



Romantic-Realism and the Gustatory Shift: A Gastro-Psychological Reading of Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*

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Abstract:

Food in literature goes beyond reflecting class, memory, desire, and belonging. It shows the quiet ways people decide who they are and whom they may become. In Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*, chocolate is real food, a language of the senses, and an invitation to friendship. It also changes the way a person sees life. Studies of food in literature often treat it as a cultural sign, but its power to change a character's outlook needs closer study. Using Ronald W. Tobin's gastro-critical approach and Ruth M. Stauffer's idea of Romantic-Realism, this article analyzes how Harris brings imagination together with the hard facts of daily life. Through Josephine Muscat, Armande Voizin, Guillaume Duplessis, and Vianne Rocher, this article argues that *Chocolat* tells the story of a "gustatory shift." The change begins with taste, but it grows through personal choice, friendship, and care.

Keywords: culinary literature, gastrocriticism, Romantic-Realism, *Chocolat*, psychology, gustatory shift.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf writes that “one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (21). Her words connect food with thought, love, and rest. Joanne Harris builds the world of *Chocolat* around the same connection. The novel is full of food that people touch, smell, make, buy, give away, refuse, steal, and eat. Food becomes a way of understanding people. A favorite chocolate points to a wish that social rules have pushed aside. A shared drink helps someone speak about pain. A feast brings together people whom the village has kept apart. Taste is therefore both a private bodily experience and a way of speaking to the community. Vianne is a chocolatier well known for the tasteful bittersweet chocolates she creates. She inherited the recipes from her mother. When Vianne was a child, her mother abducted her and took her away. As a result, she has the impression that no place in this world is permanent for her.

Vianne and her four-year-old daughter, Anouk, make their home in a small village in France called Lansquenet. Opposite the chapel, she establishes a chocolate shop. At first, the village residents pay little attention to her or her shop. Despite their neglect, Vianne begins to assist the people, and through the chocolates she makes, she learns the deep facts they keep. With her leadership, the community begin to transform, moving from suffering to delight and from past trauma to present pleasure. This study considers how food metaphors in literature can bring out original perspectives on the characters’ psyches. This article features the profound transformation of Harris’s characters as they come to realize their true purpose in life.

Romantic-Realism helps us understand both sides of Harris’s writing. The novel is romantic in its use of colour, symbols, the wind, intuition, and hints of magic. It is realist in its focus on housework, illness, cruelty, age, money, and the results of human actions. Harris does not ask us to choose one side. She uses imagination to show what may still be possible in real life. The most

important changes happen when a rich, almost magical experience leads to an ordinary human decision: to leave, speak, forgive, grieve, stay, or begin again. This research article calls that break a gustatory shift. It is the moment when taste changes the way a person sees the self and makes a different choice seem possible.

Research Gap

Scholars have examined Harris's culinary fiction through multiple established lenses, but those studies leave a narrower sensory-to-decisional process underexplored. S. Cynthia's dissertation, "Fusion of Food and Magic Realism: The Evolution of Gastro-magic Realism as a Sub-genre in the Select Fiction of Joanne Harris", combines culinary fiction with magical realism and reads food through Wiccan and kitchen-witch cultural studies, ecocriticism, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (144). Jasmine Joy J's dissertation, "A Literary Expedition of the Psychological and Religious Elements in the Select Works of Joanne Harris's Culinary Literature", draws on relational psychoanalysis, psychodynamic theory, food existentialism, Cannon-Bard theory, and stimulus-response theory to connect food with embodiment, religion, French dining culture, and interpersonal power (ii). These studies establish food as a magical, cultural, and psychological medium. Yet, neither isolates the sequence this article calls the gustatory shift: the movement from sensory sensation, through altered self-perception, to deliberate action. Tobin's gastro-criticism makes that sequence legible because it treats food simultaneously as material substance and cultural sign and draws on sociology, anthropology, medicine, semiotics, and psychoanalysis (622). Combining Tobin with Stauffer's Romantic-Realism therefore addresses a specific gap: not simply what chocolate symbolises in *Chocolat*, but how a pleasurable bodily encounter joins imagination to material choice and makes a new course of action appear possible.

Conceptual Framework

This article is grounded in gastrocriticism, a literary approach that connects food and literature across categories. Ronald W. Tobin introduced the term in his article “Qu’est-ce que la gastro-critique?” (Klitzing 151). Gastrocriticism treats food as beyond sustenance: it becomes a material and metaphorical vehicle for producing meaning. As Shobitha explains, the approach draws on social, cultural, and anthropological sources and opens food discourse to multiple “substructures of meaning” (134).

Ruth M. Stauffer’s idea of Romantic-Realism offers a clear way to discuss Harris’s combination of wonder and everyday life. Stauffer explains that a writer can keep the careful eye of a realist while also seeing “the nobility of life and of the spiritual significance of man” like a poet or philosopher (23). Holding these two views together makes the writer a Romantic-Realist. Romanticism brings imagination, beauty, strong feeling, inner life, and the sense that more may be possible. Realism brings limits of the body, social rules, ordinary work, cause and effect, and a world that does not change simply because someone wishes it would. Rebecca Carnighan argues that Romantic-Realism finds a balance between conflict and peace that neither Romanticism nor Realism can reach alone (9). Elaine Freedgood and N. Maureen McLane argue that realism and romanticism exist together to construct experienced realities and historical meaning. “That ‘realism’ and ‘romance’ might not be opposed—that they might even be productively kindred modes, mapping and co-creating experiential and historical conjunctures - is something recent scholars (whether self-identified as ‘Romanticists’ or ‘Victorianists’) have argued in several keys” (Freedgood and McLane). One classic example of fusing Romanticism and Realism is the poem by the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The poet imagines the urn addressing the people and offering an important lesson. No matter how

disorganised one's life gets, the only thing people really need to know is that truth and beauty are interchangeable. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats, lines 49-50).

Representations of food in literature have gone both ways. Realism approaches all the senses, and romanticism reaches the psyche through the bloodstream. It intertwines realism and romanticism in its symbolism. In literature, these ideas fuse to form romantic realism, where real transformation begins in the characters' minds. Food in literature, through the lens of Romantic-Realism, is a silent harmony that consoles the character and gives new hope. Ruth Stauffer, in her *Joseph Conrad: His Romantic-Realism*, attempts to coin an alternate term for romantic realism: 'ale theism,' the truth of life, she defines (29). Applying her ideas of a person being both a romantic and a realist, food studies show that a person's consciousness changes after consumption. When Vianne says, "I sell dreams, small comforts, sweet harmless temptations," she expresses the romantic side of her work (Harris 54). However, her chocolates also need real skill. She must control heat and timing, choose ingredients, spend money, and work with her hands. Vianne is moved by the thought of "so much art and experience" being placed into "a pleasure which can last only a moment" (Harris 60). A short pleasure is not a meaningless one. Because flavour passes so quickly, people pay close attention to it. The taste disappears, but the idea or feeling it awakens may stay. The gustatory shift begins in the brief interval between eating something and understanding what the experience means.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative literary analysis to examine the novel *Chocolat*. Close reading in the text analyzes the tremendous change all the characters undergo in Joanne Harris's *Chocolat* through a food-related lens. Ruth M. Stauffer's theory of Romantic-Realism is applied to examine

the psychological transformation that occurs in the characters' minds after consuming good food, where “good food” refers to various homemade chocolate delicacies. This research article stresses the central theme of food as a source of original perspectives. By highlighting this theme, this article intends to analyze the process of psychological transformation in the novel *Chocolat*.

Discussion

Romantic-Realism is skilfully woven throughout Joanne Harris's *Chocolat* by blending the charm of magical moments with grounded, human events. In this novel, the characters struggle with past remorse, anger, sadness, and grief. However, when they taste Vianne's bittersweet chocolates, they have an unusual feeling of confidence to face their struggles, and move on. They transform, and their emotional state shifts through the experience of taste. In the socially and religiously rigorous city of Lansquenet, Vianne's chocolate shop functions as a romantic glaze on the plain, realist location.

Richard Curle, Conrad's official biographer, argues in *Joseph Conrad: A Study* that Conrad's work is driven by “a realism which includes romance as one of its chief assets” (qtd. in Stauffer 13).

Lansquenet first appears calm and orderly, but much of that order depends on silence. The residents know one another's habits, yet they often refuse to speak about one another's pain. The church, school, cafe, and family home give people fixed roles. Vianne's shop creates a different kind of place. It is public enough to bring strangers together but private enough for honest talk. It is a business, but money does not control every meeting. Vianne gives samples, remembers what people like, and lets customers stay. When she says that she knows “everyone's favorite,” the line sounds like clever sales talk, but it also shows how carefully she watches people (Harris 40).

Josephine Muscat/Bonnet has suffered physical abuse from her husband, Paul-Marie Muscat, and has become an abused, unpaid worker in his bar. Her thefts from Vianne's shop register both desperation and a desire for an existence beyond the social and domestic cages that confine her. Tasting chocolate does not mechanically give Josephine the courage to leave; rather, its unfamiliar sweetness helps her imagine freedom, while Vianne's patience and the practical refuge of the shop allow that possibility to become a choice. When Josephine finally says, "I've left Paul.... I've done it at last," the repeated "I" makes the decision unmistakably her own (Harris 183). Once she moves into the shop, her change becomes material as well as emotional: she learns, cooks, serves customers, and begins to earn money. Vianne tells her, "You have friends here.... And even if you don't realize it yet, you're strong" (Harris 186). Friendship does not create Josephine's strength, but gives it room to appear.

In Tobin's gastro-criticism, the episode places taste inside a network of bodily pleasure, domestic labour, money, and social support rather than treating chocolate as a magical cure. Its romantic promise of sweetness becomes realist agency only when Josephine translates sensation into repeated acts: leaving Paul, acquiring kitchen skills, and earning an income. Stauffer's Romantic-Realism therefore lies in the conjunction of imagined freedom and material practice. Food changes what Josephine believes is possible, but Josephine herself performs the change.

Romantic-Realism additionally shapes Armande Voizin's story in *Chocolat*. She is elderly, diabetic, estranged from her daughter Caro, and barred from seeing her grandson Luc. In Vianne's shop, hot chocolate gives Armande a sensory pleasure that the medical and familial language surrounding her has reduced to prohibition. The taste does not erase illness or repair the family by itself; it restores a felt sense of self from which Armande can speak and choose. Her refusal to let Caro manage every aspect of her remaining life appears in their exchange:

She said reproachfully, “You really shouldn’t be here, Maman. You know what the doctor said, don’t you?”

“I do indeed!” replied Armande. “What’s wrong, aren’t I dying fast enough for you? Is that why you have to send the death’s-head on a stick to spoil my morning?”

Caro’s powdered cheeks reddened. “Really, Maman, you shouldn’t say things like—”

“I’ll mind my mouth if you mind your business!” snapped Armande smartly, and Caro almost chipped the tiles with her high heels in her haste to leave. (234)

The exchange stages the balance that Stauffer calls Romantic-Realism. Caro speaks in the realist vocabulary of diagnosis, bodily risk, and approaching death; Armande answers with wit, appetite, and imaginative self-assertion. From Tobin’s gastro-critical perspective, the hot chocolate remains inseparable from medicine, kinship, and power: eating becomes the contested act through which Armande claims authority over her ageing body. Her reestablished bond with Luc, the portrait he gives her, and the birthday boat party do not overturn mortality. They show instead that “the bestowing power of the imagination” can alter how she inhabits the time that remains (Fanger 13). The newly found hope in Armande’s mind thus clarifies Stauffer’s model: she accepts the real world’s limits while refusing to let those limits exhaust the meanings of her life.

The alteration of nature, Romantic-Realism, takes place in the life of Guillaume Duplessis, an old man with a sick dog named Charly. He goes everywhere with his dog and loves him so much. Guillaume visits La Celeste Praline for the first time. Vianne admires his gentlemanly ethics and his love for Charly. Vianne understands Charly’s struggle with a giant growth under his chin. She gives Florentine chocolates to both of them and suggests that it is time to let go of Charly. The truth of Guillaume’s situation is painful and clear: Charly cannot be saved. Hope does not appear

through a false promise that the dog will recover. It appears, through thought, that love can continue after loss without betraying the one who has died. After Charly's death, Guillaume arrives with an abandoned puppy, though he shyly insists that it is not his dog. Harris describes the puppy at his feet and a look of "pleasure and embarrassment" on Guillaume's face (196). This mixed feeling reflects grief. At first, caring for a new animal feels disloyal because Guillaume has begun to confuse loyalty with being empty forever.

Guillaume moves from living alone with grief to caring again. The daily welcome at La Praline matters as much as any single chocolate. By becoming a regular customer, he becomes part of other people's lives and no longer carries his grief entirely alone. The puppy does not replace Charly, and one bond does not cancel the other. Instead, the puppy represents Guillaume's difficult decision to open his heart again. "'Maman!' she bellowed in my ear. 'Guillaume's found a dog!' I turned to look, my arms still full of Anouk. Guillaume was standing beside the door, his face reddened. At his feet, a small brown-and-white mongrel, no more than a puppy, lolled adoringly" (Harris 232). Read through Tobin, this movement belongs to a practice of commensality: chocolates, conversation, and repeated visits move Guillaume from private mourning toward shared social life. Stauffer's balance of romantic possibility and realist limit is equally clear. Charly's death remains irreversible, yet Guillaume can enlarge his idea of loyalty so that caring for the puppy does not betray the dead. The gustatory shift is therefore neither cure nor replacement; it is a change in what grief permits him to do.

Vianne changes other people, but the village changes her too. Her gift for guessing favorites and making people feel welcome grows from a childhood spent moving from place to place. Her mother taught her to follow the wind, avoid close ties, and treat every departure as freedom. Vianne has learned to make this restless life look brave and confident. Nevertheless, the same habit stops

her from trusting anything permanent. She can make a home for other people more easily than she can believe that a home might be possible for her.

Chocolate is how Vianne earns a living, carries her mother's memory, protects herself, and cares for others. It lets her approach pain gently. She does not demand that customers tell her their secrets. She gives them something real and waits. This patience keeps care from becoming an invasion of privacy. As part of her defense system, she makes and sells chocolate. While she sees how the town's residents change, she experiences a strong feeling of joy. Vianne says, "I believe that being happy is the only important thing" (Harris 182). As she interacts with the locals, Vianne wears bright colors and has a pleasant demeanor. Her chocolate shop serves as a retreat for healing, akin to modern-day therapy. Because she knows what it means to be unkind, she is kind. While quietly accepting Armande's death, she reminisces about her mother's death due to cancer. Though she cannot fully recover from the trauma, she distracts herself by giving her heart and soul to making gourmet chocolates. As a Romantic-Realist herself, Vianne finds comfort in being the so-called 'kitchen witch' that transforms the locals' lives with her chocolates. Her chocolates become the sole reason for blooming hope in the village of Lansquenet. Here, Joanne Harris's *Chocolat* demonstrates the causal link central to Romantic-Realism, moving from the world's imperfections to the acceptance of a harmony that fits in with both truth and beauty.

Conclusion

Joanne Harris's *Chocolat* presents food as a physical art that can change how people see their lives without making hardship disappear. From a gastrocritical view, chocolate is both food and a symbol formed by religion, gender, medicine, work, memory, and money. One of Harris's most convincing ideas is that change often starts in a small way. A warm cup in someone's hands, a favorite sweet remembered, or a meal offered without condemnation can soften the belief that

suffering is all life has to offer. A person may first meet hope as warmth, flavour, colour, or the simple relief of being welcomed. In this way, pleasure becomes valuable not because it removes pain, but because it helps people face pain without losing hope.

Harris's *Chocolat* gives an overview of how the characters move from their past trauma to present pleasure, with love, forgiveness, community, and, of course, chocolates. The characters are teeming with hope and optimism, like Vianne's Florentines, filled with rich chocolate and almond shavings oozing caramelly goodness. Viewed through the prism of Romantic-Realism, the novel reveals that good food and good company can alter a person's conception of reality, leading them to ultimate objective reality: the truth of life (Aletheism). After the arrival of Vianne's La Celeste Praline shop, the locals tasted and experienced warmth and brightness in their lives for the first time. Lansquenet village got its joy back. Studying the characters in this novel through the theory of Romantic Realism is clearly fitting, as it aligns with the psychological aspects of the research paper, where food and behavioral transformations appear in abundance. Future research can also look into thanatological interpretations, Marxist literary theory on the influence of community, and feminist adaptations of the kitchen.

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