

How Do You Take Your Genre? The Coffeehouse as Messenger

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In this article, Wyland utilizes the concept of convention and the CHAT process of representation to explore the boundaries of what could be a genre in his genre analysis of *The Coffeehouse in Uptown Normal*, with the hopes of showcasing how we can understand the implicit meanings and messages of non-written genres.

One day in my Introduction to Teaching Composition course, my fellow graduate students and I were having a debate (much like debates I imagine students in ENG 101 have). The topic was **genre**. The argument: what is a genre and what *isn't*? This debate in particular was over whether a water bottle does or does not qualify as a genre. If this debate does not characterize the nature of what it means to be an academic, then I don't know what does. I mention this discussion because it highlights a particular interest of mine within the field of Genre Studies: how should we understand genre in terms of its definition if there continues to be, even amongst individuals who are trying to teach genre within the ISU Writing Program, dissenting opinion in regard to its boundaries? My answer: we don't.

Let me explain. I'm not saying that we shouldn't attempt to define genre. If we didn't give genre a definition at all, then we wouldn't be able to say that a particular genre has its own set of distinguishing characteristics. What I'm proposing is a move away from attempting to provide ourselves with hard and fast definitions of what a genre is and isn't. Instead, we should move towards a practice that gets us to think more in terms of what a genre *could*

be. To me, **genres** are texts that convey a message in a particular, meaningful way. In my opinion, one concept that I had the most difficulty with when first learning about genre, and a difficulty I believe a lot of newly exposed Genre Studies learners face, is understanding the potential of the concept of genre to convey these messages not in explicit, alphabetical ways, but in implicit, **contextual** ones. When I say contextual, I'm referring to a message that is not conveyed overtly with words (opposite the way a novel portrays a message with writing or the dialogue of a movie portrays a message through explicit statements of characters or of the film's narrator). A contextual message is one that is inferred through observation and that is only understood by connections we consciously make between non-alphabetic objects and the meaning we perceive these objects to hold.

In order to demonstrate this process of analyzing contextual genres, I set out to perform a **genre analysis** of a particular space a person most likely encounters without knowing they are interacting with a genre or existing within a genre. The genre that I am referring to in this case is coffee shops, and the specific text within that genre that I am analyzing is The Coffeehouse in Uptown Normal. I hope that through my genre analysis, both those reading this article and I will not only see the possibilities of genre, but also see how to go about conducting a close reading of texts in the world at large in order to understand their implicit messages.

A Quick Coffee Break: What's a Genre Analysis?

I believe the best place to start a genre analysis is by doing what I referred to above as a close reading of the features present in the text of a genre. A genre analysis is, as I understand it, an attempt to explore the **conventions** of a particular genre (or the unique aspects of that genre that allow us to distinguish it from another genre) and to then unearth the implicit messages those conventions convey. In this case, the "text" of The Coffeehouse is situated in the aesthetic within its walls and its placement/relationship with the community of ISU. What follows, then, is my genre analysis, a detailed observation of The Coffeehouse on a Friday afternoon in Uptown Normal and my thought process while working to form meaning from The Coffeehouse's aesthetic and connection with place.

Grabbing Lunch: I Mean, Doing Research

I sit in a black leather booth, the cracks in its upholstery mended with black duct tape. My notebook sits atop a wooden table, one of many types,

the finishes of their surfaces all different colors. The furniture¹ within the Coffeehouse is all eclectic in nature. The chairs have varying patterned backs. Some are a medley of wood and metal, some are merely wooden. Some are cushioned, some are not. Framed and unframed artwork² hangs upon the shop's walls, and beside them all are small white stickers conveying the artist of the piece, their contact info, the piece's name, and a price (I know, you've noticed the superscripted numbers and might be looking for footnotes, but that's not what the numbers are for ... I'll get to that, though; keep reading!).

All of the art is for sale, and all of the art is done by local artists, student or not, and hangs on the walls due to the Coffeehouse's allowance (because it helps bring in business). On the door into the shop there is a small black sticker with the words "support local artists" on it.



Image 1: The interior of The Coffeehouse.



Image 2: The exterior of The Coffeehouse.



Image 3: Sign at The Coffeehouse stating, “Support local art.”

One of these aforementioned local artists enters the shop with a cohort of fellow artists and interested buyers. I know this because upon entering, the artist in question came up to patrons of the shop individually and informed them and myself what was going on, not to feel out of place or disturbed, and that the catered finger foods for the event are available to the public, and we are welcome to help ourselves to some. I thank her, and she leaves to tend to some interested individuals who are scrutinizing one of her pieces on the wall, each of her works made with actual coffee grounds

or beans. Then, my ears are met with the gentle vibrations of the strings belonging to an acoustic guitar³. The soft chords are being strummed in the back corner of the shop by a gentleman who is performing there atop a small carpeted stage. He is testing the sound and appears to be playing “Gold on the Ceiling” by the Black Keys.

I sit facing the front of the shop, which is all glass, lending a view of the tracks running through Uptown and the stores across the street, Babbitt’s among them. To my left is the front counter of The Coffeehouse, where food or beverage orders are taken. There you will find The Coffeehouse’s menu, which will tell you that all food options here are vegetarian, and that they serve breakfast all day⁴. Behind the bar is a small work area where the baristas pour coffee and fix the beverages. It is lined with a glass container which holds their pastries; amongst today’s offerings are pumpkin bars topped with cream cheese icing, scones, and a variety of muffins. Hidden away past the work area is a kitchen where I can now see employees in white aprons checking meal tickets and plating food orders. Now, one of the employees working the counter brings me the vegetarian frisco burger and fries I ordered, takes my order number card off of the table, and asks me kindly if I would like some salt and pepper for my meal. I respectfully decline and thank her for her service, and she then proceeds to smile and go back to the work area to care for the plethora of customers they now have due to the art showcase.

As I chew on some fries (which are delicious by the way; if you haven’t tried Coffeehouse’s fries yet, you should definitely get some in the near future), I gaze around the rest of the interior. Behind the work station and the pastry containers are trash can holders that read “thank you,” atop which sit bins for dirty dishes. The Coffeehouse does not use disposable dishware,

unless you order something to go⁵. There is also an array of coffee beans in large dispensers and some accompanying bags where you may purchase their coffee in bulk. There is a grinder there as well, so you may take the coffee back home as grounds, if you please. The employees fixing the beverages also grind their coffee here and stock the coffee under the bar from these dispensers. You bring home the coffee served to customers in shop.

Understanding the Genre Conventions of The Coffeehouse

If you are an astute individual, you might have noticed the superscripted numbers (and my parenthetical discussing them) in my written observations of The Coffeehouse. If you didn't notice the numbers, then don't worry, because I'll be talking about them all in detail at this very moment. The purpose of the numbering of certain words in my observation of The Coffeehouse was to make evident the instances where I observed the coffee shop to be displaying clear genre conventions. As I noted above, the conventions of a genre are characteristic qualities a genre frequently displays. Below, I've made a list of all of the conventions that I noticed while observing The Coffeehouse.

1. Furniture
2. Wall Décor
3. Music
4. Food/Drink
5. Silverware/Dishware

The next step in a genre analysis is to get at what I think of as the **criteria** for a genre's conventions. I see criteria as the specific objects/words/people/things present within a genre that work to portray the genre's conventions. For example, furniture is one of the several conventions I found within The Coffeehouse, and the criteria that work together to form this convention of furniture are things like booths, chairs, tables, benches, etc. Because there are booths and chairs and tables in The Coffeehouse, I can say that the genre convention of furniture is represented. Worth noting is that criteria for genre conventions do not need to be present within the specific genre you're analyzing. Genre criteria are merely things which *could* be present in order to represent a particular convention. Here is a list of the things inside of The Coffeehouse that I was able to identify as criteria for the genre conventions I listed before.

1. Chairs, booths, tables, benches.
2. Paintings, pictures, clocks, frames, murals, etc.
3. Speakers, instruments, singing, performance.
4. Breakfast menu (including omelets, sandwiches, soups, etc.), pastries, coffee/espresso drinks, teas.
5. Plates, forks/spoons/knives.

Evidence: The Proof's in the Pudding, or the Pastries

Now that I've identified the different criteria that designate particular conventions in a genre, I'm going to list specific examples/instances where I see the conventions I outlined earlier being presented in the specific place/genre I'm analyzing. These examples could be labeled as **evidence**: the ideas/words/objects *specifically* and *actually* found within the genre one is analyzing that demonstrate a particular genre convention (as opposed to criteria, which simply *could* be found; so criteria are just possible, conceptual markers of particular genre conventions, whereas evidence consists of actual, existing markers of genre conventions within an actual text, like The Coffeehouse, in this case). Now presenting: a brief list of evidence I found within The Coffeehouse to back up my previous claims of existing genre conventions.

1. Cracked black leather booth, wooden tables with different finishes, variety of chairs.
2. Coffee paintings, other artwork done by local artists.
3. Gentleman playing guitar, singing "Gold on the Ceiling."
4. Vegetarian breakfast menu, vegan pastries/soups, fair-trade coffee/espresso drinks, organic teas.
5. Ceramic plates, silver forks/knives/spoons.

Wake Up and Smell the Representation: What's the Big Deal?

Now, in order to draw conclusions as to the nature of what The Coffeehouse is trying to convey to us, its audience, we need to take a closer look at the forms of evidence that I provided in my list, and we need to understand that, in any kind of genre analysis, it is often useful to consider how a specific instance of a "text" (in this case, The Coffeehouse) can be understood in

relation to other instances of texts within that genre (so, again in this case, other coffee shops). When performing a genre analysis, something to look out for in our observations are the ways in which the criteria we describe take shape in particular forms of evidence. *Why* do the forms of evidence appear the way they do within the genre we're analyzing? This question, *why*, is so important to the process of genre analysis because it recognizes that the authors of specific texts within the genre we are analyzing have made and are making conscious decisions about how the text presents itself and therefore are engaging in the purposeful act of conveying meaning to their audience.

Now I'm going to attempt to display how the particular forms of evidence I found in The Coffeehouse give meaning and how these meanings represent The Coffeehouse as a place that is attempting to give off a specific vibe to those who enter it, the act of which therefore characterizes The Coffeehouse as a unique text within a specific genre (the genre of coffee shops).

While wall art is a convention displayed in the genre of coffee shops from Starbucks to Dunkin, the wall art in The Coffeehouse is unique. The wall décor in The Coffeehouse is not a mass-produced print; instead, it is the work of local artists. This difference between The Coffeehouse and other coffee shops in Uptown Normal is significant. The connotations and meaning of the art displayed on the wall in The Coffeehouse deals heavily with the CHAT aspect of representation. **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)** is just a theory for analyzing texts, kind of like genre studies, and it actually works well in conjunction with genre analyses because it asks us to think about *how* and *why* authors use certain conventions in their texts and what evidence they use to represent those conventions. The CHAT aspect of **representation** is particularly useful for us since it refers to how an author conceives of his/her/their texts and then actually carries out the goal of creating that text and therefore also refers to how an author chooses the means by which a message is conveyed, the form which a message manifests itself in. Wall art is a **convention**, an idea or notion characteristically found in particular genres, of the coffee shop genre, and is seen in coffee shops from Starbucks to Dunkin to The Coffeehouse. What is unique about the means by which wall art is *represented* in The Coffeehouse is the way in which it is inextricably paired with both the artist of the work and said artist's relationship with geography. Let me explain. As noted in my observation of The Coffeehouse's interior, all art adorning the walls of The Coffeehouse is paired with a sticker that lists the name of the artist who created the piece and the sticker on the glass entryway stating: "support local art." Although a face may not be leant to one's association with the art on The Coffeehouse's walls, the idea that this art is not mass produced for the

sole purpose of lending the walls of the shop some décor, *is*. The art itself becomes synonymous with Uptown Normal and, also important, the product of an individual residing within Uptown Normal.

The furniture in The Coffeehouse isn't pristine and new like the furniture in other coffee shops in the Uptown Normal area. The leather booths have cracks in their upholstery and the tables and chairs all look different from one another. This variance in appearance has a purpose. This variance displays The Coffeehouse as eclectic and gives the shop a feeling of character and history. This feeling of history also works to make The Coffeehouse feel like it's a part of Uptown Normal, like it has been in the area for a long time and is therefore a local business.

The Coffeehouse also lends itself as a local business by recruiting local musicians to play there. Other shops will merely play music through speakers set up inside, but The Coffeehouse went to the lengths of providing its patrons with a live act. Also worth noting: the performer himself is from the Bloomington-Normal community. When I was happily indulging in my frisco veggie burger and fries, I overheard a couple sitting behind me informing an individual that the gentleman who was testing his sound on the stage in the back corner of the restaurant was actually their son. The gentleman's selection of music to perform was also quite interesting. He chose to play "Gold on the Ceiling," an alternative/indie rock song written and performed by The Black Keys, an indie rock band that has recently come into notoriety. By choosing to play a song that can be described as belonging to the genre of "indie" or "alternative" music, the gentleman portrayed his thoughts as to what he believed would *fit* the mood of The Coffeehouse and the audience who would be present there, conveying that The Coffeehouse is a space that caters to individuals who would be more prone to like indie or alternative music.

Also, The Coffeehouse serves solely vegetarian cuisine. The sausage is made of soy, the bacon as well. Most pastries are also vegan, a conscious choice by The Coffeehouse that portrays them as catering to the current culinary trends of our age. This move designates The Coffeehouse as a business that is in tune with the outside world, one that adapts to modern day trends and caters to all customers. (Sorry meat eaters!)

Speaking of current trends, The Coffeehouse also showcases its commitment to going green by re-using silverware/dishware that it serves to its customers and by providing customers with ceramic/glass mugs when dining in store in order to cut down on the amount of disposable silverware/dishware being used. Oftentimes in coffee shops, drinks are served in paper cups with plastic lids and food handed out in disposable containers, but The

Coffeehouse strives to set itself apart by cutting down on waste going to landfill.

What I Learned: The Coffeehouse Ain't No Average Joe

All in all, when you walk into The Coffeehouse, you know you are walking into a local business and not some coffee shop chain the likes of which you are likely to find pretty much anywhere else in the country. The art effectively communicates to its customers: The Coffeehouse cares about community. This message resonates strongly with those who belong to the Bloomington-Normal community. Who doesn't want proof that the establishment they visit cares about them? By looking closely at the genre conventions present within The Coffeehouse and the ways in which these conventions were displayed, I was able to come to the conclusion that The Coffeehouse attempts to purposefully convey itself as a local business that caters to its customers in menu selection and in service while also caring for the environment. This conclusion wasn't plastered as a manifesto anywhere within The Coffeehouse's walls, nor was it told to me by the manager or any one of the employees. Instead, I was able to come to an understanding of what The Coffeehouse stood for by simply analyzing it as a space.

The Coffeehouse is only one of many genres whose messages aren't stated explicitly for us to digest. The world is full of genres whose deeper meanings need to be uncovered by our keen observation and analysis. **Genre research**, the activity performed to understand the ways in which a genre works in the world, is so much more than online investigation. Whether it be through the perception of cracks in leather booths or noting of the type of food that a restaurant serves, genre research can be done by simply observing the world around us, by diving deeper into the places and spaces we inhabit with the understanding that genre is so much more than words on paper.



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