Food Studies and the Reemergence of Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism in Literary Criticism[1]

Los estudios alimentarios y el resurgimiento del estructuralismo de Lévi-Strauss en la crítica literaria

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Abstract

Food provides more than physical nourishment; it is a language that can vary from generation to generation and culture to culture. Because of this, Food Studies has arisen as a prominent area of interest in both the anthropological and literary sectors. The structuralist theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularly those presented in "The Culinary Triangle," served as precursors to Food Studies and can be readily applied to literary texts. By analyzing Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* through such a lens, I illustrate in this paper how Lévi-Strauss's work and its relation to Food Studies is relevant in literary criticism, particularly when exploring characterization.

Keywords: Structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Food Studies, Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*

Resumen

La comida proporciona más que alimento físico; es un idioma que puede variar de generación en generación y de cultura en cultura. Por ello, los Estudios de la Alimentación se han erigido como un área de interés destacada tanto en el sector antropológico como literario. Las teorías estructuralistas de Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularmente las presentadas en "El triángulo culinario", sirvieron como precursoras de los estudios

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alimentarios y pueden aplicarse fácilmente a textos literarios. Al analizar *La Vegetariana* de Han Kang a través de esa lente, ilustro en este artículo cómo el trabajo de Lévi-Strauss y su relación con los estudios alimentarios es relevante en la crítica literaria, particularmente cuando se explora la caracterización.

Palabras clave: Estructuralismo, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Estudios alimentarios, Han Kang, *La Vegetariana*

1. INTRODUCTION

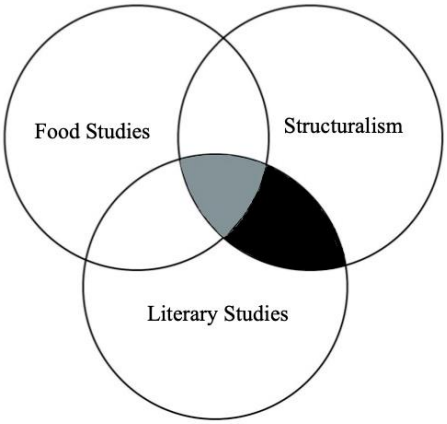
In my small Catholic school, a single building housing Kindergarten through eighth grade, it was the job of—nay, the opportunity for—the second grade to present a live-action adaptation of the French fable "Stone Soup." The story goes that weary travelers stumble upon a village stricken with famine. The inhabitants of the village hoard what little food they have and refuse to share with their neighbors or the hungry travelers. The travelers then gather the townspeople and ask for a pot, water, and a fire and promise to show the villagers how to make soup from stones. The travelers plop a stone in the water and take a sip. How odd…a flavor profile is missing! If only there was a potato they could add. Suddenly, a villager dices up a potato and tosses it in the pot. The travelers take another sip. Much better, but if only there was a carrot. And celery. Perhaps some salt. Slowly, villagers begin to compile their meager foodstuffs and—voila!—the soup made of stones becomes a feast. To an audience of elementary students, the moral of the story is that sharing is caring and working together will save the day. To put this lesson in more "grown up" terms: By collaboratively compiling basic foodstuffs, the villagers create a dish far more elaborated and fulfilling than a mere potato or cabbage. This story is an example of society, of culture rebuilding itself during times of struggle.

Now allow me to share one more story: the Greek myth of Prometheus. Prometheus was a Titan who betrayed Zeus by bringing fire and civilization to earthly mortals. Upon discovering this crime, Zeus secured Prometheus to a rock, where a bird would devour his regenerating liver every day for eternity. Prometheus's punishment for providing mortals with the capability to consume--to form civilizations and become superior earthly beings--was to become the consumed.

While this French tale and Greek myth differ in message, tone, and audiences' age group, they possess commonalities: solitude and community, cooperation and greed, nature and culture. And at the center of it all is food. Food is a universal language. Eating, like drinking and sex, is one of humanity's most fundamental behaviors. Each bite is a silent "yes," a statement of willingness to continue one's participation in this life (Ryan 145). Claude Lévi-

Strauss, a leading name in structuralism and anthropology, devoted much time to the topic of food. His article, "The Culinary Triangle," elucidates how food is elaborated not only by natural means but by cultural means, and he furthered this argument by illustrating how one's society is in turn affected. In "Le cru et le cuit" or "The raw and the cooked," he "argued that the preparation of food is a form of language that reveals a society's structure" (Graf 465). Jane Duesselier corroborates this claim in her discussion of her Asian American Foodways students: "They begin to understand that by making and consuming food they are active creators of culture" (333). Food's presence is abundant throughout literary history, playing integral roles in classics such as *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and Plato's *Republic*. Books have been written on the history of particular vegetables, such as R.N. Salaman's *History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Mintz, Du Bois 102). So why is it that, until recently, scholars "were amazingly reluctant to study food, especially the aspect closest to our hearts (and arteries): food consumption" (Belasco 2)?

According to Graf, "no recent attempt has been made to engage in fruitful academic exchange or to collect works that apply [Lévi-Strauss's] structural theory systematically to the study of contemporary foodways and assess its impact on the analysis and theorizations produced within this domain" (465-466). However, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist ideas of food's role in culture as expressed in his essay, "The Culinary Triangle," can readily compliment those of Food Studies in literature. Structuralism arose from the study of language—the language expelled from our mouths rather than that which is swallowed by them. Structuralism's goal is "to determine under what conditions [people's] actions and words can have meaning" (Debaene 23). Food Studies encourages the idea that food preparation and consumption *does* have meaning. For years, critics of Food Studies, structuralism, and literary studies have missed the opportunity to link these three fields:



As we will address, literary critics tossed structuralism aside with the introduction of *post*-structuralism. Food Studies arose from the ideas of structuralism and has, consequently, remained primarily focused on anthropological perspectives. Only lately has food become a topic studied in literature. The recent acceptance of Food Studies and its link to literary studies opens the door to bring Lévi-Strauss's structuralism back to the page and enlighten this "grey area" of study. Failing to do so is not only a blatant misrepresentation of the development of these three areas but is also a disservice to academic progress.

2. FOOD STUDIES, STRUCTURALISM, AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Food Studies is a broad field that analyses food's influence in politics, history, agriculture, literature, health, art, and various other fields. In turn, it explores how these fields can influence food systems. However, much of this research is collected from an anthropological angle that looks to explore food's influence in day-to-day issues like social change, commodities, and ritual. Food has been studied from this perspective for over a century, as is seen in Garrick Mallery's 1888 paper entitled "Manners and meals" that appeared in *American Anthropologist*. In the 1960's, Mary Douglas and Claude Lévi-Strauss contributed to the structuralist side of the discussion. But Mintz and DuBois argue that Jack Goody's 1982 book, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, truly kickstarted the anthropological interest with food (100). Food has experienced over a century of anthropological scrutiny with the majority of its attention coming from the past thirty-or-so years. Comparatively, literary studies' contribution to the discussion is still in its infancy. As anthropologists uncovered truths about cultures and individuals through the study of food, literary criticism gradually decided to snag a piece of the Food Studies pie. As previously mentioned, literature is ripe with food imagery. In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, brothers Chiron and Demetrius are baked into pies and fed to their unknowing mother. Magic animates food, like chocolate frogs, in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Eating a specific fruit in Milton's *Paradise Lost* results in Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden. Brothers Edward and Alphonse Elric must hunt for their food in order to survive and become enlightened to the truth of alchemy in Hiromu Arakawa's manga, *Fullmetal Alchemist*. To many critics, the conversation ends there. However, those critics who appreciate food's influence know to look deeper in order to discover its role in each story. In defense of literary criticism's study of food, Joan Fitzpatrick explains:

> Until relatively recently the subject of food has been somewhat neglected by literary scholars, many of whom considered it rather too ordinary an area for investigation; it is notable, for example, that the first serious monograph on Shakespeare and food

> appeared only in 2007 (Fitzpatrick, 2007). Yet literary critics have begun to notice that much of what they research and teach involves food and the rituals surrounding its consumption. Literary critics who write about food understand that the use of food in novels, plays, poems, and other works of literature can help explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures regulating consumption. When authors refer to food they are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on. (122)

By studying food in literature, critics can learn about characters and the society that inspired them. Norbert Elias offers examples of practices surrounding food and consumption that have changed over time. For instance, in the late eighteenth century, the upper class embraced the use of multiple utensils and expected them to be presented in specific ways: "Soup spoons, fish knives, and meat knives are on one side of the plate. Forks for the hors d'oeuvre, fish and meat on the other. Above the plate are fork, spoon or knife—according to the custom of the country—for sweet foods" (90). Therefore, if a fictional text from the late eighteenth century includes these details, readers today would be made aware of this societal expectation without ever picking up a history book.

The notion of societal expectations is one of Food Study's many links to structuralism. In his defense of Food Studies, John C. Super touches on the teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure:

> Historians of food usually find it necessary to explain the sign subject. Lest the uninitiated think that food is simply planted, harvested, processed, transported, sold, and consumed, readers are alerted to complex roles that food plays in human society. For the most enthusiastic, food is the ideal cultural symbol that allows the historian to uncover meaning in social relationships and arrive at new understanding of the human experience. The tug of cultural anthropology and sociology is strong here, and underscores food as symbol and metaphor, a cultural numerator essential to the human equation. (165)

The "sign subject" refers to Saussure's idea of sign-signifier-signified[1] and can be applied to food and consumption. According to Saussure, all words and concepts are entwined by seemingly incomprehensible associations. Signifiers are simply sounds and images used to note the physical thing or idea. Naturally, as meanings change over time, so, too, do structures. But how can linguistics translate into the field of Food Studies? Lévi-Strauss's essay on the culinary triangle is an inevitable foundational text in Food Studies anthologies and courses. Let us now explore his culinary triangle to prove its potential.

[1] From Saussure's 1916 *Course in General Linguistics*

3. THE CULINARY TRIANGLE

The culinary triangle was inspired by the vowel triangle and consonant triangle[2]:

a k

u i p t

These linguistic triangles illustrate "the contrast between consonant and vowel…by the workings of a double opposition between compact and diffuse, acute and grave" ("The Culinary Triangle" 36). Lévi-Strauss argues that the same principles utilized in the formation of these triangles can be applied to "other domains[3], notably that of cooking which, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is *with language a truly universal form of human activity*: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food" ("The Culinary Triangle" 36, my italics). Just as the vowel and consonant triangles illustrate oppositions in language, the culinary triangle illustrates oppositions in food preparation brought about either by nature or culture:

culture nature

raw

unelaborated

elaborated

cooked rotten

The primary purpose of Lévi-Strauss's diagram is to illustrate the oppositions inherent in food preparation: "the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, whereas the rotten is a natural transformation" ("The Culinary Triangle" 37). At times, foodstuffs can occupy

[2] Much of Lévi-Strauss's research was inspired by Roman Jakobson's studies on syntactic structures, which was in turn inspired by Saussure. While Jakobson sough to reveal the structures of sound in language, Lévi-Strauss sought to transfer this experiment to other aspects of existence. Believing that humans possess similar subconsciousness, he searched for similar structures in mythologies and anthropology (Ugurlu 127-128).

[3] Slavoj Žižek comedically yet insightfully explored some of these "other domains" in his brief exploration of lavatories. While the idea may seem absurd, Žižek, through his semiotic toilet triangle, showed how the varying basins of German, French, and Anglo-Saxon toilets reveal aspects of each culture's existential attitudes. He then went further to illustrate other examples in which a semiotic triangle may be applied, such as the care of female pubic hair (3-4).

various places on the culinary triangle, such as how milk is consumed cooked (ex. custard), rotten (e.g. blue cheese), or raw. In "Lévi-Strauss's Theory of Cannibalism," Paul Shankman questions the culinary triangle since its application necessitates that one assumes cooking is a language (56). After all, languages possess grammatical rules. Shankman argues that Lévi-Strauss does not clearly define such rules when explicating his diagram, and the absence of guidelines creates a quandary when trying to predict the course of food's "language." However, Lévi-Strauss does address this dilemma: "No doubt these notions constitute empty forms: they teach us nothing about the cooking of any specific society, since only observation can tell us what each one means by 'raw,' 'cooked' and 'rotted,' and we can suppose that it will not be the same for all" ("The Culinary Triangle 37).

Lévi-Strauss provides an example of a more specific kind of cultural elaboration of food preparation beyond the more abstract culinary triangle in his discussion of roasted and boiled meat:

> The extremely primitive Guayaki of Paraguay roast all their game, except when they prepare the meat destined for the rites which determine the name of a new child: this meat must be boiled. The Caingaing of Brazil prohibit boiled meat from the widow or widower, and also for anyone who has murdered an enemy. In all these cases, prescription of the boiled accompanies a tightening, prescription of the roasted a loosening of familiar or social ties. ("The Culinary Triangle" 38)

He later notes how the signification of boiled vs. roasted changed over time in some cultures. A half-century after the democratic Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert published an apology of boiled foodstuffs, the dandy Brillat-Savarin expressed an opposing view: rather than serving boiled meat at dinners, roasted meats ought to be the expected expression of elegance ("The Culinary Triangle" 39). As meanings change over time, so, too, do structures. This is the case throughout all cultures.

Thus, while the culinary triangle is universal, the specific details surrounding the process of food preparation can vary from culture to culture. Lévi-Strauss expands upon this idea:

> The culinary triangle delimits a semantic field, but from the outside. This is moreover true of the linguistic triangles as well, since there are no phonemes a, i, u (or k, p, t) in general, and these ideal positions must be occupied, in each language, by the particular phonemes whose distinctive natures are closest to those for which we first gave a symbolic representation: thus we have a sort of concrete triangle inscribed within the abstract triangle. In any cuisine, nothing is simply cooked, but must be cooked in one fashion or another. ("The Culinary Triangle" 37)

In other words, the more universally abstract distinction between consonants and vowels must be supplemented by the phonemes specific to a particular language. Phonemes, in

turn, are mental constructs that organize phonetic units, or actual speech sounds. As Catherine Anderson explains:

> Within a given language, some sounds might have slight phonetic differences from each other but still be treated as the same sound by the mental grammar of that language. A phoneme is a mental category of sounds that includes some variation within the category. The mental grammar ignores that variation and treats all members of a phoneme category as the same sound.

In order for these mental categories to work, there must be a consensus as to how certain sounds connect to these categories. This notion is similar to Mary Douglas's statement on taboos: "taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity" (xii). Because food is a language, its forms of preparation and consumption can change from culture to culture. However, there must be a consensus as to how food ought to be treated and transformed.

When applying Lévi-Strauss's ideas to literature, one must remember that writing, regardless of genre, is an expression of the human condition. As previously stated, structuralism's goal is "to determine under what conditions [people's] actions and words can have meaning" (Debaene 23). Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle can help critics analyze scenes and character motivation and discover the meaning behind food's role on the page. Recognizing the structures surrounding food and then shunning or adhering to them is a form of self-expression utilized by writers when constructing characters. If one individual decides to go against the accepted structures, they are, in a linguistic sense, creating a new word. It is then up to the individual to decide whether or not they will continue forward in this manner, as their actions may not translate properly to those around them.

3. BRINGING STRUCTURALISM BACK TO THE PAGE

Structuralism's introduction to the United States was the beginning of its end in the literary field. Its arrival seemed to coincide with Derrida's deconstruction of Levi-Strauss's work in 1966. Thus, *post*-structuralism swooped into the literary field, presenting Lévi-Strauss and decades of structuralist thought as now-obsolete steppingstones. Although structuralism retained some popularity in France, its influence in the literary field was more or less ended by 1980 (Doran 3). Because of his anticlimactic introduction to literary studies in the United States, Lévi-Strauss was viewed as no more than "a precursor, whose œuvre [had] already been glossed and superseded" (Debaene 25).

While post-structuralism refutes many of structuralism's claims, there is one point on which both theories agree: there is a correlation between writing and violence. Derrida even stated that "Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss are not for a moment to be challenged when they relate the

power of writing to the exercise of violence" (Derrida qtd. in Siebers 762)[4]. Through the implementation of phonemes to form words and then combining these words into sentences that possess meaning, people have, and still do, use writing to perpetuate violence through hate speech and propaganda. The same idea can be applied to food preparation and consumption. Eating is violent. Consuming requires taking life from one being—be it greenery, grain, or game—so that its energy can be absorbed by another. Besides the intrinsic violence of consumption, humans have found ways to utilize food—its presence and absence—as a means of enforcing power. Prisoners like Socrates were forced to consume deadly hemlock. Regimes have used starvation to control the masses. Displeased parents send children to bed without dinner as punishment or make children suck on a bar of soap after uttering a curse word. Keeping in mind the connection between linguistics and Lévi-Strauss's culinary triangle, we know that aspects of food preparation and consumption are malleable and depend upon the consensus of each society. Therefore, in order for the withholding or distribution of food to possess meaning, there must be a general consensus as to which foods are worthy of human consumption. As Lévi-Strauss suggested in the anthropological sector: "…we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure—or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions" ("The Culinary Triangle" 43). This resigning of structures can occur on a broader level, such as roasting or boiling meat, or on an individual level, such as one's choice to become a vegetarian. While structuralism does seek to find the underlying traits of the human condition, humans possess self-awareness and are able to accept or reject structures around them. In order to do so, knowledge of these structures is required.

Yeong-hye of *The Vegetarian* suffers indignities for rejecting meat. In this novel, some foodstuffs are acceptable, serving as illustrations of one's participation in societal norms, while others are not. Some foodstuffs embody or even encourage violence. Knowledge of preexisting structures in the societies from which she has been subjected leads Yeong-hye to view food in specific ways, but she must decide whether she will embrace or reject the surrounding cultural expectations. Her choices to consume or to not consume determine her return to or departure from society as well as her perception of what dictates her notions of humanity. Kang utilizes the preparation and consumption of food as driving

[4] The relationship between writing and violence is both metaphorical and literal. Writing requires words, and words are comprised of phonemes, mental constructs that are both fixed and not fixed. They are "organisms," so to speak, that live in people's minds. When they are transferred to the page in the form of words, their malleable traits present in the mind become fixed, metaphorically killing them. For this project, I am focusing on the literal connection between writing and violence.

forces behind character development. In doing so, she demonstrates food's prominence not only in day-to-day life but in the expression of human thought and emotions through literature. Yeong-hye seeks to shed her human identity by embracing a vegetarian diet after the violence of her life becomes intermingled with the act of consuming flesh. The application of a structuralist lens to literature provides new insights into authorial choice, characterization, the influence of one's society, and the power of one of life's most requisite ingredients: food.

4. REDEMPTION THROUGH SUFFERING IN *THE VEGETARIAN*

What happens when an individual desires to shun society completely? What happens when one seeks to "shuck off the human"? This is the concept explored in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. The novel's heroine, Yeong-hye, has been physically and emotionally battered by the constructs of her South Korean culture. She has become a sponge, soaking up the effects of violence: she "absorbed all her suffering inside her, deep into the marrow of her bones" (Kang 163). In response to her suffering, she utilizes her understanding of societal structures surrounding food to purposefully become less human, as only by removing her identity of "human" can she be purged of the violence that she believes is one with her being. Before continuing, I must address the fact that womanhood and food have been tied together for decades in historical and literary contexts. In her article, *On Hunger, Women's Bodies, and Margaret Atwood's First Novel*, Lara Williams states, "Food is sometimes dismissed as a banal or extraneous detail in fiction, but in women's writing it is not often a neutral terrain." She then explores how sexist language paints women as objects to be consumed, as is illustrated in the phrase, "being treated like a piece of meat," the innuendos of Playboy Bunnies, and multiple infamous PETA advertisements. In "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women," Caroline Walter Bynum elucidates how food was the one realm in which women reigned. Their control of the kitchen led canon lawyers to suggest that women posed a danger to men, as they could manipulate "male virility by charms and potions added to food" (253). Women also took charge of their bodies by opting not to eat. In a time when women were subjected to undesired marriages and were trained to fear their own bodily sensations and functions, women sought to control not just their appetites but their sexuality through the restriction of food consumption. This idea was reinforced by male writers who "warned religious women that food was dangerous because it excited lust" (254). These centuries-long associations of women with food, violence, and consumption have perpetuated and formed structures harmful to the psychological and physical health of women. These structures, as seen in *The Vegetarian*,

influence the writings of female authors and illustrate yet another example of structuralism's relevance in the field of literary criticism.

The Vegetarian is comprised of three parts, "originally written as three separate novellas" (Armistead). Each part is narrated by a member of Yeong-hye's family: her husband named Mr. Cheong, her brother-in-law whose name is never revealed, and her older sister, In-hye. Yeong-hye's shift to vegetarianism is described through the voice of her husband, a self-obsessed man who strictly abides to societal norms and his own philosophies. His narration begins:

> Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. …Every morning she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish. …For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to really immerse herself in. …Only at mealtimes would she open the door and silently emerge to prepare the food. (Kang 11-13)

From the start, Yeong-hye's identity is associated with food, illustrating her husband's—and society's—expectations of her: she is meant to do housework, cook, obey her husband, and be "demure and restrained" (Kang 28). After announcing her decision to embrace a vegetarian[5] diet and presenting her husband with "a sorry excuse for a meal," Mr. Cheong recoils and recalls the many meat-centered dishes she had prepared for him:

> Tongs in one hand and a large pair of scissors in the other, she'd flipped rib meat in a sizzling pan while snipping it into bite-sized pieces, her movements deft and practiced. Her fragrant, caramelized deep-fried belly pork was achieved by marinating the meat in minced ginger and glutinous starch syrup. Her signature dish had been wafer-thin slices of beef seasoned with black pepper and sesame oil, then coated with thick rice power as generously as you would with rice cakes or pancakes, and dipped in bubbling shabu-shabu broth[6]. She'd made bibimbap[7] with bean sprouts, minced beef, and pre-soaked rice stir-fried in sesame oil. There had also been a thick chicken and duck soup with large chunks of potato, and a spicy broth packed full of tender clams and mussels… (Kang 22)

In terms of the culinary triangle, all of these dishes embrace culture: they are cooked, hence they are elaborated. Even the "sorry excuse for a meal" Yeong-hye prepares for her husband falls under the same category, as she presents him with seaweed soup, rice, soybean paste, and kimchi. While meat is absent from this meal, these dishes demonstrate Yeong-hye's continued participation, for now, in her society, as almost all of the food has been elaborated in some way. Seaweed soup and rice are cooked. Soybean paste, while raw, is made by

[5] Yeong-hye's lifestyle change, while referred to as "vegetarian," is more accurately described as vegan; she throws out the eggs and milk (Kang 21) and anything made of leather (Kang 28).
[6] made with beef or pork and vegetables
[7] rice mixed with meat, vegetables, sauce, and possibly egg

smashing soybeans, thus altering their physical appearance before consumption[8]. The vegetables in kimchi are raw but have been fermented, which is a controlled form of rotting. By analyzing this food-fueled scene through the lens of the culinary triangle, we see that Yeong-hye has barely begun to shuck off her cultured and human identity.

Simply becoming vegetarian is not enough to transform Yeong-hye from "human" to "unhuman" based on both our analysis of the culinary triangle and the norms of her society. As her appalled husband notes, many people become vegetarian. Buddhist priests[9] "are morally obliged not to participate in the destruction of life." However, as far as Mr. Cheong is concerned, "the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion. In any other case, it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes has mine had done" (Kang 22). This is an instance in which an individual's choice to accept or reject structures affects the lives of those around them. Ironically, in this case, it is Mr. Cheong, not Yeong-hye, who rejects society's structures. He could accept his wife's decision but chooses not to since he believes his own philosophies outweigh those of their society. If he does not want a vegetarian wife, society's opinion on the matter is inconsequential. He calls her "insane" (Kang 19) and a "strange, frightening woman (Kang 52). He feels "disgust" toward her (Kang 51). Jones addresses how disgust "is not due entirely to the sensory qualities of an object… Objects characterized by inferiority and meanness debase us through the intimacy of contact" (58). To Mr. Cheong, his wife's "drastic transformation" from omnivore to herbivore is enough to make her nearly unrecognizable: "I really didn't have a clue when it came to this woman" (Kang 23).

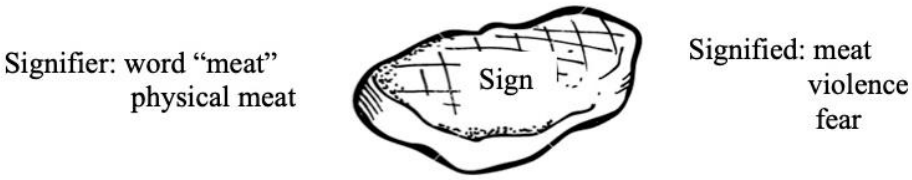
Yeong-hye's family, a "family of meat lovers" (Kang 73), initially offers no more support than does her husband. They are shocked by her lifestyle adjustment but are even more horrified by her physical appearance, as she has lost a considerable amount of weight. While their initial astonishment appears to stem from loving concern for her health, Yeong-hye's rejection of meat after her father demands that she eat it transfers the source of their

[8] In "The Culinary Triangle," Lévi-Strauss explores various techniques of cooking. As discussed in the introduction, the culinary triangle "delimits a semantic field, but from the outside," (37) as do linguistic triangles. Therefore, culinary triangle after culinary triangle could be structured in and around one another, one of which could explore the elaborated or unelaborated forms of raw food. For example, a carrot from a garden in not elaborated but sushi is, as its presentation and taste has been altered by cutlery and seasonings.

[9] Buddhism is mentioned several times throughout the novel when discussing Yeong-hye's diet. One may assume that, were she Buddhist and obeying the structures of that socially-acceptable religious practice, her choices would not be scrutinized so fiercely. Her defiance stems not from simply being vegetarian but from choosing to not adhere to any preexisting structure.

frustration from her health to cultural disrespect: the choice to not abide by structured expectations. Enraged by her disobedience, her father strikes her and attempts to force-feed her meat. When forced to comply to the structures she seeks to reject, Yeong-hye "growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips." She then took a fruit knife and slit her wrist so to put an end to her torture (Kang 48). Yet even when she is in the hospital due to her wound, her family persists. Her mother tries to sneak her soup with goat, claiming it is "herbal medicine." After a single sip, Yeong-hye vomits, to which her mother responds, "Look at yourself now! Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole!" (Kang 55-56). The mother's statement highlights the "mental grammar" surrounding meat. To Yeong-hye's family, meat is a source of life. If "the world will devour you whole" if you reject meat, then meat is implied to be the "sacrificial lamb," so to speak, that saves humanity. According to this idea, the world is a vicious place. Only by consuming meat, by devouring a life, can a person save their own.

Yeong-hye's "mental grammar" varies from that of her family and most of society. She recognizes the animal from whence the meat came and the violence necessary in its preparation. Even touching meat is enough to send her into a frenzy of panic, as she, aware of the violence required to kill and butcher an animal, wants no part in the ritually normalized destruction of life. Rather than embracing the violence, she shifts her perception:



To those around her, meat itself is merely a thing to be prepared and consumed. By changing the signified on a personal level rather than a cultural one, Yeong-hye illustrates how a knowledge of preexisting systems opens the door to individual interpretation and adherence. Yeong-hye's decision to cut her wrist is another example of her making individualized adjustments to the mental grammar surrounding food. The knife with which she cuts her wrist is no mere table knife: it is a *fruit* knife. By slicing her flesh with a blade constructed to slice fruit, she blurs the boundaries of her existence and hints at her aim of becoming plant-like, as will explore.

The idea of blurring boundaries is present throughout Yeong-hye's dreams and her streams of consciousness that are scattered throughout Part One. Her dreams are replete with fear

and loathing and with the smells, textures, and sounds of murder and meat being consumed. In her dreams, she cannot tell if she is murdered or if she is the murderer: "*boundaries wearing thin"* (Kang 35). Sleep comes "*in five-minute snatches*," and she finds herself wide awake at night in a house "*chill like rice or soup that has been left to go cold*" (Kang 40). She slips into a dissociative state: "Familiar and yet not…that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling" (Kang 20). She becomes "*a different person*" (Kang 40). Her body, once a source of comfort, becomes alien:

> *Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I'm okay. Still okay. So why do they keep shrinking? Not even round anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening—what I am going to gouge?* (Kang 41)

As time progresses, as Yeong-hye's dreams continue and their chilling effects bleed into her daily life, she becomes separated from her identity of a human consumer. She does not recognize her own mother when she is in the hospital after cutting her wrist, yet she expresses a new sense of self-identification as consumer-turned-consumed:

> *I don't know why that woman is crying. I don't know why she keeps staring at my face, either, as though she wants to swallow it. …My wrist is okay. It doesn't bother me. The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. I don't know what it might be. It's lodged there permanently these days. Even though I've stopped wearing a bra, I can feel this lump all the time. …Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. …Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe*. (Kang 56)

Yeong-hye's belief that the animals she ate are still within her and affect her is similar to principles explored in Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*: "The Indians of the south-east United States attribute pathological phenomena to a conflict between men, animals, and plants. Vexed with men, animals sent them diseases. Plants, who were friends of men, retorted by supplying remedies" (164). Yeong-hye's desire to shift from human to plant illustrates her desire to become one with the remedy of life's pains and also demonstrates a structure found in various cultures throughout the world: animals are associated with violence, and plants are associated with peace and renewal.

Most characters insist that Yeong-hye suffers from some sort of psychological disturbance resulting in anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia[10] (146). While this may be so, not all are disturbed by her lifestyle. Her brother-in-law, an artist, has sexually fantasized about her for years and now sees in her the creative muse for which he has been searching: "Her calm

[10] As O'Key asserts, many reviewers of this text have interpreted the story too literally: "…as a tale of how domestic imprisonment ultimately hastens a destructive and anorexic psychosis" (3).

acceptance…made her seem to him something sacred. Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a 'person,' but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either—more like a mysterious being with qualities of both" (Kang 95). When Yeong-hye cut herself, he was the one who bound her wrist and carried her to a car to transport her to the hospital (Kang 74). Afterward, he kept his blood-stained shirt, the smell of which made him recognize, "He was worn out, and life revolted him." He desires to become closer to Yeong-he, as he sees her as "something sacred" (Kang 95), an individual "who didn't belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being" (Kang 78). In his brokenness, brother-in-law sees a ray of inspiration in Yeong-hye. Her "sacredness" is accentuated by the presence of a Mongolian mark on her lower back, which, to brother-in-law, "called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual" (90). Yeong-hye's plant-like identity is further established when she agrees to be painted in colorful flowers for his artistic endeavor. The other model for the project, an artist called J, agrees to also be painted and pose nude with Yeong-hye. However, when asked to go further and begin having sex with her to enhance the intimacy of the moment, J breaks down, crying, "I guess there are just parts of myself that I need to, to awaken…" (Kang 112). Brother-in-law later has a fellow artist paint him in colorful flowers, and Yeong-hye agrees to have sex with him not due to lust but because she likes the flowers covering his body (Kang 113). The flowers on her own body even make her nightmares stop (Kang 104). As they are having sex, "like one body, a hybrid of plant, animal and human" (Kang 120), brother-in-law thinks, "*I want to swallow you, have you melt into me and flow through my veins*" (Kang 121). This notion of consuming Yeong-hye puts a threatening spin on the trope of lovers becoming one through intercourse. If she is consumed, they could not be one, as her life would be extinguished.

The relationship between Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law shares similarities with the account of Lidwina, a woman who died in the Netherlands in 1433. After an incident that paralyzed her entire body sans her left hand, eating became difficult for Lidwina. She ultimately ceased to swallow or sleep, but, being a devout Christian, she viewed fasting and illness as "redemptive suffering." Hagiographical accounts state that she received visions of the Blessed Mother and of Jesus. Pieces of flesh and bone that fell from her putrefying body exuded fragrant aromas. After one vision of the Blessed Mother, Lidwina's breasts began to produce milk. Her caretaker drank this milk and was satisfied for three days ("Fast, Feast, and Flesh" 248-249). Bynum argues that "in Lidwina's story, fasting, illness, suffering, and feeding fuse together. Lidwina becomes the food she rejects. Her body, closed to ordinary

intake and excretion but spilling over in milk and sweet putrefaction, becomes the sustenance and the cure—both earthly and heavenly—of her following" (250). Yeong-hye fuses her hunger and suffering with redemption, her atonement for all the animals she consumed. In doing so, she becomes a higher being in the eyes of her bother-in-law. Just as Lidwina's caretaker drank the milk from her breasts, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law seeks to metaphorically consume her through intercourse in order to become more like her. Lidwina's suffering was considered redemptive and praise-worthy by the structures of her society and religion, so she was viewed as holy and was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1890 (Murray 26). However, were Lidwina enduring her troubles today, her story would be quite different. Researchers believe that her case presents one of the earliest documentations of multiple sclerosis. Murray argues, "I am convinced that the evidence suggests elements of marked religiosity, mysticism, histrionic behavior, and even self-mutilation. Although there may have been an underlying neurological disease, the diagnosis must be left open" (26). Yeong-hye is, in a sense, a fictional modern-day Lidwina. However, because of advancements in medical knowledge, her suffering and fervor are viewed as the results of schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa. Rather than being venerated by her family and doctors, she is proclaimed mentally ill and must battle against the structures of her society to succeed in her pursuit for redemption.

Even though Yeong-hye is frequently hospitalized, she continues to persist. When In-hye visits her in the hospital, In-hye finds her standing upside down. Yeong-hye explains that she is no longer human and therefore no longer needs food:

> I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head…leaves were growing from my body, and roots[11] were sprouting from my hands…so I dug down into the earth. On and on…I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs; I spread them wide… I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water. (Kang 154)

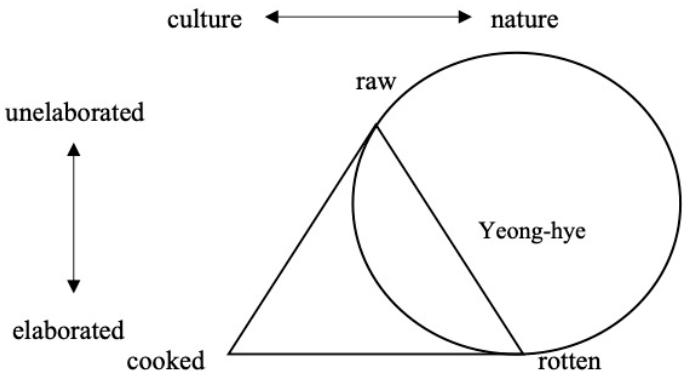
Yeong-hye believes that her strict diet, which prohibits her from ingesting anything but water and sunlight, will purge her from the horrors of her dreams:

> I thought all I had to do was stop eating meat and then the faces wouldn't come back. But it didn't work. …And so…now I know. The face is inside my stomach. It rose up

[11] Intriguingly, trees possess elaborate root systems through which they can communicate with and nourish each other. They can intertwine roots and grow fungal networks, creating a sort of nervous system connecting them beneath the soil (Popova). While Yeong-hye's desire to be plant-like illustrates her desire to not engage in the ritualized act of killing for consumption, it also expresses how nothing can truly be achieved in isolation. There must be community-wide agreement. In Lidwina's time, those around her accommodated her behavior and believed it to be the will of God. For Yeong-hye, the people in her life try to "fix" her. She is not part of any community, so she withers.

> from my stomach. …But I'm not scared anymore. There's nothing to be scared of now. (Kang 122)

Just as "fasting, eating, and feeding all meant suffering, and suffering meant redemption" to Medieval women ("Fast, Feast, and Flesh" 256), Yeong-hye believes that her suffering and imminent death will free her from the violence inherent in her human nature: "Why, is it such a bad thing to die?" (Kang 162). Such a profound statement rattles the structures surrounding her and places her in a position of power driven by choice, even though she, like Lidwina, becomes the consumed. As O'Key notes, "Despite being 'devoured' by the social order she rebukes, Yeong-hye is frequently interpreted as escaping from this world" (9). To become plant-like, to shed the culturally-influenced parts of her being and therefore be freed from violence, Yeong-hye must rot:



In the end of the novel, Yeong-hye's body is essentially consuming itself due to lack of food. She vomits blood. Her nails are brittle. There are no veins strong enough to support a needle. She is alive, and yet she is rotting. She can barely speak; she is silent, like a plant. As In-hye smooths her sister's hair in the back of an ambulance, she thinks back to the morning she found her with her husband, to the video her husband had made:

> She recalls the sight of those two naked bodies, twined together like jungle creepers. Of course, it had shocked her at the time, and yet oddly enough, the more time went by the less she thought of it as something sexual. Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human beings. The writhing movements of those bodies made it seems as though they were trying to shuck off the human. (Kang 184)

Here, In-hye begins to see the cracks in the structures. While adultery is forbidden, she recognizes that what occurred between her husband and Yeong-hye was not in fact due to

lust.[12] They had sex, yes. But the act was not fueled by sexual desire. She, as has the reader, come to see that cultural expectations—structures—can be bent, even broken, on an individual level to meet one's needs. This does not mean that others will agree with this new way of living, but the point is made that structures, though upheld by the consent of the masses, can be altered.

Han Kang and literary critics have elucidated how food's presence on the page serves as a means of expression. In a 2016 interview about her book, Han Kang stated:

> *The Vegetarian* depicts a woman who rejects an omnipresent and precarious violence even at a cost to herself… Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those beings? …Eating meat, cooking meat, all these daily activities embody a violence that has been normalized. (Lee 62)

O'Key offers further insight on this matter:

> …literary studies scholars have argued that even if we were to read Yeong-hye's hunger strike as connoting a death-drive, we must also identify it as a paradoxically regenerative death-drive, one in which Yeong-hye shrinks and becomes- vegetal in order to dig an escape-route out of a destructive patriarchal society. Yeong-hye, they argue, escapes the interlinked forces of gendered violence and 'carno-phallogocentrism' – the carnivorousness of anthropo-centric modernity, theorised by Jacques Derrida as the sacrificial ingestion of animal flesh that remains central to modernity's construction of meaning – and consequently embraces a form of nonviolent, vegetal life. (3)

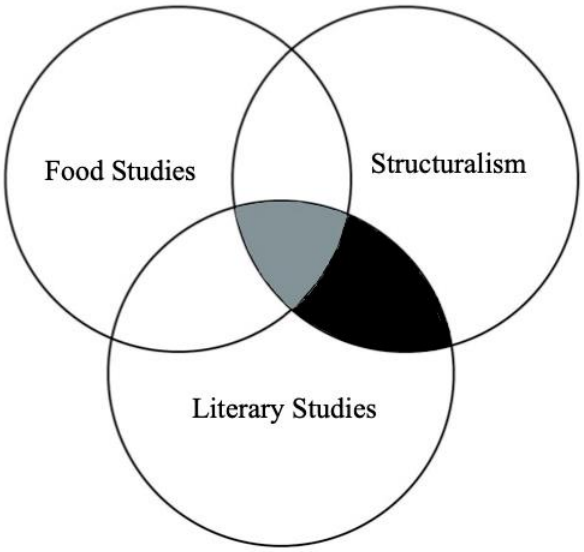
Without an awareness and understanding of the structures influencing her, Yeong-hye would never have been able to dig her "escape-route." Unlike animals, humans have the ability to see what makes us tick and to learn from the structures we observe. Because of structures, we can understand why and how certain foods are eaten and others are not. Yeong-hye knows the structures of her society. She knows her place in her marriage, her family, and society at large, and, thanks to an understanding of her place in these structures, she has the capacity to knowingly shun it all. By doing so, she, like a hunger-striking suffragette, opposes the structures that constrain her.

5. CONCLUSION

"Food is not rational," says author Jonathan Safran Foer. "Food is culture, habit, craving and identity." It is a necessary ingredient for life. Food Studies emphasizes food's influence in

[12] Earlier in the novel, Yeong-hye refuses to have sex with her husband because his body "smells of meat" (Kang 24). Mr. Cheong resorts to raping her, after which he finds Yeong-hye steaming and peeling potatoes. Just as she was forced from her "raw" form to perform this socially-expected, "cooked" expectation, she transforms the potatoes from a raw to a cooked state and proceeds to peel away their skin, just as Mr. Cheong peeled off her trousers (Kang 39-40). Yeong-hye exhibits no regret after sleeping with her brother-in-law, thus illustrating that these two sexual experiences were fueled by different desires.

areas like anthropology, politics, and literary studies. With the study of food comes the opportunity to reintroduce structuralism to literary criticism, particularly when exploring characterization. Structuralism is present in literature often without an author's knowledge. There is no proof that Kang was inspired by structuralism, much less Lévi-Strauss, but his insights are applicable to her novel and countless others. This is no coincidence. Structures are part of the human condition. Whether innate or formed by society, they create cohesion and consistency and, in effect, open the door to chaos when individuals choose to shun them. The field of structuralism has been shunned by literary critics for far too long. Thanks to the recent acceptance of Food Studies, reintroducing structuralism to the page is the next logical step:



Literary studies, Food Studies, and structuralism are connected through their development over the course of history, and yet the union of these three fields has yet to be explored. While literature offers a realm to escape the human condition, it opens doorways to the subconscious and reveals patterns—and structures—often unrecognized by the individual. As Lévi-Strauss applied structuralism to myths nearly fifty years ago, literary critics ought to resume his quest and apply the ideas of structuralism to literary texts so to explore further levels of characterization. Texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Alice B. Toklas's, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* are worthy of such a pursuit. Much contemporary Jewish-American literature, like Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy* and Allegra Goodwin's *The Family Markowitz* provide uniquely cultural perspectives of food's control and influence. By bringing food into the literary context, structuralism, being a

forerunner in the movement of Food Studies, is deserving of its place in the world of literary criticism.

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