



Narrative Analysis of Thomas Hardy's *The Three Strangers*: An Application of Roland Barthes's Five Codes

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a structural narrative analysis of Thomas Hardy's short story The Three Strangers through the lens of Roland Barthes's five narrative codes: the hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes. By employing Barthes's semiotic framework, the research investigates how Hardy constructs suspense, develops characterization, and generates multiple layers of meaning within the narrative. Using a qualitative textual analysis, the study examines the interplay of mystery, sequential actions, symbolic oppositions, recurring motifs, and cultural references that shape readers' interpretation of the text. The findings reveal that the hermeneutic code sustains narrative tension through the gradual disclosure of the strangers' identities and intentions, while the proairetic code advances the plot through a carefully arranged sequence of actions. The semantic and symbolic codes enrich the narrative by assigning deeper connotative meanings to characters, settings, and motifs, particularly those associated with law, justice, community, and identity.

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Introduction

Narrative, as a representation of life, portrays emotions of human beings and their social and cultural behaviour across history. When we analyse the structure of a narrative, we are, in reality, studying the pattern of human behaviour itself (Pradl, 1984). The short narrative, specifically, is considered a formally distinct literary genre, which makes it a proper site for close analysis. To understand how a narrative (i.e. short stories) generates meaning requires close analysis and interpretation of the text and its underlying structure. For this task to be accomplished, it is required to apply a structural analysis from the field of Narratology, the study of narratives and their formal structure.

In the field of Narratology, structuralism is one of the most important analytical approaches that focuses on the structural analysis of a text to extract fixed meaning. This approach, also developed to be a broader intellectual movement, was significantly advanced by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his foundational contributions in the 1950-1960s. The central claim of this movement is that language cannot be fully interpreted and analysed as an isolated unit; it must be understood and interpreted in a larger system of relations. While Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure emphasized fixed-meaning and structure-based analysis, later theorists challenged this firmness and looked for an interpretive and subjective approach, giving rise to post-structuralism

Among the most influential of these theorists is Roland Barthes (1915–1980), a French literary critic and semiotician. In *S/Z* (1990), Barthes modifies strict structuralist analysis, arguing that language is not fixed and that a single unit of language may carry multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. He identified the distinction between “readerly” which states passive consumer of the text and “writerly” which states active participant in meaning-making process (Mokhtari, 2015). He proposed the idea that a literary text contains multiple layers of meaning mainly because the reader actively participates in the meaning-making process through personal experiences and understanding, rather than passively receiving a single, fixed interpretation of a text. Later on, he introduced his model of five codes in his book *S/Z* that is situated at the intersection of structuralist and post-structuralist thought.

This theoretical modification provides the structural framework for the present study which practically implements Barthes’s model of five codes that he introduced in his foundational work *S/Z* to Thomas Hardy’s short fictional narrative, *The Three Strangers*. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English poet, novelist and architect, widely regarded as one of the greatest figures of Victorian era. His major literary themes included fate, chance, human struggles, the indifferent universe and criticism on Victorian social conventions pertaining to law, justice, morality, class and social standing. His narrative *The Three Strangers*, first published in Longman’s Magazine in March 1883, also contains similar ideas of fate, human struggle, and criticism of the disproportionate punishment for the fugitive in rural England.

The narrative begins with the depiction of a stormy night of March 28 when there was a christening ceremony of a shepherd’s daughter in an isolated cottage. However, the peaceful ceremony is soon disrupted by the arrival of three strangers at the hut who keep their identities hidden. Hardy keeps readers confused and engaged until he revealed that, at the shepherd’s party, the first stranger was an escaped prisoner who was socializing with the second stranger, a hangman who had just come to execute him, while the third stranger, whom everyone mistakenly assumed to be the fugitive, was actually the brother of the first stranger. The plot contains various layers of meaning and underlying pattern that structure the narrative and can be examined through the structuralist-poststructuralist analysis of the narrative particularly Roland Barthes’s five codes.

This study argues that Barthesian codes are applicable to *The Three Strangers* for revealing layers of meaning, its underlying plot structure, and the pattern of mystery, while also identifying the binary opposition and contextual understanding that shape the narrative through hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes.

Problem Statement

Thomas Hardy's *The Three Strangers* has been widely discussed for its portrayal of descriptive imagery, culture, complexity of human nature, mistaken identity, and strictness of law over common people. However, it has never been analysed from the perspective of structuralist-poststructuralist model, particularly Roland Barthes's model of five codes to highlight its underlying structure of the plot, mystery, connotative meanings, binary oppositions and shared knowledge.

Therefore, this study applies a systematic structuralist-poststructuralist model of Roland Barthes on *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy to understand how certain codes of the model reveal underlying structure, hidden meanings and shared knowledge of the seemingly suspenseful plot.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- To find out which codes of Roland Barthes' theory are applicable to Thomas Hardy's short story "The Three Stranger."
- To understand and highlight how codes such as hermeneutic (code of mystery) and proairetic (code of action) contribute to the overall suspense of the narrative.

Limitations of the study

The present study applies the five codes on *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative in a systematic manner and highlight its hidden elements that make it more than just a suspenseful story. For this purpose, through textual analysis approach, the five codes are highlighted in the narrative with textual evidence from the story to uncover actions in order (proairetic), connotative meanings, such as shepherd's isolated cottage exposed to stormy weather gives meaning of vulnerability and unpredictability of fate (semantic), binary opposition such as perception vs reality (symbolic) and cultural background and knowledge such as customs of celebration in the English countryside (cultural) and hidden identities of the strangers (hermeneutic) in the story.

However, despite such a diverse perspective of analysis, Barthesian model of five codes does not provide systematic way of analysing and highlighting how language style of each character and role, overall style of the writer, and literary devices in the narrative that make it effective, unique and meaningful. For this limitation to be addressed authentic stylistic study alongside Barthesian model is suggested to make the analysis and interpretation more diverse and thorough.

Literature Review

Thomas Hardy's *The Three Strangers* has been analysed by many scholars and researchers for its suspenseful narrative style and thematic analysis. Some scholars like Michael Millgate, William Van O'Connor, and James L. Roberts have focused on the structural, philosophical, symbolic, and cultural contexts of the narrative, while Ajmal et al. have practically implemented the theoretical framework on their selected narrative.

Marroni (1992) identifies classical dramatic elements in the structure of *The Three Strangers* arguing the narrative ensures the unity of time (a stormy night), place (cottage), and action, as it was also performed on stage as a one-act play with only few changes. Additionally, he noticed a similarity between the plot of *The Three Strangers* with the pattern of a folk ballad. He also highlights the transition from a tragic beginning of the narrative to its comic ending. In the narrative, *Timothy Summers* is a lonely, condemned prisoner but in the end, he gains sympathy of locals and becomes a heroic figure whose escape exposes rigid, unjust laws.

However, O'Connor (1958) offers thematic and philosophical analysis of the narrative, arguing that the narrative has two levels: one is suspenseful and engaging storyline, while the other level is the philosophical meaning of the narrative. Furthermore, he examines cosmic irony (literary device) in the narrative, suggesting that Hardy presents human actions from a detached point of view, depicting them as insignificant within a larger universe that controls human destiny and outcomes. However, he does not provide systematic analysis of its structure that the present study addresses.

In contrast to O'Connor's findings, Roberts (1962) argues that *The Three Strangers* does not illustrate cosmic irony, in which human actions become insignificant when viewed across space and time. Instead, he argues that the legend of Timothy Summers remains memorable and a cultural asset even after fifty years. According to his findings, Timothy Summers becomes a folk hero as he possesses qualities praised by locals such as "courage," "composure," and, "resourcefulness," while the hangman is portrayed as a devil-like figure (192). Additionally, he notices Christian symbolism, such as the recurrence of number three and christening ceremony. He concludes that the narrative is about legend, symbolism and culture rather than insignificance of human actions.

Mane (2019) explained that Thomas Hardy wrote *The Three Strangers* for his specific readership, particularly middle-class people because the entire narrative is about rural, poor people of Wessex. He further adds that Hardy has criticized Victorian penal code, social inequality, and poverty through the portrayal of an escaped prisoner who was subjected to disproportionate punishment for a minor offence. The interpretation is also supported by factual historical records of "Bloody Code" in Britain by King and Ward (2015), under which harsh penalties were imposed for property-related crimes including minor thefts like sheep-stealing. He also emphasizes that Hardy was impressed by the profession of a hangman and two of his stories are centered on the life and personality of hangman in English countryside.

Millgate M. (1982), on the other hand, emphasizes the structure of the plot and suggests that the tale of three strangers is a well-organised story in which the whole excitement and involvement of readers depends upon the plot, characters, human behaviour, and the relevant setting of the narrative. (238).

Hendricks (2022) asserts that her analysis suggests *The Three Strangers* is a "tale of disguise, mistaken identity and premature judgement." Each of the three strangers who appears at the cottage has their own distinct back story and identity. She focuses on how the prisoner and his executioner enjoyed shepherd's party and sang together, then parted their ways, implying how human nature is too complex to be judged and understood at the first encounter.

While the studies mentioned above provide thematic, cultural, structural, and symbolic analysis of the narrative, none has applied structuralist narratological analysis specifically Barthes's model of five codes on *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy. The model was originally applied by Barthes himself in his seminal work *S/Z* (1990), in which he analysed the structure of "Sarrasine" by Balzac. Since then, the model has been applied to extract multiple layers of meaning, structure and cultural background of the narratives.

For instance, Ajmal et al. (2025) apply Barthes's five narrative codes to O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*, illustrating how the codes function together. Their analysis depicts the hermeneutic code generating curiosity through unresolved enigmas, while the proairetic code creates suspense through plot action. They also identify the semantic and symbolic codes in recurring images, such as the vine leaves and soup, which carry connotative meaning, while the cultural code situates the narrative within broader historical and artistic contexts. Their findings affirm Barthes's claim regarding the universality of narrative codes, showing their continued relevance for analyzing classic short fiction.

With the help of these studies and their underlying ideas, this article contributes to the field by implementing Barthes's model of five codes for a deeper understanding of the structure of Thomas Hardy's short story *The Three Strangers*.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative and interpretive in nature and utilizes textual analysis approach. The data is analysed directly from *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy published in Longman's Magazine and Harper's Weekly the in March 1883 and in short story collection called Wessex Tales in March 1888. The research employs model of five codes proposed by Roland Barthes: The hermeneutic, proairetic, symbolic, cultural, and semantic code. The most important factors in which those codes are relevant are mentioned. The referencing style of the American psychological association (seventh version) is used for referencing and crediting other researchers.

Theoretical Framework

The narrative analysis is based on Roland Barthes's Model of five codes that he proposed in his seminal work *S/Z* in 1990. In this book, he gave critical structuralist analysis of *Sarrasine*, a short story written by Honoré de Balzac. The model comprises five narrative codes serving different kind of analysis approach to highlight how a narrative creates suspense, organizes actions, and gives meaning based on interpretation of the reader.

The Barthesian codes are used to decode text which are as follows:

The Hermeneutic Code: The hermeneutic code (HER.) refers to any element in a story that is hidden and exists as mystery for the reader. Most of the stories hide details in order to increase the effect of denouement of the story and keep the reader guessing and engaged in the narrative until it is revealed. However, some stories leave some aspects as mystery for individual's own interpretation and do not explain at all.

The Proairetic Code: The proairetic code (ACT) refers to the major structuring elements that builds the plot of narrative. It is a chain of events that occur respectively to keep the reader engaged in the narrative.

The Semantic Code: The semantic code (SEM) gives connotative and associative meaning of the denotative words. The author artistically uses semantic code to imply deeper meaning through conventional words. For example: description of characters' appearances, setting of the narrative, dialogues, actions contribute to the associative meaning one has to interpret by themselves.

The Symbolic Code: The symbolic code (SYM), according to Barthes, is a "battle" between two opposite signs. For example, the words "good" and "evil" can be very different semantic codes but when two connotative elements are placed in opposition, they form an element of symbolic code. This is a bit similar to the semantic code but symbolic code is wider and deeper encompassing various signs and symbols to convey abstract ideas and meaning.

The Cultural Code: The cultural code (REF) refers to the cultural background norms and customs when the story was written and their impact on narrative and characters as well. Barthes, in his book *S/Z*, describes cultural code as "to a science or a body of knowledge" (20). Religious characteristics also fall in this category, how they influence the characters and overall the narrative.

The codes mentioned initially (hermeneutic and proairetic) are "syntagmatic" (Rice and Schofer, 1982, p.21), as the function of both codes relates to the way language elements organize in such order to make linguistic structures. (Cambridge Dictionary). While the remaining codes are "paradigmatic" (Rice and Schofer, 1982, p.25), as the function of these codes relates to the way linguistic items play a specific role in the structure of the language. (Cambridge Dictionary).

All of the codes mentioned above provide structural framework to analyse and uncover hidden meaning in narratives. The present study aims to utilize the framework on *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy, to examine its structure and extract multiple layers of meaning in the narrative.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This part of the study looks closely at *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy using Barthes' storytelling rules. Each code is explained and referenced with textual evidence from the story.

The Hermeneutic Code

In *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy, the hermeneutic code manifests through the mysterious identities and professions of the three strangers at the party and fate of the first stranger, Timothy Summers, who is identified as criminal.

"Some said that he went across the sea, others that he did not, but buried himself in the depths of a populous city. (p.23)

In *The Three Strangers*, the fate of the first stranger, the sheep-stealer and criminal remains uncertain. While it is revealed that he is wanted for poaching and is arrested by the constable, the story does not clearly state what happens to him afterward. Some characters speculate that he may have “*went across the sea*” (p.23) while others believe he went to a densely populated city.

This ambiguity adds to the overall sense of mystery and leaves readers to interpret the first stranger’s fate based on their own understanding of the narrative.

The Proairetic Code

The story begins with the description of setting that is told by an omniscient narrator 50 years after the event happened. As in the story, *Fifty years ago such a lonely cottage stood on...* (p.1). The entire plot of the narrative is based on a stormy night and an isolated setting.

Then, the introduction to characters is given. The initial event that occurs in the narrative is a party at stormy night. The shepherd is holding a party of his daughter’s christening *The guests had arrived before the rain began to fall*, (p.2) and almost nineteen people are gathered in a small cottage as in the story “*Nineteen people were gathered here*” (p.2)

The story subsequently develops with the arrival of first stranger at the cottage asking for shelter from rain storm. As in the story “*The rain is so heavy, friends, can I ask leave to come in the rest a while*” (p.06) When, the first stranger arrives at the cottage, his appearance and hidden identity create suspense in the story. Then the second stranger arrives for the same purpose to get shelter from rain storm until tomorrow morning. As, in the narrative: “*I must ask for a few minutes’ shelter, comrades,*” (p.8-9)

Just like the first stranger, the second stranger also brings suspense about his identity and job until he makes clear through his song as “*For my customers I tie, and take them up on high,*” Through his lyrics the readers and guests present there understood that he is a hangman and reacted with surprise and fear.

Rising action in the narrative occurs with the arrival of third stranger who comes at the cottage to ask for way as in the narrative: “*can you tell me the way to--?*” (p.14). The reaction of the third stranger at the door after he looked at the guests was too unusual for the readers and the people in the cottage. It created curiosity in the narrative to know what made him react in that way. As described in the story: “*his knees trembling and his hand shaking so violently,*” (p.15)

The narrative becomes tense when sudden gunshot was heard and the third stranger run away at the same moment. Then it is revealed by the second stranger (hangman) that the gunshot was sign of a prisoner has escaped from the Casterbridge prison. The people and readers misinterpret the moment because according to them, third stranger, as he reacted, must be the escaped prisoner. Due to the premature judgment of guests, they started finding the third stranger to arrest him because he is an escaped prisoner. The constable with other people took lanterns and went for catching him. As “*Then pursue the criminal at once,*”(p.16). However, the first and second stranger do not join the search as one of them believes it is responsibility of the government to take action while other has not enough strength. When they bring him to the authorities, the story

becomes increasingly suspenseful because he is not recognized by officials as the actual prisoner. Then, they ask who was he and what made him react awkward. So he said:

“My crime is that the condemned man is my brother” (p.21)

So, It is revealed that the man in the chimney-corner (first stranger) was actually an escaped prisoner and brother of third stranger. The story moves to the end when the innocent brother of prisoner is free and let go. *“And so the little man was released off-hand;” (p.22)* The story, then, concludes with the unknown fate of escaped prisoner who was a sheep-stealer (first stranger).

“The bass-voiced man of the chimney-corner was never recaptured” (p.23)

What was unusual for a prisoner is that he had sympathy of the locals because according to them, hanging for stealing sheep is not appropriate penalty. In the narrative as: *“But the intended punishment was cruelly disproportioned to the transgression” (p.22-23)*

In short, there are following actions that are creating suspense for readers and structuring the plot,

- a) A stranger wants shelter in shepherd’s house,
- b) The second stranger appears for the same purpose,
- c) Both strangers’ identities are hidden, but the second stranger reveals he is a hangman.
- d) The third stranger reveals his relation to the first stranger as his brother, who is escaped from prison.
- e) Due to the premature judgement of characters, actual prisoner (first stranger) escaped and never found again. However, he gained sympathy of the locals as the intended punishment of execution was considered disproportionate for such a minor crime as sheep-stealing out of extreme poverty.

The Semantic Code

Semantic code refers to the use of language and symbols to convey deeper meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the text. The semantic code is evident through the following textual features.

The isolated English countryside and shepherd’s cottage exposed to storms carry semes of vulnerability and unpredictability of fate. It is ironically presented as an unorganized social setting where a hangman, his quarry and the quarry’s brother could sit under one roof without knowing each other.

Additionally, the song of the second stranger regarding his profession carries semes of darkness and his purpose of execution as a hangman. Apparently, it sounds like an entertaining song at the celebration as the lyric: *“for my customers I tie, and take them up on high,” (p.12)* and *A little hempen string, and a post where on to swing” (p.13)* but when readers and characters interpret

the pattern of lyrics they understand that he is a hangman. In reaction, all of the characters begin considering him the "*Prince of Darkness*" that is itself a semantic code referring to the devil.

Furthermore, Hardy uses playful choice of words that carry meaning different from the one characters or readers interpreted. For instance, when the first stranger reveals about his occupation as a "wheelwright," everyone thinks he repairs wooden wheels. However, it is later revealed by the second stranger (who is brother of the first stranger) that "*He's a watch-and-clock-maker*" (p.22) Hence, the word "wheelwright" referred to the wheels of clock and watches rather than wooden wheels.

In addition, the anonymity of strangers' identities not only serves as a hermeneutic code of mystery but also a semantic function of exemplarity. For instance, there are no biographical details about the executioner but attributes which are common in every hangman: pride, alcoholic, comfortable in his work. Similarly, the first stranger has semes every other escaped prisoner may have: thirst, tiredness, and fear. In this way, these characters become examples of the background and roles they belong to, without having individual identity of their own. Hardy uses this technique to highlight the exemplarity of roles. Despite being different in nature, all the hangmen and escaped prisoners may behave similarly in certain situations.

Hence, by attributing meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the text, Hardy skillfully structures the narrative effective, unique and engaging.

The Symbolic Code

In *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy, one of the most evident symbolic code (binary opposition) in the narrative is perception vs. Reality. All the guests present at the party perceive and judge strangers based on their outward appearance, expressions and reactions at the moment. However, Hardy reveals the complexity of human nature when each of the strangers is misinterpreted. The third stranger, whom everyone thought was fugitive, due to his expressions and reaction at the door of the shepherd's hut, was actually the brother of the first stranger. Hardy, by utilizing the binary opposition of perception vs. reality, demonstrates that outward signs such as nervousness, trembling and numbness are not enough to consider someone fugitive. Moreover, this opposition carries the entire plot of the story as it confuses readers and keeps them wondering who is guilty until the very end.

In *The Three Strangers*, Hardy depicts another binary opposition between the sympathy of ordinary people and strictness of the law towards the first stranger, Timothy Summers, who was a convicted sheep-stealer and expected to be executed by the law. In the narrative, when the second stranger reveals his profession as hangman and his intention to execute a prisoner next morning, guests start viewing him with fearful and surprised expressions as Hardy describes him as "*Prince of Darkness*" and setting as *circulus, cujus centrum diabolus*. (English translation: The circle, whose center is the Devil) (p.15)

Moreover, Hardy shows that common people had sympathy for the prisoner because his only crime was to steal a sheep out of his extreme poverty and that execution was a disproportionate punishment. However, Hardy shows that despite great sympathy in their hearts, none of the characters spoke on the behalf of the escaped prisoner and supported the law they did not find

equal. The binary opposition of the strictness of the law and ordinary sympathy in the narrative shows how law remained dominant in English countryside despite disagreements of the commoners.

In this way, symbolic code of binary opposition reveal how Hardy creates tension in the plot while adding meaning and suspense to the narrative.

The Cultural Code:

If we look into the cultural background when the narrative was written we get to see the story is displaying in 1820s and 1830s, a period of social unrest in England's agricultural regions. When poverty led to steal and exploit rural English people.

Before the *Punishment of Death Act 1832*, the penalty for sheep-stealing was hanging. It is significant cultural element of the narrative because the first stranger is sentenced to death because he has stolen a sheep. However, the people of Wessex were not satisfied with the penalty because they thought that stealing sheep is not a capital crime to execute the prisoner. As,

"But the intended punishment was cruelly disproportioned to thee transgression" (p.22-23)

In *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy, cultural code is displayed through various elements of rural English life and the societal expectations that influence the characters' actions and choices. The story is set in the English countryside, where **rural customs and traditions** play a significant role in shaping the characters' lives as the nature of celebration and party is vividly depicted in the narrative as follows:

"Candlesticks that were never used but at high-days, holy-days, and family feasts." and "candles on the chimney-peice always meant a party." (p.02)

The descriptive imagery mentioned above demonstrates the customs of celebration in the English countryside as it was a christening ceremony of shepherd's daughter and all the details in the narrative regarding the celebration display cultural, traditional, religious customs and practices of the rural areas of England.

Additionally, Hardy depicts the shepherd's cottage as a symbol of simplicity and isolation. If we look culturally, the cottage, the close-knit community, and the connection to the land and agriculture are cultural elements that impact on the narrative and characters' lives. The hospitality of the shepherd also represents the cultural aspects where guests are respected and provided shelter although all three guests were strangers.

Moreover, cultural codes related to social hierarchy and class distinctions are clear in the interactions between characters. The constable, as a representative of law and order, holds authority over the shepherd and other villagers. For instance, the dialogue *"You are a sworn constable?" (P.16)* shows the status of a sworn constable. In context it shows that one can give legal commands only when he is a sworn constable. Similarly, in the dialogue *"Then pursue the criminal at once, with assistance,"(p.16)* the tone of constable's dialogue shows his authority

over others. Hence, cultural codes related to justice, morality and legal system are also well displayed in the narrative.

In addition, cultural codes related to gender roles and expectations are also availed in the story. The shepherd's wife fulfils traditional roles associated with domesticity and caretaking, while the male characters engage in activities related to agriculture and law enforcement. These gender roles influence the characters' interactions and relationships within the story.

Overall, cultural code in *The Three Strangers* provides readers with insight into the social, economic, and moral landscape of rural England during the time period in which the story is set.

Discussion

The present study applied structuralist-poststructuralist analysis, particularly Barthesian model of five codes to highlight and uncover hidden structure and meanings in *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy. The interpretation and analysis of the story from the perspective of Roland Barthes's five codes revealed that all the codes i.e hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes, work together in layers to drive the entire narrative and generate meaning beyond literal words. From the analysis above, it is identified that hermeneutic code of mystery in the narrative regarding the mistaken identity of the fugitive works better with the sequence of events in certain order. For instance, the retrospective and folklore narrative style of the plot, as the story is recalled fifty years after the events occurred, functions with specific order of actions that create suspense and mystery and keeps readers engaged and confused wondering who the fugitive is and what happened to the fugitive in the end.

Additionally, symbolic code of binary oppositions significantly contributes to the central tensions of the narrative such as the conflict between perception and reality when identifying the strangers based on their outward appearance, expressions and reaction at the moment. Through playfully utilizing the symbolic code, Hardy depicts the complexity of human nature and premature judgement when all of the characters assume the third stranger to be a fugitive, without considering the fact that their mistaken identification could result in someone's execution. Moreover, symbolic, hermeneutic and proairetic codes of narrative analysis are further enriched with the connotative meanings of semantic code. Hardy creates layers of meaning in the narrative by using vivid imagery, playful words, and irony to make the entire narrative effective, engaging and mysterious. For instance, the semes of unpredictability and vulnerability in stormy weather and isolated hut add to the mystery (hermeneutic) and central tension of the narrative regarding perception and reality (symbolic code). Similar to the relatable function of respective codes, cultural code also contribute to add meaning and context to the narrative. The depiction of English countryside, customs of celebration, gender roles, hospitality of farmer, and penal code significantly adds meaning and background information to the narrative it was written in.

The similar ideas are also enforced by scholars, such as Marroni (1992) who identified the unity of time, place, and action and folklore pattern in the narrative that was noticed in findings of proairetic code of action. In addition, Mane's (2019) observation regarding cultural aspects in the narrative, such as the rural life of Wessex, and the depiction of injustice, inequality and poverty in the Victorian era, corresponds with findings of the present study. For instance, In the cultural code (class distinctions between constable and shepherd) and symbolic code (sympathy of common people vs strictness of the law), it was affirmed that the intended punishment for

Timothy Summers was disproportionate to the minor crime he committed and the locals sympathized with him because his crime was motivated by extreme poverty. However, the present study misaligns with the portrayal of cosmic irony interpreted by O'Connor (1958), and instead supports arguments of Roberts (1962) that the tale of three strangers is about the embodiment of Timothy Summers as courageous folk hero and the portrayal of symbolism, legend and culture through codes of mystery, connotation and culture.

In this way, Barthes's model of five codes offers systematic structuralist-poststructuralist framework for interpreting and analysing hidden meanings, structure and binary oppositions in the narrative. The five codes work in layers, as noted by Ajmal et al (2025) in their article "Deciphering *The Last Leaf*: A Barthesian Approach to O.Henry's Short Story" (Ajmal et al, 2025) endorse that the five codes function together in the narrative and each code contributes to the formation of another in the narrative.

Thus, Barthesian model of five codes does not work in isolation but in layers where each code adds meaning, structure and context to the other. From the narrative analysis of *The Three Strangers* by Thomas Hardy from the perspective of Barthesian model of five codes, it is confirmed that the narrative contains all the five codes that work together to generate meaning, create suspense and make the narrative complex and engaging more than just a mysterious plot.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Barthesian codes of narrative analysis provide a structural framework for examining how plot drives action (proairetic), creates suspense (hermeneutic), and adds meaning through connotation (semantic) and binary opposition (symbolic), including cultural and social background of the text (cultural). Hardy's *The Three Strangers*, written in retrospective narrative style, fits well within the Barthesian five codes of narrative analysis that expose how the portrayal of isolated English countryside, anonymity of strangers, escape of a fugitive, and uncertain ending of the narrative create meaning, suspense and mystery. The story highlights social struggles, injustice, harsh penalties, and rural costumes of Wessex. From the structuralist-poststructuralist view, *The Three Strangers* contains multiple meanings and interpretations as the reader is actively working with the text. However, the framework lacks analysis of Hardy's unique style of writing and characterization through dialogue, including usage of literary devices in the narrative that contribute to the meaning and interpretation. Therefore, an authentic framework of stylistic analysis is suggested to be used along with the model five codes to provide a comprehensive analysis of the narrative.

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