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Food as Escapism: The Use of Food in “Big Two-Hearted River” and *A Farewell to Arms*
and its Psychological Implications

It surprises me that no one thinks of Ernest Hemingway as a food writer. Sure, maybe not in the same vein as established pantheon such as M.F.K. Fisher, David, Lebovitz, or Ruth Reichl, but I find that he fits the category nonetheless. However, rather than writing on his personal experiences with food as the axis and focal point of his own life - though they do feature predominantly in the appropriately named *A Moveable Feast*, something that will be discussed shortly - food focuses as a tool, metaphor, or means of plot and character. The use of food and drink is quite prevalent within Hemingway's writing, albeit more drink than food (indeed, after reading his work it's surprising he was ever sober enough to put pen to paper). Still the food itself cannot be ignored, his characters are often found eating by themselves or with others musing over their situations and using it as a source of self-reflection. One may even argue that Hemingway included these scenes as a way to have his characters actively participating in a daily ritual with which the reader could identify with, for who hasn't mused over their own dismal state of affairs over a steaming and aromatic plate of pot-au-feu (or what have you)?

Hemingway himself realized the dominancy of food in his writing within his memoir noting that, “I found that many of the people I wrote about had very strong appetites and a great taste and desire for food” (101). Given it's a strange revelation to have at this point after so many articles, short stories, and novels in which his characters

in nearly every single chapter partake in various foodways. Indeed the memoir itself is called *A Moveable Feast*, directly inferring the gustatory aspects associated with Paris in which he was referring to in a letter to a friend. In addition, the very first chapter is titled “A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel” and another being “Hunger is a Good Discipline”. This and the fact that eating and plenty of drinking take place in nearly every chapter of his memoir, let alone his works of fiction, place with uncanny certainty the importance of food in Hemingway’s work even if he wasn’t as aware of it’s prevalence as he thought (maybe he had been drinking to much to notice?).

Still, the food wasn’t there just for the sake of it being present, a siren-like temptation to find the nearest apple tart or glass of brandy while following the exploits of his heroes and anti-heroes and the women who loved them. As stated before, the food serves a purpose within his stories: it functions as a way to analyze and understand the characters. Food has long been an important aspect of human nature, society and psychology – it indicates our state of mind, ideals, and world understanding. One instance in particular is food’s use as a tool of escapism, a way to run away from our current problems and find comfort in or perhaps dig ourselves deeper into despair. In his book *Food & Nutrition: Customs & Culture* Paul Fieldhouse explores the concept of food and its psychological relation to us as a form of escapism by noting that “Adults frequently use food as an emotional outlet – a crutch to help them handle and to live with anxiety, tension, frustration, unhappiness, irritability, disappointment, loneliness or boredom. No human can escape such emotions as these and thus he must find ways to cope with them” (203). In the form of a meal or a simple bite to eat people and thus characters in a story are able to demonstrate mood and reflect emotions – food is a form of non-verbal

communication whose messages can be as complex or subtle, if not more so, than the words we say or write. Certain foods already have established physiological and psychological connections; Bernard Lyman notes how queasiness of the stomach due to nervousness can result in the rejection of food, or the association of sweets with moments of joy and celebration or a generally pleasant state of mind (52-53). The moments of eating, sharing of food, and mentions of hunger therefore play a great role in understanding the characters and food's use as a form of avoid their present situations.

As going into every scene of every character in Hemingway's cannon would be excessive, not to mention hunger inducing, this paper will focus on the short story "Big Two-Hearted River" and his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. In relation to food I plan to engage in a dialogue that argues that it is used as a form of escapism for the characters. Furthermore in analyzing this gustatory mechanism I hope to prove that in this escapism the reader is able to analyze and understand the psychological and emotional states of the characters.

Much of the extensive criticism about "Big Two Hearted River" agrees that Nick is in a state of shell shock after the war and that his country trip to the river functions as a form of escapism in order to ameliorate his damaged psyche – "a pastoral retreat from reality" as Sarah Mary O'Brien states (1). In order to escape reality he goes on a fishing trip, a food practice long ingrained in human history, symbolic of our connection with nature and our psychological connection with food, nutrition, and ourselves as a whole. Michael Owen Jones argues that the symbolic realm of foodways is demonstrative; each meal is imbued with special meanings related to an individual's multiple identities, idioms, ideologies, and psychological state (2). This idea can be applied acutely to the

fictional human being as well as the physical, real world human being, thus the act of fishing as a form of escape from the war torn world of the 1920s. Still, before Nick ever comes to the stream he sits down for a simple meal after setting up his campsite.

As Robert Lamb notes Nick possesses a “haunted consciousness [who] attempts to escape a world of danger and pain through ‘the faithful observance of customs they invent for themselves’” (162). The forest before the campsite is ravaged by fire creating an apocalyptic landscape that symbolizes the war to end all wars. Once he has finished his camp set up he becomes “settled. Nothing [can] touch him:” he has already begun his escape (139). Nick begins to prepare his canned food methodically, Hemingway marching us through the process of cooking the food and describing the process detailing each moment: “The beans and spaghetti warmed. Nick stirred them and mixed them together. They began to bubble, making bubbles that rose with difficulty to the surface;” this staccato, methodical description creates of contemplative beat that becomes almost meditative allowing Nick to focus slowly on his food and hunger rather than muse over his recent shell shocked state of mind (139). Hemingway reinforces this meditative quality of the meal allowing Nick to “[drink] the juice of the syrup of the apricots, carefully at first to keep from spilling, then meditatively, sucking the apricots down” (141). Once again the methodical pacing of the story creates a slow beat forcing the reader to slow down with Nick and contemplate a serene state of mind encouraged by this simple canned meal. The peristaltic food ritual described allows Nick to escape his shell shocked state, enforcing the theme of escapism and psychologically demonstrating not only his stressed state, but his current calmed one brought on by his self imposed ritual of the canned meal. Food becomes a mode of self-psychotherapy to what Bernard Lyman

would argue enhances the state of well being with the apricots being a simple therapy in a can (155).

Of course the fact that the meal is canned at all is just as important as the food it contains. O'Brien argues that Nick's attempts at escapism fail because according to Marxist theory the swamp in the story acts as a "machine in the garden" or a reminder of the harsh realities of the world outside his idyllic pastoral escape (67). Furthermore she argues that Nick's very presence there foils his escape, his very existence in the forest nullifying the purpose. It could be argued in conjunction then that the canned food is an extension of "the machine" that Marx expresses as it is a product of the new industrialized society. However, the time frame of the story and Nick's state of mind must be taken into consideration. In the 1920's mass production of food was a relatively new concept whereas before people were reliant on seasonality, root cellars, and shopping almost daily or growing their own food, the preparation of food met a new era of convenience. Frederick Lewis Allen in his overview of American culture in the Roaring Twenties points out "sales of canned foods were growing, the number of delicatessen stores had increased three times as fast as the decade 1910-1920, the output of bakeries increased by 60 per cent during the decade 1914-1924. Much of what had been housework was now either moving out of the home entirely or being simplified by machinery" (83). For Nick the presence of this canned meal isn't so much an impediment on his escape but a facilitator of it. The presence of canned food could even be seen as an escape from the hard work and drudgery that the supposed idyllic natural world offers, or in this case forces, upon humanity. Nick says when first preparing his food that he's got a right to eat it if he is willing to carry it; while slightly pessimistic he finds joy in his

escape into his meal. The canned food allows him ease in preparation and a chance to thoughtlessly avoid confronting his war-ravaged self and mind. The canned food offers a form of psychological security, a lack of anxiety from where his current meal has to come from and relax after the physically trying hike and camp setup (Fieldhouse 206).

There is also the curious case of the canned apricots in specific to consider. Generally, society as a whole argues that fresh is better than canned, we prefer the farm fresh organic, Farmer's Market produce rhetoric to define our food. An apricot should be tangy, juicy, with a slightly fuzzy feeling that's warm and holds back the flavorful sweet-tart juices. Canned fruit is seen as sugary, processed, "The Machine" destroying our natural foodways. Yet Hemingway pens Nick to prefer the opposite, noting that the canned "were better than fresh apricots" (141). While it has been years since this writer has a good fresh apricot (a persnickety fruit to be sure) it's hard to imagine anyone preferring the taste of canned, sickeningly sweet fruit-in-syrup. Still, the nouveau food technology that emerged in the twenties offers simplicity both in preparation and in tactile stimulation as Nick enjoys opening cans. Both of these factors then offer food as an emotional outlet for Nick to displace his anxiety and escape his war trauma through alimentary means.

In the second part of the story Nick performs one full meal and the beginning of another, his breakfast and later the cleaning of his fish in preparation for a meal, one the reader isn't present for. Part two begins with Nick's rushed breakfast, one that he is "too hurried to eat... but he knew he must," (145). Hemingway notes the importance of eating in his memoir where after going on about the clarity that comes with hunger, but argues "eating is wonderful too" (72). At this point in his memoir Hemingway then finds a sort

of emotional relief in his meal of cold beer, bread, and potato salad. Just as Fieldhouse notes that food can be used to actively express a psychological state of mind or feeling, Hemingway in his consummation of food and drink finds escape from his worry developing food into a displacement activity from his mental anxiety (198-199). This idea is then applied to Nick's experiences in his breakfast, a chance to gather energy for the fishing that lies ahead. The food puts him in a complacent state of mind away from the hurried state he was previously in, able to take calm in his "good camp" after another methodical, more natural meal of buckwheat pancakes, apple butter, and grilled onions (146-147). In the description Nick, and therefore the reader find comfort in embracing all five senses of the meal as the grease spits sharply while the pancake batter oozes lugubriously "like lava" over the pan (146). These senses bring Nick and the reader into a calm familiar place of breakfast where outside concerns aren't addressed or even a factor as Hemingway has decidedly ignored them and refused to acknowledge them. Indeed for four paragraphs nothing but the food is described – the escape from outside stimuli is successful and psychological and emotional peace is achieved. To enforce this point after a full stomach Nick cleans up his good camp and finds emotional satisfaction in his current place of self; the reader can also note that Nick is no longer hurried or concerned (except when reflecting upon the swamp) but rather is happy with no mention of stress or a hurried attitude hovering about him.

While Nick utilizes food to escape shell shock, Frederick and Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* use it to escape various other problems: the war, death, pregnancy, the army, even Italy itself. The two characters are notably "always hungry," something William Adair understands as an implication of an intuition or fear that all the good

things in their life will inevitably disappear (20). In a similar fashion to Nick the hunger of Frederick and Catherine is related to a crystallized feeling of security and control – hence the use of food as an escape to something safe or familiar. This escapism then acts as a form of the Freudian defense of avoidance, by submersing themselves in the multisensory pleasures of food by themselves or with others they can temporarily avoid the anxieties and circumstances that harangue them (Tyson, 15). Though this avoidance via the meal doesn't necessarily lead to destructive behavior per se (ignoring instances of alcohol, of course, in the story), the desire to fill this feeling of lack or loss does lead to consequences. Simply put, hunger relates to lack, which holds connection to the desire for peace and quiet, which is displaced into the desire for food to fill the hunger or lack.

One scene of particular importance in which lack plays a role in *A Farewell to Arms* is what is often referenced as the cheese scene where Frederick, nibbling a bit of cheese in the middle of an active battlefield. As Frederick sits down with compatriots for a pot of warm macaroni he cuts up some cheese he has obtained and melts it over the pasta which is to be eaten with their hands, drinking corrupted wine that has a metallic taste – a less than idyllic meal. Still, to take a meal at all in the midst of an active fight seems insane, however the meal acts as a form of escape, a visceral and basic pleasure in which the soldiers can find comfort. The meal is consumed with eagerness as they ignore the explosions around them focusing solely on the food, “They were all eating, holding their chins close over the basin, tipping their heads back sucking in the ends [of cheese]. I took another mouthful and some cheese and a rinse of wine. Something landed outside that shook the earth;” barely does the sounds of bomb and mortar fire even phase them

from their meal (54). The desire for peace away from their present surroundings, the lack of serenity, encourages this escapism into their cobbled meal.

In addition to this Lacanian analysis of escapism and lack, the individual parts of their humble dinner have psychological connections to feelings of safety and comfort as well. Lyman notes how certain foods psychologically and physiologically call forth “diverse associations that carry with them patterns of emotions, attitudes, ideas, and beliefs characterized by an overall aura of pleasantness or unpleasantness” (157). Certain foods then create a biological, psychological, and emotional reaction when eaten generating feelings of safety. Harriet Bruce Moore talks of “the unhappy, suffering, far from home and loved ones, soldier [who] looks back to milk as in many ways expressing the comfort and security of life as it was back home;” what she stresses is that milk acts as a nostalgic safety food, something particularly helpful to soldiers such as Frederick (Fieldhouse, 207). Given the cheese is a more adult, one might say cultured, form of milk, but its effect is the same; milk, Fieldhouse argues, “being the universal first food of humans” often takes on the role as a familiar food that people often resort to in times of crisis (207). People throughout history have always resorted to familiar foods in times of stress and crisis, research has shown that dairy, in its many forms, is often one of the food types most resorted too (Lyman). Thus as Frederick and the soldiers are trapped in a warzone defined by gunfire and explosions, they go on eating attempting to push their surroundings, fear, and trauma out of their mind by filling their stomachs.

The pasta itself has an emotional connection to escapism grounded in physiology and psychology as well. As Alexandra Logue discusses in her research of food and psychology, carbohydrate heavy laden meals such as pasta block the absorption of amino

acids such as tryptophan into the blood stream or muscles and focus it solely into the brain (133). This then stimulates the release of serotonin (the feel good chemical) into the body, lowering stress and anxiety (Logue, 134). While it's doubtful Hemingway was aware of the science, he was likely aware of how people usually felt after eating breads and pastas – they felt good. Therefore it's understandable why Nick resorts to eating pasta, it encourages tension release and a way to escape the anxiety of war. Given the reader is not privy to know if that was simply all the Nick was able to procure to eat, but Hemingway doesn't need to concern us with that detail, but chooses for Nick to eat macaroni and cheese – a classic comfort for Americans even today.

Lastly one cannot overlook the social aspect of this meal, the camaraderie over the meal reinforces the feelings of safety generated by the food. Instinctually humans are communal creatures, we rely on others to develop social capital and develop networks that foster good mental and physical health (Jones). In regards to food it takes Frederick and four others to put together a meal that will be able to sustain them, thus the commensalitary aspects of the simple macaroni, dust covered cheese and ferric-tasting wine eaten with eagerness and fingers acts as a collective form of escape; as good will is fostered in alimentary rituals it allows as sort of psychic retreat from the war.

Catherine of course is just as susceptible to the use of food as a form of escape as Frederick is. Curiously, Catherine seems to pattern after Hemingway's wife Hadley whom in *A Moveable Feast* seems to always be eager for their next drink or meal (almost as much as Hemingway himself). This feminine gastronome (Hadley) seems to utilize food as a way to ignore their impoverished state of affairs looking forward to each meal encouraging Hemingway to have two drinks as opposed to one and encourage

Hemingway to think up a delightfully Parisian lunch menu for themselves (36-38).

Catherine similarly seems to have a one track mind when she and Frederick are escaping Italy into Switzerland, the track being breakfast. Once they arrive in Switzerland she mentions in no more than four times, even ignoring her beau's acknowledgement on the country itself or their recent ordeal: "'What a lovely country,' she said. 'Isn't it grand?' 'Let's go and have breakfast!'" (277-278). Catherine begins to utilize breakfast as a focal point, a ritual in which there is regularity and normality as opposed to international, illegal border crossing to escape the Italian army.

Sadly, Catherine's cravings for rolls and jam are thwarted when she finds out that the café hasn't any rolls due to the war and that she will have to settle for toast for breakfast. Her response to having her form of escape somewhat modified is bare and static, the reader might expect more drama from her (this writer recalls many unsavory instances of his pregnant cousin being told "no" when it came to food), rather her responses seem almost numb, "'I'm sorry, we haven't any rolls in wartime.' 'Bread then.' 'I can make you some toast.' 'All right.'" (278). Her mode of escape has effectively been altered, the disappointment and change in menu reflects back to Catherine the precarious situation they find themselves in, an inevitable arrest after breakfast which they cannot escape from, her pregnant condition, and the fact that the war still engulfs them regardless of what country they're in.

Lastly, while I discussed the Lacanian understanding as lack in relation to hunger leading to food as a form of escapism, we also have to look at Lacan's idea of loss in relation to hunger. Adair notes that hunger comes from change and loss is basically a hunger for things past, or nostalgia (15). Loss is a predominant theme in *A Farewell to*

Arms so it should come as no surprise that the characters deal with it by turning to food and eating. As Catherine is in the hospital, first giving stillbirth to her and Frederick's son, then passing away herself, Frederick continues to return to the small food stand to eat. He attempts to have the food stave off the fear of abandonment and death that begins to control his mind as he begins to worry that Catherine will die (Tyson 23). The fear of loss then can only be filled

Frederick's eating mirrors Catherine's drugging in the hospital room, as she continues to request pain killers to numb the physical pain, Frederick turns to food in order to numb his emotional pain. This basic human mechanism to assuage guilt and escape anxiety is, as we've established, is quite common and as Fieldhouse notes "eating can be a way to ward off depression (200). As he tries to relate to her suffering by indulging himself in food, each scene with Catherine begging for more gas demonstrates the futility of his eating to escape and bond with her as all the pain killers she takes fails to aid her in escaping her physical pain, likewise food this time is unable to help Frederick, yet both continue to turn to their respective aides to alleviate themselves.

Just as previous examples show that food itself once again seems to hold a particular symbolism, as mentioned Frederick drinks and eats to numb himself just as Catherine is numbed with gas. Still the food this time is unable to work as a form of escapism, psychologically tormenting Frederick with worry that Catherine will indeed die. The food he can get is pedantic and pitiful, day old brioche, *choucroute* (various sausages, usually those on the verge of spoilage, covered in spiced mustard and sauerkraut), and a demi-blonde beer that he drinks twice. The beer is light in alcohol and repetitive, having the same drink twice in a row is a novelty in Hemingway's works and

demonstrates the pedantic futility of Frederick's attempt to escape using alcohol. Furthermore each time Frederick asks of the *plat du jour* he finds out that it's always finished and is offered some ham and eggs or the *choucroute*, basic dishes that in lieu of veal stew is somewhat depressing. The menu then refuses to offer Frederick an escape from his anguish over Catherine's troubled pregnancy, aggravating his emotional and psychological trauma.

To drive this failed escape into the narrative Hemingway describes his eating in a monotone voice, Frederick is unable to comment on the meal with exception to the temperature. His mind instead wandering about until he notices he has eaten many plates worth of food and a few rounds of beer, so buried under the weight of his current situation his mind and stomach were unable to register the sheer volume of food he ate.

Even though the food is unable to allow Fredrick to circumvent his anguish Catherine attempts to assist him in his escapism imploring him to leave her be (in effect to die alone) and spare himself her own suffering. She tells him on many different occasions to "[go] and get something to eat" even encouraging him to have a second breakfast so that he can free himself of worry (326). While he heeds her wishes the distractions are merely superficial, Frederick is unable to ease his mind with the second rate meals he finds, keeping him grounded in his reality.

The tragedy is that food is a false form of escape, or at least honest, physical escape. Paul Fieldhouse belabors the fact that the ritual of eating, as a biological necessity is bound to be turned into an emotionalized activity (197). Food elicits satisfaction and gratification from corporeal man, we are bound to connect feelings of comfort and give symbolic meaning to food and develop eating into a form of emotional and psychological

expression. It's no wonder that we as people and thus the characters contained in our social fictional spheres would attribute these associations of escape with food. Food brings comfort, a mode of leaving behind the traumas that affect our feelings, not to mention out mind, both conscious and subconscious. However, eating does not alleviate the source of the problems, just makes us forget about them for a moment. Escapism through food is simply a tool for coping. However, it can ease the pain and alleviate stress, anxiety or guilt, indeed it may even cure it at times. Unchecked it can easily go out of control and the escapism can become destructive.

In Hemingway's characters we find connection in this edible escapism – probably because eating is such a tactile, sensory habit that every single human takes part in. It makes the characters troubles more real and the reader is able to generate sympathy in their use of food as a form of coping, for who hasn't done it themselves? In attempting to escape their difficulties through food, Nick, Frederick and Catherine all gain gravity as characters as we become able to understand their psyche and feelings through their meals.

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