Title of Paper: Baked Nectar and Frosted Ambrosia: The Unifying Power of Cake in *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract:

More than any other food, cake has always symbolized luxury, human fellowship and spiritual communion, but the appearance of the first layered wedding cake at the wedding of Princess Victoria and Prince Frederick of Prussia helped to make this symbolism especially clear. Significantly, its appearance at pivotal scenes in two well-loved Victorian novels – Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* – speaks to its exalted place in the ethos of the period. In Bronte’s novel, it represents young Jane’s connection with the angelic Miss Temple, and by extension, her potential to form human bonds that have previously been denied her. In Dickens’ novel, Miss Havisham’s cake is the inverse of what a cake should be: it embodies the old woman’s withdrawal from society and her refusal to commune with those outside of her own self-fashioned prison. Taken in concert, the close reading of these two objects – as well as the appearance of several other cakes and breads in the novels – adds another layer of meaning to both texts, while helping to provide insight into a culture that held such confections in high esteem.

Keywords: Victorian Novel, Charles Dickens, *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, Cake, Bread, Victorian Cuisine, Miss Havisham, *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management*, communion

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If the shared act of breaking bread is, both in literature and in life, universally symbolic of unity between its participants, then the communal consumption of cake carries the potential to form an even stronger bond. As early as the days of the Roman Empire, during which “wedding ceremonies were finalized by breaking a cake of wheat or barley… over the bride’s head as a symbol of good fortune” (Wilson 69), the cake has become an important symbol of traditional marriage, and in a larger sense, of spiritual unity. Its resemblance to a Christian communion wafer endows the cake with quasi-religious connotations, and its sweetness implies great warmth between those who indulge in it together.

As Marie Antoinette’s possibly apocryphal taunt to the French peasantry, “Let them eat cake,” implies, cake was (and still is) the food of privilege – inherently more of a luxury item than bread, and for this reason, the Victorians held it in high regard as a subtle symbol of wealth. Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management (1861), the consummate guide to all aspects of running a respectable Victorian household, features recipes for more than thirty different types of cakes, including varieties specifically designated for weddings, christenings, Christmas, and other lesser holidays. But in fact, 1858, the year of the marriage of the queen’s daughter, also Victoria, to Prince Frederick of Prussia, may have been the most important year in the history of the cake. Prior to this date, wedding cakes had generally been flat slabs; even Queen Victoria’s own cake, though it weighed in at a massive 300 pounds, had consisted of only one story. Princess Victoria’s cake, however, was an ornate two-tiered affair, whose image captured the imagination of the public when it was published in the Illustrated London News (Humble 81).

The cake was now generally synonymous with royal glamor, and as a result, Charlotte Brontë’s impression of it in 1847, when she completed her best known novel Jane Eyre, must have differed vastly from Charles Dickens’ when he began Great Expectations in 1860, only two years removed from the advent of what was, without exaggeration, the most famous cake in human history. Although cakes are important to both novels, the two authors clearly bring their different experiences to their writing: the various cakes in Jane Eyre – gingerbread nut, seed cake, tea-cakes and cakes of bread – have much humbler appearances than the monstrous wedding cake in Great Expectations. Still, the purpose of cake in both novels is fundamentally the same: in Brontë, the shared consumption of cake bridges physical, social and spiritual distances between characters, whereas conversely, in Dickens, the unconsumed wedding cake symbolizes physical, social and spiritual alienation.

The tyrannical schoolmaster Mr. Brocklehurst first introduces the cake motif to Jane Eyre during his interrogation of young Jane at Gateshead Hall early in the novel, with his (we sense, fictional) story of a boy who chooses to sing a verse of a Psalm instead of receiving a gingerbread-nut cake, and is thus perversely rewarded with two cakes. The central transaction of the apparently unwanted for cakes in exchange for a contrived demonstration of piety is both illogical and unfair (albeit in the boy’s favor), which makes it the antithesis of what a shared meal should be. As is still the case, Victorian gingerbread-nuts were often (though not always) cut into the shape of men. If we imagine the hypothetical boy consuming a gingerbread man instead of a slice of a cake, the story assumes a darker moral, suggesting that the boy can only profit by “consuming” himself or another – telling what sounds like a
disingenuous lie instead of the truth. In this context, the boy’s consumption of two cakes then becomes a decidedly antisocial act. In practice, Mr. Brocklehurst provides no cake to anyone; instead, the girls are served practically inedible burnt porridge on his orders. Porridge is an ancestor of cake (Humble 19), as well as a sometime ingredient: early in her experience at Lowood, Jane observes several girls eating “a thin oaten cake shared into fragments,” (Brontë 52) a mockery of the gingerbread-nut that Brocklehurst implicitly promised, but is unable to bring herself to taste it. Thus, Brocklehurst is again putting forth an unfair equation: in exchange for doing their work at Lowood, which includes the faithful recitation of psalms, he “rewards” the girls with a distorted form of cake, which no one has asked for, which offers no pleasure, and which fails to provide even basic subsistence.

The schoolmaster’s offering of both porridge, and cakes apparently made from the same porridge, stands in direct opposition to the benevolent Miss Temple’s redemptive offering of bread and cheese, which restores the girls to a symbolic state of grace. Miss Temple, who throughout the novel is associated with religious purity, announces her presence in the narrative, as well as in Jane’s life, with an almost saintly action that recalls Christ’s feeding the masses with fish and loaves. As the students receive their new meal, another teacher immediately orders Jane and her peers, “To the garden!” (Brontë 57). An enclosed green space located adjacent to the imposing buildings of Lowood, the garden is a sort of Eden where long-oppressed students will break bread together, now literally, in a state of bliss. Miss Temple, aptly named, since she seems to possess a spiritual aura, which she is capable of conferring on others – often by sharing food – will shortly provide Jane with an even greater gift. After refuting Brocklehurst’s accusations that Jane is a liar, Miss Temple summons Jane and her friend Helen Burns to her room, where the three share a seed-cake. Whereas the bread and cheese provided Jane and her peers with an exultant moment of pure joy, this quieter moment takes on a tone of reverential solemnity. As the three sit in Miss Temple’s room, (a hidden temple itself, which can only be reached by navigating “intricate passages” and climbing a staircase), Miss Temple produces the gift: “she got up, unlocked a drawer, and taking from it a parcel wrapped in paper, disclosed presently to our eyes a good-sized seed-cake” (Brontë 86). Wrapped in a layer of paper, inside a drawer, within a room tucked away deep in the bowels of the school, the cake takes on the quality of a religious covenant, which must be protected by an ark. And like the biblical covenant, it represents a shared agreement: the cake symbolizes to Jane that for the first time in her life, she has found a dependable friend and a protector. Religious imagery abounds in this brief but significant scene, which an older Jane narrates with deep nostalgia:

We feasted that evening as on nectar and ambrosia; and not the least delight of the entertainment was the smile of gratification with which our hostess regarded us, as we satisfied our famished appetites on the delicate fare she liberally supplied (Brontë 86).

When she bestows the girls with bread and cheese, Miss Temple plays the part of a deity, but in the act of sharing her cake, she also shares her spiritual powers; as Jane and Helen dine on nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods, they inherit Miss
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Temple’s power. From this experience, one of her few positives moments at Lowood, Jane learns that her status as a perpetual outsider in almost all social situations does not necessarily prohibit her from access to genuine human connection. The specific variety of cake is particularly significant, as Kristen Komara argues: “Seedcake, a breadlike cake spiced with caraway, symbolizes the richness of their communion” (Komara). In addition to providing this communion, the seed-cake plants within Jane the seed of empowerment, as well as a sense of confidence in her own otherness, which she will cultivate throughout the rest of the novel.

As Mrs. Beeton’s guide implies, the Victorian household greatly valued proper cake preparation, a skill that will be modeled several times for Jane as she moves through her several different environments. Looking back at her days at Thornfield, an older Jane recalls helping to ready the house for a party:

Mrs. Fairfax had pressed me into her service, and I was all day in the storeroom, helping (or hindering) her and the cook; learning to make custards and cheese-cakes and French pastry, to truss game and garnish desert-dishes. (Brontë 191)

Jane describes activities which, to a housekeeper like Mrs. Fairfax, are simply part of the mundane routine of party planning. (So apparently familiar were these rituals to Victorians – especially the women who carried them out – that one contemporary reviewer pointed to the novel’s slight deviations from the established code of order as verification of the author’s maleness. A woman of good social standing would know better than to imply the acceptability of trussing game and garnishing desert-dishes with the same hands. [Brontë 553]) But Jane’s exuberant narration – in the next paragraph, she exclaims, “I believe I was as active and gay as anybody” (Brontë 191) – suggests that as a new member of the household, she regards these activities as a novel change from her former lives both at Lowood and at Gateshead Hall. For the first time in the novel, she has a productive, gratifying job to perform, in the service of a house she wants to benefit and a supervisor, Mrs. Fairfax, whom she trusts. Even though she herself will not be consuming the cheese-cake, or the pastries for that matter, she is, in helping with the baking, engaging in an act of communion with her new surrogate family. In its subtle way, cake is in fact a hallmark of harmonious family life, for Jane throughout the novel – as it was for Victorians at large. When she returns to Gateshead Hall for a final visit with Mrs. Reed, Jane wistfully observes Bessie, the maid from her childhood, “bustling about -- setting out the tea-tray with her best china, cutting bread and butter, toasting a tea-cake” (261-2). Jane forgets her largely miserable childhood in the care of the Reeds, as she witnesses this simple, candid scene of domesticity. Bessie is completely in her element: loyal to her employer, and content in her work, she is the quintessential Victorian maid. In general, Jane repeatedly demonstrates greater intelligence, creativity and ambition than Bessie, but at this moment, Jane silently admires her utter sense of social belonging – quietly embodied by the presence of the cake.

Cakes reappear moreconspicuously during the extended episode immediately following Jane’s departure from Thornfield. As she wanders through an unfamiliar
The village, near the rural crossroads where she has been dropped off, she passes a bakery, which triggers an immediate sense of longing:

At the bottom of its one street there was a little shop with some cakes of bread in the window. I coveted a cake of bread. With that refreshment I could perhaps regain a degree of energy: without it, it would be difficult to proceed. The wish to have some strength and some vigour returned to me as soon as I was amongst my fellow-beings. (Brontë 374-5)

Instead of using the more common “loaves,” Brontë pointedly specifies that Jane longs for “cakes” of bread, thus conjuring an immediate memory of Jane’s earlier experience with cakes, Miss Temple’s seed-cake in particular. Jane’s physical hunger is deeply intertwined with her desire for social contact. Her wish for strength and energy can be read in two ways: either she wishes to gain strength and vigour from food so that she can properly interact with her “fellow-beings,” or else, more compellingly, she believes she will draw energy from both literal food and social interaction. Bread, either in loaf or cake form, mediates almost every social interaction in this scene. After an old woman in a parsonage denies Jane a cake of bread, a farmer finally grants her a slice from a loaf of bread: “He cast on me a glance of surprise; but without answering, he cut a thick slice from his loaf and gave it to me” (Brontë 378). The exchange of food replaces the exchange of words: without speaking, the farmer sends Jane a nonverbal message of compassion as a fellow human being. By offering her the lowest subsistence-level food – a piece of a loaf of bread instead of a piece of a cake – the farmer extends basic goodwill and civility toward Jane; no profound spiritual connection occurs here. However, this simple act encourages Jane to continue seeking kindness from strangers, which will ultimately lead her to the Rivers family, and towards an upturn in her fortunes. Once inside the Rivers house, Jane is given “gruel and dry toast” to eat, a reminder of the burnt porridge at Lowood, and an indicator that the family has not yet come to accept her presence. However, immediately before her first direct interview with St John, the head of household, whom Jane will eventually learn is her cousin, Diana notes that Jane must be hungry, having “had nothing but gruel since breakfast,” and gives Jane a cake. Jane receives the offering with obvious enthusiasm: “I did not refuse it, for my appetite was awakened and keen” (Brontë 396). Both the gruel and the slice of bread from the farmer fail to awaken Jane’s appetite in a similar manner; beyond basic sustenance, she craves – perhaps subconsciously – the type of connection she sensed she had with Mr. Rochester at Thornfield. Although her consumption of cake immediately before speaking to St John is not a shared experience, it foreshadows what will come to be a strong, if complicated, relationship between the two. The cake serves as a point of entry; the first comment St John directly addresses to Jane is, “You must be hungry” (Brontë 397). Just as the cake satisfies Jane’s physical hunger, so will the Rivers family come to fill a deep social void within her.

The presence of cake at several key social junctures in Jane Eyre anticipates the theories of Hannah Arendt who, in her 1958 work, The Human Condition, theorized that human life is built on a multitude of similarly mundane objects. She
argues, “What the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private character” (Arendt 52). Although it may sometimes find itself thrust into the public spotlight, as in the case of Princess Victoria’s wedding, cake in general still retains its private character. Its symbolism is understood throughout the culture, and is reinforced at such high profile occasions as a royal wedding – and yet this exposure does not diminish its capacity to facilitate relationships in settings as intimate as Miss Temple’s chamber. Arendt argues further that such objects as cake, which we are all too often quick to dismiss as “small things,” form no less than the basis for all human relationships: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (Arendt 52).

Arendt’s “world of things” is broad enough to include durable objects like the table as well as objects like food, which are by nature ephemeral. We may expect to find a correlation between the durability of an object and the depth and longevity of the relationship it mediates. But Arendt’s claim that the world of things “relates and separates men at the same time” implies that while every thing has the potential to serve as an entry point in bringing together individuals who would otherwise remain separate, no thing has the power to support a meaningful relationship in its entirety. To apply this rule to *Jane Eyre*, Jane and St John’s first conversation is facilitated by a thing, the piece of cake, but once that thing has served the purpose of introducing the two of them, it quickly recedes into the background. When the thing is allowed to linger after it serves its purpose of providing an introduction, it often becomes obtrusive – more of a separator than a relater. Nicola Humble, a cake historian, posits that paradoxically, the cake’s temporary nature makes it a powerful symbol of an enduring human bond: “[I]t speaks of the liminality of the wedding day itself – a transitory state between two more prosaic realities” (Humble 83). The cake is thus a bridge between two temporal zones, which means that failure to consume it will result in a state of arrested development.

Having never consummated a marriage and thus, having never consumed her wedding cake, Miss Havisham, the wealthy, eccentric spinster from Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, finds herself in exactly such a suspended state. After being jilted at the altar as a much younger woman, Miss Havisham mourns the marriage she never had by entombing herself within her large house; by the time Pip meets her, she has, by her own admission, stayed out of the sunlight for years. Miss Havisham’s halted growth is primarily signified by the things she keeps in her decrepit parlor: her bridal gown, the flowers in her hair and, most grotesquely, the rotten cake still left over from what was supposed to have been her wedding day. Pip first notices the cake (although he is initially not sure what it is) on his second visit to Miss Havisham’s home:

An epergne or centrepiece of some kind was in the middle of this cloth; it was so heavily overhung with cobwebs that its form was quite undistinguishable; and, as I looked along the yellow expanse out of which I remember its seeming to grow, like a black fungus, I saw
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speckled-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to it, and running out from it, as if some circumstances of the greatest public importance had just transpired in the spider community. (Dickens 84)

Whereas Miss Temple’s seed-cake was the centerpiece of her relationship with Jane, Miss Havisham’s cake represents the other side of the coin. Black with mold where it should be white with icing, it is an inversion of all that a cake should stand for. Where it should be a symbol of union, it has become the embodiment of Miss Havisham’s disunion from the rest of the world, as well as an illustration of Arendt’s point that just as they have the power to relate, things also possess the power to separate. Pip’s mistaking the cake for a centerpiece holds more truth than he realizes: aside from being the centerpiece of the room, the cake stands at the center of Miss Havisham’s physical world, as well as her temporal life; it is the center-point at which her life’s two major chapters meet: the era before the wedding and the era following its appointed hour, or pre-alienation and post-alienation. It also serves as a rebuke to her attempt at halt the march of time: despite her best efforts, the cake only continues to decay.

The cake is so inextricably connected to Miss Havisham that it has essentially become her avatar, an illustration of Barbara Hardy’s observation that many of the most memorable characters in literature are similarly connected to characterizing objects. Hardy notes,

"When we remember novels, we tend first to remember their people… But we may promptly think of their accessories and accoutrements. The energy and resilience of the Micawbers, Oliver, and Holden Caulfield, whose physical and moral survival is no easy matter, are demonstrated by their way with things. (Hardy 14)"

Conversely, Miss Havisham’s grotesqueness and her decay are demonstrated in her cake. Miss Havisham identifies this parallel herself in a reference to her greedy relations, who hover around Satis House in hope of being rewarded inheritance money: “The mice have gnawed at [the cake], and sharper teeth than teeth of mice have gnawed at me” (Dickens 89). The incessant gnawing of the mice and the Pockets’ constant pandering drive Miss Havisham increasingly closer to her artifact, the cake, and ever further from anything resembling healthy human association.

By the time Pip comes into contact with it, the rotten cake has become a far more permanent and fixed object than a cake is designed to be; in fact, upon first seeing it, Pip mistakes it for an “epergne,” a type of table centerpiece, usually made of silver, glass or porcelain. Just as what was supposed to have been a fleeting moment of transition has, for Miss Havisham, become unnaturally stretched out to the length of more than half a lifetime, so has the cake hardened to a state of unnatural firmness, to the point where Pip is able to plausibly mistake it for metal or glass. The word “epergne” is thought to come from the French word “epargne,” which means “saving,” in the sense that by passing around the epergne, which was often equipped with small bowls filled with various spices and condiments, diners would be saving time. But here, “saving” takes on a different, though equally apt, meaning: the cake
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has become a repository wherein Miss Havisham perversely attempts to cling to the moment just before her alienation from the outside world by saving all of the props associated with that moment. In “the enclosed space of the sealed-off wedding chamber” as well as “the darkness in which the spiders, beetles, and mice crawl in the decayed wedding cake,” Curt Hartog sees “symbols and images of Miss Havisham’s repressed sexuality” (Hartog 260). But in fact, sexual closeness is just one type of intimacy that Miss Havisham denies herself. Her apparent lack of real affection for Pip, Jaggers, the Pockets and even Estella, in spite of her physical proximity to all of them, is evidence of her refusal to engage in any sort of human alliance, sexual or otherwise.

Despite Miss Havisham’s best efforts, time has continued to run its course, turning what was once presumably a tower of whiteness on a white tablecloth, into a mass of black on faded yellow. She has also been powerless to stop the ongoing rush of spiders into and out of the cake. She herself is a figurative spider, who lures various outsiders into her layer while never venturing outside herself. While the spiders physically inhabit the cake, she inhabits the moment it should have, but never did, come to symbolize.

In the process of leaping on top of Miss Havisham to save her from a fire at the end of the novel, Pip inadvertently destroys the rotten cake when he pulls out the tablecloth to use as a blanket. The removal of the cloth “dragged down the heap of rottenness in the midst, and all the ugly things that sheltered there” (Dickens 402). Although Miss Havisham identifies the object earlier, “It’s a great cake. A bride-cake. Mine!” it is, to Pip, never really a cake at all – much less a “great” one. Whereas to Pip it was originally an epergne, it is now simply a “heap of rottenness.” Since no one other than Miss Havisham can possibly hope to see it as she does, the object of the cake separates her from the rest of human society in another way. Pip’s phrase, “the ugly things sheltered there,” is deliberately ambiguous: literally it seems to refer to the spiders, beetles and mice who have adopted the cake as a home, but it may just as easily refer to Miss Havisham’s bitterness, coldness and hatred, brought about by a wedding that never occurred. Pip destroys the cake almost immediately after Miss Havisham is made to directly confront the most “ugly thing”: her pernicious manipulation of Estella, a truth that she has also been sheltering for years.

Cake is never shared in Great Expectations, as it is in Jane Eyre, but an offhand comment from Herbert Pocket still speaks to what Arendt might call its “extraordinary and infectious” charm as a cultural signifier of human unity. Soon after his initial meeting with Pip, Herbert explains that he will not use Pip’s Christian name Philip because it sounds like the name of a boy “so avaricious that he locked up his cake till the mice ate it” (Dickens 178). As seemingly irrelevant as it is, Herbert’s remark betrays a deeply ingrained cultural value: cake is for sharing, and to do otherwise is at best perverse and at worse immoral. Herbert is a relative of Miss Havisham’s, and has spent time at Satis House (where he first meets Pip when the two are young boys), so there is some possibility that Herbert has her in the back of his mind as he tells this story, and understands the resonance his words must have for Pip – but if he is trying to subtly refer to Miss Havisham indirectly, he makes no explicit indication. His example of the boy eating the cake passes by without further comment, but the similarity of this hypothetical situation to Miss Havisham’s real
situation presumably strikes a chord in Pip. Miss Havisham has avariciously assumed that she can bend the progression of time to her will, and that she can mold Estella in order to fulfill her revenge fantasies. Like the boy in the story, Miss Havisham has committed the sin of avarice – a symptom of which is her failure to share the cake – and like the boy, this sin has cost her the society of others.

On several occasions in *Great Expectations*, the food of reality is juxtaposed with the food of fantastical longing. Generally, the food and drink that Pip either eats or comes into contact with seems bland at best and repulsive at worst: in addition to Miss Havisham’s cake, he is horrified by the “scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls” and the “obscure corners of pork” (Dickens 25) at the Christmas dinner early on, by his sister’s tar water, and later on, by the greasy chophouses he frequents with Herbert. But an early story that Pip fabricates to spite his sister and the meddlesome Mr. Pumblechook reveals something of his vision for how a communal meal ought to be. After returning from Miss Havisham’s house they prompt him with questions about his experience, and he lies, “And Miss Estella - that's her niece, I think - handed her in cake and wine at the coach-window, on a gold plate. And we all had cake and wine on gold plates. And I got up behind the coach to eat mine, because she told me to” (Dickens 67). What Pip tries to pass off both to his sister and Pumblechook, and to himself, as a harmless piece of fiction may be read as an idyllic vision of the type of idealized meal he will always desire, but will never to experience. The luxury of wine and cake on gold plates stands in sharp opposition to the earlier Christmas dinner at the Gargery home, which is uncomfortable and shabby in comparison. But Pip has also presented a brief vision of the type of familial love he lacks in his life in the Gargery household – a life in which he, Estella and Miss Havisham are united by their communal meal of cake.

Pip’s fabricated experience acts as a parody of his actual experience with Estella just a chapter earlier. He recounts,

She came back, with some bread and meat and a little mug of beer. She put the mug down on the stones of the yard, and gave me the bread and meat without looking at me, as insolently as if I were a dog in disgrace. I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry - I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart. (Dickens 62)

Bread, meat and beer prove an unsatisfactory substitute for the wine and cake of Pip’s imaginings. Owing perhaps to the dissonance between his expectations and his reality, Pip finds himself particularly disappointed by Estella’s offer of bread, and the manner in which she presents it. Like the farmer in *Jane Eyre*, Estella offers basic subsistence level food, but unlike Jane, who at that point in the novel is happy to take what she can get, Pip feels humiliated and dehumanized. Part of this difference in reaction is owing to the vast difference between the context of Janes’s and Pip’s situation; while Jane is, by her own admission destitute, and content to eat whatever she can, Pip is visiting the finest house he has seen in his young life, and thus expects something greater than what he has received. Breaking bread is, for Pip, not sufficient – he will need to revise it to cake when he retells his story. Estella, for her part, is presumably aware of the effect that her actions will have on Pip. Her
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dismissive offer of beer and bread is a deliberate gesture, calculated to remind him both of his comparatively low social station, and of the hopelessness of attempts to woo her. In using the bread as a means of separation rather than relation, Estella seems to anticipate Arendt’s suggestion that the artifact can be used for either purpose. Estella draws attention to the “world of things,” to use Arendt’s phrase, that both mediate their relationship and simultaneously prevent them from intimacy. She may bring him basic food, and play cards with him at Miss Havisham’s behest, but she is a long way from indulging in cake with him as he has imagined.

According to the accounts of his family members, Dickens himself was, apparently, a lover of cake, who relished celebrating every birthday with an elaborate Victorian creation called a Twelfth-Night Cake. Seasoned with cinnamon, nutmeg and brandy, the Twelfth-Night was a Christmas favorite, which Dickens includes in the celebratory feast that marks the end of *A Christmas Carol*, a moment of great familial and spiritual unity. According to Dickens’ daughter Mamie, holiday meals at the Dickens house bore more in common with Pip’s fictional meal than with any of his actual meals. She recalled that she never saw her father as happy as he was “when he cut up the great Twelfth-cake, and distributed his bonbons and crackers, and waited upon the children like some good fairy” (Gottlieb 162). But in Dickens’ darker novels, he often denies his characters the same pleasures he enjoyed: like a life of luxury itself, a meal of cake proves an elusive goal for the working class. *Oliver Twist*, like *Jane Eyre*, must endure meals of horrendous gruel – certainly a food even lower than the bread and meat that Pip perceives as fit for a dog. In a characteristically Dickensian moment of dark humor early in *Oliver Twist*, the young protagonist encounters a woman attending her daughter’s funeral, who consoles herself with the thought that at least the family will be able to enjoy cake and wine as they mourn. But just as it does in *Great Expectations*, fantasy quickly gives way to reality. The old woman revises her original wish: “Never mind; send some bread—only a loaf of bread and a cup of water” (*Oliver Twist* 39). The act of breaking bread is supposedly endowed with great spiritual symbolism, but in practice, this symbolism is lost on both the woman at the funeral and on Pip, who see the bread only for its literal value. Instead of containing symbolism, the bread only serves as a reminder of their social class, which dictates that while cake may be part of a pleasant daydream, bread will always be the more likely option.

Fleeting urges and passing references to cake speak to its ubiquitous presence in the Victorian home, and give a sense of its significance as both a symbol of luxury, and of a particularly warm brand of social unity. But several more iconic cakes in literature have successfully insinuated themselves into cultural imagination. Nicola Humble lists two particular cakes that fall into this latter category: Miss Havisham’s wedding cake, and Proust’s Madeline from *A Remembrance of Things Past*, which is not dissimilar to Miss Temple’s seed-cake in terms of its size and its relatively ordinary character. “The tropes employed to represent these iconic cakes,” argues Humble, “tell us virtually everything we need to know about the attitudes to cake in particular – and perhaps food in general – in the national literary traditions to which they belong” (Humble 88-9). She concludes that while the French associate cake with “pleasure, plenty and nostalgia,” the English cake, embodied by Miss Havisham’s, is associated with “anxiety about pleasure or indulgence” (Humble 93). There is no
doubt some truth to both of these generalizations, but the French hold no monopoly on “pleasure, plenty and nostalgia,” all of which are vividly represented in Jane Eyre (as well as in the finale of A Christmas Carol, among others). While it is true that in the English Victorian novel, cakes go uneaten just as often as not, it is also true that characters ascribe its shared consumption – from the most lavish wedding cake to the slightest tea-cake – with the nearly mystical potential to fulfill their most deep-seeded desires.

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