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Environmental/Biological and Cultural Implications of Being an "Industrial Eater"

by Mary E. Norton

(Biology 110 and English 130: Honors Seminar)

The Assignment: Write an essay that makes connections between biology and literature, addressing the relationship between the modern industrial process of food production and the act of food consumption.

In "The Pleasures of Eating," Wendell Berry describes the "industrial eater" as:

one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical – in short, a victim. (146)

Berry also proposes that industrial eaters think of food as an agricultural product, and themselves as consumers (145). According to Berry, industrial eaters are unaware of the origins of their food and how it is processed. Their knowledge of food, and the food items they purchase, is controlled by the advertising industry, which is hired and paid for by the food industry. Berry contends that the food industry concerns itself with volume and price rather than quality and health (149).

Unfortunately, the oblivious nature of industrial eating negatively affects the environment on a global scale. Berry claims that, "how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used" (149). Industrial eaters, therefore, must include those individuals who regularly patronize the fast food industry, as well as purchase prepackaged, processed foods produced by multinational companies – clueless as to the business practices and policies of the two industries.

Both the fast food industry and the multinational corporations are responsible for placing heavy demands on agriculture to produce high volumes of crops to accommodate their individual needs. This requires farmers to employ industrialized agriculture methods, such as intensive plantings of monocultures to meet these demands. *Environmental Science: A Global Concern*, describes industrialized farming as being "highly energy-intensive," because of the heavy consumption of fossil fuels (in the forms of gasoline and diesel fuel) by farm machinery; and, also in its applications of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and chemicals (Cunningham, Cunningham and Saigo 244).

A new issue associated with agriculture is the development of GMOs (genetically modified organisms), or genetically engineered crops. The film *The Global Banquet: Who's Invited?* discusses the controversy associated with GMOs: the fact that genes are taken from one species and implanted in a completely different species to achieve a particular purpose or effect. The film also questions the consequences of unknown health risks, which may be associated with GMOs, as well as the concept that new products could be created within cells of organisms.

The multinational corporations produce much of the crops used in their food production in third world countries, like India, where methods of industrialized agriculture are employed to accommodate their needs. Farmers have been forced, over the years, to abandon their traditional self-sustaining methods of agriculture in order to raise monocultures of crops the multinationals then export. The corporations require the farmers to purchase genetically engineered seeds, which they have developed in their laboratories. In *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*, author Vandana Shiva claims that genetically engineered crops manufactured by corporations pose serious ecological risks and lead to the destruction of biodiversity and increased use of agrochemical (16).

Shiva contends that these practices rob farmers of their livelihoods, and although Indian farmers have been particularly affected, she acknowledges that, "this is a problem being experienced in every society as small farms and small farmers are pushed to extinction. (7).

I feel the definition of the term "industrial eater" accurately describes the type of eater most

modern day Americans are. American culture has evolved to what is now referred to as being “24/7,” or, non-stop – day and night. We lead busy lives and live in mostly urban communities – no longer knowing or maintaining contact with the origins of our food. We are accustomed to the availability of anything we need, or want to do, whenever we want it, and have developed a major dependence upon obtaining our food as quickly as possible. As a result of this situation, I feel that many Americans simply do not pay attention - whether intentionally or not – to anything related with their consumption of food. Food has become nothing more than fuel to be eaten on the run with no pleasure involved – a mindless endeavor.

I wholeheartedly agree with Wendell Berry’s position that if we were to take the initiative and become more aware and knowledgeable of our food – its origins, history, how it is processed and prepared, as well as resist the control of the food and advertising industries and support local growers, we would be much better off and, I am sure, quite a bit healthier.