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Food: Nourishment, Poverty, Love, and Hope in *Gods of Green County*

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Abstract

This article examines the author Mary Elizabeth Pope's use of food in her book *Gods of Green County*.

Keywords

Mary Elizabeth Pope, poverty, love, hope, family, rural Arkansas, food as setting, food as character, food as plot, Great Depression era, hopeless, mealtimes, women's work, women's studies, *Gods of Green County*

Introduction

In Mary Elizabeth Pope's (2021) Great Depression era novel *Gods of Green County* set in rural Arkansas, the lives of two families intersect in both common and devastating ways often seen in small town communities where everyone knows everyone and half or more are related. The central story revolves around whether the sheriff killed or murdered a young man in the line of duty, and on the aftereffects felt by the young man's sister and the prosecuting attorney. In the novel, Pope's use of food in general and family mealtimes in particular do much to inform the reader about the setting, characters, and even the plot of the novel. There are references to food and family mealtimes to show how women nourished their families both physically and emotionally or when they did not. The desperation of the Great Depression is seen in the actions of a father trying to keep food on his table. Descriptions of food and

meals in the first half of the story portray a sense of hope, while the lack of food later foreshadows a hopeless ending. Preparation of food is even involved in two pivotal turns of plot.

It is admittedly a generalization to say that during the Great Depression it was always women who were responsible for mealtimes for their family, but it is not that great of a stretch. The role of women in the family as the caretaker of children and home, including meals, cleaning, laundry, sewing, and education, has existed for centuries. Even during the Great Depression, if a woman was employed, it was often with domestic work. In the novel, the way the women characters adhere or not to these gender expectations shows them to be supportive or neglectful wives and mothers. Specifically, Pope uses preparation of food, or lack thereof, and participation in mealtimes, to demonstrate the mental health of female characters.

Food and Gender Roles

The character Coralee wants to be a caring wife and mother, but her poor mental health skewers her priorities to the point that she cannot always fulfil these roles. Coralee suffers from depression and paranoia, and often becomes detached from reality. She hears voices and sees people who are already dead. She begins to think the Devil is after her. She develops an unbalanced dependence on the church. However, she does have times of rational behavior when she takes care of her husband, son, and home. Pope draws attention to Coralee's periods of lucidity by showing the ways she cared for her family, including providing tasty food and keeping a garden. Her husband Big Earl reminisces on how she was when they first were married, and says, "That woman could cook. And grow a garden, too... You name it, Coralee could grow it, even years when nobody could coax so much as a turnip from the ground" (Pope, 2021, p. 35). When Coralee bakes a cake for their son's ninth birthday, Big Earl sees this happy moment in the kitchen, the two of them singing to their son, as a hopeful sign that Coralee's mental state is improving.

In Judge Leroy Harrison's home, the author again presents food as a sign of love and care, and an indicator of mental health. When his wife Mabel suffers her fourth miscarriage, she cannot get out of bed, let alone cook meals for her husband. Her mother-in-law shows up each day with "extra pork chops or greens or biscuits she'd cooked" (Pope, 2021, p. 40). Old Mrs. Harrison continues this care for her son and daughter-in-law until Mabel can get out of bed. Sunday family dinners between Leroy and his wife, and Leroy's brother Cole and his wife Bess, are at first a regular occurrence, until Cole and Bess have their own children. Then, it just becomes too painful for Leroy and Mabel to sit at their family dinner table with these children while they had none.

After Cole's wife Bess dies during the birth of their third child, Mabel Harrison steps in to help. Because of recently losing her fifth pregnancy at term, she is physically able to nurse the newborn child as her own. A woman's ability to nourish another human from her own body creates a bond between mother and child that is unique. Breastfeeding is a physical partnership between the mother and child where the mother's body adapts to the needs of the child and the two create daily patterns and rhythms of feeding accordingly. Equally important, however, is the way that breastfeeding is an exchange of love and tenderness between the mother and child, where the child associates being nourished with food with being shown love and affection in the arms of this one person only, day after day. Mabel completely overcomes the hurdle of accepting Cole's child as her own in such a short period of time because of her ability to intimately connect with the newborn by nursing him. When Leroy's mother expresses worry over this arrangement of Mabel bonding with the child that she might have to later give up, Leroy remarks that "Mabel will be fine" (Pope, 2021, p. 45). Leroy, though, knows that even after one short week, Mabel already loves the child. From Mabel's point of view, the child is hers now (Pope, 2021, p. 46). The close bond between Mabel and Caleb that started with breastfeeding grows

throughout the novel Leroy's character remains always outside their relationship, and his bond with Caleb weakens over time.

Pope continues building on Mabel's nurturing character by having her take over the care of Cole's home, including preparing meals for Cole and his other two children, and welcoming visitors. When Cole decides it would be best for Leroy and Mabel to raise the baby, Caleb, as their own, Old Mrs. Harrison is waiting for them when the couple and baby finally return to their own home. Leroy appreciatively realizes that his mother has "brought a week's worth of meals so that Mabel could have more time to get Caleb settled" (Pope, 2021, p. 48). Leroy reflects that this much cooking was "an effort" for his mother, showing he recognized the love she showed in devoting so much time to making sure Leroy and Mabel were not only well fed, but that Mabel could devote as much time as she needed to Caleb. Pope's depictions of women nourishing their families with food gives the reader an idea of their character as loving and attentive mothers.

Food and the Great Depression

Big Earl's worry over providing food for his family after Coralee donates their grocery money to the church demonstrates their precarious financial situation. Big Earl works at a cotton gin and losing one week's grocery money is the difference between his family eating or not during the next week. Coralee's irrational decision to make such a precious gift to the church without considering her family's needs is a harbinger of problems on the horizon. When Coralee donates the grocery money to the church a second time, Big Earl confronts the minister, demands the return of the money, and takes over the grocery shopping. He can no longer trust his wife to take care of him and their son. They must have money for food. Not long after, Big Earl decides to petition the Court that a judge declare Coralee incompetent so that he can send her away to a mental hospital for treatment. Coralee's lack of understanding that her family's need for food is a priority is not the only reason that Big Earl decides to petition the Court, but it is the final straw in making his decision.

Family Meals and Tragedy

Food also plays a pivotal role in two important turns of plot in the novel. In the first instance, Coralee leaves a pot of food cooking on the stove and wanders off to a field believing she is following her dead brother Buddy who has come back to life. The pot catches fire and nearly burns the house down before Big Earl arrives home in time to put the fire out. However, Coralee's neglect puts their home in danger, and this is a step too far. Big Earl confronts Leroy Harrison, the judge for Coralee's insanity hearing, at his front door with a gun, demanding he come and speak to Coralee personally and see that she really is insane. Leroy complies and after speaking briefly with Coralee in a field, realizes his grave mistake in not ruling to commit her after her insanity hearing.

A second, tragic plot turn occurs when a teen-aged Caleb Harrison skips the family dinner to meet up with Little Earl, Big Earl and Coralee's son, to go hunting. Leroy insists Caleb stay for dinner saying, "Your mama's getting supper ready...Put that rifle away and eat" (Pope, 2021, p. 223). However, it is too late for Leroy to command his son, so this statement has no power over Caleb. Because of Leroy's inattention to his son for so long, their loving bond is broken. Sitting down together for a family meal with his father means nothing to Caleb and Caleb appeals to his mother for permission to leave. Mabel, in turn, prioritizes Caleb's feelings over Leroy's wishes and lets Caleb leave. Caleb walks out the door with his rifle, heading to Little Earl's home. Had Leroy worked to maintain a relationship with Caleb, Caleb would have listened to his father and stayed for dinner instead of leaving for Little Earl's house where Coralee was waiting. Coralee, existing in a state of paranoia from not taking her medications, fears neighborhood boys are out to harm her. When she sees a young man walking through the garden headed towards her home, she grabs Little Earl's gun and fatally shoots him. The young man is Caleb, who dies on the spot. Pope has used the family dinner as the catalyst for the tragic climax of the novel.

Hope and Hopeless

Through the first half of the novel, the presence of food helps lend an aura of hope around the characters. Coralee bakes a birthday cake for her son, and Big Earl takes this as a sign she is mentally stable. Old Mrs. Harrison prepares a week of meals for the homecoming of Leroy, Mabel, and baby Caleb—a hopeful gesture on her part that Leroy and Mabel will find happiness with a baby after so much loss. Mabel’s dinner of all of Leroy’s favorite foods coincides with his mistaken feeling of relief over repaying a debt to Buddy Harper’s family by declaring Coralee sane (Pope, 2021, p. 75). When Big Earl visits Coralee in the mental institution, he brings along a carefully packed picnic basket including her favorite rhubarb cobbler and feels relieved that “she still had a good appetite” (p. 122). He is hopeful that she is getting the care she needs to recover and return home.

The author’s lack of describing food in any detail in the latter half of the book, especially part three, indicates a loss of hope. Coralee’s cousin cooks meals for Big Earl and Little Earl after Coralee is committed, but none of the food is mentioned. Leroy, obsessed with solving the mystery of Buddy Harper’s killing, misses family suppers and is often seen with a drink. Mabel, not understanding what is happening to her husband, accuses him by saying, “You don’t eat. You don’t sleep. You forget Caleb’s birthday” (Pope, 2021, p. 173). Coralee, home from the mental hospital, walks along the street and observes “most folks tucked away in their houses eating supper,” but is not shown cooking a meal for her family ever again (p. 187). Leroy, out with Lewis, remarks that “Mabel would be fussing if I was late for supper,” rather than seeming anxious to be home with her (p. 195). Late in the story, Coralee butters a piece of cornbread for a hungry Little Earl after school (p. 209). This little gesture, providing an afterschool snack to a hungry boy, would seem ordinary by most mothers in most homes. Big Earl, however, views it as a miracle, because seeing Coralee act like an ordinary mother caring for her child, knowing she is sane, is his greatest desire. This cornbread snack is Coralee’s last act of love for her family

Conclusion

In *Gods of Green County*, Pope uses food and mealtimes to help the reader step inside both the private homes of families and the private lives of women. The reader feels the reality of the poverty of the Great Depression era in one poor family's worry over grocery money. As the novel steps quickly to its conclusion, solving the mystery of Buddy Harper's death and the tragic end for all the main characters, the lack of depictions of food and family meals partially foreshadows the sadness to come. Pope's use of food and mealtimes in the novel helps the reader better understand the gender expectations of the period, how women nurtured their loved ones with food and how they were viewed when they could not do so. The novel's family mealtime scenes are especially helpful in understanding family dynamics between husbands and wives and parents and children.

Reference

Pope, E. (2021). *Gods of Green County*. Blair.