

The Food Plot in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

Michael Parrish Lee



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Introduction: Reading for the Food Plot

EATING AND THE NOVEL

This book stems from a deceptively simple question: what is eating doing in novels? E. M. Forster suggests that “[f]ood in fiction is mainly social. It draws characters together, but they seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it [...]. They hunger for each other, as we do in life, but our equally constant longing for breakfast and lunch does not get reflected” (61). Yet think, for instance, of the antisocial Dr. Grant eating himself to death at the end of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) or Jos Sedley’s distraction from Becky Sharp by sandwiches and jellies in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848). Imagine trying to hold a dinner conversation with the narcoleptic “fat boy” in Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836–1837) as he “leer[s] horribly” at your food (57) or with Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) as he gobbles a stolen pork pie, “staring distrustfully” as if afraid “of somebody’s coming to take the pie away” (19). By paying attention to how and which characters do in fact long for, enjoy, and worry about their meals, we see fiction gesturing beyond a narrow version of the “social” that would define itself against the materiality of eating—against hunger, appetite, and the sensuous pleasure of food. Oriented most vividly toward objects of the alimentary, rather than the sexual or matrimonial, variety, such characters do not fit comfortably within the marriage plot that constitutes the nineteenth-century British novel’s seemingly central narrative structure, the would-be

ultimate destination of fictive togetherness. Eating, I contend, has the potential to steer the novel away from sexuality altogether, challenging the power of desire to consolidate identity, motivate action, and drive narrative toward a resolution.

This book argues that food, eating, and appetite are central to the form of the nineteenth-century British novel. My core claim is that what is generally understood to be this novel's predominant narrative structure, the marriage plot, works in tandem and in tension with another structure that I call "the food plot." With the emergence of Malthusian population theory and its unsettling links between sexuality and the food supply, the British novel became animated by the interplay between these two plots and, through them, the friction between desire and appetite. The food plot is at once the narrative structure against which the marriage plot and psychological depth take shape and the thing that threatens to undo them. Sometimes fragmentary and elusive, sometimes sustained and overt, the food plot constitutes those moments and sequences where the materiality of food, eating, and appetite garner narrative attention. Such moments—for example, sustained focus on a character's hunger, dietary worries, or culinary pleasure; on the scarcity of food, its strangeness, poor preparation, or bad service; or, in the extreme cases of cannibalism and vampirism, on food and character becoming one and the same—challenge the cohesion of marriage plots and the psychological structures they generate. The more material novelistic eating becomes, the more it disrupts the movement of narrative toward wedlock and the depiction of personhood as centrally composed of a deep interior, an inside to be filled with yearnings and sympathies instead of with bread and cheese.

Since Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, critics have aligned the novel as a form with companionate marriage and psychological depth, or what Georg Lukács calls "interiority" (89). And despite some significant revisions to this alignment, it still makes up a key part of understandings of the nineteenth-century novel, where, even when marriages fail to occur, fail altogether, or appear facilitated by nonheterosexual desires, it generally seems to be the path toward marriage on which protagonists discover themselves and enrich their understandings of other people.¹ While ingeniously queering Jane Austen's style as resisting the confines of gender and personality, D. A. Miller still sees her novels as finally making their heroines realize the flawed "particularity" (*Style* 53) of being a "Person fit for coupling" (54). Dorothea Brooke in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) famously wants to achieve extraordinary things, but even in

Catherine Gallagher's reading, unusually attuned as it is to the complexities of embodiment, Dorothea becomes fully animated only with the "eruption of erotic sensation," the experience of "an utterly individual longing, a yearning toward some one man" that reshapes her "around a sexual and reproductive core" ("Immanent Victorian" 71). Dorothea's transformation shouldn't feel too surprising in present-day Anglo-American culture, where the marriage plot still informs so many of our narratives, from bank ads to romantic comedies, that endlessly remind us that what we want, and what our story is, is to end up with another person. But is it really through our romantic longings rather than our gurgling stomachs that our insides reveal themselves most vividly? Is Peter Brooks right to propose in *Reading for the Plot* that narrative is fundamentally mobilized by erotic desire? I'm not so sure.

What if behind the familiar story of people defined and driven by the longing for companionship and love there were another story, a story of people driven by material appetite—by the need to eat and keep on eating, the need to survive and sustain themselves at the most basic bodily level? It is not necessarily the most flattering picture of humanity, especially if we are invested in distinguishing ourselves by the depth of our feelings rather than the rumble in our bellies. What then if a lot of nineteenth-century novelists were invested in the more flattering story of people with deep feelings caring about and desiring other people with deep feelings while also knowing, or fearing, the other story: worrying that behind or beside love and desire lurked the ever-present need to eat, and that this might be the real human story? I propose that, through these concerns, the nineteenth-century British novel took on a double form, with the marriage plot usually in the foreground, but the food plot haunting it from the shadows.

By reading for the food plot, we encounter places in novels where marriage plots break down, where subjectivity seems less deep and secure, and where the drives and drifts of desire can no longer carry the story. Exploring fiction by Austen, Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, Bram Stoker, and H. G. Wells, I chart the evolving relationship between the marriage plot and the food plot over the course of the nineteenth century as marriage plots become less stable and eating gains material and narrative force. This study is primarily a theory of the novel, and while I read novelistic form as historically engaged, I am equally interested in the ways in which novels do not always behave as mere outlets for other cultural or historical forces, often actively responding to, coming into tension with, or influencing them. In other

words, I treat novels as culturally specific forms that interact with but are not entirely reducible to other forms of culture. This is not a cultural history of either eating or marriage, although it is informed by work in both of these fields. It is, rather, a book about how fiction represents eating and appetite, the functions that such representations serve, and their centrality to the workings of the novel as a form.

Until relatively recently, literary criticism has tended either to ignore food and eating or to dismiss them as unimportant. For instance, as Peter Brooks begins to discuss the “textual erotics” that he sees as organizing narrative (37), he contrasts the “socially defined” desires of nineteenth-century protagonists (39) to the efforts at avoiding “starvation” (38) found in earlier texts—efforts that for Brooks constitute a “rock-bottom paradigm of the dynamic of desire.” Appetite in this account appears primitive, almost subsocial, not sophisticated enough for further analysis. Similarly, while arguing that “great novelists reveal the imitative nature of desire” (14), René Girard dismissively notes Sancho Panza’s apparently unmediated appetite in *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615): “Some of Sancho’s desires are not imitated, for example, those aroused by the sight of a piece of cheese or a goatskin of wine. But Sancho has other ambitions besides filling his stomach” (3). Like Brooks, Girard fastens on appetite as a lower threshold to the model of literary desire that he puts forward. He brushes aside Sancho’s desire to eat as too simple, too much a unilateral relationship between person and object, to be worth serious discussion in an analysis that theorizes desire in novels as complex, “triangular,” and socially mediated (3). Or consider Franco Moretti’s more recent offhand designation of novelistic eating as the “perfect filler” (*Bourgeois* 77), as though of all the things that might occur in fiction, eating were particularly well suited to creating the sense that nothing is happening.

The Food Plot joins efforts in nineteenth-century studies to bring food and eating into view and demonstrate their importance to fiction. Books such as Gwen Hyman’s *Making a Man* and Annette Cozzi’s *Discourses of Food in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* participate in a growing cross-disciplinary interest in food and eating in the social sciences and humanities known as food studies that is helping draw attention to an understudied topic. A corrective to the assumption that eating is not worthy of serious thought, food studies and the literary criticism that shares its focus generally aligns with Roland Barthes’s insistence that “food signifies” (“Food Consumption” 21). Yet, in this way, such criticism also tends to share E. M. Forster’s view of food in fiction as “mainly social”—often

treating it more as an index of cultural concerns than as something tied to appetite and bodily necessity.² For instance, Cozzi's primary claim is that "food is one of the most fundamental signifiers of national identity, and literary representations of food [...] reveal how that identity is culturally constructed" (5), and Hyman argues that "[a]nxieties about status and place" are "made strongly manifest when the gentleman sits down to eat" (13). These are productive approaches that importantly highlight instances in novels when food and eating function as revelatory windows into key issues such as gender and national identity. But must concerns over food and eating primarily reflect some preexisting social? Do we not also assemble the social, in part, so that we might eat, so that we might create and maintain a food supply?³

The Food Plot is in dialogue with such work when relevant, but my book takes a different approach. As this project developed, I became increasingly curious about those instances in fiction when food, eating, and appetite resist acting as a social mirror or perform work that exceeds this function. And I discovered some striking similarities between those sequences in which fiction foregrounds the materiality of food and eating over and above their symbolic or indexical roles, similarities that made me think harder especially about the significance of appetite in the novel. Appetite in nineteenth-century fiction is neither equivalent to desire nor a low-end or primitive form of desire. Instead, the interaction between the marriage plot and the food plot plays out an ongoing tension *between* desire and appetite influenced by Malthusian concerns over population and the fraught relationship between sexuality and the food supply. This crucial role of appetite and the bodily necessity it often indicates is one of the reasons why, although I look at some examples of food production, the characters that enter into food plots are usually eaters or would-be eaters. This is also part of why the primary focus of this book is food and eating and not some other order of materiality, whether objects or money.⁴

The friction between appetite and desire means that nineteenth-century fiction does more than deploy an "anorexic logic that validated the slim body as a symbol of woman's lack of corporeality, her sexual purity, and her respectable middle-class social status," as Anna Krugovoy Silver puts it in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (14), drawing on the earlier arguments of Helena Michie, Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar. While remnants of what Carolyn Korsmeyer identifies as an earlier association of alimentary taste with "the feminine" and of appetite with both food and sex (5) might have lingered in the period, the nineteenth-century novel

from Jane Austen forward does not simply fashion a genteel, desexualized anorexic femininity but rather develops a general model of heterosexual interiority that is defined *against* appetite. Of course, as my readings should make clear, the stakes of being associated with eating or reduced to appetite are often very different for men and women in fiction due largely to deep asymmetries of social and economic power. If a bachelor like Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair* can command marital prospects even as he gushes about curry, women's food plots more often involve higher levels of shame, risk, and danger, from the unmarried Miss Matty's reluctance to give herself over to the enjoyment of eating oranges in front of other people in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–1853) to Virginia and Alice Madden's scant meals and calculations of the minimum amount of food that "could support life" (44) in George Gissing's *Odd Women* (1893). Such gendered differences in characters' experiences of the food plot are significant and inform my analyses, but they will not be my central focus since readings of eating along gender lines—whether Hyman's gentlemen or Silver's anorexic women—have, for all their valuable insights, tended to obscure key similarities across gender divisions that contribute to the novel's construction of deep heterosexual selfhood against appetite.

Rather than seeing the food plot as mainly a woman's story or a man's story, my understanding of novelistic eating comes closer to that of Joseph Litvak, whose *Strange Gourmets* adopts a queer theoretical framework to explore the perversity of eating and appetite in nineteenth-century fiction. Like Litvak, I follow Pierre Bourdieu in seeking to put pressure on the hierarchy "between aesthetic taste" and "merely' culinary taste" (8), but while Litvak often collapses together "the culinary" and "the erotic," I am more interested in delineating the interplay between appetite and desire. Although my book has a different method from Litvak's and isn't primarily a study of queer desire, the food plot often does resemble a queer force in that it pulls against the heterosexual gravity of the marriage plot, much as Lee Edelman's take on the "death drive" resists what he calls the "reproductive futurism" that he sees as the "limit and horizon" of the "political field" (27). However, the food plot presents a perhaps even greater challenge to this field, since it marks not only the point where heterosexuality collapses but also a limit point of sexuality itself. And where Edelman sees children as the primary embodiments of futurism, the food plot, in so frequently associating them with appetite, instead puts children in the position of being potential Malthusian devourers of the future.

The food plot marks the possibility of appetite overtaking desire as the driving force of narrative and selfhood. And all the better if the end-driven connotations of the word “plot” seem misleading when describing something so frequently fragmentary or abandoned, since it is precisely the nature of the food plot to resist the narrative closure and promise of futurity offered by the marriage plot. The food plot is a sort of shadow plot, shifting and fleeting. In this sense it is closer to several of the less maplike meanings of the word “plot”: “a small portion of a surface differing in character or aspect from the remainder; a mark, patch, spot,” “a stain,” or indeed a “burial plot” (*OED*)—which is appropriate since novels sometimes represent eating-oriented characters as positioned between life and death. At its most incipient—in the novels of Jane Austen—the food plot appears discontinuous, like many scattered plots that don’t really go anywhere. At its strongest—say, in *Great Expectations* or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897)—it shapes the plot as a whole and often finds embodiment in figures like Magwitch or the vampiric Count.

To be sure, the food plot does not encapsulate all instances of food and eating appearing in fiction, many of which are, as Forster argues, involved in drawing characters together. Such social cohesion occurs most evidently by way of structure and metaphor, with a given eating scene providing a time, space, and occasion for a social exchange and with eating metaphors showing that certain characters “hunger for each other” (Forster 61), as in the case of Jane’s “devour[ing]” love for Rochester (161) in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). But what is at stake in the use of fictional eating as a form of social togetherness? Turning again to *Jane Eyre*, we find Jane revealing her hurt feelings to Rochester:

Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have *my morsel of bread* snatched from my lips, and *my drop of living water* dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?—You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! [...]. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh:—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit[.] (Brontë 253; my emphasis)

Jane’s speech is a call for Rochester to recognize that (1) she has feelings of romantic love for him; (2) these feelings are proof that she, no soulless automaton, has a deep and plentiful interiority; and (3) such an interiority makes her worthy of his recognition and interest, makes her his “equal”

and means that she deserves more than to “become nothing” to him (253). In addition to making interiority contingent on romantic desire, this passage defines such desire—and, by extension, such interiority—as transcending and replacing bodily need, the eating metaphors displacing the necessity of eating onto love. As Jane’s feelings for Rochester take on the urgency of physical survival (Rochester becoming her “morsel” of bread and “drop” of water), her subjectivity asserts itself as ungrounded in the very necessity to which she alludes. Her metaphoric hunger for Rochester allows her to become a “spirit” unbound by “mortal flesh” and thus marks her transcendence through love of the kind of literal hunger that she experiences as a child at Lowood where the “scanty supply of food” results in “deficiency of nourishment” (60). Jane’s speech therefore announces an exchange of hunger for love, desire, and interiority and asserts that this exchange entails trading the status of being “nothing” for the value of being interesting and loveable.

Moreover, the fact that this speech is what spurs Rochester to propose suggests that the marriage plot itself depends on the subordination of hunger as a motivating force. Jane’s statement thus speaks not only for her but also for the nineteenth-century novel as a form and for the kind of subjects it formulates, asking us to be primarily interested in a type of heterosexually structured interiority that measures its depth, in part, through its distance from appetite. And as far as the novel might also produce such interiority for its readers to inhabit and imagine as their own, it is in large part through the sublimation of appetite that the novel invites readers to see themselves as “equal” and “free” along the lines that Jane insists that she is (253).⁵ This is not to say that novels attempt a simple dichotomy between body and mind. After all, the path that Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke ultimately choose is one toward physical love as well as a meeting of minds, and, as Aaron Matz notes, the marriage plot usually also implies a “procreation plot” (“Procreation” 23). The freedom promised by the marriage plot and the generation of interiority is not a freedom from the body wholesale but rather from bodily necessity. As studies such as William A. Cohen’s *Embodied* and Gallagher’s *Body Economic* have shown, embodiment was crucial to Victorian authors’ explorations of consciousness. But, as we will see, for many nineteenth-century novelists, the need to eat often represented a confining or overwhelming mode of materiality that threatened to efface individual subjectivity and choice.⁶

When it breaks out of a symbolic, metaphorical, or indexical role, novelistic appetite frequently compromises a character’s interior depth by

constituting a kind of competing interiority that threatens to reduce or replace complex inwardness or to render selfhood and the story of that selfhood in terms of material need and vulnerability rather than desire or psychological choice. After the discovery of Rochester's imprisoned first wife, Bertha, halts Jane Eyre and Rochester's wedding, Jane leaves Thornfield and finds herself penniless and hungry in a Yorkshire village. Experiencing "Want" (324), she reports that upon seeing a "shop with some cakes of bread in the window" (325), "I coveted a cake of bread. With that refreshment I could perhaps regain a degree of energy; without it, it would be difficult to proceed." Outside of the marriage plot, where the desire for another person unfolds interiority and motivates action, Jane enters into a food plot where edible matter becomes her primary object and where the very capacity of narrative and character to "proceed" depends on physical energy obtained from food. As she comes "face to face with Necessity" (326), hunger rather than love drives the story.

But Jane's food plot does not proceed in a way that resembles progress. Her narrative instead becomes restless and repetitive, seeming to go nowhere instead of moving in a direction that offers the prospect of resolution:

I was so sick, so weak, so gnawed with nature's cravings, instinct kept me roaming round abodes where there was a chance of food. Solitude would be no solitude—rest no rest—while the vulture, hunger, thus sank beak and talons in my side.

I drew near houses; I left them, and came back again, and again I wandered away: always repelled by the consciousness of having no claim to ask—no right to expect interest in my isolated lot. Meantime, the afternoon advanced, while I thus wandered about like a lost and starving dog. (327)

With its emphasis on circular wandering, this passage foregrounds appetite's resistance to narrative closure while also bringing into view potential alternate forms of closure outside the marriage plot: either the temporary appeasement of hunger with food (Jane achieves this prior to entering the village with her last piece of bread before "Want" visits her again [323–324]) or the permanent closure of the death that would come when eating cannot continue. The food plot here poses a narrative counter model where the need to eat and keep on eating is what drives a plot that can only find its final resolution in death. Narrative and character thus become one, both requiring food as fuel in order to keep going, and so becoming reducible—if not fully reduced—to biological life, to a bare plot of physical survival.

In her hungry exodus from the marriage plot, Jane seems stranded both outside the possibility of conventional narrative closure and outside the key categories of “culture” and “the human” that we might take for granted as integral to the novelistic social. The passage emphasizes “instinct,” “nature’s cravings,” and the animalism of both the sufferer of hunger and hunger itself. Yet rather than depicting pure nature or animal life, the food plot gives us nature lodged painfully in culture, the animal trapped in the human. Jane cannot become a bee “busy among the sweet bilberries” as she wishes she could before entering the village (324). She is, she understands, “a human being,” and she must dwell within and in relation to the world of people that is the dominant space of the novel. A human sufferer of animal appetite, Jane occupies the blurry margins of the social, wandering through and around the village, on the verge of begging for food but feeling that she has “no claim to ask” (327), simultaneously within and outside of human civilization as an internal exile. Jane’s situation thus demonstrates how the appetite of the food plot exists in the nineteenth-century novel as an “inclusive exclusion” in a way that resembles the relationship Giorgio Agamben describes “bare life” having to Western politics (*Sacer* 7) as life that is at once excluded from and captured “within the political order” (9): “not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city” (105) but rather life made to occupy a zone of “indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture” (109), “exclusion and inclusion” (105). Nineteenth-century fiction does not work to lock out the materiality of eating and appetite entirely (and its appearance thus is not reducible to repressed content surfacing) but includes it in ways that render it not at home in the novel. *Jane Eyre* encourages interest in and sympathy for the life of the hungry protagonist—life stripped, or nearly stripped, to physical necessity—yet the narrative includes appetite and the life that bears it partly as a means of asserting that this will not maintain interest for long and must be expelled.

This positioning of life absorbed in appetite as bereft of lasting value helps define the life that, through contrast, does have value: namely life organized by and oriented toward romantic desire. Jane asks: “Why do I struggle to retain a valueless life?” (329–330) and answers, “Because I know, or believe Mr. Rochester is still living” (330). And so the narrative worthlessness of the food plot shores up the ultimate value of the marriage plot. Nineteenth-century fiction captures bodily necessity in the form of a food plot that must be avoided, negated, or dismissed in order to create and maintain the worthwhile life generated by what D. A. Miller calls the novel’s “conjugal imperative” (*Style* 28).

NARRATIVE, POPULATION, BIOPOLITICS

If the work of this book is to make visible a plot that has gone largely unseen, then such work in some senses continues (if critically) the efforts of many Victorian novelists to find ways to narrate something that seemed to hover at the edge of what Gerald Prince and Robyn R. Warhol call “the unnarratable” (Prince 1; Warhol 221). While novelists prior to the nineteenth century were interested in eating and appetite, the food plot first emerges when these things become particular problems for novelistic representation with the intersection of fiction and concerns about population. Michel Foucault connects “that great awakening of sexual concern since the eighteenth century” (*Sexuality* 151) with the “emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem” (25) and the related establishment of what he calls “*bio-politics*” (139) or “*bio-power*” (143): the incorporation of biological “life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit” political and economic “calculations.” In Britain, the biopolitical concern with population came front and center at the turn of the nineteenth century with the rise of Malthusian thought, which tied together sexuality and the food supply and influenced the 1800 Population Act that established the introduction of regular censuses. Thomas Robert Malthus’s 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* posits two “fixed laws of our nature” (13): “First, That food is necessary to the existence of man” (12), and “Secondly, That the passion between the sexes is necessary, and will remain nearly in its present state.” Because of these laws, Malthus claims, “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (13). Malthus thus establishes a narrative of population that sets up appetite and sexual desire as the two main drives of human life while putting them in tension with one another in a way that anticipates the friction between the food plot and the marriage plot in the nineteenth-century novel that this book maps.

The relationship between the food plot and marriage plot is a key site at which biopolitics meet novelistic form, and understanding this relationship helps bring into focus the role of Malthusian population theory in the British novel’s development.⁷ In *The Body Economic*, Gallagher argues for the pervasive influence of Malthusian thought on nineteenth-century literature, political economy, and conceptions of desire. As she points out, “Malthus argued that sexual desire is as constant a feature of human nature as the need for food, and he is one of the first modern thinkers to insist that sexual intercourse is both ineradicable and essential to human happiness” (10).

In particular, I would add, Malthus naturalizes and vitalizes the kind of sexual desire privileged by the companionate marriage plot. “Passion” for Malthus is a reproductive, heterosexual “passion between the sexes” (Malthus 12) that is also a monogamous “attachment to one woman” (18). Gallagher notes that Malthus describes “sexual passion” as “rational” and “pleasurable” (42); he also makes it synonymous with sympathy and companionship. Malthus could almost be taken as an early theorist of the marriage plot when he writes: “Virtuous love, exalted by friendship, seems to be the sort of mixture of sensual and intellectual enjoyment particularly suited to the nature of man, and most powerfully calculated to awaken the sympathies of the soul, and produce the most exquisite gratifications” (89). In other words, Malthus both theorized sexual desire as an essential drive and connected it to deep interiority, viewing it as simultaneously physical, intellectual, emotional, and social.

Malthus’s theory emerged at a time when, as Ruth Perry notes, the accelerating enclosure of common lands for commercial use produced a greater “dependence on wages” that, “together with the new scarcity of land and cottages,” “pushed young people into earlier marriages,” resulting in “an unprecedented growth in population” (324). “[R]oot[ing] people more firmly in their conjugal rather than their consanguineal families” (334), this trend contributed to a cultural shift wherein “the biologically given family into which one was born was gradually becoming secondary to the chosen family constructed by marriage” (2). As agricultural developments facilitated both population growth and the increasing importance of the conjugal bond, Malthusian thought helped forge a narrative of universal reproductive sexuality but tied this narrative to the problem of appetite multiplying beyond the food supply. At a time when the marriage plot was becoming central to the novel form, population theory thus offered a narrative that helped establish this plot as *the* human story while also introducing a narrative impasse where the flip side of sexuality is a never-ending need to eat and where the reproductive future threatens to devour itself.

In nineteenth-century Britain, then, eating becomes a narrative problem as well as a biopolitical one; just as sexuality takes center stage as a grand narrative, appetite begins to destabilize it. As novelists writing in the wake of Malthusian population theory imagined social worlds where narrative closure was synonymous with the procreative futurity of the marriage plot, the shadow of appetite threatened to undermine this closure and this future. The food plot as a distinct form emerged in the first quarter of the nineteenth century when Jane Austen approached this problem

and seemed almost to negate it, her fiction working to sever the connection between sexuality and eating by defining the former against the latter. As we will see in Chapter 1, Austen's published fiction includes food, eating, and appetite in ways that subordinate them to the marriage plot, working to diminish their power and make them uninteresting, incorporating them into narratives only to make them seem not worth narrating. As Austen helped make the marriage plot central to the novel form, eating came to look insignificant—not quite that species of the unnarratable that Warhol calls the “*subnarratable*,” or that which is “too insignificant or banal to warrant representation” (222), but rather *just barely* narratable: the stuff of backgrounds, margins, minor characters, and dull musings. In this way Austen sets up the novelistic framework that relies on an opposition between the food plot and the marriage plot.

But while the food plot begins as subordinate, it remains structurally crucial as that which the marriage plot defines itself against. And as novelists in the Victorian period worked with Austen's framework, they also began responding to and participating in a growing social impetus to sympathize with the hungry by actively experimenting with modifying and subverting Austen's model, figuring out ways to bring eating and appetite more visibly and centrally into their narratives. Food plots in Austen might look barely narratable, but by midcentury they gather force and cohesion while still fluctuating around different levels of the unnarratable without quite merging with them—often conjuring dullness but frequently veering more powerfully toward the “supranarratable” that Warhol describes as “*what can't be told because it's 'ineffable'*” (223). And, as we shall see in later chapters, by the 1890s, when Darwinian ideas helped generate new avenues for exploring the “animalistic” aspects of the humanity, food plots took on undeniable narrative centrality, spawning starving artists, cannibals, and vampires.

By exploring the dynamics of the food plot, this book offers a corrective to understandings of narrative that privilege sexuality and offers a new lens through which to see how the nineteenth-century novel constructs its most culturally reproduced figure: the (often middle-class) individual of heterosexually structured interiority. Such a figure is delineated through a capacity to escape reduction to appetite that distinguishes it from the many others that the novel marginalizes partly through their association with food and appetite. These marginalized subjects include members of the working classes, criminals, gypsies, servants, and animals as well as figures

that do not quite fit with marriage plots—figures of pre-, post-, refused, or failed reproductive sexuality, such as children, unmarried adults, and those who have married but not borne children. Through such association with eating and appetite, the novel thus connects those who fall outside the marriage plot and those who fall outside the category of the upper- and middle-class British human, and such figures become variously disposable.

In formal terms, these figures often serve as the flat characters that help round out central characters in a process that works along similar lines to the “asymmetric structure of characterization” that Alex Woloch argues organizes nineteenth-century fiction (30). And when food-associated characters such as Magwitch, Jos Sedley, and Count Dracula aren’t exactly rendered flat or minor, they are often killed off or otherwise expelled from the text. Despite Woloch’s attunement to the manifold characters “who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe” (13), he does not link this structure of characterization to concerns surrounding population and thus misses the biopolitical implications of the asymmetries he explores. Nineteenth-century fiction responds to the narrative conundrum posed by Malthus’s connection of reproduction to the unsustainable multiplication of hungry mouths by flattening or ejecting characters associated with appetite, as though the lives and stories of lovers can remain central and valuable only if appetite and its bearers become disposable. Characters in food plots often occupy a position that resembles the “bare life” that Agamben describes as being simultaneously included within and excluded from the political order (*Sacer* 7) and being, moreover, “*life exposed to death*” (88), life that it appears acceptable to kill (or, in the case of fictional characters, kill off).

Central characters and protagonists can also enter into food plots, but they must escape appetite if they are to get their marriage plots on track and find harmonious resolutions to their stories. Characters such as Jane Eyre, Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, and Mina Murray in *Dracula* enter food plots that threaten to reduce them to bare life. They manage to escape, even if others do not. Jane survives hunger and enters a marriage that is made possible by the death of the flesh-biting, “animal”-like Bertha (293). Mina is exposed to appetite in the form of a vampiric infection that must be cured through the killing of Dracula before her marriage plot with Jonathan Harker can find its happy (and reproductive) resolution. It is as if the hungry body itself must be killed off or displaced onto other disposable characters for the marriage plot and the deep subjectivity it produces to carry on and find their culmination. In this and other respects,

the novelistic subordination of eating to the marriage plot anticipates Sigmund Freud's theorization in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) of the oral stage as the most primitive stage of psychic development, something that must be outgrown in order for a person to achieve full individuation and healthy adult sexuality; it also informs later critical approaches that privilege sexuality while ignoring food and appetite. To understand the relationship between the food plot and the marriage plot is to begin to come to terms with the extent to which such a subordination continues to shape our reading practices and conceptions of selfhood.

A TASTE FOR CHARACTER

The food plot is where biopolitical concerns intersect with aesthetic ones, in particular with shifting understandings of literary character. In contrast to the eighteenth-century focus on the legibility of character, Deidre Shauna Lynch shows that, "at the turn of the nineteenth century characters became the imaginative resources on which readers drew to make themselves into individuals, to expand their own interior resources of sensibility" through a new mode of "sensitive reading that plumbs the depths of a character in a novel" (126). This new emphasis on psychological depth—on "appreciating" the inner lives of beings who cannot possibly be taken at face value—was part of a "new form of self-culture" and "the mechanism of a new mode of class awareness" (126). The newly deep, or round, character "supplied readers with the means with which to implement the work of cultural classification and stratification that Pierre Bourdieu calls distinction," allowing readers "to distinguish their own deep-feeling reception of texts from other readers' mindless consumption" (19).

This reconceptualization of literary character meant that the nineteenth-century British novel was from the onset bound up not only with projects of aesthetic "taste" but also with the devaluation of the alimentary that, ironically, such projects usually entailed. According to Bourdieu, an opposition between the "taste of sense" and the "taste of reflection" has "been the basis of high aesthetics since Kant" (6), and the intellectual "detachment of the pure gaze" is linked to "an ethos of elective distance" from material "necessity" (5). Korsmeyer explains that a Platonic "hierarchy of the senses" (5) that privileges vision and hearing while denigrating gustatory taste (3–4) was further entrenched by eighteenth-century thinkers who developed "philosophies of taste," theories "of the perception and appreciation of beauty that form the foundation for contemporary