



2005

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### Recommended Citation

Ezeokoli, Odinaka (2005) "ANYTHING TASTES GOOD WITH A LITTLE SALT AND PEPPER: CANNIBALISM IN LU XUN'S "DIARY OF A MADMAN"," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 7 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol7/iss1/11>

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**ANYTHING TASTES GOOD WITH A LITTLE SALT AND PEPPER:  
CANNIBALISM IN LU XUN'S "DIARY OF A MADMAN"**

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It was 6:30 pm and I had just stepped in the house after a long day of yard work. Words could not express the pain I felt from the vacancy in my stomach. My mother must have sensed my famished condition from the kitchen because as I walked in she called out, "Dinner will be ready in just a second." The aroma that filled the house entranced me, and I was immediately thankful. I quickly went upstairs, washed up, then came back down, and sat at the table. My mother placed a plate in front of me as my mouth watered in starving anticipation. However, as soon as I set eyes on the meal, my appetite vanished and the color drained from my skin. Sitting before me was a heaping plate of human forearms. My mind urged me to leave, but my stomach begged me to stay. After much debate, they came to a compromise. I reached for the salt...

The first time a child was given human flesh to eat must have been a strange experience. Myriad thoughts must have been running through the child's mind, like, "Who am I eating? I haven't seen Billy from across the street in a while..." In Lu Xun's diary of a Madman," our hero believes that children, and adults alike, are being served this meal every day. He might not be too far off from the truth. To understand cannibalism's meaning, and the medium which Lu Xun uses to convey this meaning, the idea of flesh-eating should be addressed and analyzed; this method of thinking should be considered for its relevance, not only to Lu Xun's society, but also to modern society as well.

People are resistant to change. History proves this hesitancy to change from age to age, time and time again. Anytime a free thinker appears in a society with a different take on things, he or she is "eaten alive." His or her ideas are rarely accepted immediately. Galileo's idea that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice-versa was renounced by church officials of his day. Nobody believed Columbus when he said the world was round. And everybody thought Jesus was a nice guy until he started telling people to change the way they lived. The "Madman" in Lu Xun's story is another visionary that is ahead of his time. A philosopher once said, "Even crazy people believe that they are sane." So then, who decides the minimum number of marbles a person must possess before they have "lost it"? Even in "Diary

of a Madman,” the so-called madman fits many standards for normal—he thinks about the things that are happening around him, he is concerned about his family, he can communicate his ideas; so what is so “mad” about him?

He is similar to the free thinkers mentioned above. He is nothing like anybody around him, and he refuses to do what everybody else does. He questions the way people around him behave, and people around him do not like that. They do not want to think that something is wrong with the way that they, and their parents, and their parents' parents, have been living. Thus, a simple, easy solution is given to the problem—he is labeled crazy. Lu Xun lived in China and during his time, people that gathered enough nerve to rebel against the powers that be were socially martyred, and if they had a political career, it would be rendered nonexistent if they went against their party lines. So dissenters had to tread carefully and be creative whenever they spoke out so that they could keep their livelihoods and still express themselves. Thus, the crazy label works out rather well for Lu Xun; now he can express his dissident views, through the Madman, without any backlash from society because his character is already mad. After all, what can be done to an insane person? Nothing, he or she is just allowed to continue on their course and it is hoped that they will come around some time. So now Lu Xun has a vehicle that he can use to get his point across to those who are open to his way of thinking without sacrificing his position in society.

But some may think that it is not a big deal for a crazy guy to be calling people cannibals. This may be true, but not here. This crazy guy is making a truly profound statement about the things going on around him. Our hero is speaking out against people blindly following traditions without giving thought as to whether or not there is a better way of doing things. In “Diary of a Madman” he says, “...they’ve been continually eating people for four thousand years” (2735). Perhaps not coincidentally, Confucianism has also been practiced in China for about the same amount of time. The “Madman” also states his justification for this statement. As he is looking through a history book he notices that

Across every page were the words BENEVOLENCE, RIGHT-EOUSENESS, and MORALITY. Since I couldn’t get to sleep anyway, I read that history very carefully for most of the night, and finally I began to make out what was written between the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE! (2729).

The words that he comes across are all virtues that are stressed in Confucianism. But our hero’s critique is not just limited to Confucian traditions or religion. His critique also relates to things that people

do today, with no forethought, under the premise that "it has always been that way." Whether the circumstances that people blindly accept are equality in wages for genders or races, loyalty to a particular political party because of family background, music that one listens to, or even education in some cases, people seem to be ready and willing to throw all discretion out the window and follow the nearest bandwagon to death- as long as the bandwagon leader has a good enough reason. Nobody knows where they are going, but since their ancestors have been going this direction for generations, it MUST be the right way to go.

And thus the dilemma ensues, which side is right? If people have been doing something for four thousand years then something must be right about it. How else would it last so long? Things will last as long as people just passively follow whatever dominant trend happens to be in. Because ultimately, sitting back and nonchalantly doing whatever everybody else is doing is much easier than taking a stand against something, especially an institution or practice with years of history behind it. The "Madman" makes this observation himself when he states, "...they all join together to hold each other back, and talk each other out of it! That's it! They'd rather die than take that one little step" (2732). So, after much deliberation, our protagonist decides to confront the myopic monster that has been eating away at society for generations. Of course he begins with his elder brother, and he tries to convince him to stop his cannibal ways. By taking this "little step," our hero aligns himself with all great free thinkers who take that first step out of obscurity and put themselves on the line for what they believe in. But Elder Brother does not want to hear what his sibling has to say.

Earlier in the story, the "Madman" asks a valid question about his brother concerning cannibalism He asks, "Could it be that he's lost all conscience and just goes ahead and does it even though he knows it's wrong?" (2731). This is a good question because in many situations where people are doing something wrong, they try to rationalize their actions in their minds so that they will not feel guilty; a common rationalization is "everybody's doin' it." Even the madman notices the people's rationalizations He points it out when he says, "All they think about is eating human flesh, and then they go sneaking around, thinking up every which way they can camouflage their real intentions" (2730). After doing this particular wrong thing a few times, the rationalization matures into a form of numbness in which the person no longer feels remorse for the wrongdoing; rather, it becomes a normal way of life. This is cannibalism in top form. The conscience has been gnawed away and what is left is just a mold that has been filled

with generations of “tradition.”

Later in the story, after Elder Brother closes his ears to his brother’s calling, the “Madman” replies, “You’re going to tell me it can’t be done! Elder Brother, I think you’re very likely to say that. When that tenant wanted to reduce his rent the day before yesterday, wasn’t it you who said it couldn’t be done?” (2733). So cannibalism can also apply to a lack of love or consideration for one’s neighbor: when people feel that the need to advance in society is so strong that they should do so at the expense of others. A saying goes, “No man is an island” In other words, people cannot survive by themselves. People need people, and when one puts one’s own needs and wants ahead of everyone else all the time, problems follow. When society as a whole begins to constantly put itself first, then a deadly epidemic ensues. The “Madman” notes of this epidemic and its effects on Day 9 of his diary, “They want to eat others and at the same time they’re afraid that other people are going to eat them. That’s why they’re always watching each other with such suspicious looks in their eyes” (2732). Basically, this outbreak of selfishness spawns a vicious cycle wherein no one can be trusted.

Lu Xun’s story is a warning against following with no thought. His point is not that tradition is entirely bad. After all, tradition is what cultures are built on, and it is how communities and nations give themselves a sense of identity. Tradition only becomes an impediment when it is followed obtusely. When people are persuaded to do something that is normally against their better judgment with an “everybody’s doin’ it” argument, they are putting salt on an arm in preparation for a meal. And every time people allow themselves to be convinced to do something on the grounds of an “everybody’s doin’ it” argument, they are taking a bite out of someone’s leg. Taking out an evening to flip through the channels on TV is proof enough that much of what is offered as entertainment these days is no more than our culture saying, “Please pass the salt.”

So then, what is the answer? Our protagonist gets it right in his last line when he says “Save the children . . .” (2735). Meaningless tradition cannot be stopped unless it is attacked from the root. Children must be taught not only the importance of learning but also of thinking.

## References

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