Brandon Schock

ENG 464

Dr. Kilpatrick

15 November 2015

ChickieNobs and Zucchini Cheese: Food Ethics in *Oryx and Crake*

Vegetarian readers can relate to aspects of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. While modern meat production has not reached ChickieNobs proportions, the novel’s disturbing images of genetically modified animals being bred for human consumption are familiar to those who advocate a plant-based diet. When Jimmy, the novel’s protagonist, is young, he experiences a tension between his diet and the ethics of meat producers, but the older Jimmy is the highly carnivorous foil to the plant-based diet of the Crakers. Jimmy’s changing attitude toward eating animals helps frame a discussion on the novel’s complex food ethics, which suggests that both omnivorous and plant-based can become unnatural and therefore dangerous.

When Jimmy is a child, he sees animals being burned in order to get rid of a disease. Jimmy’s father reassures him that these animals are dead—“like steaks and sausages, only they had their skins on”—but this does not comfort the boy, who “thought he could see the animals looking at him reproachfully out of their burning eyes” (18). Jimmy is struck by a powerful feeling of guilt, as though he was to blame for what happened to them. Even when he is older, this is a memory from his childhood that he continues to go back to.

Jimmy is young when pigoons, pigs with human tissue inside them, are first created. When people begin to widely suspect that pigoon meat is in their food, some joke about it openly. The text explains, “This would upset Jimmy; he was confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself” (24). Jimmy’s father is involved in genetically modifying animals; his mother has strong moral convictions against this. When Jimmy’s parents fight, their son absorbs their clashing views on genetic manipulation, resulting in reasonable confusion.

This creates a tension for Jimmy, concerning “who should be allowed to eat what.” When he looks on at the pigoons in their pens and thinks about the poor living conditions of the animals, he feels “a vague sense of shame” (26). While nothing suggests that Jimmy or his mother ever go vegetarian, other people do. At HelthWyzer Public School, which Jimmy attends, soy products are served for vegetarians (54). This indicates that a substantial vegetarian population exists at a school for the children of HelthWyzer employees. Vegetarians, or at least the parents of vegetarian children, are working for a company that produces pigoons.

This disconnect among vegetarian employees at HelthWyzer can be better understood after an examination of an older Jimmy and the Crakers. When this older Jimmy sees a rabbit, he has to resist “carnivorous desires,” which make him want to “whack it with a rock, tear it apart with his bare hands, then cram it into his mouth, fur and all” (96). Jimmy resists these urges, not because he thinks this behavior would be wrong, but because he does not want to offend the Crakers, the new human species who are vegetarians. The Crakers avert their eyes while Jimmy eats like a lion gorging on its meal (101). When house pets approach Jimmy, he drives them away with stones, but later, he wishes he would have eaten them (108). Jimmy, who was once disturbed at the thought of eating a pigoon, later fantasizes about bludgeoning one to death and eating it (150). Young Jimmy experiences tension because he does not know what is right to eat; older Jimmy experiences tension because he does not want to be rejected by the Crakers.

These two tensions deal with Jimmy trying to understand is natural for a human being. Part of older Jimmy’s willingness to eat animals is due to a realistic survival need, but there is also an important psychological component at play. Older Jimmy’s “carnivorous desires” contrast with the plant-based diets of the Crakers. Eating meat is something that reminds him that he is human, unlike the Crakers. While Jimmy’s fantasies of ripping up rabbits and eating dogs are depicted brutally, they reflect Jimmy’s humanity. The ideal approach to food ethics in *Oryx and Crake* is a return to a natural diet, because vegetarianism can also be unnatural.

ChickieNobs, which are compared to giant warts, appear in the novel as the ultimate end of factory farming: a fast-growing creature that is specialized for meat production and feels no pain (203). A vegetarian might quote Jimmy’s mother, who says that creating pigoons and ChickieNobs is “interfering with the building blocks of life” (57). *Oryx and Crake* is not simply propaganda for vegetarianism, however. ChickieNobs become a regular part of Jimmy’s diet toward late adulthood, but so SoyOBoy burgers (249). The novel’s world is supersaturated with soy replacements for real meat, yet Atwood does not appear to be suggesting that this is good.

During his college years, Jimmy lives for a short period of time with a roommate named Bernice. She is described as “a fundamentalist vegan” with “stringy hair” who does not use deodorant and wears smelly clothes (189). Bernice is the clearest example of a vegetarian in the novel, and she is portrayed in a highly negative light. Bernice resorts to burning Jimmy’s sandals simply because they look like they are made out of leather (189). Throughout the novel, Bernice and the God’s Gardener’s protestors are depicted as irrational and violent.

Just as unnatural meat production is portrayed negatively, so is the unnatural production of imitation animal products. When Jimmy visits Crake later in the novel, he eats a product that looks and tastes like real cheese, but it actually comes from a new species of zucchini (208). When Crake creates a new species of human, he makes them vegetarian—not for ethical reasons, but for reasons of efficiency. Jimmy objects to Crake’s decision to have the new humans eat caecotrophs, their own waste (159). Atwood draws a parallel between the production of ChickieNubs and the waste-eating Crakers—both remove humans from a natural diet for the sake of an inhuman, utilitarian ideal of efficiency.

Crake originally tells Jimmy that these new humans will be sold. He says, “You’d be surprised how many people would like a very beautiful, smart baby that eats nothing but grass. The vegans are highly interested in that little item. We’ve done our market research” (305). Like the vegetarians working at HelthWyzer, these vegans are contributing to a push toward unnatural humanity. Many of the women at Watson-Crick remind Jimmy of Bernice, “the God’s Gardeners pyromaniac vegan” (204). The women at Watson-Crick, who are at the forefront of genetically modifying animals, remind Jimmy of Bernice, because both represent a violent fundamentalism that would alter push humanity away from what is natural.

ChickieNobs and cheese from zucchini can go hand-in-hand. Young Jimmy is concerned with what is natural for humans to eat, and it is this same concern for the natural that manifests in Jimmy’s meat eating later in life. Atwood shows the real danger of being a vegetarian who accepts a push toward an unnatural humanity. The novel’s world is saturated both with genetically modified animals and *faux*-meats, and proponents on both sides are working against natural humanity. Atwood suggests that food ethics should be concerned not just with animal welfare, but also with what is natural for a human. Omnivores and vegetarians alike can view the novel as a conversation starter and a warning against unthinkingly consuming the unnatural.