A Structuralist Reading of Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea* through Roland Barthes' Five Codes
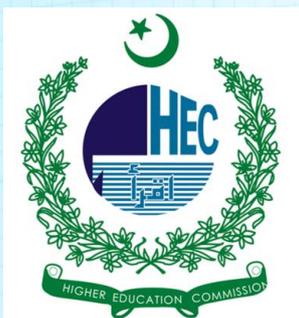
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Abstract

This study examines the narrative structure of Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea* through the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes' five narrative codes. Using a qualitative textual analysis, the research explores how hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes function within the narrative to construct meaning and shape readers' interpretation of the protagonist, Rosemary Fell. The analysis reveals that Mansfield skillfully employs narrative strategies to expose the contradictions between Rosemary's self‐image and her actual motives. While Rosemary initially appears compassionate toward a poor girl, the unfolding narrative gradually exposes her class consciousness, insecurity, and performative charity. The findings demonstrate that Barthes' codes provide a productive analytical framework for uncovering the layered meanings embedded in the text and for understanding Mansfield's critique of social class, materialism, and superficial morality in early twentieth‐century British society.

Keywords: Narratology, Roland Barthes, Five Codes, Katherine Mansfield, A Cup of Tea

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is widely regarded as one of the most influential modernist short‐story writers of the early twentieth century. Her fiction is known for its psychological depth, subtle narrative techniques, and exploration of social class and human consciousness. Among her frequently anthologized works, *A Cup of Tea* presents a compelling portrayal of an upper‐class woman whose seemingly charitable act exposes underlying anxieties about beauty, class, and identity.

Narrative analysis offers a valuable framework for examining how literary texts produce meaning through structure and storytelling strategies. Scholars such as Riessman (2008) emphasize that narratives are not merely sequences of events but meaningful arrangements that shape how individuals interpret experience and social reality. Stories therefore function as interpretive structures through which cultural values, identities, and social relations are constructed and communicated.

Within literary studies, narratology focuses on the structural features that organize

narrative discourse. Prince (1982) defines narratology as the study of the form and functioning of narrative. By examining narrative components such as plot structure, sequencing of events, and symbolic patterns, narratological approaches reveal how texts generate meaning beyond their surface storyline.

This study applies Roland Barthes' structuralist theory of narrative codes to Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*. In his seminal work *S/Z* (1974), Barthes proposes that narratives operate through five interacting codes that guide readers in interpreting the text. These include the hermeneutic code (enigma), proairetic code (actions), semantic code (connotations), symbolic code (binary oppositions), and cultural code (shared knowledge). Together, these codes form a "weaving of voices" that produces multiple layers of meaning within a narrative.

By applying Barthes' framework, this research aims to demonstrate how Mansfield constructs the character of Rosemary Fell and critiques the moral pretensions of the upper class. The analysis shows that beneath the surface narrative of charity lies a deeper exploration of insecurity, vanity, and social performance.

Statement of the Problem

Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea* has been widely discussed in literary studies for its portrayal of class consciousness, psychological complexity, and subtle narrative style. Many scholars have examined the story from perspectives such as symbolism, psychological characterization, and socio-cultural critique. However, despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to analyzing the narrative structure of the story through the lens of structuralist narratology, particularly Roland Barthes' theory of five narrative codes.

Barthes' model provides a systematic framework for understanding how meaning is constructed in a narrative through different layers of textual signals, including enigmas, actions, connotations, symbolic oppositions, and cultural references. Applying this framework to Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea* can reveal how the narrative gradually exposes the contradictions between the protagonist Rosemary Fell's self-perception and her actual motives. The story appears on the surface to depict an act of charity by an upper-class woman toward a poor girl, yet the narrative subtly unveils themes of vanity, insecurity, and class consciousness.

Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of a comprehensive

narratological analysis of *A Cup of Tea* using Barthes' five codes. By examining how these narrative codes function within the story, the study aims to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in the narrative structure and demonstrate how Mansfield employs narrative techniques to critique social class and performative morality.

Research Questions

1. How do Roland Barthes' five narrative codes operate in Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea* to structure the narrative?

2. In what ways do the hermeneutic and proairetic codes contribute to the development of suspense and narrative progression in the story?

3. How do the semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes reveal themes of class consciousness, insecurity, and performative charity in the characterization of Rosemary Fell?

2. Literature Review

Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea* has attracted scholarly attention for its subtle narrative technique, psychological complexity, and critique of social class. Critics have approached the story from various perspectives, including symbolism, psychological characterization, and socio-cultural analysis. These studies highlight Mansfield's ability to portray the contradictions of upper-class morality while exposing the emotional insecurities underlying seemingly charitable actions.

One important line of inquiry focuses on the symbolic aspects of the story. Zhang (2021) examines the symbolism in *A Cup of Tea* and argues that Mansfield uses symbolic elements to represent the superficiality of upper-class generosity. According to Zhang, objects and situations within the story, such as the act of offering tea, symbolize the illusion of compassion among the wealthy, suggesting that Rosemary's act of kindness is motivated more by personal satisfaction than genuine empathy.

Similarly, Nasilloyevna (2022) provides a literary interpretation of the story and emphasizes its continued relevance in modern society. The author argues that Mansfield's depiction of class inequality reflects broader social realities where the wealthy often demonstrate superficial sympathy toward the less privileged. The study highlights how the narrative exposes the social distance between different classes and the performative nature of upper-class benevolence.

Another perspective is offered by Asmarani (2018), who analyzes the psychological characterization of Rosemary Fell. Asmarani argues that Rosemary represents a privileged yet insecure individual whose behavior reveals narcissistic tendencies and a strong desire for social recognition. The study suggests that Rosemary's decision to help the poor girl is influenced by her need to perform an act of generosity that enhances her self-image rather than by genuine concern for the girl's welfare.

Dattatraya (2017) also explores the narrative technique employed in the story and highlights Mansfield's skill in revealing character indirectly. According to Dattatraya, Mansfield does not explicitly judge Rosemary's actions; instead, she allows the narrative structure and character interactions to gradually reveal Rosemary's hypocrisy and insecurity. This subtle narrative strategy demonstrates Mansfield's mastery of modernist storytelling techniques.

From a theoretical perspective, narratology provides useful tools for understanding how narratives construct meaning. Prince (1982) defines narratology as the study of the form and functioning of narrative and emphasizes that narrative structures influence how readers interpret events and characters in a text. Similarly, Riessman (2008) explains that narrative analysis focuses not only on the content of stories but also on the way they are structured to produce meaning and shape interpretation.

Within structuralist narratology, Barthes (1974) proposes that narratives function through a system of five codes—hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural—which guide readers in interpreting the text. These codes operate together to create layers of meaning and to structure the reader's engagement with the narrative. By identifying these codes within a literary text, scholars can uncover hidden patterns and deeper thematic implications embedded in the narrative.

Despite the growing body of research on *A Cup of Tea*, most existing studies focus on symbolism, psychological characterization, or social critique. Limited attention has been given to analyzing the narrative structure of the story through the framework of Barthes' five narrative codes. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by applying Barthes' narratological model to explore how Mansfield constructs meaning in the narrative and how the five codes contribute to revealing themes of class consciousness, insecurity, and performative charity in the

characterization of Rosemary Fell.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design based on textual analysis. The primary data for the study is Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea*. The analysis focuses on identifying narrative elements that correspond to Barthes' five codes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural.

The analytical procedure involves close reading of the text to identify narrative segments that illustrate each code. These segments are then interpreted to examine how they contribute to character construction, thematic development, and narrative progression.

According to Barthes, the hermeneutic and proairetic codes operate sequentially by organizing narrative suspense and action. The semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes, by contrast, operate paradigmatically by generating thematic associations and interpretive frameworks. By analyzing the story through these codes, the study reveals how Mansfield structures meaning through narrative patterns rather than explicit commentary.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the structuralist theory of narratology, particularly the concept of narrative codes proposed by Roland Barthes. Narratology focuses on the structure, function, and organization of narratives and examines how meaning is produced through narrative techniques and textual elements. Structuralist theorists argue that narratives are not simply sequences of events but structured systems of signs that guide readers in interpreting a text. Among the influential scholars in narratology, Roland Barthes provides an important framework for analyzing narrative meaning through his theory of five narrative codes.

Barthes introduced the concept of narrative codes in his influential work *S/Z* (1974), where he analyzed Honoré de Balzac's short story *Sarrasine* to demonstrate how narratives produce meaning through different textual signals. According to Barthes (1974), a narrative is composed of multiple voices or layers of meaning that interact with one another. These layers can be understood through five interpretive codes that help readers decode the hidden meanings embedded within the narrative structure. These codes include the hermeneutic code, proairetic code, semantic code,

symbolic code, and cultural code.

The first of these is the hermeneutic code (HER), also known as the code of enigma. This code refers to elements within a narrative that create mystery, suspense, or unanswered questions. Such enigmas encourage readers to seek explanations as the narrative unfolds. The hermeneutic code functions by delaying answers and maintaining curiosity until the narrative gradually resolves the questions it raises (Barthes, 1974). In literary texts, this code often appears through ambiguous actions, hidden motives, or unresolved situations that invite interpretation.

The second code is the proairetic code (ACT), commonly referred to as the code of action. This code relates to the sequence of actions that structure the narrative and move the plot forward. Each action leads to another, creating a chain of events that produces narrative progression and suspense. According to Barthes, the proairetic code helps organize the chronological development of events in a story and contributes to the reader's expectations about what will happen next (Barthes, 1974).

The semantic code (SEM) is the third narrative code identified by Barthes. This code refers to elements in the text that carry connotative meanings beyond their literal sense. These meanings are often associated with specific words, descriptions, or images that contribute to thematic development. Through the semantic code, certain textual details function as signifiers that evoke deeper associations and contribute to the interpretation of characters, settings, or themes.

Closely related to the semantic code is the symbolic code (SYM). This code operates through binary oppositions and contrasts that structure the deeper meaning of a narrative. Symbolic codes often appear in the form of opposing concepts such as wealth and poverty, appearance and reality, or power and vulnerability. By organizing these oppositions, the symbolic code reveals the underlying tensions and ideological conflicts within the narrative (Barthes, 1974).

The fifth and final code is the cultural code (REF), which refers to references to shared knowledge, cultural norms, and social conventions. These references may include historical information, social practices, or commonly accepted beliefs that are recognized by readers within a particular cultural context. According to Barthes, the cultural code connects the narrative to broader systems of knowledge and helps readers interpret the text in relation to social and cultural realities (Barthes, 1974).

In Barthes' view, these five codes operate simultaneously within a narrative and create a "weaving of voices" that produces multiple layers of meaning. Rather than functioning independently, the codes interact with each other to guide the reader's interpretation of the story. Through the interplay of these codes, narratives become complex structures that invite readers to decode hidden meanings and ideological messages embedded within the text.

In the context of this study, Barthes' five-code model provides an effective analytical framework for examining Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea*. By applying these codes, the study aims to identify the narrative elements that construct suspense, develop character motivations, and reveal thematic concerns related to class consciousness, insecurity, and performative charity. The framework enables a systematic analysis of how the narrative structure contributes to the deeper interpretation of the story and how Mansfield subtly critiques the social attitudes of the upper class through her narrative technique.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Hermeneutic Code (HER)

The hermeneutic code refers to elements of mystery or unresolved questions that generate suspense within a narrative. In *A Cup of Tea*, several moments function as enigmas that invite readers to interpret Rosemary's motivations.

One such instance occurs when Rosemary suddenly decides to bring the poor girl home. Her decision appears spontaneous and unexplained, raising questions about whether her action is motivated by genuine compassion or by a desire for excitement and self-dramatization. The narrative leaves this motivation ambiguous, encouraging readers to speculate about her true intentions.

Another example appears in the characterization of the poor girl, Miss Smith. Her background and circumstances remain largely unexplained, which reinforces the narrative mystery and shifts attention toward Rosemary's perception of poverty rather than the girl's lived reality.

The final question of the story—"Am I pretty?"—represents the ultimate hermeneutic moment. This question reveals Rosemary's underlying insecurity and reframes the entire narrative, suggesting that her charitable gesture was ultimately motivated by vanity and self-validation.

4.2 Proairetic Code (ACT)

The proairetic code refers to sequences of actions that drive the narrative forward. In Mansfield's story, the plot unfolds through a series of interconnected events.

The narrative begins with Rosemary visiting an antique shop where she considers purchasing an expensive enamel box. This moment establishes her wealth and refined taste while also hinting at her fascination with luxury and aesthetic pleasure.

The encounter with the poor girl introduces the central conflict of the story. Rosemary's decision to bring the girl home initiates a chain of actions that culminate in the confrontation between Rosemary and her husband, Philip.

The climax occurs when Philip comments on the girl's beauty. His remark destabilizes Rosemary's sense of superiority and triggers her jealousy. This moment shifts the narrative from apparent charity to emotional insecurity.

The falling action occurs when Rosemary gives the girl money and sends her away. The resolution arrives in the final scene when Rosemary seeks reassurance from her husband about her own attractiveness.

4.3 Semantic Code (SEM)

The semantic code involves elements that carry connotative meanings within the narrative. Mansfield employs descriptive imagery and symbolic objects to deepen thematic significance.

The winter setting at the beginning of the story conveys emotional coldness and social distance, reflecting the harsh realities faced by the poor. In contrast, Rosemary's luxurious home represents wealth, comfort, and social privilege.

Material objects such as the enamel box and elegant clothing reinforce themes of consumerism and class identity. These objects highlight the contrast between Rosemary's affluent lifestyle and Miss Smith's poverty.

4.4 Symbolic Code (SYM)

The symbolic code operates through binary oppositions and thematic contrasts. In *A Cup of Tea*, several symbolic oppositions structure the narrative.

One prominent opposition is between wealth and poverty. Rosemary's luxurious lifestyle contrasts sharply with Miss Smith's destitution, illustrating the social inequality of early twentieth- century Britain.

Another symbolic contrast appears between appearance and reality. Rosemary initially perceives herself as generous and compassionate; however, her actions ultimately reveal insecurity and vanity. This contrast underscores the theme of performative charity.

The title itself functions symbolically. While a cup of tea appears to represent a simple act of kindness, it ultimately becomes a metaphor for superficial generosity and social performance.

4.5 Cultural Code (REF)

The cultural code refers to shared knowledge and social conventions embedded within the narrative. Mansfield's story reflects the class structure of early twentieth- century British society, where social hierarchies were rigid and interactions between classes were often shaped by prejudice.

The tradition of afternoon tea also carries cultural significance. In British society, tea gatherings functioned as social rituals associated with refinement and elite social circles. Within the story, tea symbolizes both hospitality and social exclusivity.

Rosemary's fascination with the poor girl therefore reflects a broader cultural attitude in which poverty becomes an object of curiosity or temporary amusement for the wealthy. Mansfield uses this cultural context to critique the superficial morality of the upper class.

5. Discussion

The present study applies Roland Barthes' five narrative codes to analyze the narrative structure of Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Cup of Tea*. The analysis demonstrates that Mansfield employs a sophisticated narrative strategy in which different codes interact to construct layers of meaning and gradually reveal the protagonist's psychological complexity. Through the hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes, the narrative not only advances the plot but also exposes the contradictions between Rosemary Fell's self-image and her actual motivations.

The hermeneutic code plays a crucial role in generating narrative suspense and guiding readers toward the underlying meaning of the story. Several moments in the narrative create questions that remain unresolved until the end of the text. For instance, Rosemary's sudden decision to bring the poor girl home raises an immediate question

about her motives. At first glance, the act appears to be a gesture of kindness and generosity. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that Rosemary is more interested in the excitement and novelty of the situation than in the girl's wellbeing. The final question she asks her husband—"Am I pretty?"—serves as the ultimate revelation of her inner insecurity. This moment resolves the central enigma of the story by showing that Rosemary's actions are driven by vanity and the need for validation rather than by genuine compassion.

The proairetic code also contributes significantly to the development of the narrative. The story unfolds through a sequence of actions that create cause-and-effect relationships within the plot. Rosemary's visit to the antique shop establishes her social position and her fascination with luxury. Her encounter with the poor girl initiates the central conflict of the story and leads to a series of events that ultimately expose her insecurities. The turning point occurs when Philip comments on the girl's beauty. This remark disrupts Rosemary's sense of superiority and triggers feelings of jealousy and anxiety. Consequently, the narrative action shifts from apparent charity to emotional rivalry, leading Rosemary to send the girl away. Through this sequence of actions, Mansfield skillfully reveals how a seemingly benevolent act is transformed by personal insecurity and social competition.

The semantic code further enriches the narrative by adding layers of connotative meaning to specific elements in the text. Descriptive details such as the winter setting, the luxurious interior of Rosemary's home, and the expensive enamel box emphasize the contrast between wealth and poverty. These details highlight the social divide between Rosemary and the poor girl, reinforcing the thematic focus on class disparity. Moreover, the imagery associated with material objects reflects Rosemary's attachment to luxury and appearance, suggesting that her identity is closely tied to social status and consumer culture.

Similarly, the symbolic code operates through a series of binary oppositions that structure the thematic meaning of the story. One of the most prominent contrasts is between wealth and poverty. Rosemary represents the privileged upper class, while the poor girl embodies economic hardship and social vulnerability. Another important opposition is between appearance and reality. Although Rosemary initially presents herself as generous and compassionate, her behavior ultimately reveals insecurity and

superficiality. The title *A Cup of Tea* itself functions symbolically: what appears to be a simple act of kindness becomes a metaphor for superficial charity and the performative morality of the upper class.

The cultural code also plays an essential role in shaping the narrative's interpretation. The story reflects the rigid class structure of early twentieth-century British society, where social interactions were strongly influenced by class distinctions. Cultural practices such as afternoon tea carry significant social meaning, symbolizing refinement, leisure, and social status. Within this context, Rosemary's fascination with the poor girl can be interpreted as a reflection of upper-class attitudes toward poverty. Rather than viewing the girl as an individual with genuine needs, Rosemary treats her presence as an interesting social experiment. This cultural context helps explain the protagonist's behavior and highlights Mansfield's critique of upper-class hypocrisy.

Overall, the interaction of these five narrative codes demonstrates Mansfield's skill in constructing a multilayered narrative that exposes the contradictions of social identity and moral performance. The story illustrates how acts of charity may sometimes serve as expressions of vanity and self-interest rather than genuine compassion. By employing subtle narrative techniques and symbolic contrasts, Mansfield encourages readers to question the authenticity of social morality and to recognize the psychological insecurities underlying seemingly benevolent actions.

Thus, the analysis confirms that Barthes' narratological framework provides an effective approach for uncovering the hidden meanings embedded in Mansfield's narrative. The five codes work together to reveal the complexity of the protagonist's character while simultaneously offering a critique of class privilege and superficial generosity in modern society.

6. Conclusion

The application of Roland Barthes' five narrative codes to Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea* reveals the intricate narrative strategies underlying the story. Through hermeneutic enigmas, sequential actions, symbolic imagery, and cultural references, Mansfield constructs a multilayered narrative that gradually exposes the contradictions in Rosemary Fell's character. Although Rosemary initially appears compassionate, the unfolding narrative reveals that her actions are shaped by vanity,

insecurity, and class consciousness. Mansfield thus critiques the performative nature of upper- class charity and highlights the social inequalities embedded within early twentieth- century British culture. This study demonstrates that Barthes' structuralist framework provides a valuable tool for analyzing narrative structure and uncovering implicit meanings in literary texts. By examining how the five codes operate within the story, the analysis offers deeper insight into Mansfield's narrative technique and her subtle critique of social class and moral pretension.

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