton, Lewis Carroll and Roald Dahl , in no particular order, are taken up. The gem in the diadem of food-writing in Children's Literature, is inarguably, Enid Blyton (1897-1968). For those who were born in the 1960s and 70s the world over, Enid Blyton was staple food that we devoured greedily with great excitement. Bedtime stories, Grandma's stories, 6 0' clock tales, 8 o'clock tales, Fairy tales, The faraway tree, The Naughtiest Girl series were the first taste. The Famous Five, Secret Seven, The Adventure series, The Five Find-Outers and the exciting stories of Boarding schools like Malory Towers and St Clare's among others were steadily handed down to us from seniors. Not to be missed were the midnight parties and candle-light feasts with canned pineapples, lemon sucks, jammy buns and tinned biscuits. The images of pure, escapist pleasures that Enid Blyton created were justice enough to make students of Boarding schools try out pranks in an otherwise drab existence.

Enid Blyton could set one off, self-drowning, on a pool of drool with her ethereal descriptions of generously buttered and freshly baked scones with sugar sprinkled on them, sweet-smelling strawberry jam with thick slices of bread and butter (none of those slim, mean and stingy bread slices from Aunt Polly or whoever), farm fresh, thick – creamed milk and ginger buns to go with them. Food fit to make the most fastidious diet regimes to become gone cases! - There is an uncanny austerity and missionary meticulousness to the ritual of eating with Enid Blyton. Perhaps it was the reflection of the times of the 1940s where, after the Second World War, austerity marked the dietary history of the world then (Dr Joan Ransley, Honorary lecturer in Human Nutrition, University of Leeds).

Meal times were regular – breakfast, lunch, high tea and supper, with a small 11 o'clock thing in between. The children always carried nice, home-made things, neatly packed into baskets in their cycles and at the drop of a hat, flash picnics on fresh, green grass is ensemble. They do visit the local eatery at times, a friendly Mrs Smith's home parlor, for freshly baked cakes, tarts, hard-boiled eggs with a screw of salt and an ice-cream lolly that Timothy, the dog, gulps down at one go, making it seem ' a waste of an ice-cream'. There were always generous lashings of lemonade or ginger ale to wash it all down. All this betwixt solving dark mysteries in

eerie castles, running behind spooky trains and sinister secrets. Ideas and insights emerge like blue thunderbolts during such open-air meals and roadside parties.

The children are mannered enough to share food and even Fatty *aka* Fredrick pass the food and liberally feed Timmy aka Timothy and in the other series it is Loony the dog. The children treat the dog well and give it generous nibbles and bites. These are in-built lessons on ethics, empathy and moral values in Enid Blyton. Perhaps it is the food connect for their diet is simple and balanced. Hunks of crusty bread for carbs, cold fish, meat and a ‘large round ham’ for protein, fiery red radish or a crisp, dewy lettuce for vitamins and minerals and luxuriantly fresh, creamy milk from the dairy. Simple, down to earth, healthy food, nothing very exotic, yet the gless with which the children ate their food made the reader drool and drench the pages, seeking at least a poor substitute to the completely alien, foreign foods mentioned therein. This scholar when at Switzerland for presenting at an Educational Leadership, was affected with food nostalgia and hunted shops for marshmallows that the children munched on their many picnics, bought a packet and greedily ate several and then found that beef gum was one of the ingredients and then it did not taste so good after all!

The Island of Adventure is a part treatise on food – pure, natural and simple things that are available to the Jack, the neighborhood boy who has no family barring his old grandfather and the children Mike and Nora, the twins and their sister Peggy, who are ill-treated by their Aunt Harriet and Uncle Henry and run away to the Secret Island, all by themselves.

In the book “The Secret Island” by Enid Blyton, the beans, radishes, lettuces, mustard and cress grow enormously in the rain. Jack and Mike harvest the “rain-swollen” lettuces and bring them back to their friends to relish them – “so crisp, juicy and sweet”. They also had a simple meal of fried eggs and mushrooms, wild strawberries and cream, afterwards.

They tame a cow, christening it Daisy and grow fowls and hens in the island. They build a willow house and lead a Robinson Crusoe-like life on the island. When they are forced to hunt rabbits that so tamely come to them in the island, little Nora feels bad to kill them for meat. But Jack the older boy convinces them that they need to eat meat in order to survive the cold. Humanitarian touches and reprimands when one of the children fails to obey rules and laws are visible in the passages and lessons for young children on moral and ethical living as undercurrents.

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) immensely popular with the children but seen as rebel literature by grownups then, has plenty of imagery for food in it. History has it that too many rules on Etiquette and Dining during meal times were prevalent when he wrote the book. Hence may be as a sign of rebel, he may have used food in a symbolic way. The Mad

Hatter's Tea party to which Alice sits down uninvited, fresh dishes placed upon old and not-cleared dishes, placing elbows on the table and the atrocious pouring of hot tea on Little Dormouse's nose.... The images do come across as a clear no-no. The young girl eats cakes and gulps down potions listlessly, which leads to a lot of adventures and growing up large and shrinking too small. Enid Blyton is at a diagonally opposite station in the study of Food and Literature, when compared to Lewis Carroll. Food is a temptation that Alice often succumbs to – only this time the food brings dangerous tidings for her. Alice ate and drank not because she was hungry but just as a past time and when in search of an adventure.

Carroll may have had a hidden didactic agenda to it all in 'Alice in Wonderland' by showing what perils can be precipitated for children who do not exercise restraint in eating. If Enid Blyton showed children how to eat, Lewis Carroll put forth how not to eat. Alice encounters a mushroom, by eating one side of which she would grow taller and by eating the other side of which she would grow shorter. But the caterpillar her freshly-found soul mate, who lures her to eating the mushroom does not tell her which side would do what. Hence Alice is frightened beyond her wits. May be Lewis Carroll wanted children to exercise caution before eating anything offered by strangers.

Alice has a tryst with the terse pigeon that mistakes her to be a serpent, the resplendent replicate of the sinister evil in literature, who had come to prey upon her precious eggs. Alice glibly tells her that no doubt as a human, she was fond of eggs. This rude riposte unnerves the naïve pigeon but gives Alice an idea that she could pose to be a serpent. The ultimate end to the story comes in the form of a Trial on food, where the King and Queen of Hearts stage a trial to investigate who stole the Queen of Hearts' tarts. Here again there is a temptation for Alice for food:

There is, "in the very middle of the court...a table, with a large dish of tarts upon it: they looked so good, that it made Alice quite hungry to look at them" (86). The trial scene wrenches Alice from the tumultuous Wonderland and brings her back to her sister, to the real world. Even in the sequel to the book "Alice in Wonderland" the 'Through the Looking-Glass' book there is a passing reference to this fad for food of Alice where Humpty Dumpty tells her that with the right guidance she could have grown up better had she not yielded to temptation for food.

Both the books recur on any research on food in literature, although the treatment of food as an object to entice is different. (Spring 2013 Nothing More Delicious: Food as Temptation in Children's Literature by Mary A. Stephens Georgia Southern University)

The third author taken up in this study is Roald Dahl (1916-1990). Roald Dahl 's immensely popular books are a much later escalation in the flight of Children's literature, with

Dahl's first essay when he was only sixteen years of age, extolling the noble indulgence of eating and drinking. He is identifiable to the current crop of children after the film "Charlie and the Chocolate factory"

Jodie Slothower and Jan Susina note that "Dahl's stories reveal an author obsessed with food" (28). His love for food is gluttonous, luxurious and almost obscene. The protagonists who partake the meals in his books are the starved, emaciated, economically weak sort, whose hardships the readers will feel, truly deserve the super-sumptuous spreads that Dahl red carpets for them (13 of the best food descriptions by Tom Bonnick). Morals, there will be, with magic thrown in, in the make-believe world of Dahl's books. Good and bad children will be there in the stories, with the implication that the good will truly triumph at the end. And the patter ensues with an adult guide, who is there to fetch and bail out the good child from the clutches of the bad, amidst ravenous descriptions of food, in giga quantities, colourfully chaotic and in mind-boggling varieties, fit to give a jaw dropping effect, much like in the scenes of Charlie and the Chocolate factory movie. As though as a compensatory afterthought, there will be a fat child in the story, much addicted to eating which is a subtle warning to wean off highly indulgent children. The protagonist good child will be depicted as a child who has family values, with a generous extended family of four grandparents and he would not trade being with them for the sake of as great a temptation as owning a chocolate factory. As a stark contrast, the villainy children will be ego-centric, unfair, impolite and spoilt brats, who connive umpteen contrivances to go on top and sustain their place there. The gluttony for food will be ascribed not to the children themselves but to insufficient upbringing and indulgence of parents who fail to prune the character ethic of children as they grow up, in their formative years. These lessons, Dahl indoctrinates through his stories, creating unforgettable characters

(<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/children/2017/6-of-the-most-glorious-roald-dahl-heroes>) like Matilda who uses a spell to teach a lesson to the stentorian school Principal, Billy the brave who meanders into the forest,

Charlie Bucket with his grandpa sailing into the Willie Wonka Chocolate factory, George the accidental scientist and Sophie who saves the children of the world and James the savior of the insects aboard his Giant Peach. He reproaches and reprimands neglectful parents in the stories, up scaling his didacticism to the earlier generation too.

If Enid Blyton, Lewis Carroll and Roald Dahl have woven food into literature from 1832 to 1990, the Indian treatise 'Arthashastra' written by Chanakya in an ancient book called 'Vridha Chanakya' states 'We are what we eat' ('Atha Sanskrutam') <http://blog.practicalsanskrit.com/2010/07/we-are-what-we-eat.html>. The verse was written anywhere between 371 and 283 BC in Pataliputra, India. Chanakya or Kautilya or Pandit Vishnugupta adorned the court of King Chandra Gupta Maurya as his political Guru and God

Father. His body of work titled “*Arthashastra*” was veritably the Bible of Political Wisdom and Ruling, earning him the title, ‘The Indian Machiavelli’.

The shloka is a simple one, but has deeper connotations:

Lamp eats eats darkness and produces [black] soot!
What food (quality) [one] eats daily, so will [one] produce.
We become what we eat –
दीपो भक्षयते ध्वन्तं
दीपो भक्षयते ध्वन्तं कज्जलं च प्रसूयते ।
यदन्नं भक्षयेन्नित्यं जायते तादशी प्रजा ॥
dIpo bhakShayate dhvAntam kajjalam cha prasUyate |
yadannam bhakShayennityam jAyate tAdRishi prajA ॥

The ‘*Artha Shastra*’ is a political treatise, composed, expanded and re-dated between the 2nd century BCE and 3rd century CE. It was influential until the 12th century, when it appeared. It was rediscovered in 1905 by R Shamasastri, who published it in 1909. The English translation was first published in 1915. This is a sample of the connect between food and literature from an ancient Indian perspective, perhaps a forerunner to all world literature, taking into count the time it was written.

This hint from ancient Indian wisdom is quoted here to add an Indian perspective relevant to the current scenario, where book reading among children is dwindling and is in doldrums, whence caution and precaution need to rule the connect between food and literature today. The latest in the gamut of Children’s literature is Harry Potter, by J K Rowling, who has confessed to borrowing heavily from Enid Blyton in her descriptions of food. With obesity becoming a curse with the case of couch potatoes, what lessons will be imbibed as regards food, in children’s literature, is again a moot point. It suffices to say that literature must and will pass the litmus test of being a beacon light to the society, in the basic human activity of food.

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