

Worksheet for Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

Vocabulary

Omnivore: a person or animal that can eat both animals and plants as food.

Herbivore: an animal that eats only plants as food. (determined by instinct/physical function)

Carnivore: an animal that eats only animals as food. (determined by instinct/physical function)

Vegetarian: a person who chooses to not eat meat but does eat eggs, dairy, and/or honey.

Vegan: a person who chooses to eat only plants and not meat, dairy, eggs, and/or honey.

Dilemma: a dilemma is when a difficult choice has to be made between at least two possibilities, usually equally undesirable possibilities.

Savagery: being fierce or cruel.

Pre-writing

As a human you are born an omnivore. Are you also a vegetarian? A vegan? Something else? Write about how you would define your eating habits and whether that's important to you or not.

Breaking Down the Text

1) Pollan begins his piece by introducing readers to the idea of “the omnivore’s dilemma” (1). A dilemma is when a difficult choice has to be made between at least two possibilities, usually equally undesirable possibilities. What is the dilemma an omnivores faces?

2) Pollan describes being an omnivore as “a boon and a challenge, a source of tremendous power as well as anxiety” (1). How can it be all of these things at once?

3) For Pollan, omnivore offers a number of satisfactions, among them “the pleasure of variety” and “the comfort of the familiar” (1). What does he mean here? Have your own eating habits brought you these same satisfactions?

4) Pollan argues that a shared sense of taste “brings people together, not only in small groups but as communities” (2). How can food create communities? Are you part of a community that eats the same kinds of foods? What are they?

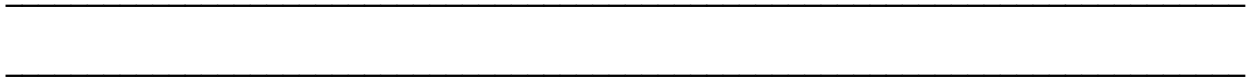
5) According to Pollan, cultures develop “elaborate structures of taboos, manners, and culinary traditions” when it comes to eating (2). Why do cultures develop such elaborate structures? Can you think of any from your own culture that impact your own eating habits? Is there something that you think is wrong to eat, perhaps?

6) In discussing the potential pitfalls of omnivory, Pollan claims that “[a] potential for savagery lurks in a creature capable of eating anything” (2). What does it mean to be savage? Explain why he feels this way, and have you ever felt that?

7) Pollan believes that most people choose not to think about things like slaughterhouses because “most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat is or what it takes to bring it to our plates” (3). Do you fall into this category? Is it problematic to want to eat meat but not be realistic about where it comes from?

8) Of the recent rise in the popularity of vegetarianism and animal rights awareness, Pollan admits, “I’m not completely sure why this should be happening now” (3). What are some of the possible causes that Pollan brings up? Why do you think it’s so popular right now?

9) What is the “schizoid quality” that Pollan identifies in the relationship today between people and animals (4)?



10) Pollan concludes by discussing John Berger's essay, "Why Look at Animals?" What point does Pollan join from Berger's essay? Why is it significant for Pollan?
