



Food, Labor, and Emotional Intimacy in Amanda Usen's *Scrumptious*

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Abstract

Literary Theories have started to take an interest in food as an important narrative element in terms of representing social and economic relations. Food in modern fiction is no longer just a source of food or enjoyment, but a system that is defined and guided by the position of the class, the conditions of labour, and emotional control. The novel Scrumptious by Amanda Usen provides a valuable literary point of entry into the analysis of these issues because the author places her romantic story against the backdrop of the challenging and risky professional work in the cooking industry. Using the experiences of the two main characters, Marly and Joe, the novel is able to bridge intimate relations into the material realities of food labour. The socio-economic reading of Scrumptious discussed in this paper is concerned with the culinary labour organisation of identity, aspiration, and emotional engagement. Basing his/her research on the specific concept proposed by Pierre Bourdieu of taste and habitus and the theory of emotional labour introduced by Arlie Hochschild, the paper will explore the manner in which the work of professional cooking, described in the novel, is both labour and affective. Kitchens come out as the area of subordination, strictness, and endangering, forming both the professional identity and the personal relationships. The article claims that Scrumptious has food labour as the central focus of the narrative form, and it shows that romantic intimacy can be built under the conditions of economic uncertainty and emotional regulation. The love in the novel does not exist as an abstract or separate form of material life, and rather, it is created by the fruiting work and the burden of work, emotional stress. The novel by Usen exposes food as a literary framework in which the issues of class, labour, and emotional experience are negotiated in the context of socio-economic realities of culinary work.

Keywords: food studies, culinary labor, class identity, emotional labor, socio-economic narrative

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Introduction

Food has become a growing emphasis of literary studies as a valuable prism with which cultural and socio-economic relationships can be explored. Previous critiques tended to understand food in its basic form of sustenance, enjoyment, or home cooking. The modern academia, though, acknowledges food as a storytelling form, which is predetermined by the stratification of classes,



working conditions, and disciplining emotions. Cooking, serving, and consumption in literary form are ways of showing how aspects of daily practise are ingrained within larger structures of power and, as such, expose social inequalities, which may go beyond the immediate sensory experience and individual preference (Bourdieu, 1984).

Food is no longer considered a neutral or decorative aspect in fiction in this critical context. Rather, it serves as a story machine where the issues of labour practises, positioning of classes, and affective control are investigated. Occupations in professional kitchens and service areas (restaurant) are created as places in which physical work and emotional management converge. The ritual of food preparation anticipates the processes of bodily control, time urgency, and professional calmness, the way identity and closeness are determined by material circumstances of work (Hochschild, 1983).

These issues are directly focused on *Scrumptious*, a novel by the author Amanda Usen, who is an American author, and her professional background as a trained chef enriches her insight into the description of the work of a cook. By relying on her personal experience with the culture of restaurants, Usen places her story in the harsh environment of professional cooking. Even though *Scrumptious* falls in the category of culinary romance, it leaves behind traditional romance storylines with emotional growth taking place as part of the context of organisational hierarchy, economic precarity, and professional discipline. It portends physical intensity of kitchen work, instability of service work, and emotional repression necessary to survive in the profession, through the experiences of its protagonists, Marly and Joe. This paper argues that food labour in *Scrumptious* constitutes a socio-economic system that fosters identity, relationships, and emotional experiences. The work of the cooks helps the characters to define themselves, the way they relate with others, and how they negotiate intimacy. Through a socio-economic literary approach that considers the Bourdieuan understanding of the concept of habitus and Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, this paper will demonstrate that love in *Scrumptious* is developed within, rather than outside, material and emotional boundaries. The

meaning of food as an influential literary structure is comprehended in this paper as a way in which the relationships between classes, the labouring life, and the emotional life are intertwined.

Mapping Food, Labor, and Emotion in Literary Studies

Food has been traditionally held symbolically in literary and cultural works, serving as a symbol of identity, belonging, and social differentiation. The early literary criticism tended to take food as a symbol of plenty, erotic longing, or home cooking. However, more recently, the move has been to see food as a culturally and economically situated practise that manifests social hierarchy and power relations. In this sense, the study by Bourdieu on the subject of taste is still very fundamental, as it shows how food preferences are influenced by the dispositions of classes and the choice is not individual (Bourdieu, 1984). This understanding has been used by literary critics to demonstrate how food stores coded differences between finesse and need, privilege and survival.

In fiction, food is often utilized as a negotiating tool of identity and social status by the characters. Cooking, serving, and eating are common activities that are used to indicate aspiration, exclusion, or resistance. The approaches to cultural studies also highlight that food narratives indicate the convergence of material circumstances and symbolic meaning so that the readers can track how daily practises manifest larger socio-economic systems. In this regard, food is not a descriptive reinvention, but a narrative strategy, which is known to reveal the interplay between individual experience and social structure.

In line with the increasing general interest in food symbolism is an emerging literature criticism involving labour and service work. Modern fiction predicts more and more careers of instability, poor wages, and emotional labour, as economic markets tend to move toward service-based labour. According to scholars who discuss representations of work in literature, these types of stories provoke the romanticised ideas about work, as they reveal precarity, physical fatigue, and hierarchical regulation.



Culinary labour takes a rather expositional place in this discourse. Professional kitchens are commonly portrayed as places of discipline, competition, and inequality of authority, in which the mobility of classes is promoted and limited. The process of food preparation becomes a skillful work that characters strive to achieve legitimacy and self-definition, but have not been able to get out of economic realities. In this background, *Scrumptious* can fit into many stories that dwell on work as a structuring process in daily living. The novel does not describe professional cooking as an activity that is not connected to material issues but rather presents it as a work informed by instability and professional pressure, which makes it reflect more of the wider literary approaches to class and economic precarity (Usen, 2012).

The other important branch of literary criticism deals with emotional control and the performance of emotions in narrative texts. The phenomenon of emotional labour, as formulated by Hochschild to be used in the sociological framework, has gained extensive use among literary scholars to understand how characters handle feelings in a manner that meets expectations imposed by the institutions or occupation (Hochschild, 1983). The portrayal of fictional service work usually emphasises the aspect of emotional composure as an obligatory feature of the workplace rules, especially in jobs that imply care, hospitality, or dealing with customers.

Emotional labour often determines how characters associate with each other as well as how they see themselves in literary narratives. As characters are depicted to repress frustration, act warmly, or even hold control as a part of their professional self, there is no clear distinction between work and personal life. Although a lot of research has been conducted on emotional labour in the context of service careers, not much has been done regarding culinary romance as a genre in which food labour and emotional intimacy overlap. *Scrumptious* fills this unexplored gap by connecting the relationship development with the emotional needs of professional food preparation. Such a lack of scholarship makes it clear that there is a necessity to undertake literary analyses of the way emotional labour is exercised in culinary texts to define work and intimacy.

Through these aims, the paper establishes *Scrumptious* in the context of work, affect, and socio-economic life in literature discussions. It adds to an emerging corpus of criticism that identifies everyday labour as the key to narrative meaning and criticises the genre-based assumptions that divide romance and material reality.

Articulating the Research Gap: Food, Labor, and Intimacy in *Scrumptious*

Although *Scrumptious* by Amanda Usen is well known among the culinary romance genre, the focus of the novel, according to critics, has been on the romance or the glorification of food culture. These readings tend to disregard how professional culinary labour is a structuring force in the narrative. Consequently, *Scrumptious* is often discussed as a genre text but not as a piece of literature that addresses the issues of labour, classes, and emotional control. The inclination represents a wider disparity in the literary criticism, in which food-centred romances are rarely investigated from a socio-economic perspective.

The main research question that will be discussed in this research is: What is the role of food labour in the formation of narrative meaning? Precisely, the article poses the question of how cooking in *Scrumptious* impacts the identity of classes, emotional controls, and romantic relationships. Food work in the novel is not the matter that is given as an objective setting, but a system that is dominated by discipline, hierarchy, and economic instability. Based on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the analysis of the culinary professional behaviour and skill in relation to class and aspiration is achieved through the socially conditioned dispositions of these variables, which reflect socially informative attributes of quality culinary skills (Bourdieu, 1984). Simultaneously, the theory of emotional labour offered by Hochschild offers the method of exploring the way in which characters cope with emotions on the basis of the demands of their positions and the ways of extending this control to personal relations (Hochschild, 1983).

This study has three objectives. To begin with, it will focus on exploring food as a narrative form that systematises the character growth and



development of the themes. Second, it attempts to examine culinary work as material and emotional work, considering not only physical, but also affective discipline. Lastly, the paper examines the role that labour conditions play in the creation of intimacy by contending that romantic relationships in *Scrumptious* are formed in, and not outside, of socio-economic constraints. Through these aims, the novel comes out as an interesting literary interaction with daily labour and emotional living.

Research Design and Analytical Approach

The main passage that is going to be analysed in this paper is *Scrumptious* (2012) by Amanda Usen, a modern novel that takes place within the framework of culinary romance. The novel is especially useful in literature analysis since the professional food labour becomes the central theme of the narrative. Kitchens and restaurants are some of the culinary locations where character identity, professional ambitions, and interpersonal relationships are cultivated. This continued attention to the food work qualifies *Scrumptious* as a suitable work to study the socio-economic aspects of preparing food in fiction (Usen, 2012).

The research follows a qualitative approach of textual analysis, with close reading being the major analytical tool used. The specific scenes illustrating the work of culinary, interpersonal, and emotional interaction are analysed to spot the repetitive patterns regarding the positioning of classes and control of emotions. The narrative description, dialogue, and character behaviour are taken into consideration to understand how labour conditions determine the dynamics of relationships in the text.

The discussion is informed by the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu on taste and habitus to understand how culinary delicacy and discipline are indicators of class identity (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover, the theory of emotional labour by Arlie Hochschild is applied to the investigation of how the characters cope with emotional feelings in accordance with professional demands, with references to the relation between work and intimacy (Hochschild, 1983).

Culinary Labor as Material Reality

The textual interaction of *Scrumptious* indicates that culinary labour is suggested as a physically

challenging and economically uncertain type of labour. The environment of professional kitchens in the novel is presented as one dominated by rigorous schedules, time control, and command. The characters are fatigued, strained, and pressured to deliver continuously, and underlining the embodied essence of culinary work. Such representations confront the romanticised representations of cooking by preempting the view of labour as repetitive, controlled, and unstable. As observed by literary critics, service work stories have started focusing more on precarity and physical discipline as important aspects of contemporary labour (Sennett, 1998; Standing, 2011).

At *Scrumptious*, food preparation cannot be separated from economic survival. In job creation, it is shown as unpredictable, and professional achievement is pegged on constant self-control and adherence to the demands of the institutions. This can be attributed to Bourdieu's view on labour practises, which he says can create dispositions and body practises over time to produce disciplined subjects fit to a particular social domain (Bourdieu, 1984). The kitchen, therefore, serves as a provider of power in terms of routine, assessment, and repetition. Further, according to Mintz, food labour has historically exemplified non-equivalent relations of production, associating daily labour with the macro-economic systems (Mintz, 1985). The story Usen tells is representative of this fact, as the culinary work is introduced as a material limitation, defining the existence of the day and the future dream.

Food and Class Aspiration

The other important discovery is related to the presence of the culinary skill as cultural capital. Professional cooking skill is turned into a tool of social negotiation of positions and self-value in *Scrumptious*. The skills of the technique, the taste principles, and professionalism are depicted as a sign of legitimacy in the culinary hierarchies. Food, therefore, plays the role of a channel of expressing and contesting class aspiration. Here, the idea of habitus, as brought forth by Bourdieu, is quite effective, as it has been proposed to explain how food practises can represent a socially predetermined disposition of an identity in classes (Bourdieu, 1984).



This is shown in the novel because access to professional kitchens and cooking knowledge is not even, which upholds the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. The desire of characters to be stable and recognised is mediated by the process of food work, according to the argument presented by Goody that cuisine is frequently a location of social differentiation, which is associated with class and expertise (Goody, 1982). Also, food functions symbolically as a signifier of ambition and self-fashioning, which conforms to the cultural studies method of analysing food narratives as the place where identity and hierarchy merge (Counihan, 1999; Wilk, 1999). The ambition of the culinary is empowering and restrictive in *Scrumptious*, and it shows how the mobility between classes is pictured but subjugated in the professional labour systems.

Emotional Regulation in Culinary Spaces

Emotional regulation is also a primary need of culinary work in the novel that is highlighted by the findings. In high-pressure kitchen settings, characters are shown again and again to be dealing with stress, frustration, and holding back. A control of emotions is revealed to be a priority as a professional skill and not as a personal decision. This dynamic can be analysed through Hochschild's concept of emotional labour that offers a critical perspective of how workers are obligated to conform to emotional demonstrations to the requirements of the institution (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional discipline is depicted in *Scrumptious* as a means of survival in the profession.

Notably, the same affective control is carried into romantic relationships outside the workplace. The novel demonstrates how emotional patterns that are cultivated at work define intimacy, vulnerability, and communication. According to scholars like Illouz, contemporary romantic relationships are highly determined by economic and emotional management practises that are determined by capitalism (Illouz, 1997). In the same vein, the work of affect by Ahmed is of the view that emotions do not exist in solitude or spontaneity, but they move within the social structures or systems (Ahmed, 2004). Love in *Scrumptious* is built in the workplace by common efforts and hard work, along with emotional suppression, which

shows the convergence of emotional labour and romantic vulnerability. This observation highlights the fact that intimacy is organised around the professional discipline as opposed to being external to it.

Interpreting Culinary Labor, Class, and Emotional Intimacy in *Scrumptious*

The results of this paper suggest that *Scrumptious* develops culinary labour as a major organising principle, in which the identity of classes, emotional regulation, and romantic intimacy are negotiated. Instead of introducing food as a mere symbolic or aesthetic component, the novel inserts its story into the material circumstances of professional cooking. Cooking rooms act as the place of control and ranking, defining the attitude to the self and communication of the emotional state of characters. This depiction was in line with critical standpoints, which interpret everyday labour as one of the most important determinants of narrative meaning in new fiction (Bourdieu, 1984).

In socio-economic terms, the socio-economic identity of *Scrumptious* is expressed as embodied practises, which entail skill in cooking, endurance, and professional behaviour. As a kind of cultural capital, food promises a sense of belonging and reassurance, and at the same time, upholds institutional authority and economic precarity. These forces make it hard to picture an ideal story of upward mobility as they demonstrate the parameters of aspiration being limited by labour conditions (Goody, 1982; Mintz, 1985). The novel, therefore, does not place class as a given category and has it as a lived circumstance that is crafted through repetitive labour and professional performance.

The importance of emotional control in culinary and romantic areas is additionally mentioned in the discussion. As part of their professional activities, characters need to deal with stress, suppress vulnerability, and maintain emotional composure. Based on the idea of emotional labour by Hochschild, the novel shows how the practise of affective discipline in the workplace is carried to the personal relations (Hochschild, 1983). Romantic intimacy is created during the process of common work and emotional survival, instead of spontaneity, which represents the tendencies of wider



cultural history, where emotional life is conditioned by economic systems (Illouz, 1997).

All in all, *Scrumptious* defies the distinction between labour and intimacy, showing how emotional attachment is created in socio-economic limitation. Food appears to offer a literary form between the relationships of classes, emotional behaviour, and individual affiliation, making the novel an important addition to the current literary debates on work and affect.

Conclusion

Scrumptious by Amanda Usen has been approached in this paper as a literary text pre-empting food not merely as a theme of pleasure/romance, but as a structuring power, a product of labour, class relations, and emotional control. Placing the story in the context of the professional sphere of culinary activities, the novel attracts consideration of the material circumstances in the context of which identity and intimacy are established. Culinary work also becomes an ongoing process in the text, which determines the habits, dreams, and relations of the characters. The discussion shows that professional cooking in *Scrumptious* is an embodied practise by which identity in classes is negotiated. Skills, discipline, and endurance become symbols of legitimacy in the culinary hierarchies and show how social positioning is created as a result of day-to-day work and not as a hereditary role. Simultaneously, the novel reflects the emotional needs that service workers are subjected to. Control, restraint, and composure are depicted as necessary elements of professional survival that define the adaptation of the characters to stress and their relation to each other. Notably, in the novel, romantic closeness is not formed under other circumstances. Rather, the emotional attachment is established in the setting of economic uncertainty, workplace pressure, and mutual fatigue. Love is expressed as a process that is guided by collaboration, endurance, and emotional regulation, and not spontaneity or romantic escape. This plot device, in contrast to the traditional separation of social work and personal feelings, helps to understand that the two cannot be separated. *Scrumptious* brings a delicate literary experience

to the present-day realities of the socio-economic world by incorporating the element of romance into the food preparation process. The novel reveals food labour as a mediating force between classes; this is an emotional and personal connection, making the daily work central to the meaning of the narratives. The research thus adds to the literary work that acknowledges food-focused stories as important locations to study labour, affection, and identity in contemporary fiction. These readings broaden the analysis of food studies in literary criticism and open up the possibility of exploring further how mundane labour practises define emotional and relational life.

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