Decoding The Layers of Meanings In A Poem *Small Kindnesses* By Danusha Laméris: A Barthesian Reading

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Abstract: This article aims to examine the forms of representation of Roland Barthes' narrative codes in Danusha Laméris' poem *Small Kindnesses*. The narrative codes are: Hermeneutic Code, Proairetic Code, Semantic Code, Symbolic Code, and Cultural Code. The aim of identifying these codes is to discover the implied meaning in addition to the literal meaning of a discourse. As Barthes in his modern semiotic theory proposed connotative meaning in addition to denotative meaning. This research uses a step-by-step qualitative approach by following the way Barthes explored the novel *Sarrasine* in his book when he introduced the theory of narrative codes. The outcome of the study reveals that in the poem *Small Kindnesses*, five narrative codes are used in it to achieve connotative meaning or hidden meaning. The result of this meaning is how *Small Kindnesses* carries social, structural, as well as religious messages as a poem.

Keywords: danusha laméris, connotative meaning, narrative codes, small kindnesses, roland barthes.

▪ INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a form of expression expressed in literary works. As a medium to channel emotions and ideas, poetry also serves as a means of communication for a poet. With a structured form, poetry relies on the power of words that are dense and full of symbols to create deep and layered meanings. Whether in old or modern poetry, every work of poetry carries a message and reflects the social and cultural conditions at the time the poem was created (Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017). Therefore, in addition to the explicit meaning, poetry also contains implicit meaning, including the cultural values inherent in it. One of the modern poems that depicts the social conditions of its time is Danusha Laméris' poem Small Kindnesses, which was first posted on The New York Times in 2019. In an effort to understand the implied meaning contained in poetry, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is a relevant analytical tool.

Roland Barthes is a French post-structuralist, literary critic and semiotician who is widely recognised for his ideas in the field of sign and meaning studies. Born on 12 November 1915 in Cherbourg, France, Barthes contributed greatly to the development of modern semiotic theory and brought a new approach to understanding texts and culture. Barthes argues that every literary text, including poetry, does not only convey the denotative meaning that appears on the surface, but also holds a deeper and hidden layer of connotative meaning (Ali et al., 2022). Roland Barthes introduced the theory of five narrative codes in his book entitled 'S/Z' published in 1970. In this book, Barthes categorised the signifiers in the narrative into five codes that interact with each other reveal how literary works, including poetry, convey meanings that are not immediately apparent but can be understood through in-depth analysis. The five codes are:

The Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code is also known as the code of "enigma" or "mystery". It refers to all the enigmatic, puzzling and mysterious elements of a text that make reader curious to decode their mystery (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). Here, the readers tend to disclose certain secrets by asking several questions of their knowledge as "what is happening and why is that happening? What is the obstacle?"

The Proairetic Code

The proairetic code is also called the action code. It refers to the narrative elements that create tension in the storyline. These suspenseful elements play a dual role in a text. Firstly, they state that something is going to happen and secondly, they make the reader pay attention and respond to resolve the tension. Here, the reader tries to gain more knowledge about the action by asking some questions like 'What will be the reaction to a certain action?' or 'What happens next? In this way, it keeps the reader's interest alive for the upcoming action.

The Semantic Code

The semantic code is also called as the connotative code. This code refers to the connotations within a text that add deeper meaning and layers to the narrative. These connotations can be cultural, emotional, or symbolic, enriching the story by providing additional context and significance beyond the literal meaning of the words. According to Barthes, all narratives have some definite "characters, places and objects" that connotatively help the reader to understand the theme of the text.

The Symbolic Code

This code is also known as the antithesis code. It is similar to the semantic code and hence makes it difficult for the reader to make a clear distinction between the semantic code and the symbolic code. However, the symbolic code refers more to the opposing and contrasting elements of the text that the reader uses to organise reality. This contrast is also called binary polarity.

The Cultural Code

This code is also called as the referential code. refers to elements in a text that rely on shared knowledge, cultural norms and understanding of the community to convey meaning. They include references to common beliefs, ideologies, historical contexts or customs that readers are expected to recognise and understand due to cultural familiarity. When used in literature or other forms of media, cultural codes allow writers to make assumptions or shared knowledge without explicitly explaining them, thus creating deeper layers of meaning.

Barthes' five codes theory is chosen, here, to see the extent to which these 'codes' help to understand the underlying thematic meaning of a story. By applying these codes to a narrative, the reader can transform a simple text into an authoritative one. It was Barthes who distinguished the reader's text from the author's text. He calls the reader's text a traditional text where the reader's main goal is to passively accept everything that has been written. In contrast, the author text is a modern type of text where the reader has full freedom to produce various textual meanings.

▪ **METHOD**

Participants

The participants of this study are not human subjects but rather textual elements derived from the poem Small Kindnesses by Danusha Laméris. The poem serves as the primary data source, offering rich textual content for analysis. This approach aligns with qualitative textual research, which focuses on the elements of the text itself rather than external responses to it. By focusing exclusively on the text, the study ensures a controlled and precise examination of the application of Barthes' narrative codes. The text was selected based on its thematic depth and its capacity to exemplify the use of Barthes' codes, such as the Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Cultural codes, making it an ideal case for in-depth semiotic analysis (Bouzida, 2014; Hassan et al., 2014).

Research Design and Procedures

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on textual analysis. The methodological foundation for this research lies in Barthes' S/Z, wherein he divides a text into lexias and systematically applies his narrative codes (Barthes, 1970; Bouzida, 2014). While the current study does not divide the poem into lexias, it adopts the step-by-step analytical process outlined by Barthes. The first step involves a close reading of the poem to identify textual elements such as tensions, puzzles, symbols, binary polarities, and cultural references. This step ensures that the analysis captures the layered meanings embedded within the poem.

The second step entails segmenting the poem into thematic components corresponding to the five narrative codes. Each segment is carefully examined to determine how it aligns with the characteristics of Barthes' codes. For instance, the Hermeneutic code identifies elements that create curiosity or mystery, while the Semantic code focuses on deeper connotative meanings (Zaib & Mashori, 2014; Hassan et al., 2014).

The final step of the procedure involves synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative that demonstrates how the poem operates on multiple semiotic levels. This synthesis is presented in two stages: first, by providing a critical overview of the textual dynamics, and second, by discussing the implications of applying Barthes' codes to the poem. This structured approach ensures a thorough exploration of the poem's layered meanings while adhering to a rigorous analytical framework (Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017; van't Jagt et al., 2014).

Instruments

The primary instrument in this study is the researcher, who conducts the analysis using Barthes' theoretical framework. The researcher's expertise and familiarity with Barthesian semiotics play a crucial role in identifying and interpreting the five narrative codes within the poem. This aligns with qualitative research paradigms where the researcher's interpretative skills are central to the validity and reliability of the findings (Hassan et al., 2014; Ramazanova, 2021).

The textual elements of the poem are treated as data points for the analysis. To ensure a systematic examination, the study employs a framework adapted from Barthes' S/Z. This framework categorizes textual elements into five codes, each associated with specific characteristics. For example, the Hermeneutic code captures elements that evoke

mystery or curiosity, while the Symbolic code examines binary oppositions and contrasts (Barthes, 1970; Bouzida, 2014).

To enhance the rigor of the analysis, the study follows a systematic process of coding and interpretation. Each line of the poem is examined to identify patterns and themes that align with Barthes' codes. The process is iterative, with repeated readings of the text to ensure consistency and depth in the interpretation. This approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the content of the poem while allowing for the exploration of its broader thematic implications (van't Jagt et al., 2014; Argüello Manresa & Glăveanu, 2017).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process is guided by Barthes' semiotic framework, which provides a structured approach to uncovering the layered meanings within the text. The analysis begins with a close reading of the poem to identify elements that correspond to Barthes' five narrative codes. This process involves examining the poem line by line to identify tensions, puzzles, and connotations that reveal its deeper meanings (Hassan et al., 2014; Bouzida, 2014).

After the initial identification of textual elements, the analysis proceeds to categorize these elements according to the characteristics of the five codes. For instance, the Hermeneutic code identifies questions or mysteries within the text, while the Proairetic code focuses on actions and events that drive the narrative. The Semantic code explores connotative meanings, the Symbolic code examines binary oppositions, and the Cultural code contextualizes the text within broader social and cultural frameworks (Zaib & Mashori, 2014; Ramazanova, 2021).

The data are then synthesized into a cohesive narrative that highlights how the poem operates on multiple semiotic levels. This involves connecting the findings from the five codes to demonstrate how they interact to create a layered and nuanced understanding of the poem. The analysis also includes a critical discussion of the implications of these findings for understanding modern poetry and the application of Barthes' semiotics (Barthes, 1970; Bouzida, 2014).

To ensure the validity of the analysis, the study employs iterative readings of the text and cross-references the findings with established interpretations of Barthesian codes. This rigorous approach ensures that the analysis is both systematic and comprehensive, providing valuable insights into the semiotic dimensions of the poem. Through this process, the study aims to contribute to the broader field of literary semiotics by demonstrating the applicability and relevance of Barthes' framework to contemporary poetry (Hassan et al., 2014; van't Jagt et al., 2014).

▪ **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The poem 'Small Kindnesses' by Danusha Laméris was published in The New York Times on 19 September 2019. Later in 2020, this poem was included along with Laméris' other poems in her poetry anthology Bonfire Opera.

Small Kindnesses
I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover

from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead you first," "I like your hat."

Analysis
The Hermeneutic Code

The title 'Small Kindnesses' itself can be considered to contain a hermeneutic code. This is because when readers start reading the poem, they will glance at the title first and build curiosity. They start to question what the title actually wants to convey from the whole poem, as the title serves as an introduction or description of the theme or main subject of a work.

As the title suggests, the phrase 'Small Kindnesses' can be interpreted by the readers themselves. There are some initial assumptions about how the poem proceeds such as; small kindnesses as a description of a small number of good deeds, other interpretation is, since the word 'small' means few in number (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024.) that there is a list of a few simple human good deeds in the poem, and others. Thus, the title puzzles the reader with its content, offering a mystery before it is explained. Barthes says that this is what the signifier provides as a way to be understood (Zaib et al., 2017).

The Proairetic Code

The proairetic code is meant to keep the readers engaged with the flow or discourse in a text. In the poem 'Small Kindnesses', Laméris uses an enjambment structure, where a line of the poem continues without a break to the next line (Ramazanova, 2021). As seen in the following excerpt of lines one to three:

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"

This use of enjambment creates a picture of the action that is happening while focusing the reader on the next action. As seen in the excerpt above, the end of the first line in the poem does not end with a period or punctuation mark that signifies the end of the sentence. Also, the sentence structure placed in the first line is not a perfect sentence, but rather makes the reader have to look to the next line to make the words in the first line make sense.

The same goes for the second line, when this line ends with the phrase "people pull in their legs" there is a questioning of the purpose of the action, 'what do people pull in their legs for?' or 'in what context would people pull in their legs?' This initial description of the action that is supposed to be taking place is not complete until it is continued to the beginning of the third line. Here, it becomes clear that people pull in their legs 'to let you by'. In poetry, the use of enjambment helps create tension and rhythm that keeps the reader following the progression of meaning from line to line, keeping their attention focused on the poem as a whole (van't Jagt et al., 2014).

According to Barthes' theory, in its meaning, a signifier can contain codes that, when analysed, open up other meanings besides the literal one (Bouzida, 2014). The use of enjambment is a language style as well as a sign presented by the poet and delivered to the reader. The use of enjambment like this implies the reader to read this poem at a slow tempo as if someone is doing an observation.

When you look at the content, the poem Small Kindnesses contains imagery that describes simple daily human activities; walking down a crowded aisle, spilling lemons from the grocery bag, handing a cup of coffee, etc. However, these things can only be seen if we pay attention to our surroundings and automatically slow down the tempo of our attention to the world. So, the implied meaning that can be obtained when looking at the proairetic code in this poem is that as humans, we must remember that sometimes the simple things in life can be valuable if we try to pay attention.

The Semantic Code

The semantic code is reflected in the poem Small Kindnesses, especially in the content of the poem. The following is an excerpt of the third to eighth lines of the poem where the semantic code can be seen:

… Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
…
… Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.

Firstly, the third line shows a scenario where strangers show compassion by saying "Bless you" to someone who sneezes and is said to be carrying the remains of 'Bubonic plague'. The word 'Bubonic plague' itself represents a strong diction. Historically, Bubonic plague is associated with a dark period in 14th century Europe when one of the most fatal pandemics in human history killed as many as 50 million people, perhaps 50% of Europe's 14th century population. This event became known as The Black Death (Duncan & Scott, 2005).

As with the use of this diction in the line above, the meaning of the poem becomes richer. As the next line ("Don't die," we are saying.) clearly shows the action of human empathy in general. However, when added to the previous term 'Bubonic plague', this action becomes even stronger in its meaning. This is to imply that humans actually have a sense of empathy for each other, even if it is for strangers. As stated in the eighth line above (Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.) Basically, humans as social beings are not only dependent on each other but also have a sense of humanity that makes them live their lives by taking care of each other or at least not trying to do harm to others.

The Symbolic Code

To find the symbolic code, Barthes' theory states that a comparison, polarity, or binary opposition is needed. Therefore, in the poem Small Kindnesses, the symbolic code can be found by looking back at the semantic code beforehand. Then afterwards, another one message is found which is a comparison of the previous code message. The analysis is used by looking at the following excerpt of the poem:

Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. ...
...
We have so little of each other, now.

Previously, the message from the semiotic code in this poem is that humans are made up of such a high sense of compassion and empathy that they are able to pray for strangers and choose not to hurt others with their actions. However, looking at the final line of the above quote (We have so little of each other, now.) creates an image of the opposite of the big-heartedness that was previously portrayed. This is because it turns out that no matter how big the human heart is, we are still at the very limit of belonging to one another. Thus, the hidden message of this symbolic code is that humans should give the same empathy to each other because now, there is no excuse for the treatment that comes out of us to be less or more. The simple things that humans should do as stated in the quote above (to say thank you to the person handing our coffee, to give back a smile at someone.), in modern terms, can also be called 'the bare minimum' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024.).

The Cultural Code

The following excerpt shows that this poem contains cultural code:

We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead you first," "I like your hat."

In the first sentence of the first line of the excerpt (We have so little of each other, now.) there is the word "now" which indicates time. In the context of the poem, the time indicated is within the scope of an era. In other words, the meaning of the word "now" here is 'this era' which is the 'modern era'. The meaning of modern era is also proven again from the next sentence and line (So far//from tribe and fire.), precisely in the words 'tribe and fire' which can be associated with tradition that reflects traditional qualities. Furthermore, by saying "So far", it means that the traditional traits have been left behind. One of the implicit messages here is that this poem is a reflection of the importance of compassion and empathy in modern society.

There is also a cultural code in the religious context, starting in the third line of the quote (What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, ...) the term 'the holy' is associated with belief and religion. The use of this word is to indicate the nobility of the term. In

other words, the diction has made the small kindnesses that are listed throughout the poem a highly praise virtue especially in the view of certain religions. One word that adds to the cultural and religious context is the word 'temples' in the next line (fleeting temples we make together when we say, 'Here,) which is a play on words that is still connected to the word "the holy". In a religious context, 'temples' can be interpreted as places of worship.

Thus, the analysis of the narrative code in the poem Small Kindnesees by Danusha Laméris shows that this poem contains five narrative codes proposed by Barthes and his theory of interpreting a sign. Each code produces its own meaning which varies in its connotative meaning or implied meaning apart from its literal meaning.

▪ **CONCLUSION**

The analysis has brought a conclusion that literary work, including poetry, serves as a sign and that every sign has connotative meaning along with its denotative meaning. This along with Barthes, a post-structuralist linguist who states in his book S/Z (1970) that to make meaning of a sign is not only about the old structure way that only resulting in one literal meaning, instead the interpretation may be varied by individuals. And to create this interpretation, Barthes notices that the sign has codes to narrate the interpretation. There are five narrative codes according to Barthes; the hermeneutic code, the proairetic code, the semantic code, the symbolic code, and the cultural code. All five of this code supposedly interact with each other to create an implied plot from a discourse. In the poem Small Kindnesses by Danusha Laméris, all of the five codes are analysed each as they form whole layers of meanings. Starting from the title, Small Kindnesses opens the readers' curiosity towards the actual content of the poem. After finally line by line decoded there is an implied message that can be interpreted as the result. The poem Small Kindnesses is an expression as well as a statement that humans, in fact, has a nature to give compassion and empathy towards one another. Therefore, in the context of living in this vast modern world., they supposedly take a moment to pay more attention on their surroundings. Moreover, the decision of a kind act is always a praiseworthy either culturally or religiously.

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