

A Bittersweet Recipe

Spaces of Utopia and Imagination in *Harry Potter* Meals

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Abstract: My purpose with this paper will be to analyze how food contributes for the creation of relationships between *Harry Potter* characters and how it helps readers to evaluate certain spaces and moments within the series itself. The existence of food helps to determine some of the most important interactions between characters of the saga and can be seen as part of the narrative device that makes the plot evolve (for example, the very first encounter of the main characters). In order to demonstrate this circumstance, I will be focusing on the imaginative properties of *Harry Potter* meals, particularly in the final book of the saga, and also how they can be used for the characterization of Utopian and Dystopian spaces in certain moments of the story. The moments before and during the reign of Voldemort, the series main antagonist, may not only be analyzed through contrasting adjectivation or positive and negative emotions, but also through the existence and quality of the food that is presented to the characters. Finally, what I wish to emphasize is that food is a strong psychological component that contributes not only for the happiness or bickering between characters, but it also assists the readers in assessing certain situations and in making their reading of the series a more appealing and delicious activity, confirming the words of George Bernard Shaw that “there is no sincerer love than the love of food.”

Keywords: Food Studies, Imagination, Harry Potter, Rowling

Resumo: O meu propósito com este ensaio será analisar o contributo da comida na criação de relações entre personagens da série *Harry Potter* e a forma como ajuda os leitores a avaliarem certos espaços e momentos da própria série. A existência da comida ajuda a determinar algumas das interações mais relevantes entre

personagens da saga e pode ser vista como parte da ação que permite ao enredo evoluir (por exemplo, o primeiro encontro das personagens principais). De forma a ilustrar estas circunstâncias, irei concentrar-me nas propriedades imaginativas das refeições em *Harry Potter*, particularmente no último livro da saga, e também como estas podem ser usadas para a caracterização de espaços utópicos e distópicos durante certos momentos da história. Os momentos antes e durante o reinado de Voldemort, o antagonista da série, podem ser analisados não só através de adjetivação contrastante e de emoções positivas ou negativas, mas também através da qualidade da comida que é representada no devir da interação entre as personagens. O que desejo realçar é que a comida tem uma forte componente psicológica que contribui não só para a felicidade ou discussões entre as personagens, mas também ajuda os leitores a avaliar certas situações e a fazer da sua leitura da série uma experiência mais apelativa e deliciosa, reverberadora das palavras de George Bernard Shaw de que “there is no sincerer love than the love of food.”

Palavras-chave: Estudos sobre alimentação, imaginação, Harry Potter, Rowling

J.K. Rowling’s famous saga, *Harry Potter*, has enchanted the hearts and minds of people of all ages and they keep on asking for more content to devour. From the wonderful magic to heart-wrenching plot twists, Rowling’s ability as a story teller secured a spot for *Harry Potter* as one of the most beloved series of the 21st century.

One of the wonderful details that caught the minds and appetites of the readers was the diversity of the food and sweets existing in the series, from everlasting sugar quills to beans that have all flavors in existence (both good and bad) to sumptuous and mouth-watering banquets at Hogwarts’ Great Hall.

Being associated to the food studies group in my faculty, my purpose with this paper is to analyze not only some of the ingredients in the series, but also some of the moments in which they are inserted and to see how this synergy between food and plot is set into motion.

The *Harry Potter* series presents us a wide variety of ingredients, which are cause for celebration not only for the various readers of the series, but also for the characters of the

saga including Harry Potter himself (who had always been deprived of proper meals at the home of his cruel aunt and uncle, the Dursleys) and Ronald Weasley, who, unlike Harry, had always been accustomed to exactly the opposite situation, which still didn't prevent him from sharing Harry's enthusiasm upon their first arrival at Hogwarts.

Food is the kind of ingredient that can define relationships throughout years to come and the relationship between these two main characters is one that was firstly tested in such a way. According to Marianne Fisher, a professor of psychology at St. Mary's University at Halifax, Nova Scotia, "what appears to be an individual phenomenon is actually deep seated in our social and psychological behavior. Food and emotions are inexorably linked, thanks to a complex reaction in our bodies that affects our emotional attachments to loved ones and our need for food." (*apud* S.A., 2013)¹

Upon finding about his true identity as a wizard and a small fortune left to him by his parents, in other words, his birthright, Harry, who had never had any right to sweets in the Muggle world, wastes no time in trying to acquire all the Mars Bars he could get at the Hogwarts Express. However, some of the things he ends up getting are Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans (whose flavors go from the ordinary ones, like chocolate, peppermint and marmalade to spinach, liver and tripe); Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs and Pumpkin Pasties.

Ron's meal, however, pales in comparison. Despite the numerous, good meals he has with his family, Ron's family is poor, and his meal consists of four Corned Beef sandwiches. Harry, who never had any friends to share anything with, insists that Ron eat the sweets with him. After a small moment of reluctance, Ron joins in the meal gladly: "It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way, through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies." (Rowling 1997: 114)² Thus a strong bond is forged between the two main characters and the following scenes of this alternative universe, a marvelous Utopia where magic runs amok, are brought to us in smooth succession.³

The next few lines I will be delving into to are from the final book of the saga, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, seeing as these are extremely illustrative ones, which display the effects and consequences of the vastness and scarcity of the food that is

presented to the characters before and during the dominion of Lord Voldemort, the series main antagonist.

Having learned how to attract her readers, Rowling does not use long descriptions to explain the characters' surroundings. Instead their surroundings become self-explanatory through obvious denominations, for example, the Forbidden Forest. Instead, the descriptions of food in *Harry Potter* are the ones that are immensely detailed, but readers do not complain, in fact, they prefer it that way. (Virole 2004: 374)⁴

Before Voldemort takes over the world, things seem calm and heavenly for our main characters, who are assisting in the wedding of Ron's elder brother, Bill. This is a time for celebration and, obviously, an opportunity to enjoy a marvelous feast. The marquee upon which all people sit transforms itself into a gleaming dance floor and waiters pop up on all sides, some bearing silver trays of pumpkin juice, butterbeer, and firewhisky, others tottering piles of tarts and sandwiches. Furthermore, according to the book, the wedding cake is topped with two model phoenixes that take flight when the cake is cut, and there are also bottles of champagne that float unsupported through the crowd. (Rowling 2007: 163) Such highly desirable and nearly perfect qualities provide the series with a stronger sense of Utopia. With appetizing magic, a lot of joy and all the food you can eat, this utopian wedding seems just the sort of occasion every person would like to be a part of.

However, this joy is to be short-lived and we begin to see the first traces of darkness and sadness in a conversation that Harry has with one of Ron's aunts, Muriel, and Elphias Doge, about the reliability and reputation of Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts' deceased Headmaster. The reader can tell that each new sentence by Muriel, insulting the former hero of the magical community, and the consternation she caused Harry and Doge was always accompanied with a replacement of champagne and "the recitation of the scandals about Dumbledore seemed to elate Muriel as much as they horrify Doge." (Rowling 2007: 176) Here we see that food and beverage isn't only used to emphasize joy and happiness, but also sorrow and despair.

During the dominion of Voldemort, our heroes next sanctum, Grimmauld Place, has been given some of the best protection magic can provide, but not only is it one of the

gloomiest places Harry has ever set foot in, it is also, at that moment, devoid of edible food to boot.

Nevertheless the place, which can be seen as one detached from the outside world, shielded them from the oppression of Voldemort and the Death Eaters. For the moment they were safe. We are presented with a heterotopia of sorts, a space in which an alternative social ordering is performed. (Hetherington 1997: 40)

Eventually, our heroes, visited by a friend, discover, while holding Butterbeers in hand, that the once idyllic existence of the wizarding community has now turned into one filled with peril, unease and restlessness since Voldemort's rise to power. As the mood of the book grows darker and shortage of food becomes more constant, Voldemort's world, in which only pure-blooded wizards could live, and which is, thus, Dystopian in essence, is set into motion. Little comfort though it may be, here we see Butterbeer being utilized not only to help characters establish a conversation, but to give the reader a sense of comfort while reading sad news.

However, food not only demonstrates the current condition of a person's mood and disposition, but it also indicates changes in a character/s. For this reason I would like to bring attention to the sort of treatment that wizards have always given to beings such as house-elves. In the midst of an apparently perfect society, these powerful magical creatures have always been slaves to wizards and the way in which they are treated can be characterized as inhumane, sometimes even brutal.

A perfect example of this sort of suffering is Kreacher, who does not receive proper treatment at the hands of his previous owner, Sirius Black.⁵ Nevertheless, due to reasons pertaining to the plot, Kreacher's ownership passes to Harry himself and, having learned from his Godfather's mistakes, he treats the elf properly. This behavior on the part of the protagonist results in several drastic changes in their current location including: "an almost unrecognizable kitchen, with shining surfaces, utensils burnished to a rosy glow, a merrily blazing fire, on which a cauldron is simmering," and, finally, Kreacher, dressed in a snowy-white towel (in contrast to the dirty rag he always wore), and who serves our heroes the best French Onion soup they had ever had (Rowling 2007: 252). The elf's cooking improves

drastically after receiving better treatment. The way food is cooked can, thus, be seen as a reflection of a characters' state of mind something which also extends to our own world. Furthermore readers see that darker moments are succeeded by more joyful ones and vice-versa.

Concerning joyful moments, there is food in the series that is used for celebrations, however there is also food which is used for pranks and laughter, courtesy of the Weasley twins, Fred and George, who are the proud owners of the popular joke shop, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. When it comes to managing a joke shop one has to be both creative and imaginative, in other words, a natural prankster. The Weasley twins' apparently harmless sweets include: Canary Creams, which temporarily transfigure the eater into a canary; Tongue Toffee which, when eaten, causes the tongue to rapidly swell and turn purple; and other obvious ones like: Fainting Fancies, Fever Fudge, Nosebleed Nougat and Puking Pastilles, included in the Skiving Snackboxes, whose purpose is, as we have seen, to make the user ill. The purpose of these boxes is to make a student appear unable to stay in class.⁶

Nonetheless, some of these sweets are actually used by the main characters in order to infiltrate the ministry of magic, once again, due to reasons pertaining to the plot, and so as to overthrow Voldemort. Needless to say that the infiltration is a success and food can once again be seen as something that allows the plot to move forward.

However, escaping the ministry itself proves to be a much bigger challenge. After an escape that seemed almost impossible, our heroes are now on the run, because their previous whereabouts are discovered. Here we see a change of scenery from a pristine, cozy kitchen to the middle of nowhere, where Harry and his friends need to survive through the use of magic and their own wits, in other words, a cheerful place is once again replaced with one filled with uncertainty and food scarcity. Nevertheless our heroes find, once again, a bit of comfort in beverage, more specifically, hot mugs of tea drunk inside a magically protected tent. These serve not only to bring warmth to themselves, but also, even if subconsciously, to the anxious readers and, thus, another heterotopia is created.

Just like all other grim locations, this one is also devoid of good food and tensions between Harry and his friends, Ron and Hermione, threaten to rise. Having had nothing to

eat with the exception of wild mushrooms, our heroes are forced to scavenge in order to survive, since food is something which cannot be produced by magical means in the world of *Harry Potter*.⁷

Their searches are fruitless at first, but, just like before, the main characters are able to discover sustenance in the form of scrambled eggs on toast, the ingredients for which had been taken from a nearby farm without anyone knowing, but still scrupulously paid for by Hermione. Despite their trials and tribulations there is still an attempt to preserve good values in the midst of a world full of scarcity and despair.

This first proper meal in the middle of nowhere is “their first encounter with the fact that a full stomach meant good spirits; an empty one, bickering and gloom;” and that “it was much easier to relax when they were comfortably well fed.” (Rowling 2007: 324) And, once again, gloom is replaced with joy.

The three main characters, however, have different kinds of reactions to these situations which I find worthy of emphasis: Harry is the least surprised of the three, because he suffered periods of near starvation at his aunt and uncle’s; Hermione bore up reasonably well, her temper being simply much shorter than usual and her silences very dour. Ron, however, had always been used to three delicious meals a day, courtesy of his mother or of the Hogwarts house-elves, and hunger made him both unreasonable and irascible. In the words of George Bernard Shaw: “There is no sincerer love than the love of food.”⁸

This tension eventually reaches a climax during which Ron points out that their adventure is not only fruitless in terms of finding the right weapons to defeat Voldemort, but that the shortage of food and lack of comfort is something he simply can’t stand and, thus, driven by rage, resentment and hunger, Ron departs leaving Harry and Hermione on their own.

Having been left to their own fortunes and, apparently, an irreparable stop in the progress of the plot, something is necessary to make it move forward and, thus, food is used once again, but for a different purpose: persuasion. Once again, due to reasons pertaining to the plot, which I will not be exploring, Harry wishes to visit his birthplace, Godric’s Hollow,

where his family was killed by Voldemort. Harry believes that the place holds answers for him, but it is one filled with danger, and Hermione is the kind of character that would prove difficult to persuade in pursuing such a course of action. Nevertheless, they find themselves an unusually good meal: spaghetti Bolognese and tinned pears, found and scrupulously paid for in a supermarket by Hermione. Harry believes that having a full stomach will make Hermione more persuadable. The readers can see that this simple bit of narration is a sign that something is about to happen and that the plot will be advancing once again. In the end both characters agree to embark on the new adventure, once again due to the nourishment they received before.

Some of the ingredients in the series are delicious, other hilarious, but some are eccentric in the slightest, just like the following case. In the midst of their adventure, Harry and Hermione, after being reunited with Ron, visit the home of one of the most eccentric characters in the series: Xenophilius Lovegood, in order to find more answers in the fight against Voldemort. As a welcoming gesture, Xenophilius offers his guests an infusion of Gurdyroots, which is deeply purple as beetroot juice and it tastes, according to Harry, “quite disgusting, as though someone had liquidized bogey-flavored Every-Flavor Beans”. (Rowling 2007: 458) In stark contrast, Xenophilius smacks his lips in apparent appreciation of the Gurdyroot infusion, always insisting that people always ask for his recipes.

This entire situation, combined with Xenophilius’s less than warm welcome, is used as an indication to the readers that the characters should try to find a better place to stay, which proves to be true, since, once again, they barely escape Death Eaters, who invade the house. The tragic scene notwithstanding, this comedic bit shows the reader that not all the food in the series is delicious or appealing, but that there is food for every taste.

The last moment of the story I would like to bring to your attention is the ending of the book. As it is to be expected of a story like *Harry Potter*, there comes a time when the hero has to face the main antagonist, in this case Voldemort, after which he ends up being victorious. During this moment everyone is sitting together regardless of race and hierarchy: teachers and pupils, ghosts and parents, centaurs and house-elves. In the midst of this celebration, our heroes have the gratitude of the wizarding community and a much

deserved meal. This is to say that food is used, once again, as an ingredient to strengthen the union between the characters of the series.

To sum up, food in *Harry Potter* proves to be an effective plot device, a key component in the interaction between characters and, finally, a menu capable of satisfying not only the characters of the series themselves, but also readers of all ages who simply cannot get enough of this immense feast for the imagination. In other words, food alone is a spectacle to behold. Furthermore, these meals are so influential that there have been recipes inspired by the books themselves and all of those can be found, for instance, at The Wizarding World of *Harry Potter* at Universal Orlando Resort. We, thus, realize that the *Harry Potter* books not only increase readers' appetites, but also their curiosity and imagination.

Notes

¹ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/06/food-and-love_n_2410936.html>

² Rupert Grint, the actor who plays Ron in the *Harry Potter* series, says that this was his favorite scene to shoot from all of the movies. The reasons for this are obvious.

³ In standard usage, the meaning of the word Utopia has narrowed and now usually describes a non-existent society that is intended to be viewed as considerably better than contemporary society. (Sargent, 2005: 11)

⁴ An exception of note is one made by a fan of Rowling's, who commented on her tweeter page that he was fasting for Ramadan while reading the *Harry Potter* books, and that that was not the best thing to do during that time. According to him, the way the author described food had him starving, to which Rowling replied that he should, then, try *Deathly Hallows* since the trio of heroes experiences several moments of starvation which help to put their friendship to the test. (Rhodan, 2015)

⁵ Harry's Godfather.

⁶ Most come in two colour-coded parts: one that will cause the malady and one that will heal the students once they leave class. According to the twins they wanted people to enjoy profitable hours. <http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Skiving_Snackbox>

⁷ It can only be changed or multiplied if the wizard already has some.

⁸ <<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/georgebern103677.html>>

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