



Activity 3

Aim: carry out a close comparative reading of food details/scenes from sources across a broad historical range

This activity looks at the role played by the representation of the feast. Feasts in children's literature – and in lore and literature more generally – can be used to communicate a multiplicity of meanings, both positive and negative. The task requires reading and comparing extracts from a range of literary sources which feature descriptions of feasts.

The feast is an important motif in many forms of lore and literature, as it is of course an important social ritual. The feast can have many connotations – community, celebration, and so on. Of particular importance and sociocultural and historical significance is the relief and joy the feast brings after a period of famine or voluntary fasting – think of the pleasures associated with food at Eid after Ramadan or Easter after Lent. But the depiction of a feast can convey sinister ideas too. Often these more ominous eating experiences are used to explore ideas about power, control and entrapment. This relates to the moral and ideological ambiguity of much food imagery, as we explored in the previous activity through considering the two interpretations of the Land of Cockaigne.

TASK

Compare and contrast the representations of the feast in the extracts below. Most of these feasts can be interpreted as a trap and they all herald encounters with different or magical worlds. What is your response to these descriptions of food? What, if any, features do they share in common?

You could use some or all of the following headings and key words to organise your thoughts:

- Content, meaning, themes
- Genre, form
- Voice, perspective, tone, mood
- Language devices, word choices, details

Extension

Can you think of any further examples of feasts from your own reading? Reflect on the function the feast fulfils in these examples – whether the wish fulfilment of hungry minds, a



joyous celebration, a ritual welcome, a sinister trap or something else. It is very likely that the feast will signify multiple things at once.

Extract 1

The Tempest (Shakespeare), Act 3 Scene 3, a mirage-feast provided by Prospero

Enter PROSPERO above, invisible. Enter several strange Shapes, bringing in a banquet; they dance about it with gentle actions of salutation; and, inviting the King, & c. to eat, they depart.

...

FRANCISCO

They vanish'd strangely.

SEBASTIAN

No matter, since
They have left their viands behind; for we have stomachs.
Will't please you taste of what is here?

...

Thunder and lightning. Enter ARIEL, like a harpy; claps his wings upon the table; and, with a quaint device, the banquet vanishes.

Read the full scene at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/tempest/tempest.3.3.html>

Extract 2

The witch's house in *Hansel and Gretel* (collected by the Brothers Grimm):

“When they approached the little house they saw that it was built of bread and covered with cakes, but that the windows were of clear sugar.”

Extract 3

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Lewis, 1950), a seemingly modest tea that would have been perceived as a feast by readers experiencing post-war rationing:



“And really it was a wonderful tea. There was a nice brown egg, lightly boiled, for each of them, and then sardines on toast, and then buttered toast, and then toast with honey, and then a sugar-topped cake.”

Extract 4

A Wrinkle in Time (Engle, 1962), a feast provided by an enemy who controls the entire society:

“The table was set up in front of them, and the dark-smocked men heaped their plates with turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and gravy and little green peas with big yellow blobs of butter melting in them and cranberries and sweet potatoes topped with gooey browned marshmallows and olives and celery and rose-bud radishes and –”

Extract 5

The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008), eating in the Capitol:

“He presses a button on the side of the table. The top splits and from below rises a second table top that holds our lunch. Chicken and chunks of oranges cooked in a creamy sauce laid on a bed of pearly white grain, tiny green peas and onions, rolls shaped like flowers, and for dessert, a pudding the colour of honey. I try to imagine assembling this meal myself back at home... Days of hunting and gathering for this one meal and even then, it would be a poor substitution for the Capitol version. What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button?”