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BREWING SYMBOLISM IN ERICA BAUERMEISTER'S *THE SCHOOL OF ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS*

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Abstract

This study explores the characters through symbols. Each member in Lillian's cooking class has their own setbacks and the selection of certain essential ingredients help them to unravel themselves from the problems and find their true authentic self through food. Erica Bauermeister has intricately woven the symbols with each character's life and is simply exquisite to analyse deeper. The symbols she incorporated imparts the emotions that are not given attention to in typical life. Symbols are vital patterns of meanings that connects the inner and outer worlds of the character. The members Lillian, Claire, Chloe are symbolically portrayed through ingredients like apple, crab, heirloom tomato. In this study the symbols are examined to analyse the characters.

Keywords: symbolism, food studies, apple, heirloom tomato, crab

Erica Bauermeister's novel *The School of Essential Ingredients* was published in the year 2009. She loves the slow way of living and cooking. She writes about compassion, connection and the things that are in the background of daily life. She has written a memoir, five novels and a two of readers' guide to books. In the novel, the protagonist Lillian relatively resembles the author's voice, she says, "We're all just ingredients. What matters is the grace with which you cook the meal." (Bauermeister, 139) Literary devices are the best thing that assists the authors to intensify and enrich their narrative. It adapts various roles in literature making the readers involve into the story's themes and the characters. Among many devices symbolism is highlighted in this study. Symbolism is when an object, person, ideas that are abstract, marks, a place or an event that is used skilfully to denote something bigger than the literal sense [1]. It is layered and is deep like casserole and lasagna dishes. Dixon in her book *The Changing Chicken* says that "food is burdened with a symbolic load; those who are involved in food communications are forced to adopt a dual emphasis upon the internal (personal) and external (social) meanings of food." (64) This paper analyses the symbols employed in the novel through which the situation or a role of a character is exposed. To paraphrase Paxson, food encompasses all the material, sensory and symbolic properties that has the possibility to either increase or diminish the characteristics of the eater. Anthropologists have been relayed on the fact that

culturally the food is how people conceive and assimilate its essential qualities like the edibility and the nutrients it has to offer. By eating these types of food they directly acquire these qualities making eating a substantial act as food makes the eater.[2]

Symbolism in the novel

This novel consists of series of interconnected stories of eight members who attend the cooking class that Lillian conducts. The author Bauermeister has given a series of ingredients that perfectly aligns with their character or their evolving personality to bring out a whole essence of their being (meal). The title itself is symbolic, as the author looks each character as an essential ingredient (vegetables, fruits, herbs) that come from different culture, place, facing rooting problems, that needs love, care, attention, an urge to belong somewhere, and to send packing their loneliness. All these characters (ingredients) come together in the kitchen to form a community (meal) which is something to marvel about. It has greater and deeper meanings when analysed thoroughly. Lillian, as said above is the owner and the chef of the restaurant Lillian's in Northwest America which has been a reward for her tedious work, in that restaurant she conducts a cooking class once a month on Monday night. She possesses a unique quality and perspective in analysing food and the eater.

When examining her past, she has been subjected into a minor neglect by her mother. As her father left her mother and her when she was four, her mother recoiled herself from the reality, making her own world filled with books. She was present but not really present and involved for years in her daughter Lillian's life. Lillian decided to cook for her as she loved and believed cooking like people believe in religion. Young Lillian takes great effort to bring her mother to the reality by making dishes after dishes like scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes and Mexican-styled coffee. But nothing worked out for her. Her mother would have it and retreats back to her books. But one thing changed her completely and made her come out of her daze, it is when Lillian brought her mother an apple.

A single apple (fruit) overturned her life's events. She got her mother back and explored cooking together along with that she recognizes the power of food. It has many symbolic references, as in *The Holy Bible* [3], in the garden of Eden, the forbidden fruit is the apple which comes from the tree of knowledge. Through this apple, Adam and Eve acquire knowledge, gain consciousness and become aware of the happenings around them. The symbolic representation of apple in Lillian's character has various meanings to it, a journey that made her a chef, her devoted bond with food made her a teacher who unfolds way for others who stumble and stagger in their daily lives. Her continuous effort to bring back her mother to reality and back to her conscious world is when she bit the apple.

Lillian's mother took the apple and absentmindedly pressed its smooth, cold surface against her cheek. "It feels like fall," she commented, and bit into it. The sharp, sweet sound of the crunch filled the air like a sudden burst of applause and Lillian laughed at the noise. Her mother looked up, smiling at the sound, and her eyes met her daughter's. "Why, Lillian," she said, her voice rippling with surprise, "look how you've grown." (Bauermeister, 32)

For Lillian food was never just mere sustenance, it is beyond. By the transformative power of apple, she and her mother acquire knowledge by obtaining a new found joy and the beginning of life. As she taught her students, food transcends beyond just food by giving access to emotion, healing and memory.

Another symbol put forth by the author is through Claire. She is one of the members of the cooking class and attends it as it is gifted to her by her mother. She leaves behind her three-year old Lucy and a baby at home with her husband James. After arriving at the restaurant, she could not stop thinking about her family, stressing over the things that she asked for her husband to take care of. Claire, before the birth of her children loved gardening, her husband more, spending time leisurely as it comes. After becoming a mother Claire feels as if she is pushed to the background which makes her invisible to everyone and it bothers her. She feels, "She became the frame for the picture that was her son and daughter." (Bauermeister,

48) She pushes herself to maintain her identity and, in the process, becomes overwhelmed with her responsibilities. On entering into motherhood, she could not find time for her, as she entirely dedicates herself for reading stories to Lucy, nursing her baby, taking care of them all day when her husband is out working in a different atmosphere from her. Despite many struggles she continues to love them endlessly. She is desperate for a lone time to get herself together to know who she really is other than her role of a wife and a mother. This cooking class provides her the time she always needed to find herself.

In her first cooking class Lillian teaches them to cook crab. It has the quality of adaptability, resilience and has the ability to change itself by growing out for the next of life. Claire has lost herself in bits and pieces on the journey of becoming a mother and to grow out of it she has to shed the outer layer that others built around her. The symbolism of crab is apt for her situation, when the crab outgrows its shell, it sheds for its body to grow, this process is known as molting, though it is in its defenceless and stressed state it is a necessary and a transformative state that the crab has to undergo to sustain its life suggesting a lesson that one has to shed their outer shell that limits their growth.

During the class Lillian teaches them how to kill the crab, and Claire is shocked by the cruelty done to it. The act of killing a crab is hard for Claire as she has turned into a new woman (a mother) soft, loving, empathetic being, she hesitates to do the things which she has done before. This act of killing the crab for a meal gives her the opportunity to face the challenge and help her move to finding herself. The crab is cut open in the class, which acts as a symbol that she cannot hide behind the shell evermore and must face the facts and accept the exposed emotions to connect with others and herself. After killing the crab like Lillian had taught her,

she stood at the sink, Claire's body was shivering and yet—and this ran counter to everything she thought about herself—deeply stirred. It was like jumping off the high diving board when you believed you couldn't, hitting the cold water and feeling it fly over your hot skin. Claire the bank teller, Claire the mother, would never have killed a crab. But then again, Claire thought, these days she was a lot of things she didn't recognize. (Bauermeister, 52)

After the cooking process of crab is done, Lillian gives them time to relish in the smell and the warmth of the dish they made together. Claire ardently obeys it, closing her eyes and enjoys her time putting herself first to reconnect with herself. And when she ate,

The meat touched her tongue and the taste ran through her, full and rich and complicated, dense as a long, deep kiss. She took another bite and felt her feet settle into the floor and the rest of her flow into a river of ginger and garlic and lemon and wine. She stood, even when that bite, and the next and the next were gone, feeling the river wind its way to her fingers, her toes, her belly, the base of her spine, melting all the pieces of her into something warm and golden. She breathed in, and in that one, quiet moment felt herself come back together again. Slowly, Claire opened her eyes (Bauermeister, 60)

Following the sensational act, the flavourful meal they enjoyed were mixed with ginger, garlic, onions, lemon, wine which helps her to rearrange and find herself once again. The pain and vulnerability of change and transformative process is universal thing that the living beings has to undergo to find the new personality that may be astonishing at times.

Chloe, a teenager was invited to the cooking class by Lillian herself. She is associated with the heirloom tomato, a variety which was not popular before and grown in homes. The seeds of this tomato are saved for the next year to continue farming and to pass it on to the people they know. With the rise of demand on commercial tomatoes, growing heirloom tomato became a hobby and the main cause for its prevalence today is the baby boomers' interest in living a peaceful life by engaging in gardening and looking for the unique ingredients and dishes (Jordan). Today slowly with the rise of organic foods, its popularity is grown.

But is usually found in the farmer's market grown locally, selling it to the local restaurants. Donna St. George, a New York Times reporter on her study asserts that,

heirloom tomatoes outdo the modern kinds that most people eat, enthusiasts say, in flavor, tenderness and diversity. There are several thousand heirlooms in all. Some are tangy, some sweet; some as big as grapefruits, others as small as grapes. They come in zebra stripes, heart shapes, emerald greens, deep purples, chocolate browns. (St. George)

Heirloom tomatoes are different from the commercial ones, the beauty and its imperfection make it unique with its pleasant appearance, taste and is authentic and deeply connected with tradition. It depicts the characteristics of Chloe, unique, different, messy and imperfect kind of girl and feels like she is "not enough" but indeed an essential ingredient for Lillian. But due to her lack of attention she could not maintain her self-esteem and her romantic life. Lillian gives her a chance in her restaurant to prove herself and others that she is also capable of doing things. She assures her, "Well, let's just say that in my experience people who seem distracted can be some of the most interesting people you'll ever meet." (Bauermeister, 152)

She wanted to treat her boyfriend Jake with a pasta meal and show him her love through the food she makes. She gets an heirloom tomato from farmer's market and an expensive wine to make the dinner the best, but her manipulative boyfriend dismissed her by having opened "the expensive wine" while cooking, she feels agitated that her love is not reciprocated. She throws away the tomato in the garbage, indicating that she gave up on herself without knowing her self-worth and going back to Jake and accepting the way he treated her. When making tortillas in the cooking class Lillian gives her an heirloom tomato to work with:

The tomato was unlike anything Chloe had seen before, bulbous and swollen, more horizontal than vertical, with ridges running from top to bottom along its sides, straining in places, ready to burst. There was red, certainly, but of a painter's palette of variations, deep garnet to almost orange, with streaks of green and yellow. Its comforting weight filled her hand, the ridges sliding between her fingers. She pressed softly, then stopped, feeling the skin begin to depress beneath her touch. (Bauermeister, 167)

She gets to touch, cut open and taste the beauty and after tasting she says, "Why would you ever want to eat anything else?" Chloe asked as she finished. (Bauermeister 168) Everything changes when she started observing her surroundings, the tortillas she helped to make has made not only helped her but also everyone in the kitchen. It is filled with such an energy, laughter, romance and the fact she was a part of it made her realise her self-worth.

Lillian again gifts her with one of the beauties an heirloom tomato as a prize and this time when she reaches home, she did not throw the tomato when Jake dismissed her, instead she places it on the table and says: "That's a good tomato—you don't need to mix it with anything." (Bauermeister 175) packed her bags and left him. This act portrays that she owns her self-worth and her authenticity. Though the heirloom tomatoes are imperfect and weird, it is praised for its pleasing taste likewise Chloe is also worth of every ounce of love and self-respect even though she is distracted and imperfect. As said before, the seeds of the heirloom tomatoes are saved for the next year denotes renewal and growth through imperfections. Chloe understands that her imperfections are not her setbacks but her seeds of growth.

Conclusion

Symbolism has a subtle and a skilful way of conveying the characteristics of the characters. This novel is stuffed with symbols and its relation to the characters are evident in providing insights into their emotions of loss and what they have gained in return, their memories and the formation of a community engrossed within the broader themes. Through food they make peace with themselves and their evolving selves. Thus, the members of the cooking class, Lillian, Claire, Chloe and even the other members have certain symbolic quality that matches well with a specific ingredient.

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