

Monstrous Consumption and Resistance in *The Vegetarian* and “Eight Bites”

Paige Allen

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her final paper for a class called Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities: Ancient Plots, Modern Twists, Paige Allen examines two texts, a novel and a short story, to explore the intersection between consumption, humanity, and monstrosity in the context of restrictive eating. As she orients her reader to the central ideas of her argument in this introduction, she explains the ways consumption habits have a long cultural history of being linked to “human nature.” The claim of this essay, that the texts in question present instances of something Paige calls “resistant monstrosity,” is a strong example of the lexicon term **thesis**.*

Excerpt

Near the beginning of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye sits in a restaurant with her husband and his coworkers, none of whom are particularly receptive to her decision to stop eating meat. “Meat eating is a fundamental human instinct which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right?” one of the coworkers says. “It just isn’t natural” (Kang 29). Here, Kang articulates a fundamental anxiety of the text: that one’s eating habits are inextricably linked to one’s humanity. In the words of the old adage, we are what we eat.

Consumption habits have long dictated cultural and categorical boundaries, defining “us” and “them,” the human and the non-human—or, the monster. The non-human is often rendered monstrous through its acts of abnormal consumption: the zombie eats flesh and brains, the vampire drinks blood, the ancient Greek Scylla and Charybdis snatch men up and swallow them down. In these cases, monstrosity stems from the non-human eating excessively and eating something a human should not (often, all or part of a human body).

However, abnormal consumption can also appear through what is not eaten. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus recalls the land of the Cyclops and first defines its inhabitants’ otherness not by their large size or singular eye but by their agricultural habits: “they never plant with their own hands or plow the soil // No flocks browse, no plowlands roll with wheat; /

unplowed, unsown forever—empty of humankind— / the island just feeds droves of bleating goats” (lines 121, 145-147). In ancient Greek culture, in which bread- or barley-eater could be a synonym for human, the Cyclops is marked as other because he does not cultivate wheat into food. Even as Odysseus describes the physical appearance of the Cyclops, he underscores this difference in consumption habits: “Here was a piece of work, by god, a monster / built like no mortal who ever supped on bread” (lines 211-212, emphasis mine). The Cyclops is categorically other—a monster, not a mortal—because he does not consume as Greeks do.

This essay will examine two recent works of fiction that use restrictive eating habits to indicate cultural and categorical crisis: Kang’s novel *The Vegetarian* and Carmen Maria Machado’s short story “Eight Bites.” In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s choice not to consume is an act of resistance which transforms her as she seeks liberation from the accepted monstrosity of human life. In “Eight Bites,” the speaker abstains from eating because she thinks it will liberate her, but it actually divides her from herself. Both Kang and Machado use abnormal consumption to reveal the monstrosity of the cultures in which their characters live and to induce categorical transformation—that is, transformation from a human into another category of being. These transformations produce “resistant monsters,” non-humans considered monstrous by the culture because of their resistance to the culture’s own monstrosity. By the end of these works, the death of the human, strictly defined, is a positive outcome, upsetting the superiority of human society and gesturing toward a future for resistant monstrosity.

Author Commentary
Paige Allen

I began formulating the ideas that would become this paper while working on a presentation for the course “Ancient Plots, Modern Twists.” My assignment was to close-read a theme across several texts in our unit on monsters, and I explored the mouth as a site of monstrosity through consumption, violence, and language. Later in the course, I read *The Vegetarian* as part of the unit on metamorphosis, and I was interested in how it added to and complicated the ideas of “monstrous consumption” I had formulated through my presentation.

Though I hoped my final paper could stem from my presentation, I wanted to do more than repeat what I’d already discussed and tack *The Vegetarian* on at the end. Moreover, my presentation focused on close-reading and comparison rather than on making a cohesive argument—which I would need for an effective paper. An option for the final paper was to compare an assigned text with a text from outside the course. I had previously encountered “Eight Bites,” and as I re-read it to consider using it in my final paper, I realized its story of self-denial could make an interesting conversation partner with the restrictive eating in *The Vegetarian*.

While my paper wasn’t primarily about any of the texts I discussed during my original presentation, the work I put into the presentation offered an important foundation to my argument. Through it, I developed my ideas regarding monstrous consumption, allowing me to interrogate *The Vegetarian* and “Eight Bites” more deeply and identify patterns. The presentation also gave me a basis for my introduction and a means of setting up the conversation at the beginning of my paper so that I could position my thesis in it.

Even after I narrowed the topic of my paper to restrictive eating and monstrosity in *The Vegetarian* and “Eight Bites,” it took me a long time to develop the thesis that appears in this version of the paper. I started by working out the relationship between monstrosity and consumption within each of the texts. I then compared my close readings across them, noting

similarities and differences. I wrote my first draft using a “beta thesis” (a working thesis) that was more descriptive than argumentative. Writing a draft of the paper helped me discover new areas for analysis, strengthen the relationship between the two texts, and develop original ideas. In fact, the part of my thesis about the death of the human wasn’t in the original draft of my paper. I was only able to develop a conclusion about the larger implication of these stories after writing the paper.

The process of taking my paper from a presentation to its final product reveals how gathering and presenting information—at first as interesting observations, then as increasingly refined arguments—actually allows a thesis to take shape. In other words, I found I needed to try to say something in order to determine what I actually wanted to say.

Editor Commentary
Tess Solomon

In this paper, Paige compares two texts, the novel *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang, and the short story, “Eight Bites,” by Carmen Maria Machado, which both include instances of restrictive eating habits. Paige’s **thesis** is that this theme represents for both texts an indication of “cultural and categorical crisis.” Through a careful examination of these texts in the context of a critical analysis of the ways consumption can indicate or contradict how we see ourselves as human, Paige writes an illuminating essay that gets at very big questions through expert close reading.

She begins with a very strong introduction, using a helpful hook from the novel *The Vegetarian* to lay out the terms of debate. When a character invokes the idea of human nature in relation to meat-eating, Paige explains how the author is articulating “a fundamental anxiety of the text: that one’s eating habits are inextricably linked to one’s humanity.” From this claim, she is able to successfully pivot to a brief history of the way consumption habits are linked to monstrosity, which can arise out of both what is eaten as well as what is not. With a very clear introduction to the key terms, consumption and monstrosity, Paige arrives at her implicit motivating question: how can consumption in its link to monstrosity be utilized to make cultural critiques? The rest of the essay delineates the way two texts answer this question: the novel by connecting a refusal to eat with a refusal to “ingest cultural expectations,” the short story by describing how conforming to restrictive cultural norms for women can create monstrosity.

Most crucially, the final paragraph of this excerpt is where Paige theorizes the idea of “resistant monsters,” characters who become monstrous within their societies, and in so doing, reveal the true monstrosity of the culture from which they diverge. Paige’s intervention here takes the form of this new key term, which succeeds because it is at once graspable and provocative. She is able not only to map the term onto the texts and use it as an interpretive

framework but also to describe how using the lens of resistant monstrosity allows the readers of these texts to understand their implications and even their internal arguments.

Paige's paper exemplifies the lexicon term **thesis** in conjunction with others, such as orientation, key terms, and analysis. The final point to highlight is that this interplay between all of the elements generates a strong and cohesive paper. It provides a wonderful illustration of the way these elements of the lexicon, which we learn independently in Writing Seminar, should eventually come together to create a seamless whole.

Professor Commentary
Yelena Baraz, Classics

Paige's paper paired the novel we read and discussed in the seminar, *The Vegetarian*, with a short story, "Eight Bites." It is a brilliant pairing, and her reading shows how the authors use similar tropes around restrictive eating to show the strictures that culture places on women, while at the same time emphasizing that the protagonists' motivations are opposites of one another: the protagonist of the novel attempts to escape humanity, while the narrator of the story is under the illusion that she is achieving the best version of herself as a human being. As the excerpt shows, Paige's reading of the two texts is informed by a broader sense of the relationship between monstrosity, consumption, and cultural expectations. These opening paragraphs skillfully present the more familiar tropes of what monsters eat before introducing the thesis of the paper: in these female-centered texts, restrictive eating is a reaction to social monstrosity yet is often perceived as itself monstrous. The formulation that these female characters are both "resistant monsters" is a powerful starting point, while the introduction at the same time avoids reducing the differences between the two women and their trajectories. The paper that follows further explores the complexity of the women's responses to their respective societies' pressures: the protagonist of *The Vegetarian*, Paige shows, rejects the human but fails in her attempts to become a plant, often portrayed as an animal when her consumptive needs resurface. The protagonist of the story tries to destroy a part of herself that returns as a regressive, child-like entity, Paige suggests. The paper builds on the initial links by showing the connections between two texts that allow the differences to come more sharply to the fore.

Works Cited

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Bios

Paige Allen '21 is a concentrator in English from Mountain Top, Pennsylvania, pursuing certificates in Creative Writing, Humanistic Studies, Theater, and Music Theater. She loves writing and reading about monsters, and she plans to pursue a Master's degree in gender studies. She's active in several student theater groups, *The Daily Princetonian*, The Wesley Foundation, and the Behrman Undergraduate Society of Fellows. She wrote this paper as a senior.

Tess Solomon, '21 is an English concentrator from New York City. She is pursuing certificates in German and cognitive science. She loves reading and writing and plans to pursue a master's degree in English. She is a Writing Center fellow and recently finished her tenure as co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Nassau Weekly*. She wrote this as a senior.