

## **Sophister Module Description 2023-24**

**Full Name: The Literature of Eating**

**Short Name: Food Writing**

**Lecturer Name and Email Address: Dr Margaret Robson: robsonm@tcd.ie**

**ECTS Weighting: 10**

**Semester Taught: HT**

**Two hours weekly - as timetabled**

**Assessment Details: One 5,000 word essay**

**Year: JS**

### **Module Content:**

Learning eating is learning culture.

Throughout history the consumption of food has occupied the bulk of human labour: growing, rearing, producing, trading, cooking and serving food is fundamentally about our essential need for nourishment. But our need for food goes far beyond the functional, through the emotional, the civic, the political, invoking all the senses, taste, smell, sight, hearing and touch.

From foods that are proscribed, or proscribed at certain times, through to table etiquette, we learn how to handle food and the protocols of eating according to ideas of human hierarchies and values.

Food is also, though, a political tool whereby peoples can be controlled through food distribution practices. Famines may begin as a consequence of natural occurrences, natural disasters, but the civic response to it can be a means of wiping out dissent, ethnic groups, or whole peoples.

On an individual level people may adopt food practices to satisfy religious or political ends.

Hunger can be a form of communication: where the individual denies themselves food, the audience for such an act is sent a very clear message, the hunger striker's refusal to be part of the body politic, the religious person's denial of the body prefiguring a union with God.

Feasting and fasting provide the poles of display wherein food may be a means of 'soft' power: state banquets, lavish weddings, the food and the tableware and the sense of occasion dazzle the guests, reinforcing the host's social status, wealth and power.

In this course we will look at literary representations of aspects of food culture.

The topics to be covered include the following:

Cannibalism; institutional food; eating children/children eating; food as social control; food in Dickens; the politics of fasting; food and gender; the technology of food production; famines and starvation; the hunger artists; the sacred meal; what you eat on your travels.

## Course Outline

Week 1: What is a Meal? When, where and how we eat.

The Sacred Meal and Sacrificial Food. *The Book of Leviticus*

Mary Douglas, 'The Abominations of Leviticus'. Pp.48-58 in *Food and Culture: A*

*Reader* eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (Routledge, 2013)

Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', pp.249 – 275 in *Implicit Meanings* (Routledge, 1975)

Week 2: 'Eating People is Wrong': cannibalism.

The charge of cannibalism has always been levelled against people whom other societies label 'inferior', an aspect of colonialist practice on which Montaigne, in his 1580 essay writes: 'every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country' (*Of Cannibals*).

In this section we will look at a variety of representations of cannibalism.

Extracts from *Beowulf* (10<sup>th</sup> century); Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (between 1588 and 1593); Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (1729)

Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism* (Princeton UP, 1990)

Week 3: Institutional Food.

Institutional food, from canteen to prison, may betray attitudes towards its constituency.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts we will look at, issues of the contempt for the poor (as well as the practice of profiteering) are shown through diet.

Extracts from Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847); Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838);  
*Oliver Twist* (1837)

Charles Dickens, 'A Walk in a Workhouse', in *Selected Journalism* ed. David Pascoe (Penguin  
Books, 1997), 239 – 245

Enid Blyton, *Malory Towers* (six books between 1946 and 1951)

Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, *Molesworth* (1953)

J.K. Rowling, the *Harry Potter* books (1997-2007)

#### Week 4: Eating Children, Children Eating.

Children's literature offers a cornucopia of food, from *Little Red Riding Hood*,  
*Jack and The Beanstalk*, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) to Maurice Sendak's *In The Night  
Kitchen* (1970). Here eating is about poverty, about single parenthood, about step-families  
and about the child's desire for sweetness. We will look at the ramifications, the lessons  
both moral and economic that these texts suggest.

Roald Dahl, *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* (1964, revised edition, 1973)

Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*  
(Routledge, 2006)

#### Week 5: Food as Social Control.

From bribery to reward, the outright control over *The Hunger Games'* people in Panem  
embeds practices of supply and demand, semi-starvation and decadence that are the  
logical end of autocratic rule. Taking its tone from the circuses of ancient Rome, *The Hunger  
Games* plays out the dynamic of the control of the means of production, especially when it  
comes to food.

Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (2008)

'The Minnesota Experiment', Chapter 8 in Sharman Apt Russell *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (Basic Books, 2005)

Week 6: Foreign Bodies: what we eat on our travels.

What will we eat when we aren't at home? Do we take our food, our condiments, with us? Few of us will be as challenged as Colonel F.M. Bailey, travelling near Tashkent in 1918 when he 'was obliged to do some unpleasant charcuterie in the snow' (*Mission to Tashkent* (London, Folio Society, 1999), 75).

Foreign food offers challenges to the palate, the stomach - and cultural identity.

From taking it with us to bringing our food habits back home – these are ways of encountering the strange and the stranger – or refusing to do so.

Fabio Parasecoli, *Gastronativism: Food, Identity, Politics* (Columbia UP, 2022)

*Literary texts for this week will be confirmed*

Week 7: READING WEEK

Week 8: Food and Gender.

Little girls are known to be made of 'sugar and spice and all things nice', whilst boys are – literally – disgusting. What do these gender categories tell us about what men and women are allowed to eat, and how does advertising exploit this?

Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969); Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (1862); The

Song of Solomon' *The Bible*.

Fabio Parasecoli, 'Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men's Fitness Magazines', pp.284-298 in Counihan and Van Esterik, eds.

Week 9: Technology and Food Production.

The problem with food is that it goes off: the organic world decays, in some cases very quickly; what *is* the shelf life of a lettuce? Waste is a huge challenge to food producers and retailers, but the challenge of variety in our diet is also one that sees the development of technology as a means of keeping food on the shelves and in our shops for longer.

In this week we will look at a range of issues, from the rubbishing of food to the widening of means of preservation and the access to the exotic.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)

Robert Albritton, 'Between Obesity and Hunger: The Capitalist Food Industry', pp.342-352 in Counihan and Van Esterik

Jack Goody, 'Industrial Food: Towards the Development of a World Cuisine', pp.72-90 in Counihan and Van Esterik

Charles Dickens: 'A Monument of French Folly' pp.427-437 in *Selected Journalism 1850- 1870*, (ed. David Pascoe)

Week 10: Food, Power and Display.

The feast is one of the most charged of occasions: a feast is typically offered as a means of sealing a change of circumstances, baptisms/birth rites, weddings, funeral

meals; treaties; these are literally the milestones of life in which circumstances, inheritance, unions and hierarchical organization change. As such, they are also places of danger, where the new family construct, new member, may be an object of envy or hostility. Similarly, the nature of these celebrations make forgetting to invite an important guest introduce the potential for catastrophe.

The meal, the feast, done right is a tool of diplomacy – done wrong – it may reignite or spark war.

‘The Feast of the Century’: display and power in feasting.

Recipes and Menus from the fifteenth century.

*Curie on Inglysch* ed. Constance Hieatt and Sharon Butler

(EETS, SS8, 1985)

Sonenshine, Tara et al. ‘Culinary Diplomacy: Gastrodiplomacy, and Conflict

Cuisine: Defining the Field’: Is The Kitchen The New Venue of Foreign Policy?:

Ideas on Food as A Tool for Diplomacy, Building Peace and Cultural

Awareness’, *Gastronomica* Jan 1 (2016), pp.9- 11

#### Week 11: Eating in Dystopia.

McCarthy’s *The Road* is an examination of what happens when all the structures of civilisation collapse. ‘The Minnesota Experiment’ demonstrated that table manners quickly became shocking when the men were being starved: *The Road* shows how all of the rituals, the usages societies develop in order to allow people to live together with some degree of stability, are savaged by the implosion of all codes which follow destruction. How soon does the structure break down into protection offered by tribe, religion, caste, national identity, colour, creed, ability (or disability)? Each of these may offer some inclusion - for a while – but as resources decrease, the family offers the only unit in which the individual may be safe.

School of English

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Chapter 12, 'Protocols of Famine', in Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History*.

Week 12: Food on Film.

Stanley Tucci, *Big Night* (1996); Gabriel Axel, *Babette's Feast* (1987)

### **Learning Outcomes:**

On successful completion of the course students will be familiar with the cultural importance of food.

Students will gain an understanding of the ways in which food is used in and by literary texts.

Students will be able to offer critical and theoretical interpretations of the role and meaning of food in literature and culture

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### **Learning Aims:**

This course aims to show the ways in which food is used to represent culture: from 'unclean' eating, to structuring society through discriminatory food practices, our everyday needs are codified to show our place in society through what and how we eat.

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## Reading

***Food and Culture: A Reader*** Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik

(Routledge, New York, 2013) and ***Hunger: An Unnatural History***, Sharman Apt Russell

(New York, 2005).

These two books underpin the reading we will be doing for this module; multiple copies will be available in the library on reserve.

A full bibliography will be put up on Blackboard at the start of the new academic year.

If you have any questions, email me.

Look forward to meeting you,

Have a good summer!

Best wishes,

Margaret Robson

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Please note:

- **Curricular information is subject to change.**
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**