

Terri Carter
HRS 190
Nov. 9, 2008
Word count: 1,769

Reading Analysis of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

Michael Pollan has gotten past the idea of the pastoral to the idea of becoming a hunter and gatherer, therefore eliminating the omnivore's dilemma or at least give himself a better understanding of what constitutes the dilemma itself. Indeed, Pollan realizes that not only do omnivores have a dilemma, but also the vegetarians' of this world may have a greater dilemma. He decided to do an experiment and try to cook a meal using food that he grew, foraged, or hunted himself, with a little (a lot) help from some friends. Inexperienced in hunting and foraging for food, Pollan was unprepared for the outcomes and learns quite a bit about him and the views of other hunters and foragers.

And this, I suppose, points to what I was really after in taking up hunting and gathering: to see what it'd be like to prepare and eat a meal in full consciousness of what was involved. I realized that this had been the ultimate destination of the journey I'd been on since traveling to an Iowa cornfield: to look as far into the food chains that support us as I could look, and recover the fundamental biological realities that the complexities of modern industrialized eating keep from our view (281).

Angelo Garro is the man who helps Pollan in his quest for foraging various mushrooms and hunting wild pig for his meal. Pollan was surprised at what he had to endure to get his hunting license, but getting the rifle was in comparison rather easy. As far as foraging for mushrooms, that was a different story. This brought about a dilemma for Pollan; how do you know which mushroom is good and which is poisonous?

My encounter with the chanterelle- or was it a false chanterelle?-put me in touch with one of the most elemental facts about human eating: It can be dangerous, and even when it isn't dangerous, it is fraught. The blessing of the omnivore is that he can eat a great many different things in nature. The curse of the omnivore is that when

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it comes to figuring out which of those things are safe to eat, he's pretty much on his own (287).

Pollan details how our bodies are equipped for eating meat and why we are omnivores.

Other animals, for example, the koala bear, who only eats one thing, eucalyptus trees. Humans can eat a variety of foods and food types. This is attributed to our higher brainpower and the sense of taste, whether it is sweet or bitter.

Disgust turns out to be another valuable tool for negotiating the omnivore's dilemma. Through the emotion has long since attached itself to a great many objects having nothing to do with food, food is where and why it began, as the etymology of the word indicates. (It comes from the Middle French verb *degrouster*, to taste.) Rozen, who has written or coauthored several fascinating articles about disgust, defines it as the fear of incorporating offending substances into one's body.... "Disgust is intuitive microbiology" (292).

Pollan describes cooking to be one of the best tools that omnivores have come up with, and stating that:

...we depend instead on the prodigious powers of recognition, memory, and communication that allow us to cook cassava or identify an edible mushroom and share that precious information. The same process of natural selection came up with both strategies: one just happens to rely on cognition, the other goes with the gut (294).

But, cooking our food eventually led to fast food and the dilemma we have now, obesity and the need for dieting and the different fads that come with the need to watch our diet and the human response of impatience.

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Along with the issue of one's diet is the question, do we need to eat animals? To answer that query, Pollan decides to become a vegetarian for a short while and discovers that it is not a food issue, but a moral issue.

In recent years medical researchers have raised questions about the good to eat part, while philosophers like Singer and organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have given us new reasons to doubt meat is good to eat—that is, good for our souls or our moral self-regard. Hunting is in particularly bad odor these days, even among people who still eat meat; apparently it's the fact of killing that these people most object to (as if a steak could be gotten any other way), or perhaps it's the taking pleasure in killing an animal that is the trouble.... A relic of an ignorant past that very soon will fill us with shame (305).

Pollan also posed more questions regarding PETA's views and what would they feel would constitute a good life and filled with happiness and even fulfillment of an animal's life to be within their standards. Is Polyface Farms nothing more than a glorified "death-camp" for their animals and if not, what would be? Suffering of the animals is what they are most concerned. It is interesting that Pollan considers we have replaced the natural predator for another one, us humans. If we cease to eat meat, this also condemns the people of certain areas in the world where crops do not grow. The food chain and the ecological system would be changed forever (327). In addition, then if the animal had a clean kill, then one should feel good about eating that meat, knowing the animal did not suffer.

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Now the next question is who and how can a person slaughter an animal? Perhaps one should think as Joel Salatin, and believe that they do not have a soul as humans or as Pollan feels in the next passage.

Religion, and ritual, has played a crucial part in this process. Native Americans and other hunter-gatherers give thanks to the animal for giving up its life so the eater might live. The practice sounds a little like saying grace, a ceremony hardly anyone bothers with anymore. In biblical times the rules governing ritual slaughter stipulated a rotation, so that no individual would have to kill animals every day, lest he become dulled to the gravity of the act. Many cultures have offered sacrificial animals to the gods, perhaps as a way to convince themselves it was the god's appetite that demanded the slaughter, and not their own. In ancient Greece, the priests responsible for the slaughter (Priests! Now we give the job to migrant workers paid the minimum wage) would sprinkle holy water on the sacrificial animal's head. The beast would promptly shake its head, and this was taken as a necessary sign of assent (331).

Pollan feels that we have taken out all the rituals regarding the slaughter of our meat. Realizing this, he was prepared to try to slaughter his pig for his meal. This was quite a process for Pollan, since he had never killed an animal before and never experienced the sharpening of his senses for that brief time while in the woods. I believe he was almost embarrassed at the feeling that overcame him after he shot the pig. He actually swelled up with pride at his accomplishment. Dressing the pig led to disgust for Pollan. He would never eat the meat if he had stayed near the smell of the entrails. Instead, he would take the picture of the event and he was then able to look back on the event.

There it was, one of the food chains that have sustained life on earth for a million years made visible in a single frame, one uncluttered and most beautiful example of what is.

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Then, Pollan was able to go hunting for mushrooms in the Sierra Mountains. He also explained about the social dos and don'ts when it comes to foraging these wonderful mycorrhizal species. He also explained that some societies are mycophiles and some are mycophobic, depending on where you lived. The phobias involving mushrooms stems from the poisonous and hallucinogenic properties of some of the varieties. Pollan feels you must trust someone who knows on a first hand basis the differences between the good and bad types.

Finally, Pollan was ready to prepare his meal of different foods he killed, planted, or foraged. Angelo, of course being a chef, assisted him with his endeavor of the perfect meal. He realized that this was a slow process and he could not do this every day.

But imagine for a moment if we once again knew, strictly as a matter of course, these few unremarkable things: What it is we're eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in true accounting, it really cost. We could need any reminding that however we choose to feed ourselves, we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world (411).

2. Evaluation:

Pollan makes great arguments for the humane slaughtering of animals for our use as food. Although, as he pointed out, most people would rather not know where their food actually came from and how it got to the supermarket. He was also very passionate in his endeavors to try to make the best possible meal he could with what he had. The omnivore's

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dilemma almost made Pollan quit in his endeavor, he had to put his morality aside and look at the bigger picture: of what would it take to survive. He found that it was not easy and nor would he want to do this every day, nor could he financially, and that is why the food industry took off with so many convenience foods. It is easier to pop something in the microwave than it is to grow, or forage, or hunt for one's food.

3. Wider Relevance:

When Pollan mention the religious aspect and the rituals when meat was presented to the gods for their consumption, it reminded me of the Puja ritual in the Hindu tradition we had read. Also brought to mind was Barbara Kingsolver and how she was able to cook this way for a year, only she did not feel it was necessary to kill all the animals herself. Instead, she and her family lived on a farm where it is easier to grow and forage food and keep their own poultry. Even exchanging goods for some beef or pork from a neighbor was less costly and much easier than the route Pollan took and I think he would have had a much better outlook on the omnivore's dilemma.