

# IT'S A STAPLE: THE ROLE OF FOOD IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE & FILM

Food is woven deeply into the fabric of Southern life and has become a distinctive feature of the region. From food served at a funeral repast to dishes born of ingenuity and poverty, Southern food provides more than just nourishment – it helps to “reveal history, social values, and social problems; it maintains community and identity; and it contributes to the development and maintenance of southern culture” (Davis and Powell 2014). As a result, writers and filmmakers have used Southern food as an expressive device to show emotions, forward plots, develop characters, and foster a sense of place. In fact, food in these works can sometimes become it's own character. Here are a few examples that show how food in Southern literature and film is used. How is food used in the book you're reading?



## *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

By Zora Neale Hurston

Food is used to express the mood of relationships in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. How food is given, received, or rejected parallels the characters' relationships. For example, Hurston introduces a new relationship between Janie and Tea Cake with a basket of strawberries: “You needs tellin’ and showin’, and dat’s whut Ah’m doin’. Ah picked some strawberries too” (162).

\*image used with publisher permission

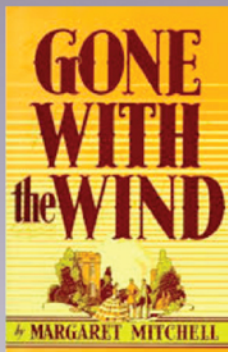
## *Invisible Man*

By Ralph Ellison

In *Invisible Man*, food is used to invoke memories and thoughts about African American identity in the South. The unnamed narrator buys a warm yam from a street vendor and the experience of eating it triggers both memories and disillusionment. He states, “I would eat them [yams] whenever and wherever I took the notion... Yet the freedom to eat yams on the street was far less than I had expected...” (267).



\*image used with publisher permission



## *Gone With the Wind*

By Margaret Mitchell

Food in *Gone With the Wind* helps to symbolize the fluctuating economic fortunes of its characters. For example, Scarlett O'Hara famously gets sick after eating a radish and declares, “As God is my witness, I'm never going to be hungry again” (592). The radish helps convey the destitution and food insecurities many Southerners suffered at the time.

\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions

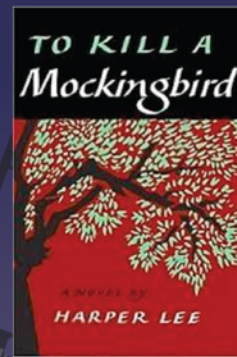
## *Fried Green Tomatoes at The Whistle Stop Café*

By Fannie Flagg

Food is at the heart of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. In the book, one of food's many roles is to act as an equalizer in an unequal South. For example, homeless men ride trains to eat at the café, African American men are given food through the back door, and those that work at the café, both black and white, help each other.



\*image used without publisher objection



\*image used with publisher permission

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*

By Harper Lee

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, food is used to illustrate social class, race, and equality. For example, African American characters bring humble, rural foods to Atticus Finch while White neighbors bring more elaborate dishes. Yet, regardless of the type of food, every dish comes together on the Finch's table to be eaten and enjoyed.

## *Sitting for Equal Service: Lunch Counter Sit-ins, United States 1960s*

By Melody Herr

*Sitting for Equal Service: Lunch Counter Sit-ins* recounts the events surrounding the Greensboro lunch counter sit-in that ignited similar protests across the South during the Civil Rights Movement. Here, the lunch counter, symbolizing food, service, and community, is used to effectively and powerfully expose the racial inequalities of the Civil Rights-era South.



\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions



## *The Help*

In the 2009 movie, *The Help*, Minnie, a domestic, when asked to disguise the origin of her employer's fried chicken by burning it, responded, “Minnie don't burn chicken.” This response was a clear statement of pride in one's identity, work, and place using a quintessentially southern food.

\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions

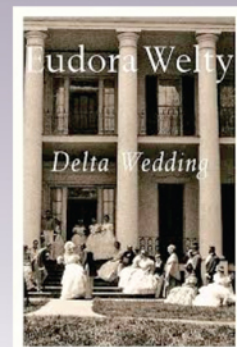
## *Dear Darkness*

By Kevin Young

In this collection of poems, Young uses food to express his African American Southern identity and experiences of deep loss. Specifically, in “Victuals” and “Eulogy,” he uses images of the abundant food served after funerals to convey grief and longing. In “Eulogy”, he writes, “... eat till your stomach spills over No more! You'll cry too full for your eyes to leak (161).



\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions



## *Delta Wedding*

By Eudora Welty

From the opening dinner to the wedding feast to the post-wedding picnic, *Delta Wedding* is filled with images of food. These meals and the time spent preparing them highlight women's strength and self-awareness. The kitchen, thus, becomes a place where women explore their inner most thoughts as they prepare the foods that bring their families together.

\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions

## *Black Boy*

By Richard Wright

The absence of food is a recurring theme in Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*. Wright's hunger is both physical and metaphorical. He longs for both actual food and for the ability to live freely as an African American man in the South during the early 20th century.



\*image used in accordance with the Fair Use guidelines for nonprofit educational institutions

Mississippi Humanities

UMMC  
Center for Bioethics  
and Medical Humanities

