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FOOD AS A NARRATIVE AND CULTURAL MARKER IN J. K. ROWLING'S HARRY POTTER SERIES

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Abstract: The article analyses the role of food in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as a narrative and cultural marker. Through close textual analysis, it demonstrates that food-related scenes and eating practices convey emotional states, structure social relations, and articulate notions of belonging and exclusion. Culinary imagery is shown to contribute to the internal coherence of the fictional world and to mediate the reader's engagement with the narrative. The study argues that food functions as a stable semiotic element through which cultural meanings are constructed and communicated within the fantasy text.

Keywords: food imagery, narrative marker, cultural meaning, fantasy literature, Harry Potter Series.

In literature, food extends far beyond its basic nutritional role, operating as a means of shaping fictional worlds and expressing cultural values. Descriptions of meals and eating practices frequently reflect social norms, character traits, and emotional atmospheres, guiding readers' perceptions of the narrative universe [2, pp. 67–68]. Contemporary research increasingly recognizes food as a crucial

narrative and cultural marker, capable of revealing social hierarchies, cultural identities, and relationships between characters. As S. Khatoon and A. Antony point out, “food functions as a literary device that connects the past with the present, shaping characters’ identities and revealing the deep-seated influence of memory and heritage” [2, p. 69].

The *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling offers abundant examples of this phenomenon. Recurrent portrayals of feasts, everyday meals, and contrasts between plenty and scarcity enrich the story world, serving as indicators of social status, cultural affiliation, and emotional wellbeing. Although substantial scholarship has examined Rowling’s use of myth, genre, and intertextuality, the significance of food as a narrative and cultural element has received limited attention. This study therefore explores how culinary imagery in *Harry Potter* contributes to character development, cultural representation, and the overall construction of the magical universe.

In recent literary scholarship, food has increasingly been conceptualised as a culturally meaningful practice that actively participates in the production of textual meaning. Rather than serving a purely descriptive or ornamental function, food-related practices in fiction operate as semiotic acts through which identities, values, and systems of belonging are articulated. As L. Clark argues, “buying, consuming, and serving food are acts of signification through which people construct and sustain their identities,” emphasising that food is fundamentally tied to questions of identity and belonging [1, pp. 9–10]. Within narrative discourse, such acts acquire heightened symbolic value.

From this perspective, literary representations of food reveal layers of cultural information embedded in character behaviour and social interaction. The ways in which characters engage with food – how it is prepared, consumed, or shared – often signal their cultural background and social positioning. L. Clark also notes that in novels, “the way food is presented by, consumed by, and shared by characters often says a great deal about the characters and their culture of origin and identity” [1, p. 12]. Food thus emerges as a subtle but effective narrative marker that communicates meaning indirectly, without explicit authorial explanation.

This approach proves particularly productive when applied to the *Harry Potter* series, which, as L. Clark observes, performs “cultural work on multiple levels” through the constant interplay between the familiar and the fantastical [1, pp. 8–9]. The coexistence of recognisable everyday foods alongside magical confections reflects the broader tension between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. In this sense, food simultaneously reinforces the boundary between reality and fantasy while offering a point of continuity that renders the fictional world accessible to the reader.

Culinary imagery also plays a central role in the construction of identity within the series. L. Clark highlights that sweets and desserts contribute to the formation of both Wizard and Muggle identities and function as a mediating element between characters and readers. Importantly, while readers are excluded from the magical abilities depicted in the novels, they are able to engage imaginatively with food, which remains grounded in shared human experience. As the scientist remarks, “readers cannot make potions or perform spells, but we can create and experience the food” [1, p. 3], making food a particularly effective narrative bridge.

In addition, the act of sharing food serves as a form of social communication within the narrative. Communal eating establishes bonds, negotiates power relations, and delineates moral and social boundaries. L. Clark points out that “power is constructed through the sharing of food with others,” a process through which characters’ ethical qualities are revealed [1, p. 37]. Drawing on anthropological insights, she further associates shared meals with practices of companionship and social cohesion, noting the symbolic importance of bread-sharing in the formation of communal ties [1, pp. 38–39].

Taken together, these observations position food as a multifaceted cultural and narrative marker that encodes identity, belonging, and social relations. Grounded in this theoretical framework, the present study approaches the *Harry Potter* series as a text in which food functions not merely as background detail but as an integral element in the construction of meaning, contributing to both the internal coherence of the fictional world and the reader’s engagement with it.

In Rowling’s narrative, culinary depictions consistently operate at the

intersection of emotional expression, social communication, and cultural coding.

Carlie McAbee notes that “throughout the Potter series, Rowling uses food events to indicate and emphasize her characters’ feelings and emotional states... food events and mealtime rituals display bonds between characters which allow for the sharing of important and sometimes sensitive information” [3, pp. 1–2]. This principle is evident from the very first Hogwarts Welcome Feast, where the lavish display of roast meats, magical sweets, and overflowing tables immediately communicates warmth, community, and inclusion – in contrast to Harry’s neglected meals with the Dursleys. Here, food operates as a medium of affective and social connection, signaling both belonging and narrative significance.

The series further employs bodily responses to food as metaphors for emotional states. C. McAbee observes that “the state of Harry’s stomach often mirrors his feelings... it *lurches, sickens, churns, twists, drops, or warms* in accordance with his emotions” [3, p. 2]. For example, Harry’s stomach *drops* before a Quidditch match and *warms* while sharing a feast with friends, literalizing his psychological states and reinforcing the embodied nature of narrative affect. Such imagery transforms ordinary eating into a narrative mechanism through which readers can experience characters’ emotions firsthand.

Food also encodes emotional deprivation and fulfillment. C. McAbee argues that “to provide food is to provide emotional fulfilment, and to deny food is to withhold feelings or refuse emotional connections” [3, p. 3]. The meager, begrudgingly served meals with the Dursleys function as a narrative sign of neglect and alienation, whereas Hogwarts feasts and Weasley household breakfasts – replete with bread, eggs, and sausages – signal care, hospitality, and acceptance [3, p. 4]. These domestic culinary scenes exemplify Clark’s observation that “food in novels takes on an added layer of complexity whereby the way food is presented by, consumed by, and shared by characters often says a great deal about the characters and their culture of origin and identity” [1, p. 12]. Together, they underscore food’s dual function as both emotional and cultural marker, linking personal identity with social belonging.

Shared meals in Hogwarts further illustrate ritualized social functions. C. McAbee emphasizes that “rituals – both social and practical – transform mere food into a meal” [3, p. 5], while festive events such as Christmas banquets unify characters across house and cultural boundaries. The material abundance of magical feasts, along with their communal performance, functions as a textual embodiment of social cohesion, echoing O. Pluta’s assertion that food carries symbolic meanings which structure identity and social relations within cultural contexts [4].

Even brief culinary interactions, such as tea shared with Hagrid, serve as intimate spaces for emotional exchange and narrative development. C. McAbee notes that Hagrid’s hospitality transforms simple food and drink into a medium for trust, information, and comfort [3, pp. 8–9]. Such moments reinforce food’s role as a bridge between character and reader, reality and magic, social and emotional experience.

The analysis of culinary imagery in the *Harry Potter* series demonstrates that food functions as a multilayered cultural and narrative marker, intertwining emotional, social, and symbolic dimensions. Beyond its material presence, food mediates character relationships, communicates emotional states, and encodes cultural identity. As O. Pluta notes, “culinary practices and representations carry value-laden meanings that structure social experience and cultural identity” [4, pp. 215–216]. In this way, Rowling’s depiction of meals, feasts, and shared treats aligns with broader anthropological and cultural understandings of food as a symbolic medium.

Food operates as both expressive and relational within the narrative. It provides a lens for understanding psychological and emotional states, facilitates social interaction, and marks inclusion or exclusion within the Hogwarts community. The series’ repeated emphasis on communal meals and domestic hospitality illustrates the potential of food to function as a vehicle for moral, social, and emotional communication. L. Clark emphasizes that “food in novels takes on an added layer of complexity whereby the way food is presented by, consumed by, and shared by characters often says a great deal about the characters and their culture of origin and

identity” [1, p. 12]. This observation underscores how shared culinary practices are encoded with social meaning and contribute to the construction of cultural identity within the narrative.

Moreover, food in *Harry Potter* bridges the ordinary and the fantastic, allowing readers to navigate a magical universe through familiar cultural codes. As O. Pluta highlights, “through the symbolic meanings of food, texts create connections between individual experience and collective cultural practices” [4, p. 219]. The juxtaposition of everyday meals with magical treats enables the reader to engage affectively with the narrative while simultaneously experiencing the wonder of the fictional world.

Finally, food in the series is a narrative and cultural instrument that structures character development, social cohesion, and reader engagement. C. McAbee concludes that “food in the *Harry Potter* series offers a compelling though conservative view of the role that home and family play in the lives of young adult characters... Food imagery becomes a bridge for the characters and readers via a familiar, unifying comfort item” [3, p. 10]. Through this lens, meals, shared snacks, and feasts operate as integral elements of the series’ narrative architecture, embedding emotional, cultural, and social meaning into the text.

In conclusion, culinary imagery in Rowling’s work demonstrates that food is never incidental. It is a site of emotional expression, a marker of social and cultural belonging, and a bridge connecting the magical and real worlds. By presenting food as both ordinary and extraordinary, Rowling emphasizes its narrative centrality, reinforcing its role as a core cultural and literary device within the series. The study confirms that food in *Harry Potter* operates simultaneously as a medium of emotional resonance, a marker of social structure, and a cultural symbol, highlighting its enduring significance in literary analysis.

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