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Decoding the Edible Ecriture: Barthesian Reading on Select Culinary Crime Narratives

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Food is a subject of multifaceted discussion, often uncovering diverse food-related concepts. Among these is Culinary Mystery Narratives, a relatively new subgenre growing in popularity among international readers. This subgenre's appeal stems from its whodunit or enigmatic structure, where food functions as both a narrative and meta-narrative device, captivating readers through its layered storytelling. This paper delves into the concept of food as a code, metaphor, and narrative tool in two short stories, "Foodies" and "Creampuff," from Rob Hart's *Take-Out: And Other Tales of Culinary Crime*. The collection presents a delicious range of stories, rich with cultural diversity and culinary metaphors woven into mysterious frameworks. The focus of this study is Hart's skillful intertwining of mystery and culinary narratives. To analyze these elements, Barthes' five code theory—proairetic, hermeneutical, semantic, symbolic, and cultural—is employed. Through this theoretical lens, the study decodes the mysteries within these narratives, revealing how Hart transforms food into a multifaceted narrative device. This unique approach underscores the intricate relationship between food and mystery in culinary crime fiction, showcasing how culinary elements contribute to the genre's narrative depth. The paper applies Barthesian theory to reveal new insights into the structural and narrative dynamics of culinary mystery fiction.

Keywords: Mystery Fiction, Culinary Crime Fiction, Food, Five Code theory, Barthes

Crime fiction is one of the most popular narratives for many readers. The term is complex yet simple to define. Dr. Milda Danyte defines the term as “any story that has a crime and its solution as a central feature of its plot” (2011, p.5). Danyte identifies the 19th century as the origin of these stories and they contain “more mystery about the crime that has taken place” (p. 5). She categorises it as a murder mystery because they intertwine the detective character with the murder mystery’s primary plot. Charles Rzepka, in his work *Detective Fiction*, describes the features of mystery/detective fiction as a story that “contains a detective” and “an unsolved mystery (not always exactly a crime)”. And it is “an investigation by which the mystery eventually is solved” (2005, p. 10).

Crime or detective fiction typically revolves around a crime or mystery that needs to be resolved, with the main characters often being investigators or detectives. The emphasis is typically on unravelling the puzzle, uncovering clues, and ultimately resolving cases. While there can be moments of rapid action, danger, or peril for the characters involved, this is not necessarily the sole focus of the genre. Crime or detective fiction can also explore other aspects, such as character development, psychological insights, social issues, and the moral dilemmas faced by characters. Genres can vary from gritty and realistic portrayals of crime to more light-hearted or comedic approaches. Some stories may indeed have high action and peril, while others may be more focused on the intellectual and deductive aspects of the investigation. Ultimately, crime and detective fiction encompass a diverse range of narratives, and the specific elements emphasized can vary from story to story. Although action and danger can be present in many instances, they are not the sole defining characteristics of the genre. “By now there are countless numbers of specialised fields-Christie- type mysteries that feature recipes and cooking, travel abroad, or the Jewish faith” (Danyte, p. 39). Culinary Crime Fiction, or Culinary Mystery Fiction, is one such contemporary trend that blends narratives of food and suspense.

Cookery shows and recipe books are in high demand in print and electronic media. Food boosts nostalgic memories. “Food is the thing that binds all of us, across continents and cultures. No matter where you go, there are signature dishes and traditions of hospitality. Sharing a meal is as much about emotional sustenance as it is about the physical” (Hart, 2019, p. 2). Thus, down the memory lane, one can always find a pinch of food memory. Hence, Food acts as a “fantastic storytelling device” (p. 2). Food sometimes plays a vital role in many narratives. However, it gains momentum when the edible component is contained in a crime narrative. Food kept away from the suspense formula has now become a significant component in whodunits, according to Soler. She points out the reasons as “food humanizes the detective” and “it constitutes identity” (2012, p.128). Hence, Culinary mystery narratives are “a return to basic pleasure of eating and cooking and embodiment of the sense of natural taste through a formula appealing to the public” (p. 128). Rob Hart’s collection is one such structure where culinary elements perform sometimes as background, character, or the very threshold. Rob Hart’s mystery fiction comprises a delicious collection of 16 short stories set against the backdrop of the culinary world, “flavored with a hearty dose of crime” (Calamela, 2019).

Culinary crime fiction’s semiotics explores food’s many symbolic and narrative uses. Food conveys themes, character depth, and social criticism, not simply the basics. These stories might add significance by symbolising and metaphorizing food as corruption, desire, or power. Cuisines, cooking methods, and dining rituals reveal people’ histories and socioeconomic standings, strengthening the narrative. Vivid descriptions of food’s tastes, scents, and appearance enhance the story’s atmosphere and emotional impact. Semiotics in culinary crime fiction, drawing inspiration from Roland Barthes’ ideas, examines the intricate function of food as a symbolic and narrative tool. It investigates how signs and symbols related to food contribute to themes, character progression, and social critique in crime stories. By utilising Barthes’ theoretical framework, including the five codes, researchers might reveal more profound levels of significance and

intricacy in the complex network of culinary semiotics inside these narratives.

French critic Roland Barthes is regarded as the twentieth century's most important structuralist. His contributions to semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, and modern criticism have helped shape structuralism. According to Barthes (1974), the meaning of a text cannot be determined by the author; rather, it must be actively constructed by the reader during text analysis. In such an analysis, various codes should be considered for a text whose constituent parts compose it individually. According to him, these protocols produce interwoven text. In accordance with Roland Barthes' theory, the interaction between a text's producer and audience is viewed as a complex relationship in every communicative action. The objective of Barthes' structural analysis of narratives was to identify the function of subordinate systems in the composition of a text; however, his overall analysis marginalised the meaning of texts. As a result, in his approach to textual analysis, he focuses on understanding how texts acquire meaning; that is, he shifts from the meaning issue, which entails seeking the fixed meaning of a sign, to meaning creation, in which the reader is responsible for creating meaning.

Roland Barthes asserts (1974) that a text or narrative is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified, which can generate multiple meanings through the participation of readers in a phenomenon that produces meaning. He opposed the conventional concept of interpreting a narrative according to the text's confined structure or the author's fixed point of view. According to Barthes, the text is a tangled ball of strands that must be unravelled. He believes that it is futile to attempt to determine the structure because each text or narrative has a different structure from the others. However, he argues that such distinctions are the result of textuality and not of some form of uniqueness. Insisting on specific meanings and references, he adds that some writings attempt to dissuade readers from openly connecting text to this already written material. A realistic novel provides closed text with limited meaning, whereas other texts encourage the reader to generate meaning.

Barthes (1974) proposed the Barthesian Code as a framework for examining how meaning develops in the literature and other forms of media. In crime fiction, the Barthesian code can be used to examine the ways in which a genre conveys meaning through its conventions, symbols, and themes. One aspect of the Barthesian code is the distinction between writerly and readerly written texts. A writerly written text encourages active engagement and interpretation from the reader, while a readerly written text is one that is consumed passively. Crime fiction can be considered a writerly text, as it often requires the reader to actively engage with the story, identify hints, and make deductions to solve the crime. Another aspect of the Barthesian Code is the idea of the author is death. This concept suggests that the meaning of a text is not fixed and determined by the author but is instead created by the reader through their interpretation. In crime fiction, this means that the reader can have different interpretations of crime, investigation, and resolution, depending on their perspective and background.

The common formula for all detective fiction is to find a single solution that is key to the mystery. In any Mystery narrative, the proairetic acts build suspense, which leads the plot further. Barthes suggests that “the five codes create a kind of network, a topos, through which the entire text passes” (p. 20). Barthes describes the hermeneutic code as listing “the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense and finally disclosed” (p. 19). It is a semantic code that finds additional meanings through connotations. The symbolic code uncovers meaning further, while focusing on the antithesis. For proairetic, he elaborates the following:

Actions (terms of the proairetic code) can fall into various sequences which should be indicated merely by listing them, since the proairetic sequence is never more than the result of an artifice of reading: whoever reads the text amasses certain data under some generic titles for actions (stroll, murder, rendezvous), and this title embodies the sequence; the sequence exists when and because it can be given a name, it unfolds as this process of naming takes place, as a title is sought or confirmed; its basis is therefore more

empirical than rational, and it is useless to attempt to force it into a statutory order; its only logic is that of the “already done” or “already read” – whence the variety sequences (some trivial, some melodramatic) and the variety of terms (numerous or few) (p.19).

And finally, cultural code which “...are references to a science or a body of knowledge; in drawing attention to them, we merely indicate the type of knowledge (physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical, etc.) referred to, without going so far as to construct (reconstruct) the culture they express” (p. 20).

The hermeneutic code, also known as the enigmatic code, as previously described, refers to the components of a text that provide enigma, complications, mystery, and intriguing situations inside a text or narrative. As a result, they pique readers’ curiosity and keep them engaged throughout the story. Suppressing hints, the foster enigma, mystery, and suspense in the text, helps avoid telling the truth about the story. This code prompts inquiries that call for explanation, which is typically withheld as long as possible to heighten the reader’s anticipation and keep him or her engaged to bring the narrative to a close.

In Rob Hart’s short story “Foodies”, the narrative delves into the realm of culinary exploration and the complexities of human desire for unique dining experiences. Through a careful examination of the Barthesian codes, the narrative structure and thematic elements of the story can be elucidated. It is the story of foodies who want to dine in the latest hot place. The plot is full of enigmas, complications, mysteries, and puzzling situations that cause readers to hold their breath in tension and horror. These strange events keep readers guessed until the end. This is narrated in first person. If city diners want a unique eating experience, they will have to take the back door of the narrator’s restaurant. And the narrator is very particular: “...it takes courage to cross” his back door (p. 21). When the story opens, a young couple knocks at the door, and they enter the door after uttering the password “Red Dragon” (p. 21). The narrator then describes the couple: “The boy is blond, squarely handsome, and freshly shaved.

He looks like a type who mentions the name of his college within moments of meeting new people. The girl is brunette and hair-straightened. Pretty in a way that would fade into the background of a pleasant group photo” (p. 22). They were neatly dressed, and their mannerisms indicated that they were not married. The interiors of this restaurant are mysterious, and the customers, attracted by the “exclusive experience, advertised only by word of mouth”, are also mysterious (p. 22). The front line of the restaurant served “...complicated plates of charcuterie, aged from the meat of pig, cow and lamb and duck”. The narrator elaborates on the restaurant business in New York City. It is “surmountable only to the smartest”. You can buy whatever you want. Pretty good ingredients, an expensive rate, or something from a “filthy stall in Chinatown”. He then classified the restaurant’s businesses. One can provide “comfort” dining, “molecular gastronomy” by embracing science, “come up with stunt concepts,” and the fourth one, the one that is chosen by the narrator, he calls it “journey”.

The couples seem to differ in their attitudes. They are “unsure of where to stand” (p.22). The narrator guesses that it can be the girl who is instigated to enjoy the unique dining experience because she is very curious and looks deeper into the restaurant. However, the boy is not, he “is looking at the exit” (p.23). The narrator declared that they did not allow phones inside the dining room, intensifying girl’s curiosity. And the narrator clarifies that the dining is a “Social media free zone” (p.24). However, they can surely share their “experience with your more adventurous friends” (p.23). The reader is curious about what will happen next. Someone well set the table, “carefully buffed and set with gloves to prevent even the whiff of fingerprint” (p.24). It set the ambience “the food arranged like a painting” (p.24). And when the couple is set for dining and sitting comfortably at the table, the narrator declares another welcoming statement “You are about to join a very elite club of diners” he continues “After this you will be different” (p.25). The girl pointing towards the plate asks “Who...?” This makes the reader clear about the meat that they are going to eat: the human flesh. All curiosity is connected here. The reader will obtain a simple solution for the puzzle he faces:

the hidden place, password to enter a restaurant, keeping the phones aside, and so on. However, this twist in the narration does not last long. The story ends with the narrator ordering “another ten pounds of jamon iberico”. Jamon iberico is a type of ham or cured pork leg. The meat is expensive, but the narrator is pretty confident that he can sell it at a pretty good rate as he “tricks yuppie foodies” by claiming jamon iberico as human flesh (p.26).

The hermeneutic code, as proposed by Barthes, operates within the narrative by introducing enigmas that delay resolution, creating suspense and intrigue for readers. Barthes suggested that if the author wants to delay the solution to the enigma, they will use narrative techniques to support the delay. Barthes calls these devices “snares”, “jammings”, and “equivocations” (p. 75). This code is manifested in the mysterious ambiance of the restaurant, the secretive behavior of the characters, and the use of symbolic elements such as the password “Red Dragon”(Hart,2019, p.21). These enigmatic elements engage readers in deciphering hidden meanings and anticipating revelations throughout the story.

In the story, the introduction of couples “draped in shadow” sets a mysterious tone, hinting at concealed secrets or hidden motives within their relationships (p. 21). They kept their names and identities confidential. They were addressed as “Couples”, “boys” and “girls” (p. 23). People, the atmosphere, and the restaurant’s backdrop reveal a major mystery. The restaurant on the site is peculiar, mysterious, and difficult to find. The reader is eager to determine what will occur next. The proairetic code, which pertains to sequential actions and events, guides the reader through an unfolding narrative. Despite the absence of traditional crime or detective elements, the story maintains suspense through subtle hints and ambiguous dialogue, such as indirect references to the impending dining experience without explicit details. In the story, there is no description of a crime scene, the detective character is not present, or a victim is not defined or introduced, yet there is a mysterious and fearful factor there: “What is about to happen?” There are a lot more situations and phrases that connote secrecy: “password Red dragon” “courage to cross”, “exclusive experience,” (p. 21-22). The conversation between the narrator and

couple is not direct. They all mention something they are going to have. However, this has not been directly mentioned. However, the hint is clear: It is about something edible. Readers receive many hints, but their curiosity continues.

Finally, when the narration reaches the climax and breaks into the hermeneutic code, one observes that “The detective novel, especially, very much relies on the hermeneutic code since it always includes a mystery that requires a solution” (Henriksson 14). Hints again show that the couple is ready to devour human flesh. However, there is no direct mention, but the very question by the girl, “Who...?” relates to all puzzles and confusion. However, another twisting occurs. The twist of unknown meat, which the couple and very customers mistook in this fiction, is nothing but jamon iberico. However, the connotation of this twist can be found earlier, when the narrator speaks about the competition among New York restaurants to attract more customers. While the narration initially builds a mysterious atmosphere, it ultimately concludes with a sarcastic commentary on the elitist foodie group within society.

Symbolic code, also known as antithetic code, is thought to be the most demanding and difficult code. Although this code appears to be more closely related to semantic code, in reality, it serves a far deeper purpose than the latter. Elements that provide meaning through binary opposition or antithesis are referred to as such. In “Foodies”, the binary opposition is hunger vs luxury, hunger vs necessity. Diners are not eager to satiate hunger, but excitement. The concept of good versus evil is exemplified by well-mannered and good-looking boy and girl, who both exhibit a desire for something beyond the ordinary. The shopkeeper/narrator has just adopted his marketing strategy to attract diners. This is the ultimate goal for him. Therefore, who is good or bad? Boy and girl who wanted to taste human flesh, or the narrator who deceived them by selling something else? Ultimately, “Foodies” presents a complex narrative that intertwines culinary curiosity with societal commentary. Through the strategic use of Barthesian codes, the story navigates themes of deception, desire, and blurred lines between ethical and indulgent behavior within the realm of fine dining.

In Rob Hart's short story "Creampuff," the narrative delves into the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of a bakery bouncer known as Creampuff, alongside the introduction of a popular new pastry item, the creamele. In the story, someone invented a new cronut, the creamele (a baked French pastry with frozen ice cream inside). This latest dish became so popular and famous that people would line up in front of the bakery, even at 4 a.m., to get at least one. However, the story proceeds further, with a bakery bouncer as the focal point. Through an analysis grounded in the Barthesian literary theory, the story's thematic elements and narrative structure can be examined more deeply.

The story begins by addressing the bouncer: "People called him 'Creampuff'" (p. 35). Everyone in the town addressed him as Creampuff, just as we address someone, John, or Paul. The narrator describes Cream Puff as a "big black guy", he was huge like a "recurring childhood nightmare" (p. 35). But one fine morning, "found his body in a thick pool of blood" (p. 36). Unlike "Foodies", "Creampuff" narrates the crime. Just as one would find in any common crime thriller, they established the crime scene. Somebody killed the man from an anonymous place who lacked proper individuality other than being a bouncer. The mystery of his existence ended in his curious death. "Creampuff was only a bouncer" (p. 36).

The introduction of a new menu item in the bakery, a pastry called the creamele, quickly gained popularity and became notoriously famous, resulting in a crowded bakery. To manage the increasing demand and control of the masses, they urgently needed additional manpower. Unexpectedly, a mysterious figure appeared: "Nobody knew where he came from. He just showed up one day" (p. 37). This person effectively managed the crowd. The proairetic or action code, facilitates readers' interpretation and recognition of forthcoming events within a sequence, as it pertains to the sequential components of action within a textual context. This code pertains to the fundamental sequential logic governing the progression of acts and behaviors in the narrative, with the aim of sustaining the reader's engagement in subsequent developments. Here, the entry and mystery behind the bouncer are examples of such proairetic codes. His appearance, presence, and silence are included in the proairetic code.

Only 200 creameles can be made in a single day. No prior reservations were made. If you want to have a creamele, you must be in line. Our bouncer lets no one in it. Some tried to bribe him; some celebrities and mayors of the place had to wait. A pregnant woman, tourist, and man diagnosed with cancer (his claim) had to wait in line. Creampuff remains a mystery. He hardly speaks or smile. “The only time he ever smiled was when there was a child waiting with a parent, and for a fleeting moment, he would soften”(p. 40). Because of the rush and maintenance of power, Creampuff slept over the shop. “No one asked him to. Only on one day, there was a cot. Once the evening shift had been cleared out, he would show up, lock the front door, and disappear into the back” (p. 41). Business boomed. Then, in the fine morning, his body was found. The motive remains a mystery. “No money had been taken. The creamele room is not touched. There was just his body, sprawled out on the white tile, blood cutting geometric trails through the grout” (p. 42). The enigma of the narrative was initially set in the beginning itself. Similar to the crime narratives, a body was found. It is clear that it is a murder. Victims’ individuality remains mysterious. The enigma further intensified with stories about the victim. His death became an unresolved puzzle. No one could find the reason, who did it, and so on. The enigma deepens “The owners learned that the cream puff’s body had been unclaimed. Having paid him in cash, there was no address on the file. He had become another anonymous death in an anonymous city” (p. 42). The owners of the bakery arranged a funeral ceremony for him and recollected and shared a few stories of him. The enigma then proceeds further to climax. After a year, during Creampuff’s death anniversary, when shop owners opened the shop, they received a packet: a framed photograph of Creampuff. However, no one knows who gifts them.

The name creampuff is a symbolic code and paradoxical, as the slang refers to a weak or timid person. The character in the story is exactly the opposite of what he addressed. He stood as a strong bouncer yet to be known as something delicate and sweet. It also adds a connotative meaning, which is a semantic code. His colour, the colour of his dress, his appearance, and silence symbolized and added mystery to the narrative. The hermeneutic code, a key aspect of

Barthesian theory, is evident from the outset as the story introduces the enigma of Creampuff's identity and the mystery surrounding his sudden demise. Unlike the overt crime focus of "Foodies," "Creampuff" presents a more traditional crime narrative with a clear crime scene and victim. This enigmatic setup prompts readers to decipher the motives and circumstances behind Creampuff's death, heightening suspense and intrigue. The proairetic code, which deals with sequential actions and events, plays a crucial role in guiding the narrative progression. It encompasses Creampuff's management of the bakery crowd, his enigmatic presence, and the unexpected turn of events that led to his tragic end. The code facilitates readers' understanding of the story's sequential logic, and aids in predicting subsequent developments within the narrative. Ultimately, "Creampuff" showcases how Barthesian codes can be employed to unravel the intricacies of a narrative, from enigmatic setups and sequential developments to symbolic representations and semantic connotations. Through this analytical lens, the story emerges as a compelling exploration of identity, mystery, and human perception in the context of a bustling bakery setting.

Barthes' five codes act as a frame to decode the mystery. Regarding the 'food' element, the hermeneutics code provides ample space for its interpretation. In both stories mentioned, the 'edible' metaphor acts both as background and foreground elements. In both plots, the food element acts as a setting and a thread to continue the narration. Culinary elements in narratives are usually interpreted in terms of nostalgia and memory. The interpretation of the five Barthesian codes in culinary crime fiction provides new insights into unexplored phenomena. The culinary elements in the narratives serve as both background and foreground elements, adding nostalgia and memory to storytelling. The five Barthesian codes provide new insights into the interpretation of culinary crime fiction. The application of the Barthesian five-code theory helps decode the mystery components in culinary crime narratives. Rob Hart's narratives in "Foodies" and "Creampuff" effectively captivate readers by utilizing food as a prominent narrative tool, thus enhancing the complexity of the mystery genre.

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