

STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF D.H LAWRENCE'S "The White Stocking"

ABSTRACT

The French structuralist, Roland Barthes' structuralist analysis of Honore de Balzac's short story Sarrasine, **S/Z**, published in 1970, has had a major impact on literary criticism. In this analysis Barthes shows where and how different codes of meaning function, and he uses specific 'codes' to show how a text 'works'. Barthes' five codes (to be discussed later) form a network of meaning in a text which provides a framework for analysing any text.

WHAT IS STRUCTURALISM?

The shortest and 'simplest' way of explaining structuralism is to quote Scholes (1985:4), who claimed that "...structuralism is a way of looking for reality not in individual things but in the relationships among them. As Wittgenstein insisted, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* "The world is the totality of facts, not of things". And "facts" are "states of affairs":

- 2.03 In a state of affairs objects fit into one another like the links of a chain.
 - 2.031 In a state of affairs objects stand in a determinate relationship to one another.
 - 2.032 The determinate way in which objects are connected in a state of affairs is the structure of the state of affairs.
 - 2.033 Form is the possibility of structure.
 - 2.034 The structure of a fact consists of the structures of states of affairs.
 - 2.04 The totality of existing states of affairs is the world.
- (Wittgenstein,1953)

As far as structuralism in literature is concerned, Scholes says "...structuralism has tried - and is trying - to establish for literary studies a basis that is as scientific as possible" and "At the heart of the idea of structuralism is the idea of system: a complete, self regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic structure." (1985:10)

Put in a simpler way, Structuralism "attempts to explain the structures underlying literary texts either in terms of a grammar modelled on that of language or in terms of Ferdinand de Saussure's principle that the meaning of each word depends on its place in the total system of language". (Harris 1992:378)

Jean-Marie Benoist defines the application of structuralism to literature in this way:

"An analysis is structural if, and only if, it displays the content as a model, i.e. if it can isolate a formal set of elements and relations in terms of which it is possible to argue without entering upon the significance of the given content." (1978:8)

These "formal set of elements" are the smallest meaningful units in a work and are the 'mythemes' or 'deep structures' of a text.(Mc Manus 1998:)

This might seem frightening to those of us who love literature, but this is just one of the many different approaches to reading a text. There is still ample space for the personal and subjective. That said, I wish to include two extracts to puzzle the reader and stimulate thought related to "structuralism"

Structure et liberte – Structure and freedom.

"Who is still a structuralist? Yet he is one in this, at least: an uniformly noisy place seems to him unstructured because in this place there is no freedom left to choose silence or speech (how many times has he not said to someone beside him in a bar: **I can't talk to you because there's too much noise**). Structure at least affords two terms, one of which I can deliberately choose and the other dismiss: hence it is on the whole a (modest) pledge of freedom : how on such a day can I give meaning to my silence, since in any case, I cannot speak?"

(Barthes ,Roland Barthes, 117)

“They say that by virtue of their asceticism certain Buddhists came to see a whole country in a bean. This is what the first analysts of the **recit** wanted to do : to see all the stories in the world...in one single structure. We are going, they thought, to extract from each tale its model then from these models we will make a great narrative structure, which we will apply (for versification) to any story in existence – an exhausting task... and finally an undesirable one, because the text thereby loses its difference”.

(Barthes 1976:7)

The Barthesian approach to a literary text

In this structuralist analysis of Lawrence’s “The White Stocking” I have used as basis certain aspects of Barthes’ techniques.

I have concentrated on using Barthes’ five codes; his techniques of functions, indices, informants and their nuances, to structurally analyse Lawrence’s short story.

These techniques will amply illustrate Barthes’ views of structuralist analysis, and moreover, they are neatly applicable to my structuralist analysis of “The White Stocking”.

Barthes’ Five Codes

The basic tenet of Barthes’ approach to literature may be stated in terms of Roman Jakobson’s communication theory which provides a way of analysing the six elements of any speech event (**Scholes 1985:24**).

These six elements of a speech event are seen in the following scheme:

CONTEXT

MESSAGE

SENDER-----RECEIVER

CONTACT CODE

“Whether we are considering ordinary conversation, a public speech, a letter, or a poem, we always find a message which proceeds from a **sender** [author] to a **receiver** [reader]. These are the most obvious aspects of communication. But a successful communication depends on three other aspects of the event as well: the message must be delivered through a **contact** [physical and/or psychological], it must be framed in a **code** [structure] and it must refer to a **context**. In the area of context we find what a message is about. But to get there we must understand the code in which the message is framed...”

(Scholes 1985:24).

In order to explain the code in which Lawrence’s message [short story] is framed, let us now refer to Barthes’ five codes.

Barthes recognizes five master codes in the text under which every significant aspect of the text can be considered. These codes include *syntagmatic* and *semantic* aspects of the text. The syntagmatic aspects are the ways in which the parts of the text are related to one another, while the semantic aspects of the text are the aspects of the text related to the outside world (Scholes 1985:156).

The following is a step by step application of Barthes’ five codes to aspects of “The White Stocking”.

CODE 1:

The Proairetic Code Or Code Of Actions

This code includes all actions in the story, and therefore it can, and often does, include the whole story. All actions in a story are syntagmatic. They all begin at a given point and end at another. In a story they interlock and overlap but they are mostly completed at the end (Scholes 1985:154).

In "The White Stocking" all the actions are preceded by Mrs. Whiston's excitedly getting out of bed.

"I'm getting up,.....", said Mrs. Whiston, and sprang out of bed briskly (143).

From this point onwards there is a progression in the action, although not necessarily in the Whistons' married life. Throughout the story many actions interlock and overlap, climaxing in the scene where Ted Whiston beats his wife:

"You will be frightened of me the next time you have anything to do with him," he said.

"Do you think you'd ever be told? - ha!"

Her jeering scorn made him go white hot, molten. Slowly, unseeing, he rose and went out of doors, stifled, moved to kill her.(161).

From here onwards the story's pace increases. On his return into the room Mrs. Whiston says: "And besides.....what do you know about anything? He sent me an amethyst brooch and a pair of pearl ear-rings". He seemed to thrust his face and his eyes forward at her as he rose slowly and came to her...Then...the back of his hand struck her with a crash across the mouth...(162).

From these events the code of action moves on once more, this time drawing to a close.

"Where are the things?" he said.

"They are upstairs..."

"Bring them down" he said.

"I won't", she wept, with rage. "You're not going to bully me and hit me like that on the mouth".

And she sobbed again...

"Where are they?" he said.

"They're in the little drawer under the looking-glass", she sobbed.

He went slowly upstairs...and found the trinkets. When he came back she was still crying.

“You’d better go to bed” he said...(163)

He went over...and very gently took her in his hands...

Then as she lay against his shoulder, she sobbed aloud.

“I never meant...”

“My love - my little love “ he cried...(164)

It is clear that all these actions are syntagmatic and that they begin at one point (Mrs. Whiston getting out of bed) and end at another (Mr Whiston beating her due to his jealousy).

CODE 2:

The Hermeneutic Code or Code of Puzzles

This code is an aspect of narrative syntax. In all questions raised (Who is that? What are you up to? etc.) we have an element of the *Hermeneutic Code*.

Many stories like “The White Stocking” start with an action or question which the author refuses to answer for a certain period. Most stories have barriers to the completion of action. They also have lures, feints and equivocations which delay the answers to certain questions.

These levels of narration interact and relate in various ways (Scholes 1985:154).

In “The White Stocking” these actions are mainly proairetic (Sam Adams ‘pursuing’ Mrs Whiston by sending her valentines) and hermeneutic (Mr. Whiston’s trying to find out where her valentines come from). In the second line of the story Mr Whiston asks his wife: “What, the Hanover’s got you?” (143)

The answer to this question is delayed until we see her eagerness to answer the front door and fetch her valentines. Her behaviour is now made clear. The hermeneutic code has now been solved.

On seeing her valentines her husband asks:

“Who’s that from?”

The hermeneutic code is reopened.

Lawrence has inserted a feint in Mrs Whiston’s answer to delay the answer to this question,

“In a valentine...How do I know who it’s from?”(145)

By using this technique Lawrence increases the suspense and density of the plot [message]. Our suspense is increased by the husband’s statement eleven lines further on:

“Get out...you know who it’s from.”(145)

She replies “Truth I don’t”, but we *know* that she does and that the story will ultimately answer questions, both ours, and her husband’s.

By using the hermeneutic code, Lawrence increases the suspense level in the story considerably. It almost becomes a ‘suspense novel’.

The more questions the husband asks, the more feints his wife offers as answers. The story is therefore based mainly on the hermeneutic code, especially if we keep in mind that Mr. Whiston asks 47 questions, which are ultimately answered, and his wife gives approximately 15 feints instead of answers. An example is Whiston’s question on seeing the white stocking:

“Is this another?” [Valentine]

His wife offers a feint (lie) :

“No , that’s a sample”. (145)

His question is, however, ultimately answered 37 lines further on in his wife’s statement:

“You know that white stocking...I told you a lie. It wasn’t a sample. It was a valentine.”
(147)

Lawrence also employs an interesting technique in his use of a hermeneutic code which is an equivocation as well. On p 144 we see Mrs. Whiston receiving valentines. One of them is a white stocking. We are immediately curious and want to know where this strange valentine comes from. Our question fits into the hermeneutic code. Mr. Whiston is also curious. On hearing that this is a valentine (147) he seems to us to be inordinately jealous, especially once he knows who it is from.

His jealousy increases when she wears the white stocking with a stocking she received earlier from Adams. His jealousy is, however, understandable when seen in the light of the events at the Christmas party a year earlier. He knows what we don't know. Only later in the story do we see that Adams 'procured' a white stocking from Mrs. Whiston at that party. Her husband found out about it and was furious at the time.

This view into the past is illuminating to the reader, while Mrs. Whiston receiving the stocking on p.144 is unclear. Her husband, however, knows the past events before we do. Herein lies the hermeneutic code's equivocation.

The hermeneutic code can also supply relatively quick answers which can carry a shocking and ominous tone for the persons in a story as well as for the reader. We see this on page 160:

"Why, what are you frightened of him for?" she mocked.

Whiston answers, "What am I frightened of him for?...Why, for you, you stray-running little bitch".

After all the preceding events and Mrs. Whiston's behaviour with Sam Adams we are surprised to hear her say:

"[Adams} sent me a pair of pearl ear-rings and an amethyst brooch".(162).

This is clearly a lure on Mrs. Whiston's part. We want to ask the same question that Whiston asks;

“And what did he give you them for?”

He has taken the lure and so have we. We see that Mrs. Whiston’s “...crying dried up in seconds. She was also tense”.

“They came as valentines”, she replied still not subjugated, even if beaten” (162).

By using this technique Lawrence introduces the aspect of shock into his story.

The cultural code, connotative code and the symbolic code which follow “tend to work outside the constraints of time” and are thus reversible.....there is no need to read the instances of these codes in chronological order to make sense of them in the narrative.

(Felluga,2002)

CODE 3

The Cultural Code

“Under this heading Barthes groups the whole system of knowledge and values invoked by a text. These appear as nuggets of proverbial wisdom, scientific ‘truths’, the various stereotypes of understanding which constitute human ‘reality’ .“ (Scholes 1985:154) Because “The White Stocking”, unlike Balzac’s Sarrasine, is not a ‘cultural story’, the cultural code is difficult to apply. There are, however, various instances of the cultural code in the story. The whole idea surrounding St Valentine’s Day is not strange to the European culture. This is therefore a Cultural Code since it embodies various ‘stereotypes of understanding’ constituting our existence.

The same can be said for Christmas and the ever popular Christmas parties people give. The European (Christian) culture is also one that disapproves of adultery and sexual or romantic liberties outside of marriage. This too is a cultural code which we see Whiston enforcing upon his wife.

“You don’t want to be too free with Sam Adams...You know what he is”.

“How free?” she asked.

“Why - you don’t want to have too much to do with him”.(155)

CODE 4:

The Connotative Code

The themes of the story make up the *connotative* code. They form a character as they constitute themselves around a particular proper name. The description of Sam Adams in section II of the story, on p.143, is a good example of a connotative code. We see that Sam Adams "...was a bachelor of forty, growing stout, a man well dressed and florid, with a large brown moustache and thin hair...His fondness for the girls, or the fondness of the girls for him, was notorious...".

From this description, and his behaviour towards Mrs. Whiston at the party, we can understand Mr Whiston's jealousy. Adams' notorious fondness of the girls has obviously reached Whiston's ears and causes him to caution his wife:

"You don't want to be too free with Sam Adams...You know what he is".

She doesn't listen to him and we see the result of her disobedience at the dance:

"...and it seemed she was connected with him [Sam Adams] , as if the movements of his body and limbs were her own movements, yet not her own movements- and oh, delicious!...his fingers seemed to search into her flesh..." (153)

This erotic 'seduction scene' could have been connotated (deduced) from Adam's reputation and Whiston's warning.

CODE 5:

The Symbolic Field

This is the code of 'theme' as it is usually expressed in English, i.e. the idea or ideas around which the story is constructed. In "The White Stocking" the theme, the white stocking, is even suggested in the title.

Whiston's jealousy and his wife's flirting with Sam Adams are also central themes of the story. "The White Stocking' and Mrs. Whiston's flirtations can be seen as symbolically

related. Adams' Christmas-party (p. 148-157) is a central theme (symbolic) around which the whole story revolves. Here Adams 'seduces' Mrs Whiston, she flirts with him, Whiston starts becoming jealous and Adams gets Mrs Whiston's white stocking.

The theme of Adams reputation with females is embroidered upon here:

"He seized her hands and led her forward...

"Now then", he said, taking her card to write down the dances,

"I've got a carte blanche, haven't I?"

"Mr. Whiston doesn't dance", she said."

"I am a lucky man!" he said scribbling his initials. "I was born with an amourette in my mouth". (150).

His effect upon her and her flirtation are also addressed in the symbolic code. We see this on p.151.

"She went with anticipation to the arms of Sam Adams, when the time came to dance with him. It was so gratifying, irrespective of the man. And she felt a little grudge against Whiston, soon forgotten when her host was holding her near to him, in a delicious embrace...She was getting warmed right through, the glow was penetrating into her , driving away everything else."

The theme of the stocking is resumed by Lawrence on p. 159.

"Again she tried on the ear-rings. Then another little inspiration came to her. She drew on the white stockings, both of them.

Presently she came down in them...

"Look!" she said. "They'll do beautifully".

This gives rise to the theme of Whiston's jealousy.

"He was filled with unreasonable rage, and took the pipe from his mouth" (159).

"You'd like Sam Adams to know you was wearing 'em, wouldn't you? That's what would please you". (160)

These, then, are the five codes as used by Barthes. The examples taken from Lawrence's 'The White Stocking' illustrate the validity of Barthes system, even though Lawrence's story is not a 'cultural' one.

Having shown Barthes five codes, as applied to Lawrence's story, I will now proceed to his system of functions, indices and informants.

FUNCTIONS

Functions involve *metonymic relata*, as they correspond to a functionality of doing. (Barthes 1997:93) The units of functions are not, however, all of the same importance. Some functions constitute central aspects of the novel (or a segment thereof) while others simply serve a function of 'filling in' spaces between central aspects of the novel.

The functions that make up the central aspects of the novel Barthes calls *cardinal functions* or *nuclei*. The 'gap filling' functions are simply complementary, and Barthes refers to them as *catalysers* [helping functions] (1997:93).

According to Barthes, the criteria for a cardinal function is that it introduces and concludes an action (in Fietz 1982:157).

A good example of cardinal functions and catalysers can be seen in Lawrence's story on p 159:

"She, unable to move him, ran away upstairs, leaving him smoking by the fire. Again she tried on the ear-rings. Then another little inspiration came to her. She drew on the white stockings, both of them."

This is a cardinal function, as it introduces the following action:

"Presently she came down in them. Her husband still sat immovable and glowering by the fire."

This is a catalyser since it stands between the previously mentioned cardinal function and this cardinal function which concludes the action:

“Look!” she said. “They’ll do beautifully,” and she picked up her skirts to her knees, and twisted round, looking at her pretty legs in the neat stockings.
He filled with unreasonable rage...”

From this it is clear that cardinal functions are the risky and dangerous moments of a narrative whereas catalysers [or helping functions] lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries” (Barthes 1997:95).

Lawrence is fond of this method of using what Barthes calls *functions*, and his short story abounds in them.

INDICES and INFORMANTS

Barthes defines indices as aspects referring implicitly to a character, a feeling, an atmosphere (e.g. suspicion) or a philosophy (Barthes 1997:96 and Fietz:158).

These kinds of indices are also referred to as proper indices. Such indices always have ‘implicit signifieds’. We see many examples in Lawrence’s story. We are, for example, shown that Elsie Whiston is an excitable and energetic person. These indices referring to her character always have clear ‘signifieds’. We see this in her reaction to her husband’s question as to where her valentines come from.

“It’s a valentine”, she cried. “How do I know who it’s from?”

“I’ll let you know”, he said.

After this her excitement mounts and we get a glimpse of her character.

“Ted! – I don’t!” she cried, beginning to shake her head, then stopping because of the ear-rings.

He stood still a moment, displeased.

“They’ve no right to send you valentines, now”, he said.

Another index of her character which illustrates her coquettishness follows:

“Ted! - why not? You’re not jealous, are you? I haven’t the least idea who it’s from. Look- there’s my initial” – she pointed with an emphatic finger at the heliotrope embroidery:

“E for Elsie,
Nice little gelsie”,
She sang. (145)

We also see an index referring to an atmosphere on page 148:

“You haven’t been seeing anything of him, have you?” he asked roughly.
From here onward we see the atmosphere and tension this question causes.
“Yes”, she answered, after a moment as if caught guilty.
“You’d go off with a nigger for a packet of chocolate” he said in anger and contempt and some bitterness.
“Ted – how beastly!” she cried. “You know, quite well –“
She caught her lip, flushed, and the tears came to her eyes.

Barthes defines informants in the following way:

“Informants serve to identify, to locate in time and space---they are pure data with immediate signification...[they] bring ready-made knowledge, their functionality, like that of catalysers, is thus weak without being nil”. (1997:96)

There are many examples of informants in “The White Stocking” to illustrate, but for the sake of brevity, I shall include only one example:

“They had been married two years. But still, when she had gone out of the room, he felt as if all his light and warmth were taken away, he became aware of the raw, cold morning”.(143)

In the light of the above discussion, it seems as if Barthes’ five code system of structuralist analysis is neatly applicable to the works of D.H Lawrence, and I found that it worked

particularly well on “The White Stocking”. Although Barthe’s cultural code offers some challenges in analysing ‘non cultural’ texts, it is adaptable. His functions, indices and informants, however, would be applicable to any text.

I end this analysis by agreeing with Scholes who says that Barthes believes

“....there is a great difference between literature which is merely ‘readable’ in our time (the Classics) and that which is ‘writeable’. That which is writeable is indispensable for us, because it is our only defence against the old lies, the exhausted codes of our predecessors...The writeable is a special value for Barthes, producing texts which are uncriticisable because in some way, unfinished, resistant to completion, to clarification”.

(Scholes 1985: 151)

Lawrence’s “The White Stocking” is such a text.

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