

Hermeneutic and Cultural Codes of S/Z: A Semiological Reading of James Joyce's "The Boarding House"

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Abstract

Roland Barthes as a fervent proponent of semiology believes that semiology is a branch of a comprehensive linguistics: it is the study of how language articulates the world. Semiotic codes, the paths of this articulation, accordingly underlie his attention. Barthes in a structural analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z* expounds five types and functions of these codes. "The Boarding House," one of the most widely read of James Joyce's short stories, despite its straightforwardness is correspondingly saturated with these codes such as cultural and proairetic ones. This research according to Barthes' semiology makes an attempt to elucidate the proairetic codes and structural components that carry a nonverbal cultural message of James Joyce's "The Boarding House." The present study furthermore tries to show how with resort to a series of signs and special codes a literary text can thematically be substantialized. Moreover, it demonstrates that not only can the text of "The Boarding House" be encoded by the same criteria Barthes encoded "Sarrasine" but also Joyce himself presents particular names for these codes.

Keywords: semiology, cultural codes, proairetic codes, paralysis, love, The Boarding House

1. Introduction

Semiology, the general science of signs, was proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure in the early years of the 20th century but remained just an idea until the 1960s, when literary critics sought to derive much benefit from its methodological prescience. One of the most famous of these literary critics is Roland Barthes (1915-80). Barthes advocates semiology for its explanatory energy and power of estrangement, the power that coerces one into looking closely at what goes without saying and to make explicit what one implicitly knows. Similarly, Barthes in *S/Z* demonstrates that "the world we perceive is one not of 'facts,' but rather of 'signs about facts,' which we encode and decode ceaselessly from signifying systems to signifying system" (Waugh, 2006, p. 271). He develops his semiological method of reading the sign systems of culture after Roman Jakobson's premise that creation and explication of texts depends on codes: the underlying system of rules and distinctions that makes possible signifying events. Therefore, semiology is based on the premise that insofar as human actions and objects have meaning, there must be a code, conscious or unconscious that generates that meaning.

In *S/Z* Barthes, as a structuralist and due to the "principle of parsimony" (Chandler, 2007, P. 149), enumerates five codes employed in literary texts. One of these codes is proairetic code. This code is derived from the concept of proairetic:

The ability rationally to determine the result of an action, we shall name this code of actions and behaviour proairetic (in narrative, however, the discourse, rather than the characters, determines the action)" This code of actions will be abbreviated ACT; furthermore, since these actions produce effects, each effect will have a generic name giving a kind of title to the sequence, and we shall number each of the terms which constitute it, as they appear. (Barthes, 1970/1990, P. 18)

Hawkes (1977) states that like the hermeneutic code, "this code is also embodied in sequences such as *lexia*" (P. 118); they are mostly defined by distributional relation: their relationship to other same items appearing earlier or later in the text. Furthermore, this code is irreversible: it is recorded during the process of reading and governs the reader's construction of the plot; therefore, its only definitive characteristic is its given name.

The other code is cultural code. This code vociferates the domineering culture of its society and is an authentication of established and authoritative cultural form. It provide a connotative framework since they are "organized around key oppositions and equations," each term being "aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes" (Silverman, 1983, P. 36). Actually, "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, P. 118). This brings about the assumption that everyone knows what the author means.

According to Barthes in order to reveal the codes of a text the best way is dismantling the text into *lexias* or textual signifiers of changing length. Then, these textual signifiers should be scrutinized with minute detail. Therefore, this study according to the applied methodology in *S/Z* initially divides the text of "The Boarding House" into several *lexias* in order to clarify the structural components that carry the nonverbal and cultural messages. With having recourse to the first lines of *Dubliners* this research meanwhile shows that Joyce allocates particular names to these codes.

2. Discussion

The seventh story of *Dubliners*, "The Boarding House" a microcosm of Dublin where "everyone knows everyone else's business," (*Dubliners* 61) reveals the ignobility of Dublin's nature and human nature in general. This naturalistic story reflects in miniature the pressure of Ireland environment and divulges the vulgarization of romance and institution of marriage in Dublin: it "presents a trap sprung on a sober young man by a conniving mother and daughter" (Walzl, 1961, P. 225). It also contains all of the similar signs and codes that are present in "Araby" the third story and "Eveline" the fourth story of *Dubliners*. This matter proves how Joyce was meticulous even about the signification of number and place of the stories in the collection:

I have written *Dubliners* for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform, whatever he has seen and heard. I cannot do more than this. I cannot alter what I have written. (Joyce, 1957/1966, P. 134)

In the beginning of the story we encounter the actions of Mr Mooney. His alcoholism somehow results in his state of being unconscious about his actions: stealing money from the cash box, continuously breaking the pledge of good behavior, fighting with his wife in the presence of the customers, trying to kill her with a cleaver, and selling bad meats are the actions (signs) that represent immorality and signify the proairetic code of moral paralysis (this code is also a prevalent code of "Araby," the story in which the protagonist's uncle comes home drunkard in a sacred night or a young lady flirts with two young gentlemen at the bazaar). Moreover, the description of Mrs Mooney who as a "creature" supposes Mr Doran to be a bait, a man who "had a good screw . . . a bit of stuff put by," (*Dubliners* 60) reveals her vulgar and mercenary mind and verify the authenticity of this code.

The other actions of the story revolve mostly around the main characters: Mrs Mooney and Mr Bob Doran. Mrs Mooney, a butcher's daughter and the owner of a boarding house controls much of the action and thoughts in the story. Although it seems that Mrs Mooney conspires with her daughter (Polly) to oblige Mr Doran (Polly's lover and a boarder in the house) to marry her, throughout the story she is always lethargic-without physical action-and sometimes she plunges into reveries. She does not even take one step throughout the story: She watches her daughter's relation with Mr Doran and the boarders' gossip about the affair, but she does not intervene; after breakfast she sits in a relax manner in her armchair and begins to reconstruct her interview with Polly; she glances around remarkably; "She counted all her cards again before sending Mary up to Doran's room to say that she wished to speak with him" (*Dubliners* 60), and finally she stands up and scans herself in the pier-glass.

Mrs Mooney's inert and Lethargic state (Mr Mooney's posture after divorce is not better than that of his wife: a drunkard who is sitting all day long in the bailiff's room waiting for a job) reminds the reader of the Eveline Hill. In "Eveline" Eveline Hill's actions range from trivial sitting, "She sat" (*Dubliners* 31), and standing, "she stood up" (*Dubliners* 35), to the more consequential and inefficacious actions in order to leave Dublin permanently. Being paralyzed within her monotonous domestic liability, "Eveline never move a single step. Even in the last climatic scene her action are described as "She stood . . . She gripped . . . She set her face" (Scholes, 1982, P. 101). Mrs Mooney's conspiracy to trap Mr Doran into marrying Polly similarly signifies her attempt for liberation from being entrapped by household problematic responsibilities. Contrary to their inert situation, Mrs Mooney and Eveline stunningly represent those women "who are in a struggle for setting aside the inequalities and miseries of their social environment through their representative wish for emancipation in their lonely and alienated state of minds" (Köseman, 2012, P. 587). This struggle manifests that not only are they oppressed under strict social norms but also spiritually paralyzed.

Furthermore, the actions that are related to Mr Doran are as stationary as those of Mrs Mooney: "He had made two attempts to shave but his hand had been so unsteady that he had been obliged to desist"; "He could not make up his mind whether to like her or despise her for what she had done" (*Dubliners* 61); "he was sitting helplessly on the side of the bed"; "He comforted her feebly" (*Dubliners* 62); "He stood up to put on his coat and waistcoat, more helpless than ever"; "He longed to ascend through the roof and fly away to another country where he would never hear again of his trouble, and yet a force pushed him downstairs step by step" (*Dubliners* 63). This last instance is Bob Doran's only conspicuous movement, the time when he without hope and in a paralytic manner descends the stairs. His descending

motion denotes that like Eveline's penchant to travel to Buenos Aires, Bob's proclivity toward flight is rendered unfeasible. This declining move insinuates his sacrifice and down fall from a fortune or an opportunity that he was pursuing all of his life, and consequently signifies the proairetic code of fall. His honourable job, his fear of public disgrace, and the feeling of being guilty are the signs that made him in the eyes of Mrs Mooney a young eligible man. Falling into trap, he is now obsessed by his new liability, an exacerbating predicament in which he is pinned down. Another time that he is met up in *Ulysses*, the ramifications of his fall turned him into a miserable drunkard man: "who was sitting up there in the corner that I hadn't seen snoring drunk, blind to the world, only Bob Doran" (p. 385). Accompanying this code most actions are signs that represent lethargy, and with the help of the first lines of *Dubliners* where the words paralysis, gnomon and simony sounds strangely to the little boy, the name of paralysis can appropriately be allocated to its code: "Paralysis is the inability of physical movement, but it is also a spiritual, social, cultural, political, and historical malaise" (Bulson, 2006, P. 36). This code has absolute affinities with other codes such as defeat, self-oppression, and entrapment. The signs and motif of paralysis can equally be found in each single story of *Dubliners*: for example, Eveline Hill in "Eveline" is a creature "passive, like a helpless animal" (*Dubliners* 35) who is paralyzed and unable to accept the chance of new life she is offered.

Like "Eveline," in "The Boarding House" the voice of narration is not much depended on cultural codes. Even the discourse does not reflex them clearly. What attract attention to itself are the characters' behaviours and the things that happen in their mind. With the help of some signs, the character of Mrs Mooney can be culturally encoded: She is an opportunist from the middle class of society, a woman who "was quite able to keep things to herself" (*Dubliners* 57) and tries to ameliorate her life condition. Mrs Mooney "who was a shrewd judge" (*Dubliners* 58) watches Polly's relation with Bob Doran but "kept her own counsel" till "the right moment." Pretending to be a religious woman she uses her fabricated anger and Polly's honour as moral appliances to improve the condition of her daughter's life: "She dealt with moral problems as a cleaver deals with meat, and in this case she had made up her mind" (*Dubliners* 59). All the lodgers speaks of her as "The Madam" (*Dubliners* 58). The word "Madam" in addition to denoting respect refers to the superintendent who runs a brothel. The title of story itself is interpreted as "his boardelhouse," i.e. brothel (from the Danish 'bordel'), in *Finnegans Wake* (P. 186). Mrs Mooney's capability in controlling a place in which only men tread in and her hospitality toward them is in contrast with her villain ways of embroiling young men and appraising their assets or liabilities. The only important matter for her is actually using the greatest possible advantage of everything. In fact, she is a double-dealer and the code of charlatan as a cultural code that steps in the last lines of previous story of *Dubliners*, "Two Gallants," is suitable for her.

Mrs Mooney is waiting for Bob to be entrapped in her cunningly wrought snare. She is not at all concerned about whether his daughter's marriage is based on an honest love or a dishonest one. Once in her jargon she makes use of the word "business" instead of marriage: "Mrs Mooney, who was a shrewd judge, knew that the young men were only passing the time away: none of them meant business" (*Dubliners* pp. 58-59). In addition, Polly who before the appearance of Mr Doran "flirted with the young men" (*Dubliners* 58) seems not concerned about the lack of love. The words "complicity" and "wise innocence" in the text connote that also marriage for her is not a matter of love but business: a "mercenary search for an advantageous sum" (Boysen, 2008, p. 163). She is overwhelmed with her desires and sweet dreams of future, not with love. It can furthermore be surmised that Jack Mooney, Polly's brother, was aware of the matter. As a matter of fact, in addition to the deadening social pressure of environment and moral weakness, Mr Doran's fear of a Jack as a husky hoodlum who claims that "if any fellow tried that sort of a game on with his sister he'd bloody well put his teeth down his throat" (*Dubliners* 63) has a direct influence on his final decision.

Just before Polly's first appearance in story, there is also a dexterous use of the word "vamp" that connotes a seductive woman who uses her sex appeal in a manipulative way (especially to exploit men) and just after her appearance she sang a song which confirms this connotation: "She sang: I'm a ... naughty girl. You needn't sham: You know I am" (*Dubliners* 58). Not far from her counterfeited innocence, she actually knows what she does. A woman as deceitful as her mother is seen in the last picture of Polly who like her mother surveys herself in a mirror. She is sure that her mother will arrange everything since from the beginning of affair she knew that she was under surveillance. All of these signs are altogether related to the vulgarization of romance and institution of marriage in Dublin, and with having recourse to the first lines of *Dubliners* they can properly be categorized under a cultural code: the code of simony. Simony is the selling of material goods for spiritual benefit, but it is also the vulgarization of religion, love, and the intellect. Religion is dominant in life of Dublin but decayed religion. *Dubliners* usually attend the church for prayers, marriage and divorce but in heart are indifferent to it and law of God; they usually drink even in the sacred nights. Marriage in Dublin is likewise based on guile, a renunciation of religion and love. Similar to code of paralysis this guile is dominant in the stories and dominates some characters: for instance, the little boy in "Araby" who confuses romance and commerce.

3. Conclusion

Dubliners the most widely read of Joyce's works seems deceptively straightforward. It needs to be seen as a starting point, a place where Joyce had to figure out how to tell a story, put a plot together, develop characters, and craft a conversation. Joyce believed that the domination of Roman Catholic Church and the British Empire over his country were the main causes of Dublin backwardness and inferiority. They made the Irish paralytic and learned them to oppress themselves. It was precisely this paralysis and self-oppression that first frustrated and then motivated Joyce to write. As it was demonstrated and clarified according to Roland Barthes classification, the code of paralysis as a proairetic code is a major code of "The Boarding House" that have strong affinities with other codes such as captivity,

defeat and simony. Simony that denotatively means the selling of material goods for spiritual benefit, through the course of signs connotes the vulgarization of religion, romance, and the intellect. These concept and themes are manipulated throughout "The Boarding House" with dexterity. These meticulously encoded themes give "The Boarding House" the "unity of effect," a requisite criterion for every marvelous short story. This "unity of effect" is also substantiated by Ezra Pound's article, "Dubliners and Mr James Joyce." Pound unaware of Barthes' codes comprehended that *Dubliners* with "its clear hard prose" has "freedom from sloppiness," and averred that Joyce was concerned with more than the concrete particulars of his city: "He gives us things as they are, not only for Dublin, but for every city . . . That is to say, the author is quite capable of dealing with things about him, and dealing directly, yet these details do not engross him, he is capable of getting at the universal element beneath them" (P. 267).

Although Joyce and Barthes never met each other and *S/Z* was written twenty nine years after the death of Joyce, this study demonstrated that the applied codes in *Dubliners* and especially "The Boarding House" are categorically corresponding to those of *S/Z*. It means that not only can the text of "The Boarding House" be encoded by the same criteria Barthes encoded "Sarrasine" but also Joyce himself presents particular names for these codes. Despite the fact that Barthes' codes are not magical codes that open doors for any final interpretation, they do contribute to the rich texture of short story and demonstrate the degree to which "The Boarding House" was shaped by the evocative power of signs.

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