

Symbolic Meanings of Cooking in Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five* Series

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Abstract

Food and food preparation are the elements that usually reveals in works of literature. Its recurrent motif raises the assumption that they must contain some meanings in social and cultural realm. This paper analyses the symbolic meanings of cooking, as part of food preparation, in the British children work of literature, The Famous Five, written by Enid Blyton. The analysis uses theory of semiology proposed by Roland Barthes on denotative and connotative meanings and it is conducted through close-reading. The analysis results in how cooking becomes: first, a routine obligation, where the women cook mostly spend their time doing their work in the kitchen and work orderly to please; second, cooking as a marker of maturity for coming-of-age girls, in which teenage becomes the time marker that a girl must be able to cook; third, cooking as a marker of gender-based job division, where women should involve in domestic works, while men dedicate in public sphere. The children's literature becomes one of the effective tools to embed the values and beliefs in children's mind as childhood is the golden age to receive any information through the children's senses.

Keywords: *food; food preparation; cooking; children's literature*

Abstrak

Makanan dan persiapan makan merupakan elemen yang sering muncul dalam karya sastra. Motif yang terus berulang ini memunculkan asumsi bahwa keduanya mengandung makna-makna dalam realitas sosial dan budaya. Tulisan ini menganalisis makna simbolik memasak, sebagai bagian dari persiapan makan, dalam karya sastra anak Inggris, *The Famous Five*, karya Enid Blyton. Analisis menggunakan teori semiologi dari Roland Barthes tentang makna denotatif dan konotatif, dan penelitian dilakukan dengan metode pembacaan dalam. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bagaimana memasak bermakna sebagai: pertama, suatu kewajiban rutin, di mana perempuan memasak banyak menghabiskan waktu mereka di dapur dan bekerja teratur untuk menyenangkan pihak lain; kedua, memasak sebagai tanda kematangan seorang gadis yang memasuki masa remaja di mana masa remaja merupakan penanda waktu di mana seorang gadis harus bisa memasak; ketiga, memasak sebagai penanda pembagian kerja berbasis gender, di mana perempuan harus terlibat dalam pekerjaan domestik, sementara laki-laki berada dalam ranah publik. Sastra anak merupakan salah satu alat yang efektif untuk menanamkan nilai-nilai dan keyakinan dalam pikiran anak karena masa kanak-kanak merupakan masa emas untuk memperoleh segala informasi melalui panca indera anak.

Kata kunci: *makanan; persiapan makan; memasak; sastra anak*

1. Introduction

Food and food practices are inevitable in human's life. With their adaptability and creativity, people may process the raw materials into the edibles to sustain their lives, to bring adequate nutrition to their bodies, so that they can run the living tasks. Cooking is one of the food practices playing important roles in managing the raw into the cooked ones. Structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss (1969) through his seminal work "The Raw and The Cooked" stressed the transition of the raw food into the

cooked as the nature to the culture. He pointed out that the use of technology may lead the food into more 'cultural'. He divided cooking process into grilling, roasting, smoking, and boiling, in which the first three are associated with nature, while boiling is connoted with culture. He based his argument on the belief that the first three directly contact with fire, while boiling needs equipment such as container which is human-made. Since it involves human technology, then it relates to culture.

Richard in her research (in Sutton, 2016) asserts that cooking is far more a housecraft, the art of housework. As daily routine, cooking conceives difficulties in many ways; first, it is about time, where a cook must be able to calculate and manage the time well so as the punctuality in preparing and serving the food is considered important ones. Second, it is about power, where the power of cooking process is in the hand of women, while the control is more social. Women actually perceive control and prestige over food; however, the prestige is framed in the form of courteousness to their husbands or sons-in law. Third, the teaching of cooking for young girls is focused on the context of sibling or peer-group rather than hierarchical context.

Food and food practices have been issues in works of literature even Before Century such as those in Homer's *Odyssey* which is called as 'the eatingest epic' due to the abundance of the scenes in food and food practices (Fielding in Kessler, 2005:152). During Victorian era, the writers such as Jane Austen, Charles Dicken, Benjamin Disraeli, and Thomas Hardy wrote their writings involving food and food practices picturing the social and cultural issues in that period (Cozzi, 2010). In children's literature, the existence of food and food practices cannot be separated as food becomes fundamental element in children's daily lives. Nicholson and Symons (in Keeling dan Pollard, 2009:10) mentions that the children's experiences with food build their personality throughout their childhood until adulthood. Food and food practices can reveal the issues on children's social, psychological, and cultural conditions. Therefore, food and food practices become recurrent motif in literature.

The Famous Five is one of the well-known children work of literature written by British woman writer, Enid Blyton, during 1942-1963. Consisting of 21 series, *The Famous Five* has been translated into more than 90 languages and recorded as one of the most popular children works of literature in the world ever. Even though it has been written more than 75 years ago, the series are still reprinted and put in the bookstores' shelves until today. Research by Mackey (2020) on the readers whose age range is 50 years from Canada and India, shows that *The Famous Five* may evoke the respondents' imagination and memories on their childhood, such as on food, adventures, and the locations. It shows that though passing through different culture and age, *The Famous Five* may exist in all generations.

Even though food is not central theme of the series, however, the food and food practices scenes have been depicted in the story many times. The scenes of eating together, the food preparation, and the appreciation of the fine meals are expressed regularly in the series. The recurrent scenes of food and food practices raise the questions about the importance of food and food practices in the series and what the food and food practices represent. Based on that assumption, the paper is written to analyze the representation of cooking in *The Famous Five* series and what the symbols they represent.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research applies Roland Barthes' theory of semiology. In his theory, Barthes (1985) proposes two semiological systems: denotative and connotative meaning. When signifier and signified form a sign, this results in denotative sign. This denotative sign which is also called as connotative signifier, later involves connotative signified to create connotative sign. The connotative sign or meaning is usually associated with the social context that the text encompasses. Therefore, the analysis also involves the social and cultural aspects of the works of literature. Copley and Jansz (1999) assert that the process of identification on connotative meaning is quick and happens as common as it does, so that both denotative and connotative meanings cannot be separated.

3. Research Methods

The material objects of this research is *The Famous Five Series* that include *Five Go Off in A Caravan* (first published 1946), *Five Go Off to Camp* (first published 1948), *Five Get into Trouble* (first published 1949), *Five Go Down to the Sea* (first published 1953), *Five on Finniston Farm* (first published 1960), *Five Have A Mystery to Solve* (first published 1962), and *Five a Together Again* (first published 1963). Even though all *The Famous Five* series contains food preparation, especially cooking, as this article intended to discuss; however, the above-mentioned series are those that contain higher portion of that elements required to fulfill this research aims.

The research is conducted through several steps. The first is close-reading to material objects, namely *The Famous Five* series as mentioned. They are in-depthly read and then, second, is recorded based on the aims and research questions. This step is followed by the third step, classifying the data by tabulating them on some categories that have been established. The fourth step is analyzing the data based on the theory followed with the final step of the research, which is drawing conclusion based on the analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

The Famous Five tells about the adventures of 4 (four) children aged 10-13 years-old: Julian, the oldest, with his younger brother and sister, Dick, and Anne, and his cousin, Georgina--who due to her tomboyishness she prefers to be called George--with her beloved dog, Timothy. During their holiday, they usually roam through the countryside, spend the nights in pastures, or stay in friend's or family's houses, including Kirrin Cottage, where George's family lives in. On their adventures, they usually encounter mysterious experiences that lead them to uncover some crimes. The food and food practices are depicted along with their adventures and come out regularly. As the Five spend activities more outdoor, they usually prepare and cook the food during their journey at the camp or at the homestay they spend during the holidays.

Food, according to Oxford dictionary, can be explained as "any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth." Merriam-Webster dictionary elaborates it more clearly: "1) a. material consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, and

fat used in the body of an organism to sustain growth, repair, and vital processes, and to furnish energy; b. inorganic substances absorbed by plants in gaseous form or in water solution; 2) Nutriment in solid form; 3) Something that nourishes, sustains, or supplies.” Food practices are all activities involving eating practices, from giving and sharing food, cleaning the cooking stuff and others (Neely, Walton, and Stephen, 2014). Lee (2015) puts in wider perception on food by involving how, why, where, or with whom people are eating. Cooking, then becomes part of food practices. Merriam Webster dictionary explained the definition of cooking as follows: *1.a.) the act of preparing food for eating, especially by heating: the act of cooking food; b.) a manner of preparing food; 2) food that is cooked.* This research will use no.1 definition with the wider perspectives relating to social and cultural issues.

Sutton (2016) elaborated the symbolic meanings of cooking as: 1) power, oppression, and identity; 2) knowledge, especially for women; 3) agency, that relates the cook and the consumers; 4) values, which depends on habits, willingness, and traditions which is usually unconscious; 5) instilled skills, memory, and sensory apprenticeship, that involves body, mind, and all senses through interactions with others; and 6) everyday risky activities that enable cooks to exposure harmful cooking stuff or cooking process. Sutton based those arguments on the ethnographic research that some scholars— included himself—conducted in different areas and cultures. Therefore, the natures of those meanings are situational depending on the cultural values, belief, and traditions that the community embraced.

In *The Famous Five* series, cooking activities may contain the following symbolic meanings:

Cooking as a Routine Obligation and Tool to Please Others

In *The Famous Five*, the activities of eating and cooking, which consists of the three time-meals and afternoon tea, are depicted regularly in all series. The characters of the series are described enjoying the meals and all the food practices that sometimes are put upon them. The existence of food cannot be separated from the intervention of women cooks who appear in all the series. Their main duties are “...*Cleaning, cooking, and washing,*” *she said, briskly. “But I’m not a nurse for children....”* (Blyton, 1997, *Five are Together Again*: 33). The women cook is usually associated with servant which was common in England during Victorian era until the half of the twentieth century (Todd, 2009: 183-184). Beside helping their masters on those three tasks, sometimes they also help beyond those tasks if needed. Blyton shows her willingness to reveal the existence of women servants that declined in the interwar years in Britain due to the growth of industrialisation dan urbanism that led women to have more choices to enter wider workplaces.

The depiction of women servants is mostly cooking as pictured in the series. Following the numbers of mealtime, the women cooks usually prepare breakfast, lunch, dinner, and afternoon tea which are served in the same and certain time everyday. The food is usually homemade, including the bread and biscuits, which can actually be bought in bakeshops. Their workload will rise once there are extra activities or feasting, such as Christmas, or big dinner, where people usually gather around for meal resembling a party. Joanna, Jenny, Mrs. Stick, Aggie, Doris are among the women cooks that stay

in the hosts' house and doing their cooking works as daily routine and must be conducted everyday. During the children's adventures, there exist the farmers' wives, such as Mrs. Penruthlan, Mrs. Andrews, Mrs. Philpot, who cook for the guests who come to their houses for excursion.

She was very busy in her kitchen, cooking, cooking, cooking! Her enormous larder was already full of the most appetising looking pies, tarts, hams and cheeses [...]

"You'll have to help me tomorrow, she said. "Shelling peas, scraping potatoes, stringing beans, picking currants and raspberries, and you'll find hundreds of wild strawberries in the copse, too which can go to add a flavour to the fruit salad." (Blyton, 1997, *Five Go Down to the Sea*: 88)

"Sure, Pop, "said Junior. "Say, can't I have an iced drink? Look here—who's going to drink hot tea on a day like this!"

I'll get you some iced lemonade, "said Mrs. Philpot, rising. (Blyton, 1997, *Five on Finniston Farm*: 31-32)

They all sat down to dinner. There was a big meat-pie, a cold ham, salad, potatoes in their jackets, and home-made pickles. It really was difficult to know what to choose.

"Have some both," said Mrs. Andrews, cutting the meat-pie. "Begin with the pie and go on with the ham. That's the best of living on a farm, you know—you do get plenty to eat."

After the first course there were plums and thick cream, or jam tarts and the same cream. Everyone tucked in hungrily. (Blyton, 1997, *Five Go Off to Camp*: 61)

The above excerpts indicate how women cooks execute their daily routine in cooking for all family members, in which it can be categorized as the denotative meaning. Meanwhile, when it comes with connotative signified, it can form connotative meaning, which is a tool to please others even though it may repress their own desires. In *Five Go Down to the Sea*, Mrs. Penruthlan, the farmer's wife, spend a lot of time to work in the kitchen to cook and make sure that the food is served as best as she can, including when she invites people to come for dinner after the circus's show. In the compensation of the lack of more people to help, she asks children to assist her in preparing the food. In *Five on Finniston Farm*, Mrs. Philpot tries to serve his fussy American little guest even though she should move around for preparing ice lemonade only for him, instead of tea which everybody has as it is tea time. DeVault (1991) in her research on women's participation in domestic works mentions that a lot of women feel that they are successful in their domestic works when they can make other people, chiefly men, delighted. Therefore, the cooking and food preparation activities need caring, connection, and sensitivity to the people they cook for, even though there is no blood line that connects them. DeVault (1991) asserts that cooking with caring shows woman as 'recognizably womanly.' This also occur to the women

cooks in the series. Blyton described how though the cooks prepare the food with caring, on the other hand, the uneasy feelings about cooking also emerge.

Anne looked at Mrs. Philpot's kind, tired face, and felt suddenly sorry for her. How awfully to *have* to have your home invaded by strangers, whether you liked them or not! She went over to her (Blyton, 1997, *Five on Finniston Farm*: 14)

Mrs. Philpot came into the room at once. "That's Mr. Henning's bell," she said. "I must make his coffee."

"I'll take up his tray," said Anne. "George is going to take up Junior's."

"Oh no—I really don't like you do that," said Mrs. Philpot, distressed. "Just then another bell rang. It jangled to and fro for a very long time.

"That's Junior's bell," said Mrs. Philpot. "He always seems to think I'm quite deaf!" (Blyton, 1997, *Five on Finniston Farm*: 52)

The above-mentioned excerpts denote that cooking may entail some consequences, one of them is sacrificing the cook's feelings. The distress in cooking is in hand with the obligation to keep the meal on time, keep up with the eaters' appetite, and also other factors such as the eaters' attitudes. The women cooks in the series should keep up with the things and make sure that the people they serve will be satisfied.

Cooking as the Marker of Maturity

In many cultures, girls are expected to cook when they are regarded have to come at their age to cook. Girls are 'forced' to show that they are able to cook, at least the simplest food. Not only preparing the food, but also using the fire, which means transforming the raw materials into the cooked and edible. For a coming-to-age girl, the ability to transform those raw materials is viewed as the maturity of a girl into adulthood.

There was bacon in the larder of the caravans, and Anne said she would fry that and an egg each for everyone. She was very proud of being able to cook them. She had taken a few lessons from Cook in the last few days, and was very anxious to show the others what she had learnt. [...]

"...Watch me crack these eggs on the edge of this cup, everybody, so that I can get out the yolk and white and fry them." Crack! The egg broke against the edge of the cup—but its contents unfortunately fell outside the cup instead of inside. Anne went red when everyone roared with laughter. (Blyton, 1997, *Five Go Off in A Caravan*: 31-32).

In *The Famous Five*, Anne is the character who perceives higher responsibility in food preparation among the other characters. The excerpt shows that Anne is grateful to serve others and even has

willingness to always do the things. She has apprenticed to the party who engages and is capable in cooking. Sherrie B. Ortner (1974) in her seminal article ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’ mentions that women in all cultures are symbol of nature, the untransformed nature, as they must bear with regular menstruation, giving birth, and caring the new infants and then transforms them to be ‘civilized’. Meanwhile, men are associated with culture as they are freed from the domestic roles as women must involve in, and get in more on public sectors. Therefore, when a girl has come to her teenage, socially she is constructed to be able to cook---from ‘the raw’ to ‘the cooked’ as Levi-Strauss put in as the most basic structure of civilization-- and serve others and run her roles as the new status as teenager. The cooking egg is one of the simplest skills that Anne must master and she was embarrassed when her first show was failed.

The apprenticeship to the reputable cook is one of the steps Anne must encounter. Sutton (2016) by citing the works of Tim Ingold, mentions that the skills in practicing is not about the mind commands to the body to do something, but it involves the extension of connection between mind and body, by using some utensils, and using agility even in different circumstances. The circumstance is the field of the activity itself, where in Ingold’s word: ‘the world is its own best model.’ It contains the meanings that apprenticeship involves the interactions of the senses and the body, and it can be learnt from skilled figures. Body automatization will be formed when one actively involves in his routine activities. Blackford (2009) puts in that in novels, it is common that the young girls usually learn to cook from the mother figures. The mother figure does not always *an sich* a mother, but they can be others with cooking skills to whom the girl can apprentice. In this case, the mother figures have obligation to nurture the next generation as the cooking skill should be passed through them. In *The Famous Five*, Anne learns how to cook from the skilled parties and involves in food preparation processes, such as the cooks in their house or Kirrin Cottage, or the farmer’s wives the children encounter during their holidays. Even though she does not literally learn the cooking process under supervision, Anne’s involvement in cooking dan preparing food in all food scenes in all series can be included as learning process.

Anne’s capability to handle the kitchen works makes her more grown-up. The maturity and her ability in handle food preparation is in line. When Julian asks her about the food supply for the next day, she feels to be proud to be given the task and feels mature.

“I’ll just see what we’ve got in the larder, Julian,” said Anne, getting up. She knew perfectly well what there was in the larder—but it made her feel grown -up and important to go and look. It was nice to feel like that when she so often felt small and young, and the others were big and knew so much (Blyton, 1997, *Five Go Off in Caravan*: 60)

“Some people are so awfully nice and generous, “said Anne as the mounted their bicycles to ride off again. “You just can’t help thinking them. I do hope I can cook like that when I grow up.”

“If you do, Julian and I will always live with you and not dream of getting married!” said Dick, promptly, and they all laughed. (Blyton, 1997, *Five Get into Trouble*: 41)

In almost all cultures, mothers usually inherit their cooking skills to the next generation for preservation of culture. In most Asian-American novels, the mother figures usually teach their daughters to cook their homeland menu as the tool to preserve their home culture and to keep away from the threatening modern food of the host land. In *The Famous Five*, Anne learns how to make simple food that can be seen as the traditional English food, such as English breakfast or teething for afternoon tea. The second excerpt above shows that Anne is enchanted by the generosity of people living in the countryside and their ability in cooking fascinating, delicious food. Their perfectness in Anne’s view, makes her to be able to inherit their cooking skills when she grows up.

From the above elaboration, it can be drawn that the denotative meaning is that cooking activity marks the maturity of coming-of-age girl. Connotatively, it can be a tool for preservation the traditional food and traditional values inherited from the skilled figures, in this case is women cooks that inspire Anne to have excellent capability in cooking. Dick’s comment on Anne’s desire to become a good cook means the supporting values to preserve the thought in gender-based job division, which will be discussed the next.

Cooking as the Marker of Gender-Based Job Division

Cooking, inevitably, in all cultures, is always associated with women. The separation leads the existence of gender-based job division, where Anne—and also George—involve more on domestic works, including food preparation, while Julian and Dick are put more on public, masculine sphere. The division is socially constructed through the text as the society—represented by the adult and children character—support the convention that Anne and George should do the domestic ones while boys do not.

“We’ve unpacked some bacon rashers and tomatoes,” said Anne, who loved cooking. “How do you light the stove, Julian?”

“George knows,” said Julian. “I say, did we pack a frying-pan?”

“Yes, I packed myself,” said Anne. “Do go and bathe if you’re going to. Breakfast will be ready before you are!” (Blyton, 1997: *Five Go Off to Camp*: 22).

During their camping, Anne involves a lot in food preparation, including cooking. The job division based on gender, for the feminists, is regarded as something traditional, in opposition with feminism wave emerged in the late 19th century and 20th century that promoted equality for women and refused traditional roles. Cooking may be regarded as the marker of gender-based job division, while mostly done by women. However, connotatively, especially through feminism view, it can be meant as the perpetuation of male domination over female.

However, while George refuses the tasks in domestic works, including cooking and always envies about the freedom her male counterparts receive, Anne feels happy to execute the domestic tasks, as the above and below mentions:

It was fun storing all the shopping away. Anne enjoyed it more than anyone, for she really was a most domesticated little person.

“A real home-maker!” said Dick, appreciatively, when he saw how neat and comfortable, she had made the loft, where the three boys were to sleep. “Just about room for the three of us, plus all the baggage in the corner! And how good the larder looks!”

Anne looked at her well-stocked larder, and smiled. Now she could give her little ‘family’ really nice meals. All those tins! She read the names on them. Fruit salad. Tinned ears. Tinned peaches. Sardines. Ham. Tuna. A new cake in that round tin, big enough to last for at least three days. Biscuits. Chocolate wafers—good old Julian—he knew how much she loved those—and George did, too! (Blyton, 1997, *Five Have Mystery to Solve*: 46).

“Don’t you ever open one again, then,” said Dick. “I’m the official tin opener from now on! Dear old Anne, whatever should we do without you? You take everything on your shoulders, and we just let you! We all ought to help you more.”

“No, don’t,” said Anne in alarm. “I like doing things on my own. You lot would only break things or upset them. You’re all so ham-handed when it comes to washing-up or setting out crockery, though I know you mean well.” (Blyton, 1997, *Five Have Mystery to Solve*: 67).

A research by Charles and Kerr (1988) on 181 women shows that 88,5% women are responsible for daily cooking, while men only help on non-meal preparation or snack. Most women find that that is their jobs as mother and wife, although some of them feel dislike when the responsibilities are put on their shoulders. Inness (2001) puts it that kitchen culture constructs the women’s roles. Media, such as news, advertising, cookbooks, and other sources may construct the women’s role as expected by society. Blyton’s creating how Anne enjoys working with domestic works and feels happy when she can accomplish her works as she expects, and even refuses the help from Dick who feels guilty putting all domestic responsibilities to her, shows that Blyton still maintained the traditional view of job division. In addition, the male characters also supported the job division. Coetzee (2011) asserts that Blyton indeed promotes the social convention in the mid of twentieth century on the male’s domination over female through George who perceives power as she acts as a boy, not because she is parallel with the boy. However, Coetzee argues that there is open opportunity for girls and women to succeed at masculine tasks, at the same time they can also succeed in feminine roles. Coetzee claims that Blyton tries to show the available opportunities for female’s sphere. Women are free to choose whether they will choose to be feminine as the path that Anne chooses, or to be masculine like George, with their own success through the roles that they build by themselves. Anne can be succeeded in domestic works which

is important for the continuity of the group, while George is succeeded as a group leader and involves in outdoor activities.

5. Conclusion

Cooking, as part of food preparation, entails various meanings, depending on the culture and discourse that encompass. Cooking, as the vital process in transforming the raw into the cooked, involves skills, body automatization, creativity, and feeling of caring. Skills and body automatization determine how far a cook is get used to doing his/her work and how long the time it needs. Creativity and feeling of caring are needed as the cooks should please others and sometimes restrain their own desires.

Cooking is socially considered as gendered works. The adult women and young girls become parties that are constructed to be responsible to cook, in which the responsibilities strengthen the concept of gender-based job division. Blyton, even though came from middle class family, supported the convention on the concept, which later led her to receive the label of sexism, in which it is still debatable until today. The question is why should children's literature? The answer is simply because childhood is the golden time when values and beliefs can be put on. Children can easily absorb the new values and beliefs through what they read, hear, and see. Hence, children's literature can act as an effective medium to accelerate the internalization process in children's minds.

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