

Eating With Bloom on the Sixteenth of June: Food in Ulysses

Comendo com Bloom no dia 16 de junho: A comida em Ulysses

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Abstract: *Food is not only a biological need but also a socio-cultural phenomenon. Though food is a vital need for people to survive, it does not only contain taste and ingredients, but contains other things like emotions, symbols of identity, power relations, gender roles, economy and social rules. Food choices affect lots of areas in the society and the life of individuals. This article will analyze the use of food in James Joyce's Ulysses through its ordinary hero Leopold Bloom. The novel, as the epic of the body, uses food as a reflection of everyday life and grotesque realism. Moreover, food is used throughout the novel to exemplify Bloom's personal and social identity. Bloom is a pacifist, nontraditionally masculine man, half Irish, half Jewish and also feels like an outsider in Dublin. All these aspects are narrated in Ulysses through the food he chooses to eat. Joyce has created a novel about life with all its aspects, including food.*

Keywords: *Ulysses; Leopold Bloom; Food Studies.*

Resumo: *A comida não é apenas uma necessidade biológica, mas também um fenômeno sociocultural. Embora os alimentos sejam uma necessidade vital para a sobrevivência das pessoas, eles não contêm apenas sabor e ingredientes, mas contêm outras coisas como emoções, símbolos de identidade, relações de poder, papéis de gênero, economia e regras sociais. As escolhas alimentares afetam muitas áreas da sociedade e da vida dos indivíduos. Este artigo analisa o uso da comida no Ulisses de James Joyce através do seu herói comum Leopold Bloom. O romance, como épico do corpo, usa a comida como reflexo da vida cotidiana e do realismo grotesco. Além disso, a comida é utilizada em todo o romance para exemplificar a identidade pessoal e social de Bloom. Bloom é um homem pacifista, não tradicionalmente masculino, metade irlandês, metade judeu, que também se sente como um forasteiro em Dublin. Todos estes aspectos são narrados no Ulisses através da comida que ele escolhe. Joyce criou um romance sobre a vida com todos os seus aspectos, incluindo a comida.*

Palavras-chave: *Ulisses; Leopold Bloom; Estudos alimentares.*

James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) narrates details of Leopold Bloom's day, from his waking up in the morning to his going to sleep at night, with people he encounters, his walks in the city, his inner thoughts about ordinary things around him as he experiences them, his fears, joys and also the food that he eats. This paper will analyze how food is depicted in Joyce's "epic of the body" and how it reflects the cultural and personal identity of the protagonist of *Ulysses*.

Food has been a very common motif in literature for ages, and for a variety of reasons. Its presence in literary texts may reflect many things, from socio-cultural situations to emotional states. In her book *Voracious Children*, Carolyn Daniel claims that, in fiction, characters do not eat to survive, as they are not alive, and that the existence of food in a literary work always has a different purpose (3). Food can be used as a symbol for many things. Roland Barthes affirms that "food is a system of communication". He states that as food appeals to all our senses, it creates a language which speaks to us (Barthes 24) in a very particular manner. Food is also a signifier of things other than just its ingredients. A meal may include joy, sorrow, longing, passion, anger, etc. When someone chooses a particular food over any other, they do not only consume the food, but also the meanings attached to it. Indeed, Barthes says that all the world and all the social environments are signified by food (22-23). Many other critics regard food as a code that conveys a secret message, hidden in the fabric of social relations. Mary Douglas states that food gives us messages about hierarchies, boundaries, exclusion, or inclusion in the society ("Deciphering" 36). There is a twofold interaction between individuals and society in terms of the food they consume. The social, economic, and cultural factors determine what, how much, and with whom one would eat. Also, how and what one eats would determine that person's cultural, economic, social, and religious position. Food practices like who eats what and with whom may also reflect the social structure to which an individual belongs. Thus food creates dualities like us and them, food for males and females, food for the rich and the poor.

Joyce uses food as a metaphor for different concepts, feelings and situations in *Ulysses*. Sometimes, food signifies companionship. The book begins, as a matter of fact, with a breakfast scene between Buck Mulligan, Stephen Dedalus and Haines in which they share bread and butter, tea and milk. In many instances, food is related to religion. In the fifth episode of *Ulysses*, there is a reference to the eating of bread in the communion at the church. Bloom thinks: "Look at them. Now I bet it makes them happy...bread of angels it is called. There's a big idea behind it, kind of kingdom of god is within you feel" (Joyce 99). In a move that is very characteristic of the circular nature of *Ulysses*, bread indeed has a symbolic meaning.

In the case of Molly Bloom, food is associated with sexuality for Molly. In several instances, she wants to feed men with or from her body. She once gave in Bloom's mouth "the seedcake warm and chewed" (Joyce 224). And in another instance, she literally fed him with her breast milk: "I had to get him suck them they were so hard he said it was sweeter and thicker than cows" (893). Several food items are given special symbolic relevance in the book. One of them is the withered potato that Bloom carries in his pocket as an amulet. It means many things, from being a symbol of the Irish nation to a simple memento of his mother, who gave it to him. In yet another instance, the feeling of loneliness is explained with a food scene. The scene of the last sardine left on the plate reminds him of his loneliness in society and makes him feel sad: "Under the sandwichbell lay on a bier of bread one last, one lonely, last sardine of summer. Bloom alone" (Joyce 373). As can be seen, food is more than just a biological need in the novel.

Though food is used symbolically in the novel, in the first place it exists purely as a bodily need for survival. According to Declan Kiberd, Joyce wrote *Ulysses* as the "epic of the body" (ix). In a letter, Joyce said the "individual passion as a motive for everything" is very important for the novel (qtd. in Kiberd x). Therefore, the passion of eating, like everything about the body, is central to an understanding of his work. Joyce wanted to show that the body is equal to the mind as a focus of interest for the prose writer. The book is organized in such a way that each chapter is devoted to an organ of the body as "characters experience their bodies" (qtd. in Kiberd xvi). For example, "Lestrygonians" is related to the oesophagus, and also related to lunch since the action happens around that time of the day. "Nausicaa" refers to the eye and nose, whereas "Penelope" is related to the flesh. Frank Budgen wrote that Joyce declared that "the body lives in and moves through space and is the home of a full human personality" (qtd. in Ellman 72). Therefore, every act of the body is significant as part of the characters' lives and of their existence.

One of the episodes which consists of many food motifs is "Calypso". According to Maud Ellmann, it is only in that episode, when Bloom enters the stage, that "the body begins to assert its claims" (74). The organ designated for "Calypso" is the "kidney", in honor of Bloom's breakfast. The chapter includes the material presence of Bloom with all his bodily functions. The first paragraph begins by depicting Bloom cooking kidney in the kitchen for breakfast. Before we know anything about him, we are informed of his food preferences. The way we are introduced to him is through food:

Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with

crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine (Joyce 65).

This is one of the most famous quotes from the book, explaining Bloom's appetite for the inner organs of animals. And his adventure begins as he decides to go out to buy kidneys for breakfast.

Ulysses can be regarded as an example of grotesque realism as it depicts the body of people, especially Bloom's, with all its material functions. Throughout the day, we witness Bloom defecating, urinating, farting, masturbating, eating, and drinking as a normal person. These aspects create a sense of realism to depict life as it is with all the human practices, not only mental but also, and especially, physical. This resembles Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of François Rabelais, according to which "the material bodily principle" is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people (19). Therefore, Bloom represents the common man with all aspects of his life, with his defects, fears, and pleasures. Thus he is far from being a hero of a classical epic, like Homer's Odysseus, but he is the hero of his own epic, his own life. Joyce wanted to challenge the concept of an ideal hero, who is above simple bodily functions. As Bakhtin comments, grotesque realism's "essential principle ... is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20).

The day for Bloom starts at home and ends as he goes back home at the end of the day. Similarly, eating and drinking end with digesting and going to the toilet. If this could be thought as a cycle, it may depict the cycle of life. In other words, what we see is an ordinary life reflected through food scenes and tropes. For Bloom, the food of ordinary people is different from the food of gods. He begins thinking of nectar and ambrosia. The beauty and power of these foods is not to be compared to the corporality of human's food activities, including the excretory system:

Quaffing nectar at mess with gods, golden dishes, all ambrosial. Not like a tanner lunch we have, boiled mutton, carrots and turnips, bottle of Allsop. Nectar, imagine it drinking electricity: gods food... And we stuffing food in one hole and out behind: food, chyle, blood, dung, earth, food: have to feed it like stoking an engine (Joyce 225).

This comparison of different food systems is another way to celebrate the ordinary life of the mortals. As say the lyrics to a piece that goes on in Bloom's mind all day, the

Commendatore Aria in *Don Giovanni*: “Those who dine on heavenly food/ Do not dine on mortal food.”

The novel concentrates on mortal food and Bloom’s hunger for it throughout the day. The times of the day with the experiences of the ordinary hero are marked by food. What he eats is very much connected to how he feels in everyday life. During lunchtime, as he waits for his meal to be prepared, someone asks him about his wife and many questions concerning the musical company she sings in. Bloom knows that his wife has a lover and when a question about his wife’s lover comes, we witness his loss of appetite and joy. The feeling is described with taste of food: “a warm shock of air heat of mustard hunched on Mr. Bloom’s heart” (Joyce 219). That’s when he remembers that the lovers would soon meet in his own house. Even though he finally eats, words and phrases such “relish of disgust” and “feety savour” remain on the page, as if to spoil his joy:

Mr Bloom ate his strips of sandwich, fresh clean bread, with relish of disgust, pungent mustard, the feety savour of green cheese. Sips of his wine soothed his palate. Not logwood that. Tastes fuller this weather with the chill off (Joyce 220-1).

Bloom has been constantly thinking of his wife Molly, who is supposed to meet her lover in the afternoon. He thinks that he can only eat in comfort knowing that her lover is gone: “Wine soaked and softened rolled pith of bread mustard a moment mawkish cheese. Nice wine it is. ... Then about six o’clock I can. Six, six. Time will be gone then” (222). Food is also an escape for him. The inner monologue keeps reminding him of his pain, but food makes him feel better. The examples here show how food is a part of life and emotions for fictional characters too. The appetite and loss of appetite for food are metaphors for emotions of everyday life. There are many instances where Bloom remembers his memories related with food. For example, exchanging food through a kiss, in a picnic with his wife, represents the good and happy times, whereas an advertisement about potted meat reminds him of his situation as an incomplete and cheated husband. In the introduction to *Food and Culture*, the editors explain the purpose of the book this way: “food is life, and life can be studied and understood through food” (Counihan and Van Esterik 1). Thus *Ulysses*, as one of the greatest books about how life is, can be studied through food.

Apart from being a tool for grotesque realism and the representation of everyday life, food in *Ulysses* stands for personal identity. Food habits and choices symbolize people’s character and identity, as suggested by the saying “tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are”. According to Deborah Lupton, food is at the very center of our subjectivity,

and discourses about food reflect what separates each human being from the other based on the food they choose (1). Food, the author concludes, acts as a symbolic commodity “to present a persona to oneself and others” (15). Claude Fishler also regards food as the center of our perception of identity for ourselves. It signifies our uniqueness, what makes us different from the other people (275).

However, people do not choose what to eat freely. Food practices and preferences are dominated by cultural meanings and power relations. Food choices of individuals are affected by several aspects. Certain foods belong to certain people, traditionally depending on their class, race, religion, gender and even age. Culture also defines who will eat what through written or unwritten rules.

In *Ulysses*, Bloom’s personal identity is reflected through his food choices, from “Calypso” to “Penelope”; from Bloom preparing his wife’s breakfast to Molly thinking that he wished for “a couple of eggs” from her in the morning (871). Joyce wanted to create this ordinary hero with all his bodily needs, including eating. Though Bloom is depicted as a standard human being with physical needs, he has many peculiar characteristics which separate him from the others in his society and his times. One of the ways this is presented in the novel is through the food Bloom refuses to eat. This is exemplified in “Lestrygonians”, where he is disgusted when he sees plenty of men eating meat.

The use of the food motif by Joyce exemplifies how gender roles affect food choices which are determined culturally and socially. Pierre Bourdieu claims that some dishes are attributed to certain genders. For example, meat belongs to men historically, as women are expected to eat slowly and moderately (Bourdieu 34-35). In “Sexual Politics of Meat”, Carol J. Adams claims that traditionally men needed powerful food as they need physical power to work. Eating meat has the symbolic meaning of increasing one’s masculinity and being the food of the more important gender (Adams 87). Lupton also comments that meat has the connotations of “lust, animal and masculine passion, strength... decay, anger, violence, aggression” (28).

Bloom was hungry at lunch time, and the smell of food intensified his appetite and hunger: “stink gripped his trembling breath: pungent meatjuice, slop of greens.” (Joyce 214). However, despite his hunger, he was disgusted with what he saw in the restaurant. As if he came out of his fantasy world, dreaming of food, he faces the reality. The men in the Burton restaurant were eating with their mouths open, spitting food. Also, not only the scene, but disgusting smells of the food, the people, and the toilet, all mixed together to make the scene more disgusting for him.

Men, men, men.

... A pallid suetfaced young man polished his tumbler knife fork and spoon with his napkin. New set of microbes. A man with an infant's sauced stained napkin tucked round him shoveled gurgling soup down his gullet. A man spitting back on his plate: halfmasticated gristle: no teeth to chewchewchew it. Chump chop from the grill. ... Smells of men. His gorge rose. Spaton sawdust, sweetish warmish cigarette smoke, reek of plug, split beer, men's beery piss, the stale of ferment.

Couldn't eat a morsel here (215).

Bloom sees them as uncivilized people who don't know how to eat. They are merely savages eating meat inhumanly: "That fellow ramming a knifeful of cabbage down as if his life depended on it. ... An illgirt server gathered sticky clattering plates...other chap telling him something with his mouth full..." (Joyce 216). He loses all his appetite when he sees these cannibal-like men as the name of the episode reflects. Joyce further describes these men as "swilling, wolfing, gobfuls of sloppy food, their eyes bulging, wiping wetted moustaches" (Joyce 215). And these men prefer to eat meat. Thus both the absence of women in the scene and their choices of food exemplifies the patriarchal aspect of the people who are eating there.

Bloom, as a non-patriarchal person, does not want to be identified with them, so refuses to eat with them and refuses to eat what they choose to eat. His disgust is a statement by him to reflect his identity. In *Ulysses*, after being nauseated by the meat-eating men, he chooses a gorgonzola sandwich at Davy Byrne's pub. His choice of a non-meat-based meal shows his personality through food. In the novel, in many instances Bloom is reflected as a feminine man, having nontraditional masculine qualities. For example, in "Calypso", we find him cooking breakfast for his wife in the kitchen, the traditional women's domain. In the novel, men gossip a lot about his unmanliness. In "Circe", we read: "Professor Bloom is a finished example of the new womanly man" (Joyce 613-4).

Another trait of his personality, which is his pacifism can be seen in his support for vegetarianism in the novel. According to some critics, Bloom's disgust when he sees the men eating meat arises from the violent images of animals being killed for meat:

split their skulls open. Moo. Poor trembling calves. ...rawhead and bloody bones. Flayed glasseyed sheep hung from their haunches, sheepnouts bloody-papered snievelling nosejam on sawdust...hot fresh blood they prescribe for decline (217).

There is a great emphasis on Bloom eating meat in the novel, though. He is famous for his appetite for kidney. But in “Lestrygonians”, he begins to question people’s culinary choices and criticizes meat eaters, praising vegetarians. He thinks and speaks as what vegetarians would say “Dont eat a beefsteak. If you do the eyes of that cow will pursue you through all eternity” (Joyce 210). Also, According to Bloom, there is a difference between the characteristics of people who eat meat and those who don’t. Vegetarians can produce poetry whereas meat eaters can’t:

I wouldn’t be surprised if it was that kind of food you see produces the like waves of the brain the poetical for example one of those policemen sweating Irish stew into their shirts; you couldn’t squeeze a line of poetry out of him (210).

Kiberd asks why someone who begins the day eating the inner organs of animals can change his ideas about meat in the upcoming hours of the day. He says that Bloom may be disturbed by the association of the image of meat eaters with cannibalism, or by the Plumtree’s potted meat advertisement that he sees in the paper (Joyce 172). Bloom may be also remembering the throwaway, which reads: “Blood of the Lamb ... Are you saved? All are washed in the blood of the lamb” (Joyce 190). For Kiberd, all these things may have affected him, and also the way meat is eaten. What disturbs him is the communality of the activity. According to Kiberd, Bloom enjoys eating as a lonely activity, as a “ritual” (173). There is also the probability of his thoughts of unrest about his wife’s adultery. In the middle of the scene, when he sees men eating meat violently, it might remind him of Boylan (Kiberd 173-4).

Food also indicates social identity construction. Those who eat the same food construct a group separate from the individuals who eat differently. This is called the inclusion effect of food (Fischler 277). Food also creates symbolic meanings for human societies which are constructed socially, historically, and religiously. Food, being a system of communication, contains certain codes of meaning within it. The message it contains is hidden in the social relations of the society. Moreover, religion creates food-related rules like rituals, sacrifices and taboos which further affect the food choices of individuals. The social and religious meanings of food stand for determining the distinctiveness of human groups from each other by what they choose to eat and not to eat. This defines a group identity which creates insiders and outsiders in a particular culture. Foods and drinks constitute the material means by which groups form their cultural and social togetherness. Dietary laws are ways of sharing culture and, more importantly, reaffirming belonging.

The rituals around food, sacred food, ways of eating certain food, prohibited food are all examples of how religion establishes certain rules to ascertain belonging through food. Food helps maintaining an identity of belonging to a group as opposed to outsiders.

Another social function of food is constructed by the element of the polluting and dirty food. Every culture has different things and objects regarded as impure.

More concretely, when a person proclaims his affiliation with and allegiance to a particular group that he regards as his self-contained universe and beyond whose margins he sees danger, threat, and alienation, he simultaneously invokes –explicitly or implicitly– the many badges of his social identity, which become articulated through a discourse of “purity” and “pollution” . . . He thereby asserts his separateness from people in all other groups –usually referred to in pejorative terms– and his identification with the members of his own group (Stefon and Cohen).

Each religion has its own rules about edible and inedible. According to Douglas there are many reasons for pork to be a taboo in Judaism. Douglas mentions the dietary rules in the Book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible. The prohibition of pork is explained in “The Abominations of Leviticus”. [It explains, for example, that the swine cannot be eaten “because it parts the hoof but does not chew the cud”. So, it is unclean, therefore non-edible. The Book of Leviticus also states: “their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch” (Douglas, “The Abominations” 48). Apart from the cleanliness of the animal and its meat, Douglas also claims that there is a social function of the prohibition, for pork was eaten by the non-Israelites (Douglas, “The Abominations” 49).

Victor Benno Meyer-Rochow claims in his article “Food Taboos: Their Origins and Purposes”:

Any food taboo, acknowledged by a particular group of people as part of its ways, aids in the cohesion of this group, helps that group stand out amongst others, assists that group to maintain its identity and creates a feeling of “belonging”. Thus, food taboos can strengthen the confidence of a group by functioning as a demonstration of the uniqueness of the group in the face of others (9).

Jewish dietary law, the *kashrut*, prohibits eating foods like meat and milk products together. Even meat and milk contained in food should be kept separate from each other in plates and utensils in the kitchen too.

In *Ulysses*, there are many references to cultural belonging through food. Joyce wants to demonstrate how the social identity of its hero Bloom, a Jew in a Catholic, Irish society, can be problematic through his choices of food within a day. Bloom has to choose

food according to the religious dietary laws as a Jew is expected to be. However, he doesn't comply with them.

His conscious choice of pork as food contradicts his religion's rules of atonement. So, eating pork demonstrates in a way his rejection of Jewish identity and religion. In "Ithaca", we find the following question:

Why did Bloom experience a sentiment of remorse?

Because in immature impatience he had treated with disrespect certain beliefs and practices.

As?

The prohibition of the use of fleshmeat and milk at one meal, the hebdomadary symposium of incoordinately abstract, perfervidly concrete mercantile coexreligionist excompatriots: the circumcision of male infants: the supernatural character of Judaic scripture: the ineffability of the tetragrammaton: the sanctity of the sabbath.

How did these beliefs and practices now appear to him?

Not more rational than they had then appeared, not less rational than other beliefs and practices now appeared (853).

Bloom comments on traditions on food like Christmas meals, kosher food, and sacrifice in the name of religion: "Kosher. No meat and milk together. Hygiene that was what they call now. Yom kippur fast spring cleaning inside. Peace and war depend on some fellow's digestion. Religions. Christmas turkeys and geese. Slaughter of innocents. Eat, drink and be merry" (218). So, Bloom is aware that he disrespects the Jewish dietary laws.

However, Bloom embraces being a Jew, as he calls himself in "Cyclops". He says: "I belong to a race too ... that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment" (431-2). Bloom meets with the Citizen, a prototypical nationalistic character. He challenges Bloom by asking him his nation, Bloom responds Ireland. The Citizen spits as he hears this (430). As the dialogue exemplifies, he was seen as outsider by the common people around him. He was seen as a Jew, non-Irish. He faces anti-Semitic attacks in the pub. Lauren Rich comments that: "Bloom unwittingly cements his status as an outsider in the nationalist pub and confirms the Citizen's belief that he is a penny-pinching, unpatriotic Jew" (Rich 75). Bloom tells him: "your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me" (Joyce 445). However, he is not a real Jew, since his mother was a Catholic. In his essay "Joyce's

Jewish Stew: The Alimentary Lists in *Ulysses*”, Jaye Berman Montresor lists the food that Bloom has eaten throughout the day:

The reader repeatedly bears witness to his flagrant violations of kosher practice. In “Circe,” Bello’s threat to eat Bloom, whom she likens to a “sucking pig,” is fit punishment for someone so fond of pork, and the distribution by his bodyguard of “dairyfed pork sausages” in the same episode is emblematic of Bloom’s violation of the two major prohibitions of kosher law—the eating of pork and the mixing of meat and milk (200).

According to Phyllis J. C. Levy, Bloom can be called the least religious of all characters in literature in that he doesn’t obey the rituals of any religion. This situation “leaves him with a feeling of loneliness and isolation” (Levy 27). It is both a conscious and unconscious act.

Bloom is an outsider, and his food choices only emphasize this characteristic. According to Rich, Bloom is an “unhomed” character, an outsider to the Dublin society and to his household because he is a part-Jewish Irishman (Rich 86). He is a supporter of vegetarianism, a peace-loving man, a civilized gentleman, who doesn’t belong to the same social group with those dirty meat-eaters in the Burton restaurant. Therefore, though he is hungry, he refuses to eat there and prefers to be alone. The social function of food depends on how the individual prefers to eat, together or alone. Lauren Rich in her article “A Table for One: Hunger and Unhomeliness in Joyce’s Public Eateries” concentrates on the lonely act of eating outside of home in Joyce’s works. The author provides many examples of how eating in *Ulysses* is an alienating and lonely act that creates characters that are “literally and emotionally hungry” (Joyce 72). Bloom having his breakfast alone, having no company to eat together at lunch time proves his loneliness. The wandering of Bloom in the streets of Dublin, searching for a place to eat, can be interpreted as way Joyce used to portray him as an outcast. Eating in public places requires a sense of belonging to a community, where, when they share a table, they share way more than just food.

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