

The Hunger Food Can't Satisfy:

The Communion of Food and Religion in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

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Hemingway once wrote, "There is romance in food when romance has disappeared from everywhere else" ("Gastronomic Adventures" 376). But his idea of romantic food isn't what one would expect. He boasts having sampled unusual delicacies like one-hundred-year-old eggs and porcupine ("Gastronomic Adventures" 376); and in the next breath, his characters ask for a peanut butter and onion sandwich, a mundane, if not nauseating, combination (Hemingway, "Islands in the Stream" 368).

But as entertaining as Hemingway's attempt to eat through a zoo is, the food in his literature seems more sumptuous and sincere. The table of his characters in *The Sun Also Rises* is set with authentic Spanish dishes like big bowls of vegetable soup, fried trout, wild strawberries, coffee gulped from bowls, hard-boiled eggs, and roast chicken. In typical Hemingway fashion, the descriptions are sparse, but a reader can imagine the warmth of a bowl of soup and taste the clean sweetness of summer-ripe fruit more clearly than the texture of a Chinese sea slug or the gaminess of beaver tail, two of Hemingway's more exotic "romantic" endeavors ("Gastronomic Adventures" 376). The sheer amount of food mentioned in his works leads scholars like Samuel J. Rogal to claim "the total output of prose fiction and nonfiction from Ernest Hemingway contains perhaps more references to food and drink—and to eaters and drinkers—than can be found in works by those twentieth-century American journalists and/or writers of fiction who preceded or followed him" (7). Frankly stated, food's massive presence in his works easily suggests Hemingway's love of food.

But if there was something Hemingway didn't have a taste for (not even an acquired one), it was religion. For him, there was no romance in religion, perhaps because religion reminded him too much of suburban Oak Park and stifling parents who encouraged daily family Bible study and decried the evils of sexual exploration (Meyers, "Biography" 5). Hemingway felt like he was always considered a sinner, being alcoholic, four times divorced, an obscene writer, and, at one point, a Catholic (54). But he found little solace in Catholicism. His works remain "consistently sceptical (sic) about religion and hostile to the Catholic Church" and to organized religion in general (185). For example, in his short story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," he parodies the Lord's Prayer with the nihilist "nada": "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name" (383).

Because of the two opening quotes in *The Sun Also Rises*—Gertrude Stein's famous statement "You are all a lost generation" and the scripture from Ecclesiastes—the touches of Christianity seem too intentional to be coincidentally religious. And it's not the only suspiciously religious allusion in the novel. Rogal highlights a few religious images in a scene that takes place during the San Fermin festival at Pamplona (which is also "a religious festival" [156]). On the last day before prices double, Jake finds his friends in a wine shop, sharing wine and participating in a "last supper." To emphasize the Christian flavor even further, Cohn eerily—and sleepily—emerges from the back of the store after passing out, a wreath of garlic buds around his neck, a twisted reflection of Christ's resurrection (Rogal 17). But Rogal leaves the analysis there, ignoring other religious details in the passage. There are also the evocative symbols Mike consumes in a shared meal of chopped tuna fish and vinegar, all images associated with Christ—sharing of food as communion, fish as motif in the New Testament, and Christ drinking vinegar

at His crucifixion. This scene, from a writer who, not only was conscious of his writing but of food as well, seems too close to Christianity to be an accident. With this mixture of religious symbols and food in mind, I want to look at the way Hemingway's characters purposely use food as an easy-to-swallow replacement for religion. However, by following the characters as they eat and drink their way through Spain, we come to see that, even for Hemingway, food does not always satisfy spiritual hunger.

Of course food is more than food in Hemingway's literature. The beauty and persistence of his writing depends on the effect that omitting certain facts to "make people feel something more than they understood" (Hemingway, *Feast* 71). Really, this effect comes from small details in the story that provide clues, and interpreting food is key to unraveling Hemingway's powerful effect in the novel. To Meyers, food is an important indicator of culture and character, and an image to use in lieu of a less true sentence ("Feasts" 426). In *A Moveable Feast*, details of meals are almost as clear as conversations. Recalling a lovely luncheon with "[l]ittle radishes, and good foie de veau with mashed potatoes and an endive salad . . . [and] apple tart," preserves the beauty of Paris in the 1920s (34). Especially in *A Moveable Feast*, food strengthens memory, linking physical senses with place (Law 251). Sometimes too food creates male solidarity (Stubbs 83), indicating an outsider (Meyers, "Feasts" 432), or even serves as part of a healing ritual (Benca 71). Though few critics have tackled decrypting food in *The Sun Also Rises*, it's clear that food for Hemingway is something worth romancing in a world where there's little to love.

Given Hemingway's love of food and the roles food plays in his literature, it's not surprising when his characters turn to food to fill certain aspects in their lives. Jake, half-jokingly, observes that food and wine figure heavily into Count Mippipopolous' values. This

sentiment is ironic because values are typically seen as virtues like honesty and perseverance. And yet, it rings true. The count confirms this lack of values earlier in the conversation. After being in seven wars and four revolutions, he claims, “You see, it is because I have lived very much that now I can enjoy everything so well” (67). He replaces the complex system of virtues and vices, something we collectively consider as morality, with the simple enjoyment of food and wine. Then when Brett asks, “Doesn’t anything ever happen to your values?” the count’s reply is simply “No. Not any more” (sic 67). This scene indicates that there is something more appealing about having good food versus bad food as a redefined morality than the traditional system of right and wrong morals.

To better understand what is it about food that makes it appealing as a value system, I’ll look at an instance in the novel where food does something right, in bringing people together in a sort of communion. The bond between Jake, Bill, and Harris the Englishman in *Burguete* particularly stands out as a successful communion. Their round of drinks is first seen as significant because of their alcohol of choice: wine, the liquid of communion. The purpose of traditional liturgical communion is to unite the individual with Christ, but it also unites the congregation with each other in the shared sacrament. And the feeling of unity is present as Harris grows sentimental, saying things like, “You don’t know what it’s meant to me to have you chaps up here” (134). Jake and Bill have nothing but sincere things to say after sharing the meal, and they depart with good spirits.

That’s why food can be so appealing as a morality: you partake of the benefits immediately. A meal satisfies an empty stomach. This communion is effective because everyone is satisfied. But with liturgical communion, it’s harder to experience that immediate satisfaction.

A Catholic isn't guaranteed heaven after drinking wine. Jake's desired morality very much depends on the idea of an "exchange of values . . . [that you] gave up something and got something else" (152). Jake attends mass in Pamplona, but never emerges from the cathedral with reassurance; instead he is occupied with praying for his friends and for ways to make more money, very much temporal and near-future desires (102). Jake doesn't feel satisfied with liturgical communion and turns to his friends, food, and alcohol to feel good. Similarly, it's harder to feel satisfaction when not part of a community. Though there are others in the cathedral, Jake feels cut off from them because he sees himself as "a rotten Catholic" (103). His Catholicism even draws lines between him and his friends. When Brett wants to attend mass with Jake, he informs her that it is in another (more exclusive) language and is uninteresting (154). When it comes to immediate satisfaction, whether from liturgical communion or a community of believers, Catholicism can't match the way food satisfies and unites people.

However, there are limits to how much food can satisfy, beyond the volume of our stomachs. After the tense confrontation between Mike and Robert Cohn, everyone later reconvenes for supper, which is surprisingly "a pleasant meal." There are no confrontations, and even Cohn starts to cheer up after a few drinks (150). In sharing a meal and wine, again, there are parallels to the service of communion. Here, food and wine seem to succeed as values because they result in a positive outcome: everyone is cheerful and sharing with one another. However, food doesn't solve the underlying issue. The conflict sparks up again in later chapters, but even during the meal Jake feels the "ignored tension . . . [the] feeling of things coming that you could not prevent happening" (150). The communion fails because the act of sharing and eating together is incomplete. Instead, this particular communion postpones the inevitable conflict. It is

by drinking the wine that Jake eventually loses “the disgusted feeling” and sees his friends as such nice people. Instead of bringing the group together in shared vulnerability to work through tension, the meal instead masks the tension, making the participants too drunk to care. In the end, even though the people are physically brought together, the tensions are left to ferment.

So there are limitations to how much food can properly replace morality. At the end of the novel, Jake is still left disgusted with the things that happened. Still sticking with his concept of food-as-morality, he spends a dinner with Brett consuming a large meal: “We had roast young suckling pig and drank *rioja alta*. Brett did not eat much I ate a very big meal and drank three bottles of *rioja alta*” with room still for dessert (249). But it’s not enough, as Jake orders another bottle of wine, claiming he’s not getting drunk, but just “drinking a little wine” (250). None of the conflicts throughout the novel are fully resolved: Montoya is still cross at Jake for compromising his *aficion* by corrupting Romero; Cohn has still been wronged by Mike; his friends are not such nice people; and he still can’t be with Brett. So Jake eats as much as he can, desperately trying to gain something else in return. Instead, the novel ends with an uncomfortable openness; “[W]e could have had such a damned good time together,” Brett says. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” is Jake’s apathetic reply (251).

Neither food nor wine can solve Jake’s real issues. Mistakes in food-morality, even disgusting-tasting ones, are short-lived and easy to fix. Jake washes down a bad beer with a worse cognac “to take the taste out of [his] mouth” (28). He sleeps off a few too many drinks to wake up sober the next morning (228). Food poisoning passes after a few hours. But it’s harder to wash out the bad taste of actions. Jake wishes that Mike would stop hurting Cohn because Jake liked it and felt disgusted with himself after: “*That* was morality: things that made you

disgusted afterward” (italics added 152). This guilt continues to the end of the novel, where Jake begins to “feel like hell,” he gets drunk quickly in an attempt to assumably stop feeling.

As easy as it is to claim that Hemingway abhorred religion, the failure of the food-morality presented in the novel has interesting implications. Benca’s article on spiritual healing in Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” indicates that Hemingway believed in the necessity of healing through a greater power—in the story’s instance, healing by becoming one with nature. In his article, food is a tool, not a replacement, for healing (71). Such alignment with nature doesn’t quite exist in *The Sun Also Rises*, however, except during Jake’s time in Burguete. And Hemingway is careful to demonstrate the futility of Catholicism through Jake’s skepticism, far from suggesting the church’s role in providing that satisfaction. But the alternative his characters turn to and live by isn’t enough to truly satisfy. Food and wine does have the potential to unify characters and seems more appealing than dealing with a complex system of right and wrong. And yet, eating can only take them so far before they are left with full bellies still aching for something more.

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