The Symbolism Of Food And Warmth

For the human characters in the novel One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, food and warmth represent some characteristic of the prisoners (sometimes referred as Zek-s) inside the prison camp. Food and warmth are symbols that help develop the novel and the characters, while demonstrating the rough life of a Zek in the camp, helping us understand more about their emotions and their reactions in a certain situation. All of the talk about food and warmth give a picture of the terrible conditions in the camps, where the prisoners get food only for survival. Food also helps to understand better the different characters. What they eat and how do they do it are all essential tools of character portrayal in the book. Among all the suffering portrayed in this novel, food and warmth are the main concerns of a Zek, giving them a sense of freedom inside the camp. In other words my analysis will revolve around the proposition that food in many ways becomes an indicator for the individual.

It is necessary to begin with brief information on the main theme of the novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich which is the brutality of the Soviet Union prison system called Gulag. As Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and social theorist, says on his book Discipline and Punish that prisons are created for a change of behavior, the Gulag system it is intentioned for correction of the inmate’s behavior (Eng 316, Class Notes). The novel’s hero, Ivan Denisovich which in the book is referred as Shukhov is a prisoner in a Soviet forced labor camp called the Gulag during the Stalin’s regime. Shukhov’s experience exemplifies the power of the Stalins regime and the suffering of the prisoners inside this camp. He comes from a working class family, and it is skilled to perform different works but he is uneducated. Shukhov was forced into this camps under the accusation for betrayal against the Soviet Union during the World War II. In Ivan's labor camp, in the Gulag system men are used workhorses in severe weather and horrible conditions in order to help the Soviet economy. Even though they are working for the Soviet economy the Soviet superintendents treat them miserably providing them miserable food rations (One Day, 82-83). Cold, hunger, and disease accompany the everyday life of a prisoner in the labor camp. Some of the prisoners do whatever they can in their power to get more food while some others; like Ivan, perform services for other prisoners. Shukhov eats food with his own spoon, a symbol of individualism. He eats his ration of bread slowly, storing it in the little pocket he made in his jacket, showing that he appreciates the little things, and also it proves that the prisoners are mistreated. “Shukhov had drawn a few thousand bread rations in jails and prison camps, and though he’d never had the chance to weight his portion on the scales, and anyway was too timid to kick up a fuss and demand his rights, he knew better than most prisoners that a bread cutter who gave full measure wouldn’t last long at the job. Every portion was underweight – the only question was by how much.”

I will now proceed with my analyses. The way that the prisoners eat their food tells a lot about the characteristics of a prisoner. Shukhov always removed his hat, when he ate food, showing his manners. He also shared his food expecting nothing in return, showing his side of Christian charity and he never licked the plates, maintaining his dignity. In order to get food he did not spy on other prisoners, he performed services for them. He did not let the prison misery make him forget with which hand to eat, as a lot of other prisoners did, and he used a white rag when he ate bread in order to save every crumb from falling in the ground. These elements show that

even though he is living a miserable life, his manners are in a high level, and he is trying his best to be as tidy as possible. On the other hand, Fetiukov is the opposite of Shukov. He licks plates every time he can, meaning that he has lost his dignity, he never shares food, meaning that he lacks of spiritual nourishment and he tells on other prisoners, meaning that he lost his sense of cooperation because of the lack of food inside the camp. From the physical perspective, food is essential, and Zeks are getting enough food to keep them alive only, but in a figurative sense, however, bread represents spiritual nourishment that comes through preserving one's dignity. Shukov's spiritual strength is showed the best in the ending scene where he gives his own biscuit to Alyosha the Baptist, because Alyosha is nice to everyone. (One Day, 192). Hence the name speaks for himself, Alyosha is a religious character in the book. He reads the New Testament from a notebook which he hides very well. Sometimes it seems like he is doing it especially for Shukhov. Alyosha also recommends Shukhov to ask God only for his "daily bread", a hint for the Lord's Prayer, in which bread represents spiritual nourishment. In moving his mind away from the fascination with bread in a physical sense, a Zek is able to find freedom from the physical conditions in which he lives.

Warmth is another problem for the Zeks in the camp. The bitter cold gets everywhere. It is practically a character in its own in the book because Shukhov mentiones it many time, almost every time he describes a scene. He mentions it as soon as he wakes up, because it is a constant concern of the Zeks, who are struggling everyday against the freezing cold. The way they are treated while they are doing labor shows the power of the Soviet system in this forced imprisonment camp, making the inmates life harder every day. It describes the inescapable environment that the prisoners are living in, with cold being everywhere and with the snow being in any direction, it makes the view look endless. The way that the inmates are dressed, shows how the system tries to punish the prisoners for their ideas because mostly they are political prisoners. They are stripped of proper clothing for those terrible conditions (One Day, 29), which makes them spend time on trying to find a heating source when possible for themselves rather than working. They are not given proper shoes either. The prisoners have to choose between a pair of leather boots or the wool shoes called Valenki. (One Day, 13). One rule inside the camp was that the prisoners would not work if the thermometer showed -41 degrees. But it never did, even when the true temperature was -41 degrees because the thermometer was manipulated which shows that the power of the Soviet Union was able to control almost everything including the climate. Solzhenitsyn uses many metaphors therefore snow may have another meaning in the book. Since in winter everything in the nature is covered in white, snow might be a metaphor of the same routine that the Zeks go through every day for years and years.

In conclusion, food and warmth are essential human needs which they are politicized inside the camp, in order to punish the prisoners, change their beliefs, make them feel more like number rather than a person. Although the Soviet power is undeniable, some prisoners have not lost their individuality and their dignity inside this brutal forced labor camp waiting patiently for this misery to end. The brutality of the camp has changed some prisoners, which now feel like a number rather than an individual, but Shukhov through his actions has preserved his dignity and individuality making him a body inside the camp rather than just a number. Even though that the Soviet power was undeniable and it was able to control the climate, through the spiritual nourishment Shukhov has successfully maintained his principles inside the camp. In this novel food is not just a physical need but also an indicator of the individualism and character portrayal.

Works Cited

1. Class Notes. ENGL 316 Global Literature. RITK Spring Semester. 2019