

Sample Student 2

English 100

21 December 2012

Research Essay

The Portrayal of Industrial Beef

“Power Steer,” a report written by Michael Pollan, relates the story of Pollan’s initiative to learn about the beef he consumes regularly. To accomplish this task, Pollan purchases No. 534, a beautiful Angus steer, and follows that steer from the vast grazing fields all the way to the cramped slaughterhouse. Throughout each stage of No. 534’s life, Pollan is there, tracking the cow’s food, medicines, housing, and treatment. Pollan discovers the insanity of America’s feeding system through his research; he finds that it takes enormous amounts of work and resources to feed a cow corn that can actually kill it. By collecting statistics and facts about the damaging effects of corn-fed beef and the benefits of grass-fed beef, Pollan illustrates the importance of maintaining nature’s original plan for life. Also argued through this report is the idea that what is fed to the cows is also fed to humans; if the cows are not eating what they are meant to eat, neither are humans. The author conveys these messages through common literary conventions – illustrative imagery and telling metaphor, and statistical data. These approaches to writing about his topic are used quite intentionally, and successfully, to captivate our imaginations and reinforce the messages Pollan wishes to send, driving us toward

the same conclusion as he: that something must be changed in the industrialization cattle industry.

Imagery throughout the text allows the reader to immerse him or herself in Pollan's adventure. The author keeps the reader entertained with creative visual, gustatory, tactile, olfactory, and kinetic imagery, appealing to every sense. While describing his first impression of Poky Feeders, Pollan uses visual imagery, illustrating "cattle pens [stretched] to the horizon, each one home to 150 animals standing dully or lying around in a grayish mud... [that] isn't mud at all" (389). The portrayal of the dull cattle dwelling in its own fecal matter allows the reader to share in Pollan's disgusting first sight, providing this view for the reader to ingest. Depicting the protein supplement of molasses and urea that the cows are forced to consume, Pollan describes it as "sticky brown goop" (398); using the tactile "sticky" further disgusts the readers. Pollan uses imagery to deepen the reader's connection with Pollan's story. We can feel, taste, smell, and see as Pollan does, making Pollan's journey the reader's journey – an ingenious method of getting us "there" where we need to be if we are to really experience the industry's excesses as he wants us to.

Scott Mowbray, in his report "The Rise of a New Food Culture" that also chronicles the changing industrial food "machine," uses graphic imagery to connect with the reader in a similar fashion. Mowbray describes the classic American white bread as "vitamin-enriched [and] spongy" (14). This visual imagery paints a picture in the reader's mind, a picture that nostalgically evokes (our) memories of a familiar food. In both Pollan and Mowbray's reports, emotions are tied into the images they paint; these emotions create a link between the author and the reader, allowing the

authors to effortlessly impress their conclusions and ambitions upon their followers. Through the deployment of rich, even gross imagery, Mowbray shows us how emotion and memory are indubitably linked to our destructive food habits in his effort to reveal the seedy underbelly of the food industry just as Pollan uses imagery to demonstrate that the industrialization of beef is causing the deterioration of the subjected cows and the environment.

In order to communicate his unusual story in a more understandable way for the reader, Pollan also relies on simile and metaphor. Not a surprising choice for a writer, but still an effective one in this case, given his particular subject matter and the potential power his imagery has to sway his readers if depicted smartly and strategically in his writing, which it is. Pollan inserts comparisons that transform the alien idea of industrial beef into a dynamic and relatable illustration for the readers to absorb. Here, for example, he explains the process of “backgrounding...” (393), the second stage of cattle life, after weaning at the ranch where Pollan’s cow lives: “[a]s prep school for feedlot life: the animals are confined in a pen, ‘bunk broken’—taught to eat from a trough—and gradually accustomed to eating a new, unnatural diet of grain” (393). Comparing a stage in his cow’s life to “prep school” gives the reader an image that is irrefutable in its power and likely associations: prep school prepares young students for a lifestyle of studying, reading, and sitting, all things very unnatural for an energetic child. Just like a child enrolled in prep school, the calf is prepared to live constrained, controlled and prepared for a new, unnatural life that’s largely determined by authority figures who wield the power to suspend or punish – or slaughter, if you’re the cow. The well-drawn simile is perfectly chosen

and “executed” in his writing in order to effectively make the comparison he wants to make.

In Chad Lavin’s report, “Pollanated Politics, or, The Neoliberal’s Dilemma” Lavin critiques Pollan’s approach to curing the diseased process of industrializing of beef. Lavin compares the issue of solving America’s food system through changing consumers’ ways to America’s other major problem with its consumers: debt. “Even when the problem is too much debt, the solution is to go shopping” (Lavin 43). Through this comparison, Lavin displays the consumer’s inability to truly change their lifestyles towards Pollan’s suggested ways. Using an idea the reader is familiar with and comparing it to a foreign concept allows the reader to better understand the ideas both Pollan and Lavin are conveying.

Another extended comparison in this story is of the feedlot to a pre-modern city. Most readers have not seen a feedlot up close, and do not know or comprehend Pollan’s experience in one. To relate the feedlot to something graspable, Pollan pulls upon the ancient cities taught in History class. The feedlot “is very much a pre-modern city... crowded, filthy and stinking, with open sewers, unpaved roads and choking air... as in fourteenth-century London, the metropolitan digestion remains vividly on display, the foodstuffs coming in, the waste streaming out” (397). Depicting the feedlot stuffed full of cows, waste, and food, and comparing it to 18th century London provides the reader with an image that can be processed and understood because it relates to the reader’s previous knowledge. As such, it becomes yet again an ingenious literary device Pollan uses to reinforce and underscore his fundamental message running throughout the essay.

By using comparisons to common knowledge, Pollan brings his story to a level the reader can relate to and understand. Without the similes and metaphor strung throughout Pollan's account, we would be lost and unattached – and much less apt to care about what he has to tell us. But because, with his help, we are able to grasp Pollan's explanations, we remain interested and intrigued in the content of his story. And our sustained attachment to his story in turn gives Pollan the time he needs to successfully hammer home his suspicions, beliefs and assumptions about the food industry, in the end bringing the reader along to support and share his views on the awfulness of the American beef system.

Facts and statistics appear regularly throughout "Power Steer" to address the evidence and reality of the dysfunctions within the industrial beef system. Placed among the imagery and comparisons lie the blatant facts that give this essay credibility and structure to build on. Pollan explains to the reader "growing the vast quantities of corn used to feed livestock in this country takes vast quantities of chemical fertilizer, which in turn takes vast quantities of oil—1.2 gallons for every bushel" (397). This shocking amount of fossil fuels wasted on growing corn that ends up wreaking havoc in a cow's body displays to the reader the grounds Pollan has for his argument on the insanity of American beef – an easy but effective device he uses to support his arguments running throughout the piece, again. Pollan also shares shocking information about the affect corn has on cows through Dr. Mel Metzen and Pollan's own research on the subject. Throughout his essay, Pollan follows the affects of altering the cow's natural food source. Corn causes "feedlot bloat...[which causes] the cow [to suffocate]" (400); it "can also give a cow acidosis...

[which] can lead to diarrhea, ulcers, bloat, liver disease and a general weakening of the immune system that leaves the animal vulnerable to everything from pneumonia to feedlot polio” (400). Because of feedlot diets, “more than 13 percent of feedlot cattle are found at slaughter to have abscessed livers” (401). The long string of deadly diseases placed in this essay culminates to the point that feeding cattle corn is a damaging system that should not be in place. By displaying all of the harmful affects corn has on cows, Pollan once more provides the reader with plenty of reason to believe in his argument.

Other writers rely as well on data and statistics to support their conclusions about the food industry of course, to similar rhetorical effect as Pollan’s writing. In the report “Liver Abscesses in Feedlot Cattle” by T. G. Nagaraja and M. M. Chengappa, the authors also argue that feedlot cattle are more prone to liver abscesses because of their corn diets. In the beginning of their report, Nagaraja and Chengappa state that “the incidence [of abscessed livers averages] from 12 to 32% in most feedlots” (287). This shockingly large percentage hooks the reader’s attention, making him or her wonder what in a feedlot could cause this damage. The use of statistics and facts again works as a very successful writing strategy because it provides solid support for the readers to “ingest” the meaning of the article while “digesting” the subtextual arguments. Both Pollan and the authors of “Liver Abscesses” utilize facts and statistics to persuade the reader of the veracity, even urgency, of their arguments. By using recognized sources and factual information, Pollan bolsters his argument that the process of feeding deadly corn to fattened cattle in the industrial beef system is wasteful and destructive, and also gains

credibility for his beliefs. Facts and statistics appear to be indisputable; by using such “indisputable” information in his essay, Pollan renders his argument unquestionable in his reader’s mind.

The writing strategies used in Pollan’s essay “Power Steer” aid in conveying his arguments that feeding industrial corn to beef cows adversely affects cattle and in turn humans when eating those corn-fed cows. The imagery in Pollan’s writing creates a comprehensive, captivating picture that attracts an audience searching for enlightenment. Metaphor and simile used throughout to compare an uncommon idea to an easily graspable one helps Pollan illustrate his story for readers who know little about the subject. And because readers now fully understands the ideas in Pollan’s report because of those literary strategies, we are more educated, even titillated, thus perhaps more willing to listen to Pollan’s argument. Finally, statistics and facts in “Power Steer” provide evidence that bolsters his arguments throughout. Facts and numbers give us a credible source of baseline data to hold up next to the author’s other, more subjective or emotionally charged arguments, thereby giving them more weight and legitimacy. By the end of Michael Pollan’s report, he has the readers engaged and eager to work towards changing the dysfunctional industrial beef system. A hidden message in Pollan’s essay is this: When man alters one aspect of nature’s processes, he alters a long chain of interconnected functions; he knocks down a domino and then realizes there is a lengthy line behind it that also tumbles down.

Annotated Works Cited List

Pollan, Michael. "Power Steer." *New York Times* 31 Mar. 2002, Animals sec. Print.

This report details the story of Michael Pollan's purchase of a young steer and its life as an industrial cattle. Pollan follows this steer from the grazing fields to the slaughterhouse in order to "take more responsibility for the invisible but crucial transaction between ourselves and the animals we eat" (391) and discover what he is really consuming in American beef. By the end of his steer's life, Pollan has discovered the insanity of America's beef system; feeding cattle corn that poisons them, stuffing the cattle in E. Coli filled stalls, and providing America with easily accessible heart disease.

Mowbray, Scott. "The Rise of a New Food Culture." *Huffington Post (blog)*.

TheHuffingtonPost.com, 10 Dec. 2012. Web. 21 Dec. 2012.

This report describes the industrial food culture that America has adopted. Except now, Mowbray believes that Americans' love for food and different flavors will lead them out of their industrial consumption, and into a daring food culture. Mowbray believes that Americans do not have to worry about their food remaining in the same boring and familiar ways, the "food companies want to be, must be, tuned to this new food culture" ("The Rise..." Mowbray).

Lavin, Chad. "Pollanated Politics, Or, The Neoliberal's

Dilemma." *Politicsandculture.org*. Wordpress, 27 Oct. 2010. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.

In this critique of Michael Pollan's writing, Chad Lavin displays the erroneous thinking of Pollan. Lavin expresses that Pollan's idea, to alter the consumers to solve the American food policies, is a faulty resolution. Lavin believes that "in order to politicize the US food system, [Pollan] must revert to the obviously inadequate, arguably elitist, and ultimately depoliticizing language of consumerism" (Lavin). Because Pollan bases his solution off of consumerism, he cannot actually solve the problem; only elite consumers are able to purchase the food Pollan promotes in his essays.

Nagaraja, T. G., and M. M. Chengappa. "Liver Abscesses in Feedlot Cattle: A Review." *Journal of Animal Science* 76.1 (1998): 287-98. *Google Scholar*. 11 Dec. 2012. Web.

This article expresses the relationship between abscessed livers in cattle and feedlot diets. In the article, the authors provide many statistics to bolster their argument. Also explored are other effects of grain on cows and antibiotics given, such as "Tylosin [which reduces] abscess incidence by 40 to 70%" (294), to cattle to prevent such effects. Nagaraja and Chengappa use informative and factual writing strategies to display their findings.