

# **Theory Into Practice: Barthe's Narrative Codes in Walter De La Mare's The Riddle**

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## **Abstract**

The narrative codes of semiotician Roland Barthes are magnificent in deciphering any narrative story which challenge the readers to go beyond its signification meaning. This study aims to scrutinize the narrative codes dwelt within *The Riddle*, a short story by De La Mare. The story is mysteriously and allegorically well narrated which also evokes an intriguing sense as it raises a baffling enigma. Thus, the five narrative codes are most likely suitable to unravel the tangled story text into a more vivid explanation. The discussion of this paper has identified that the 5 codes which are hermeneutic code, proairetic code, semantic code, symbolic code, and cultural code have found within the text. Each of the code bears a particular meaning that contributes to the plot of the story. In addition, the 5 narrative codes also strengthen the nuance of the story which belongs to the mystery narrative genre. By such codes appealing, the story becomes more lively, dashing and fulfill the readers' satisfaction though it leaves an enigma that has never been answered throughout the story.

Keywords: Narrative codes, Mystery genre, Roland Barthes

## **Introduction**

Narrative is one of the most popular stylistics in literary writing. A narrative is a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what characters say and do (Abrams, 1999). Almost all people have been dealing with any narrative style either spoken or written form. The written form of narrative can be easily noticed in novel, folktales and short story. The narrative is interesting since its story line is most likely similar with the people's common senses, thoughts, experiences and reality. In other words, narrative can be considered as a sort of imitation of human life. Narrative is generally classified as a mimetic medium. "Mimesis" is a term used to describe literary modes which aim to imitate human thoughts, speech, action, and the world in which they take place (Amigoni, 2000). Not only those who are interested in literary works, most individuals are already familiar with narrative as their early childhood experience; being aligned with folktales or story told by their parents or teachers. This usually becomes a way to make the children learn about moral values, what is bad and what is good as well as its consequence for each choice. Narrative is also a good tool in which certain ideas, values and moral lessons are most likely instilled. The story of hero or heroine is probably a good example from which we can take some lessons in the way we should behave, defend commitment, help others and live a life. Another example is a classic narrative story about snow white, cinderella, or sleeping beauty which has been very popular till now. From those stories we can make some patterns to highlight what is the core of the

stories which convey certain codes and messages addressed to the readers. Thus, if the story is well read and perceived by the readers, it will be easy to be deciphered.

Yet, narrative is not merely about life story and how it is reflected to the real life situation, it becomes very enchanting because of its peculiarity in polishing not only the characters but the plot of the story is usually blanketed by any breath-taking as well as heart-breaking incidents. Hence, narrative story, most of the times has fruitfully made its readers mesmerized, impressed and intrigued once they get into the story. It was far before the recent narrative theory proposed by modern scholars and theorist, a poet and critic Samuel Johnson in 1752 reflected on why narrative is so captivating as stated in Amigoni (2000). Basically, Johnson argued that narrative is widely acceptable for an individual to please himself, enable himself to be a listener and speaker at the same time, and can capture information and hopes to be then given out to the inferior society. It indicates that narrative consists of incidents or events arranged into a story (Amigoni, 2000).

However, problems might appear when the story does not denote the messages obviously since the narrative text does not always look apparent for some readers. It is even deliberately created to make the readers “traped” into an endless impression or questions in order to keep them curious and finish the reading. Moreover, many semioticians have argued that all around us including text or story can be perceived as a system of sign. A sign system is non-linguistic object or behaviour that can be analyzed as if it were a language. In other words, semiotics examines the ways non linguistics object and behaviour “tell” us something (Tyson, 1999). A sign which surely signifies something that is most likely hidden. But then, there is a code that enables the readers to identify and interpret the meaning which does not demonstrate explicitly through the text. Besides, codes might help the readers to understand the tacit story as codes will lead the readers to come to the hint of the implied meaning. The meaning of sign depends on the codes within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense (Chandler, 2007). Indeed, the operation of codes within the text is necessarily acknowledged by the readers in order to identify the meaning of the story. Rolland Barthes, a french semiotician proposed a concept or method of literary analysis. One of his most popular books entitled *S/Z* demonstrates his analysis of Balzac’s story “Sarazine”, from which he identified five codes; hermeneitic code, proaretic code, semantic code, symbolic code and cultural code. Those five codes, afterwards, are essential in order to define how the meaning of the text is constructed. Besides, the five codes are also helpful to unravel the structure of the text as well as to understand what the text is actually trying to signify. This present study uses the five narrative codes to analyze the short story written by De La Mare “The Riddle” to see how this theory is applicable in different genre of text, context and culture.

The selected short story *The Riddle* is chosen because of multiple reasons. Although it is short but it offers enigmatic sense to the readers. Many symbolic and cultural items within the story are also interesting to be explored. Besides, the divergence of characters and generations between the grandmother and her grandchildren described as the binary opposition that is challenging to be discussed further. Eventually, the interpretation of the story can give an insight understanding to the application of narrative codes.

### **The Five Codes of Rolland Barthes**

Barry (2002) stated that Barthes presents his theory of five codes to understand the underlying structure of a text. He proposed that these five codes are the basic underlying structures of all narratives. According to Barthes, each code is one of the voices of which the text is woven. Barthes suggests that the text itself supplies the code which enable him to correlate, grammatically and semantically, the various elements of the story (Cuddon, 2013). Basically, these five codes also enable the readers to determine what the text genre actually belongs to. In other words, once we recognize the genre of the text we can also identify the theme and the structure of the text itself. Before going to further discussion, it is necessary to introduce the five narrative codes of Roland Barthes.

### **Hermeneutic Code**

Hermeneutic code is also called as enigmatic code. As it represents the name, this code can be identified from any element of the text which make the readers curious, intrigued and wants to know the answer. It refers to any part of the text that is not completely explained, left a mystery and not answered. Hence the enigma code will make the readers raise some different questions and try to understand the story which is incompletely disclosed. This really the story telling code, by means of which the narrative raises questions, creates suspense and mystery (Hawkes, 1977).

In Barthes terms these elements are termed as: “snare”, “equivocation”, “jamming” and “suspended answers”. The term snare refers to ‘deliberate evasion of the truth’, and the term equivocation stands for ‘mixture of truth and snare’. Some of the enigmatic elements are answered in the end of the text while some of them remain a mystery for the reader. The reader uses his/her mental faculty to give meaning to the text (Felluga, n.d.) in (Malik & Zaib, 2014)

### **Proairetic Code**

Proairetic code is also called the code of action. It refers to any action which implies a further narrative action. This code is where the tension is built. So it left the readers keep guessing to what is going to happen next. This code describes the way a code of action is constructed for the readers, it is the sequential logic and behaviour (Cuddon, 2013).

### **Semantic Code**

The semantic code is also called the connotative code. This code refers to those elements that give some additional meaning or connotative meaning. The connotative meaning is often found in the characterization (Malik & Zaib, 2014). It suggest either particular or additional meaning by way of connotation.

### **Symbolic Code**

Symbolic code is also known as antithetical code. This code is in some way similar as the previous code (semantic code). However, the operation of symbolic code is wider and sets a deeper level of meaning than the previous one. The central point of this code is actually the existence of opposition or antithetical ideas. Often, it closely corresponds to the concept of binary opposition in order to unveil the hidden messages through this symbolic code where new meanings possibly come across from conflicting and opposing ideas. This gathers together the pattern of antithesis in the text; these groupings are repeated by various modes and meanings in the text (Cuddon, 2013).

### **Cultural Code**

This last code is also termed as referential code. It refers to any element in a narrative that refers to a science or knowledge. In other words, the cultural code tends to point to our

shared knowledge about the way the world works and prevails. This code manifests itself as a gnomic, collective, anonymous and authoritative voice which speaks for and about what it aims to establish as accepted knowledge or wisdom (Hawkes, 1977).

### **The Author and The Story**

The Riddle is a short story written by Walter De La Mare. He is a poet, writer, and novelist coming from England. He is also known as Walter Ramal. He wrote many popular stories in 19th century. He is widely known as mysterious and horror story writer. The Riddle is one of his works which was firstly published in 1923. The story embarks from the silent life of a grandmother of seventh children. They are Ann, Matilda, James, William, Henry, Harriet and Dorothea. Those children move to their grandmother house and live a new life there. It was not a pretty house, but roomy, substantial, and square; and a great cedar tree outstretched its branches almost to the windows (De La Mare, collected Short Stories, 1947).

As she welcomed her grandchildren, she told the children some rules they had to do. It was a must for them to see their grandmother twice a day, in the morning and evening to get a sugar plum and a goodnight kiss. However, the children were allowed to play everywhere as they pleased unless one restricted place. It was a room under the roof in which an old oak chest was placed. The old ladies said ".....But all the rest of the day, when school is done, you shall do just as you please, my dears. And there is only one thing, just one, I would have you remember. In the large spare bedroom that looks out on the slate roof there stands in the corner an old oak chest; aye, older than I, my dears, a great deal older; older than my grandmother. Play anywhere else in the house, but not there.' She spoke kindly to the children (De La Mare, collected Short Stories, 1947). Everything was fine and going normally. The children also started to get used to enjoy living in the house and find things that they were interested in, and so the weeks passed by but only until an incident happened. Each child was gone, they disappeared one by one.

The first child disappearing was Henry. He went upstairs and looked up the oak chest, get inside as he heard as if there was voice calling on him, and all he left was just silent. Henry was gone. Having told by Ann that Henry was gone, the grandmother calmly told the rest of the children Henry must be gone for a time and reminded them not to get close or meddle with the oak chest. The days passed by, it was Matilda who felt incomplete without the presence of Henry. She tried to figure out where Henry was. She was so curious and finally got the room in which the oak chest stood, she touched the lid, looked in and found nothing. Yet, she felt that something had her get inside the oak chest and the same experience as Henry's happened to her. She was gone. The grandmother realized that her two grandchildren were gone. She told the rest of the children once again, now Henry and Matilda who were gone would probably be back to them again or may be they were gone to them someday. She just reminded the children again to heed her warning about the oak chest.

That was how during their living in their grandmother house, slowly but surely the children was gone one by one. There were various reasons and motives embodied the actions which eventually lead each children to come to the oak chest. As if there was a strong power that was able to lead them to the oak chest and finally got into it and just merely gone. The story ends with the loneliness of the old lady who kept staying in the house, she once scrutinized all the part of the house included the room where the oak chest stood. Nevertheless, she never got closer to the oak chest since her eyes, ears, and nose were not well

functioned that she neither heard any voice nor smelled the fragrance nor even saw the oak chest clearly.

## **Discussion**

### **The Hermeneutic Code**

The hermeneutic codes concern on the presence of the enigma within the story. It will keep the reader curious and finish reading the story until the end while hoping to find the answer at the end. The title of the story "The Riddle" seems to be an enigma to the readers. It appears as a questionable title. What kind of riddle and to whom it is addressed to. The Riddle becomes an enigma as it will not be answered the whole story. However, it is just few hint in a way the beginning of the story presented the old lady statement warning the children about the old oak chest (De La Mare, collected Short Stories, 1947). Even though the "riddle" of the title The Riddle had slightly been implied, that it referred to the ancient stuff and what so called oak chest, it created another mystery to the readers. It seems that there is bigger questions that might be left. What is wrong with the oak chest? Did it do something horrible? or so forth. Slowly, the story sequentially revealed why the oak chest gave a huge impact to the characters' life. It was the oak chest which caused all the children were gone one by one without living any traces or messages.

Another enigma was clearly deployed by the various incidents going through by the children. It was still unanswerable how the children were finally led and enticed to come to the oak chest. It seems that an illusion of whispering was strong enough to guide them to get inside the oak chest and finally disappeared. There had always been a reason for the seven children to get tempted and trapped into the mythical oak tree. Yet, the detail consequence of the action remains unclear.

Similarly, the story about the children's parents and family background are unexplained. It is not clear why the children have to move to their grandmother house. There is no explanation where the children live before and how they finally come to their grandma house. It seems questionable to the readers why the children just said nothing when their grandma told them not to meddle the oak chest. Why didn't they ask their grandma the reasons or the consequence whereas they are all children who usually have a big curiosity. The mystery of the oak chest remains mysterious until the end of the story. It makes the readers puzzled and keep curious awake while reading the story. To sum up, the story is tangled with enigma that raises questions, suspenses and make the readers doubtful whether the children will be back again or will be gone forever.

### **The Proaretic Code**

Under the analysis of proaretic code, the story is interwoven by suspense action. The suspense begins when the grandma freed the children to do whatever that can make them pleased but only one they are not allowed to do; coming close to the old oak chest. The action is suspended until Henry, the first victim was gone. Henry went upstairs and looked in the oak chest. Henry saw nothing, the chest was turned out empty and concealed no treasure. What Henry thought about when looked in the chest was the memory of his mother who used to read him story, so he just went in the chest and it slowly closed. Since then, Henry had never appeared again. The first suspensful action is disclosed after Henry went in the chest and disappeared. Yet, it leads to the next suspense when Matilda tried to look for Henry and

went to the oak chest. The action is suspended and raises a question to what will happen next. It once again makes the readers have to wait until the story uncover the next “incident”.

The suspended action keep continuing until the last child went in the oak chest and was gone. Of course, the story of each child is different. It was various motifs which ultimately lead them into the oak chest and finally disappeared. Every stage of the incidents from the first until the seventh child has fruitfully made the readers keep in suspense. In addition, it seems that the suspense action designated until the story ends. Above all, the story indicates a particular pattern of how the character's in the story are influencing each other. The action of one character is influenced by the other character's action and all of those are interwoven. Then, it bears upon sustainable suspense throughout the story.

### **The Semantic Code**

This code offers an implied meaning which refers to certain intention. Some stories usually have connotative element which implies certain meaning. The first example found in this story is the fragrance coming out from the oak chest. Henry, who were the first “victim” allured by the distinctive scent he smelled from the oak chest. The fragrance signifies temptation, allurements and promises relaxation. It connotes that the oak chest has something powerful to attract the children to come in although they are definitely not allowed. The strong aroma as if hypnotizes the children to be unconsciously get inside the oak tree.

Similarly, it happened when Matilda tried to look for her brother Henry. She was approaching the oak chest and got hypnotized by the fragrance she smelled from it. It afterwards, led her to get inside and disappeared. Once again, the fragrance symbolizes power to attract and to get someone mesmerized.

The other connotative meaning is represented in the silky cloth lies on the oak chest. It signifies comfortness and indulgence. Clearly, it happened to Harriet and Ann. Harriet was playing drama with his brother. She acted as a princess just like in sleeping beauty. She laid down on the silky cloth inside the oak chest and could not be back again. The same “incident” experienced by Ann. She was in the middle of her sleeping, but she seemed someone guided her to go to the oak chest, in her mind, she felt the smooth of the silk and thought that it was her bed. She just laid down and vanished.

Basically, the two connotative codes in this story are both indicate temptation and allurements which are able to make the characters as if getting hypnotized and unrealized of what they are actually doing. They do not even remember at all about their grandma warning. The analysis of connotative codes in this story, however can give an insight understanding to the readers and it also strengthens the structure and the theme of the story. Finally, it adds the mythical senses and mysterious impressions to the readers.

### **The Symbolic Code**

Symbolic codes are usually concerned with the concept of binary opposition. It is the contrasted ideas or concept within the text reflecting the opposition situation. Under the text analysis, the binary opposition concept entails the story's structure and organization. This story concerns with the two major characters group. Grandma and the children characters are different. Grandma's nature characters are old fashioned, feeble and really aware of their

children and the tradition. On the other hand, the children have the nature of childhood period who are curious, want to do something different everyday and very active.

Grandma is physically old and weak. She just spend almost all her time sitting and doing nothing in her chair. She just wait for the routine activity that she has told to her grandchildren. Besides, because of her physical weakness, she cannot take any firm control to the children. However, the children are described oppositely. They really have the nature of being children. They like playing, going around the house, having challenging and various activities during the day. This because they are all young with strong physical power. They are also still fresh and active to spend their time by playing, exploring and initiating new ideas to be done the whole day through.

In the matter of family tradition and rules, Grandma has a serious attention to it. She never gives up to always remind the children about the oak chest which is not supposed to play around. She begs the rest of the children not to go closer to the oak chest when she found that there is already victim, one child is gone and followed by the other. Meanwhile, the children act in contrast. They neglect their grandma's warning. They are just curious about the oak chest and want to know what is wrong with the oak chest. Once they deal with the whispering and hypnotizing call of the oak chest they are simply gone. To sum up, the following table can clearly describe the different characters between Grandma and the children in a brief description.

**Table 1 shows Grandma and the children as binary opposition**

<b>Grandma</b>	<b>Children</b>
She is very old	They are young, teenagers
Acts passively	Acts Actively
Weak and feeble	Dynamic and energetic
Aware of tradition well prevails in the house	Unaware of tradition

The setting and situation of the story reveal some contrasting views and senses. It is related to the atmosphere of the story which somehow contradicts one and another. It is precisely described when the children are all complete and gathering in the house. There are laugh, noise and cheerfulness can be heard during the day. Yet, it turns into crying and gloomy, the crying of the grandama's heart and feeling after knowing that all her grand children are all gone one by one. It really breaks her heart, when she leaves alone again after the seven children who used to play around the house are all gone. She never hears the noises of the children's laughter and jocularly. Moreover, the opposite situation is described on how everything can come and go so quickly as what happened to the children. The grandmother has undergone such radical changes and situation. It deeply entails the nature of all beings in this world, that someone or something will come and go at the mean time. Nonetheless, grandma seems ready to face those conditions. Soon, after she knows that she is alone again without one child left beside her, she just enjoys and continues her life as usual. Interestingly, the story also exhibits the notion of being real and unreal. The incidents of the oak chest involve both sensible and nonsensible experience. That all the children are gone after getting inside the oak chest is real. But, it is an unreal situations when there is an invisible power that always lead the children to come inside. It is such an imagination when there is whispering voice calling the children mysteriously. Especially, it was Ann who felt that there was someone guided her to get inside the oak chest when she was in her half dreaming. She even thought that the smooth of the silk as her bed (De La Mare, collected Short Stories, 1947).

Finally, the oppositeness is conjured by the existence of the oak chest. It is definitely a real oak chest standing in the corner of one of the rooms in the house. It is also obvious that all the children get inside it. Reversely, the fragrance and the mythical voice coming from the oak chest are kind of supranormal power that make the readers go beyond the imagination. It is a real and an unreal situation that build the impressions of what so called mythifying the ordinary thing such an oak chest. The border between what is real and what is unreal remains blur and it consequently leaves a myster. Above all, the binary opposition concept as the symbolic code vehicle to structure the sory is provenly effective in this story. Those contradictions make the sense of mystery getting more tangible and stronger.

**Table 2 shows setting and situations as the binary opposition**

Laugh	Cry
Noise	Silent
Come	Go
Real	Unreal (dreams)
Clear	Blur

### **The Cultural Code**

There are some cultural references addressed in the story for instance the peculiar habit of giving sugar plum and a goodnight kiss. This habit refers to western tradition wherein the parents or those who are older in the family will give the youngers a kiss before going to bed. It is kind of being warm, familiar, and respectamong the member of the family.

Similarly, the oak chest in most cases pertains the culture of western notion about death. It symbolizes the last place a person will lay down after their death. The same notion is related to the fragrance from the oak chest as well as the silk cloth lined in the oak chest. Its peculiarity refers to the sense of death which makes the nature of death firmly existing.

The other cultural reference presented in the story is the mention of the snow falling. It obviously deals with the western season. Having snow in the winter is only happened in particular places in the world. One of the most associated area to deal with snow is surely western.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, it can be concluded that the analysis of the story by using the narrative codes of Barthes provides an insight understanding about the theme, structure and signification meaning. The five codes are all easily traced within the story and it leads to the deep impression about the mystery narrative genre. There are take-breathing enigmas that raise the readers’s intrigue awake while reading the story. The readers remain unsure of what actually happens to the seven children after getting inside the oak chest. Similarly, it remains doubtful about the mystery of the old oak chest. There are also many actions that suspend the readers curiosity. One action is suspended and heralded before the next action come. The semantic codes let the readers know about the “magic” temptation and allurment offered by the oak chest. It has guided all the children to a hypnotizing whisper to come inside the oak chest. In addition, the story is structured by the concept of binary opposition. The characters and the setting have born such contradiction situations that often clear up the mystery around



the story. The characters of grand ma and the children are well contrasted besides the setting and the situation of the story which also demonstrate oppositely . Finally, the cultural references point out the peculiar tradition of western people culture. It is strengthened by the natural element that indicates the situation and certain season in the west area.

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