

Wyatt Johnson

Lisa Haynes

English 124 B1

11 August 2014

Cooperate Greed in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

One of the most influential entities in Ruth Ozeki's book *My Year of Meats* is the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate (or BEEF-EX), a large lobby group representing the interests of "beef, pork, lamb, goat, horseas well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups" (Ozeki Ch. 1). As we learn about the operations of these industries through characters at different levels of involvement with the meat industry, we find many instances of corporate greed. The industry is willing to sacrifice the well being of their customers during the production of the BEEF-EX sponsored show, "My American Wife!" We also learn about the major role that pharmaceutical companies play in the production of meat, primarily in the use of Diethylstilbestrol (or DES). We learn that these sometimes untested drugs were used to simply improve efficiency, but unfortunately had the side effect of causing massive damage to a female consumer's reproductive system. Ozeki uses storytelling, tone, and setting to show how maximizing profit comes at the cost of morals.

Storytelling is used in *My Year of Meats* to provide personal insight into the workings of BEEF-EX while also developing a character that the reader can identify with. The main character in the story, Jane, is a coordinator for the new Japanese television show "My American Wife" where she must travel around the United States to find families that can be featured on the show. The role of the show is to "foster among Japanese housewives a proper understanding of the wholesomeness of U.S. meats." (Ozeki Ch. 1) which would further BEEF-EX's associated companies. Initially, Jane is innocent to the idea that the beef that she is marketing is hiding a dark secret. When it is later revealed to her, she only eats organic red meats if she does at all (Ch. 9). The believable nature of Jane makes it really easy for a reader to personally identify with the issues that she encounters. Through the story, we are exposed to a variety of situations that are used by the author to provide factual evidence to support the corruption both in the meat and in the processes of BEEF-EX. One of the most powerful and longest periods that we learn about information through story was

that of Jane's own attempts at having children, and her discovery of DES which "ultimately changed my relationship with meats and television. It also changed the course of my life" (Ch. 6). When describing the resulting damage of Jane's uterus from the DES that her mother took during her pregnancy, she referred to the ideal one looking like "head of a bull, with the fallopian tubes spreading and curling like noble horns", while as a result of the hormones before birth "[t]he left side of the bulls broad forehead was caved in, less triangular, as though my uterus had been coldcocked" (Ch. 7). The references to the "head of a bull" (Ch. 7) might also be a symbol of strength, or power. As a result of the DES, or the cooperation, Jane is left with a weakened sense of strength. The changes then described to her mother will highlight the difference over generations, that her mother was not even aware of these issues back then. In fact, her mother didn't even know the drugs that she was given, she "try everything. Some vitamin, some Doctor Ing-san medicine" (Ch. 11). This shows her mother's blind faith in the doctor and in the system, eventually resulting in being given DES. The doctors prescribed this even when studies that were released at the same time when it was approved for cattle, DES "showed a significant increase not only in miscarriages but also in premature births and infant deaths" (Ch. 6). It was not common knowledge as the very same drug that was used by pregnant women to strengthen their children was "even used as a morning-after pill to terminate pregnancy" (Ch. 6). This can be contrasted to the attitude that Jane had when she was prescribed Tace for her pains after the miscarriage. Armed with the knowledge of the drug industry, Jane decided to look it up, just to find that it could actually be quite harmful to someone with her condition! This relates quite nicely to the idea of the trust that the meat industry has, or rather had relating to the safety of their products. It was the simple fact that the corporations ignored the evidence, as they were making profit. Jane's development of the relationships with the people that she filmed provided another insight to the industries goals. Lara and Dyann in the novel are used as a pipeline to describe factual and historical evidence of the food and drug industry and the lengths that some people go to avoid the issues that are caused by them. Dyann went so far as to state that they could "never eat it[meat] the way its produced here in America. Its unhealthy. Not to mention corrupt, inhumane, and out of control" (Ch. 8). Another character that provided a lot of information on the industry was Bunny and Rosie. Their role was more of a direct effect of the results of the industry as they lived on a cattle ranch. As a result of the exposure to DES, Bunny's daughter, Rosie,

suffered greatly. Rosie underwent puberty at age 5, developing traits that would have taken many more years to develop which was a direct result of the extremely high amounts of DES in the environment. Jane later used footage of Rosie to spark a controversy relating to the illegal use of DES in 1991, which was still being used 12 years after it was supposedly banned in livestock production. This of course as motivated by profit, as without the use of these artificial growth accelerants, they could have gone out of business like Jane's grandparents which had lost "the family dairy farm to hormonally enhanced cows" (Ch. 6). Through the story telling by the characters in *My Year of Meats*, we are focused by Ozeki into believing that BEEF-EX utilizes its power over the American people which is then abused for profit.

The tone of the novel changes throughout the book and follows opinion that Jane has on the industry. In the beginning, Jane seems to look forward to "My American Wife!" which would "land [her] a job and keep [her] both meat-fed and employed for over a year" (Ozeki Ch. 1). Her naive outlook on the meat industry can be seen as a symbol for the innocence of the American public with relation to the industry. When we learn more about the use of hormones and drugs used in the book, the tone becomes much darker and threatening. The tone is established first with Jane's new job and relationship. Before this new job, Jane was freezing, and in need of a job. At this point as well, we meet Sloan, which later causes Jane to become pregnant. This pregnancy is interpreted as a very positive thing by Jane, as she had encountered trouble previously with attempting to have a child. We also learn about Akiko, who we first see as a very devoted wife that will do anything necessary to please her husband. This relationship devolves however at the cost of being beaten by her husband. This then results in her fleeing to America to have her child. Jane's experience is then topped off by having a miscarriage as a direct result of the industries drug practices. The Tokyo office describes the "Ideal American Family" as being free of "1. Physical imperfections 2. Obesity 3. Squalor 4. Second class peoples" (Ch. 1). This makes BEEF-EX seem very mechanical. The Tokyo office does not bother to care or worry about how the staff might interpret their requests. Their sole and only purpose is to convince the Japanese public that they should buy American beef because they are using the cast to make it seem like as a result they will have "Perfect families" (Ch. 1). This portrayal that they must strive towards. It is not their intention at all to portray any form of an "American Wife" as so ironically is their title of the show. It was also quite ironic how the most important point they stressed in all caps

was that the “MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST BE ALL-AMERICAN” (Ch. 1). This of course clashing with their undesirable and desirable points, as America is certainly a country full of “Physical imperfections” and of “Second class people” (Ch. 1).

Ozeki also uses setting to include important details regarding the overall tone as a result of the revelations made by Jane. In situations relating to the positive non-beef families that Jane visited, they usually were quite happy and bright. The specific episode which focused on the Beaudroux family where they made “Cajun-style Baby Back Ribs” (Ozeki Ch. 4). The scene for this family was in a very desirable area, having “lined on either side by ancient oaks whose branches are laden with beards of Spanish moss.” (Ch. 4). It is important to note that in this instance, the family prepared a non-beef dish, which in this situation was received quite well with both the crew and the Japanese public. We can then contrast this to the events that occurred with the Dunn family which took place at a feed lot and the slaughterhouse.

Blood was everywhere: bright red, brick red, shades of brown and black; flowing, splattering, encrusting the walls, the men. The floors were graded toward central drains for easy cleaning, yet the place was caked with a deep, rotting filth. And thick with flies. (Ozeki Ch. 10)

It is clear from the very descriptive language used that this is not a desirable place. Images such as “rotting filth” (Ozeki Ch. 10) are very powerful, and describes the unclean environment. This highlights the innocence of the American public in their assumption that food is prepared in a clean environment. Another image that is used is when Akiko is in the hospital after her husband abuses her.

It was bright inside the curtains, and the light hurt her eyes. It was fluorescent, not real light from the sun, nor was it fresh air that made the curtains shimmy and sway, but rather a back-draft from urgent bodies moving quickly back and forth outside. (Ozeki Ch. 11)

In this situation, Akiko is left with the feeling that the world seems cruel and causes her pain. Akiko would rather close her eyes and withdraw away from the world around her. As the characters learn more about immorality of the industry, they become more and more withdrawn. Her husband, John, is also fueled by these fake ideals as set out by the company, just as the light “was fluorescent, not real light from the sun” (Ozeki Ch. 11), John’s estranged ideas of family were made to be not true. Akiko’s choice to leave her

husband can be seen as a final realization of the extent that the system can influence family life, and how damaging it can really be.

In conclusion, the corporate entities as described within Ruth Ozeki's book *My Year of Meats* act with a profit first approach which results in physical and the psychological damage to the consumers of its products and content. These production boosting drugs were used even though clear evidence existed that they were unsafe for human consumption. Ozeki uses storytelling, tone, and setting to portray the image of BEEF-EX as the corporate entity whose only focus is profit. Everything from the drugs that they marketed to the food they produced were all tainted by corporate greed. With food being such an important component of everyone's lives, I think that measures should be taken to ensure that companies involved in food production act with a consumer first approach.

Works Cited

Ozeki, Ruth. *My Year of Meats*. New York: Viking, 1998. Print.