

Semiotic Theory in Literature Classes

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the benefit of interpreting literary works in class, on the one hand through an approach of free interpretation and hermeneutics, and on the other hand with semiotics as a theory that directs the further interpreting of the literary works. The corpus of research is based on the works of Umberto Eco, as an author of theoretical works, but also as author of novels on which the semiotics can be applied. The research was done with the students in order to observe how they perceive the literary works without having an interpretive matrix at hand, and how the meanings are changed after they are being offered a theoretical apparatus. In the second case, it is shown that many of the meanings are easier to grasp when there is a system of theory to predict them, and the classes are easier to organize and more effective in the end. The solutions that are ultimately obtained are more productive, and the meanings are more precise and richer. Another question that remains to be asked is whether the use of such interpretive models limits interpretation in other respects. We will dwell on several works by Umberto Eco, such as *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), *The Open Work* (1979) and *The Limits of Interpretation* (1991), etc. and from the literary works we will use the novel *The Prague Cemetery* (2011).

Keywords: Semiotics, Interpretation, Literature Classes

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Introduction

The research discussed in this paper was based on the practice of World and Italian literature classes, with students from the Departments of Macedonian Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology in Stip, Goce Delcev University. Among the many literary works that are covered in these classes, the work of Umberto Eco occupies a significant place. Although the study programs remain almost unchanged over the past years, the advantage of the teacher's experience consists in experimenting with new methods in the class during the different academic years. So, in this case, at the beginning, students were offered the work to read, and then they were challenged to interpret it themselves in class, using free hermeneutics. Next years, however, a new task was given: each of the works that was analyzed in class had to be presented through an interpretive method. For example, to use deconstruction for Beckett, phenomenology for Proust, narratology for Ariosto, etc. The task that concerned Umberto Eco was, of course, related to semiotics, which the author himself uses as a matrix in his theoretical books. What we will present in this paper is how all levels of finding and interpreting signs in *The Prague Cemetery* text can be derived. We can conclude that after we started using this method, the motivation in the classes grew significantly, and the students began to feel much more competent in the approach to the literary text. We will present all aspects of decoding levels of meaning in the mentioned work.

Defining the Theory According to Specific Novels

The first question that was posed to students was: Why exactly does Eco's work correspond to this theory of semiotics? The first step was to define why we prefer to use semiotics and not deconstruction or feminism, for example. This approach made students more sensitive to the connection between literature and theory, and to the fact that there is a reason why we choose one theory instead of another.

In one of his interviews, Umberto Eco gives the answer himself. He states that as a writer, as well as a semiotician, he is particularly interested in the structure of the false sign. His novels, erudite and often historical, deal with intrigues, conspiracies, mysteries and mystifications whose interpretation poses a challenge to semiotics and to the reader. The false sign emphasizes the significance of the transmitted information and the consequences it has in the formation of reality.

In the paper that follows, we propose a semiotic reading of Umberto Eco's penultimate novel, *The Prague Cemetery* (2011), in the way it was analyzed in class. The novel is set in the 19th century, which deals with the production of historical (un)truths through the falsification of documents, the introduction of secret services, freemasons, spies... Through the activity of the main character and his participation in the manipulation of some of the turning historical documents, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Eco offers us his revisionist reading of history. Umberto Eco (1939-2016) is undoubtedly one of the most striking figures of contemporary Italian and world literature. His novels have the paradoxical fate of being extremely erudite, historically documented, but also conspiratorial, with an interest in the occult and mysticism, while at the same time bestsellers. Since he is a writer and a semiotician, as is the case with other writers - theoreticians, in his works one can sense the self-awareness of the writer's procedure, that is, find a conditionality between his theory and his works. In the field of semiotics, he gives several titles: *Absent Structure* (1968), *Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*

(1984), *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), *Six Walks Through Narrative Forests* (1994), *Open Work* (2011).

What is particularly interesting about *The Prague Cemetery* (2011) is the possibility of looking at history as a literary narrative, where the fictionality and intertextuality that are a feature of literature are mirrored in history, and the history, through the disclosure of the narrator, is no longer a collection of documents and facts, but an instructed construction of political subjects depending on the needs of the day. This is why history requires not only reading, but also interpretation, something that the implicit narrator of this novel does by exposing the original processes that led to significant milestones. In this way, students are being offered a series of questions that establish theoretical considerations through a practical approach. For example, how historical facts are significant for the literary text, and how, on the other hand, history turns into fiction.

In addition to this thesis, in *Open Work* (2011) Umberto Eco separates the classical from the modern novel according to the degree of open interpretation to which each of them is subject. Although literary works have always, even those that Eco calls classical, carried the possibility of a plurality of meaning, however, according to him, the contemporary literary work possesses an open tendency to bring the interpretation to its ultimate possibilities.

The Place of the Reader in the Novel

The second task was to determine where is the place of the reader when we are talking about semiotic reading. If in the classical work there is a certain determinism of the meaning, in the contemporary work the reader is the one who stands in front of the possibility to invent the ending, to choose and combine the meanings depending on his worldview, degree of knowledge and results he expects from the text. The more the work is unusual and deviates from expectations, the more it is a carrier of information. The reader is called to constant organization, reconstruction, invention of the text he reads. If in *The Prague Cemetery* (2011) the first level of interpretation is done by the narrator, who writes his letters and texts in relation to the historical reality, the reader is the one who extracts the meanings at the next level, in relation to the structure of the novel. What we are interested in is the way in which Eco builds and organizes the meaning of the text, or as Larsch Moschel says in *Semiotic Analysis* (2012): "Semiotics is a method of text analysis that allows the true content of the text to emerge from its structure. It is about exploring how the text says what it says. The organization of the signified is more important than the sign." The Prague cemeteries do exist today in Prague and the interesting thing about them is that due to lack of space, the graves are piled on top of each other or next to each other; over time the plates have shifted and become distorted, so that if someone wanted to find the true meaning, he would first have to search from plate to plate, leaving it unclear whether each of the plates is in its proper place, so that each meaning is covered by some other meaning. Such a structure corresponds to Eco's idea of the interpretation of meaning in the text and of its constantly open interpretation. The very theme around which the action in the novel is formed becomes a metaphor about interpretation and serves as meta-poetics for the theory of semiotics.

But the Prague cemetery is also significant because of another historical fact. In the novel, the protagonist Simonini appears as the compiler of the historically famous forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published for the first time in 1905 in Russia. They purport to be a record of the gathering at the Prague cemetery of twelve rabbis conspiring about the way to conquer the world and thereby avenge the long history of Jewish persecution. On the other level, the

narrator's vision is that the Protocols should be released to the public in order to incite hatred against the Jews and contribute to their extermination. According to the narrator, although it has been proven that the Protocols represent a mystification, many years after their appearance they have been used to justify anti-Semitism.

The semiotic reading brought the students to the question of intertextuality, as the meaning of one text as a system of signs was explained by using other texts that had influence on the previous. The students concluded that the *Protocols* mentioned in the novel were a representative sample of intertext (in reality, but also in Eco's novel), most likely compiled by the Russian journalist Matvey Golovinsky, who, apart from the fictional moments, also includes elements from the previously published novels of Maurice Joly (*The dialogue in hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*) and Eugène Sue (*The Wandering Jew*), as well as from the novel *Biarritz* by Hermann Goedsche, in which an excerpt was taken from *Joseph Balzamo*, written by Alexandre Dumas. Each sign refers to the plagiarism of a previous sign, the works mentioned by Simonini are only a copy of another copy, pre-blaming the original, but still used as true for a certain political purpose. This interweaving of literary works justifies Eco's thesis regarding intertextuality: "It is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are made of other works, texts are made of other texts, they all speak to each other independently of the authors' intention" (Plett, 1991:193). The foreknowledge of the mentioned novels reveals the way in which the meaning was created, up to the moment when the novel appropriates the character of mystification. If Joly's novel opposes the theses of liberalism and despotism and is an implicit criticism of Napoleon III, the protagonist Simonini uses the frame of this text in order to express his opinions on the Jewish tendency to overthrow the monarchy. Aleksandar Dima in turn contributes to the inspiration of the occult space of the meeting at the *Prague Cemetery* through the creation of a site of conspiracy in the novel *Thunder in the Mountains* written by Joseph Balzamo.

In fact, the creation of historical truth by the protagonist's writings made the students conscient of the position they have in the interpretation and of the distance they should accomplish in order to understand the truth.

History vs. Fiction

Other question that was assigned to students was: how does the historical truth influence the creating the semiotics of text? We know that the semantic core that produces and drives the narrative throughout this novel is the hatred of Jews. The narrator presents the history of France and Italy from the period between 1855 and 1898, but seeking the blame and responsibility for all the evil in history from the Jews – a fact that determines the direction of any future interpretation. And Simonini, who is a forger of political documents, through the insertion of his manuscripts, changes the course and meaning of history. The protagonist of Umberto Eco is involved in the unfolding of historical events, where the reader can follow the documented events of Simonini's participation in the Piedmontese secret services; in the activities during the period of the annexation of Savoy to France; in the arrival of Garibaldi in Sicily in order to overthrow the Bourbons and the attempt to unify Italy; in the attack of Prussia in Paris; in the overthrow of the Second Kingdom and the establishment of the Third French Republic; in The Paris Commune; in the Dreyfus Affair... One chapter in the novel is dedicated to each of these historical moments. Simonini's character is paid to orchestrate the outcome of all these significant historical events. He is a spy embedded in Garibaldi's army whose projects he tries to modify precisely by collecting information, transmitting false news, letters, plots against them. He is also the author of the famous *Bordereau* in the Dreyfus

Affair, the creator of the forgery that is to be planted on a Jewish soldier to accuse him of treason in the interest of the Prussians. He is sent to incite the writers of the works preceding the *Protocols*, Joly, Dimas, Gedsche, to write against the Jews or against the Freemasons, according to the interests of politics.

Signs, according to Eco, are always *signs-functions* (Lucie Guillemette et Josiane Cossette, 2006), i.e. they get their meaning depending on the culture, as Simonini's interpretation in relation to his contemporaries is reductive compared to our current view of their cultural contribution: in the novel we follow the caricature of Emile Zola, Proust, Victor Hugo, Garibaldi... As a contemporary of the 19th century, Dr. Freud is also found in the novel filled with significant historical figures. It complements the psychoanalytical reading of the semiotic, namely, psychoanalysis also interprets signs and symptoms. Simonini takes two ideas from Freud: one is that writing, i.e. symbolic marking, enables memory, i.e. finding meaning from what has been experienced, and the roots of memory are in childhood itself. The second idea is the doubling of personality explored by Freud. Applying the Freudian model, the narrator appears again in the role of an interpreter, but this time to himself: "That's why I decided to keep this diary, even against my will, telling myself my own past, gradually as I can bring them back to my mind, even the most insignificant things, until (how was it said?) the traumatizing element comes to light. By itself. And I want to heal myself, without surrendering myself to the hands of the crazy doctors" (Eco, 2011:67). As an essential determinant of his being, the protagonist considers the two basic passions, love and hate, and begins his presentation by defining himself through what he hates: "I feel a certain discomfort as I begin to write, at least I have to bare my soul, on orders - not from God!" Let me say on the advice of a German (or Austrian, but it's the same) Jew. Who am I? Perhaps it is more useful to ask myself first about my own passions than about the events of my life. Who do I love? Some loved ones do not come to mind. I know I love good cuisine (...) Who do I hate? I hate the Jews, it comes naturally to me to say..." (Eco, 2011:13).

The main subject towards whom his hatred is directed are the Jews, a hatred that was created and nurtured in childhood, transmitted by tradition through the stories of his grandfather. Simonini is in a duality, first of all psychological, divided into two personalities, one of whom is a schemer, and the other an honest abbot, and while the first one remembers the events that are within the acceptable limits of his morality, the abbot Dalla Piccola blames him for those events that Simonini's reason suppresses due to their cruelty. The students were able to distinguish the semiotic levels of the characters descriptions from physical, psychological or ideological point of view. Their different semiotic descriptions emphasize the different narrations that they undertake and the different paths of the two narrators who are actually one literary character with divided conscience.

The Divided Narrators Who Leave Signs

Another assignment that was posed in class was the way in which the detection of different narrators in text is crucial for the strategy of production of signs in text.

Simonini and Dalla Piccola do not meet, even though they live in two rooms connected by a corridor in the same house, but only come across signs, traces and clues that tell one about the other. They both follow up on their letters in the *Diary* and read about each other. From their *Diary* comes the novel that we are reading, which should clarify to each of them whether they are one or two persons. Thus, there are three narrators, Simonini, Dalla Piccola and the narrator who, like the two previous ones, and the readers, are trying to figure out who

is who. The two narrators leave signs for each other in the form of letters that complete the story. They also leave parts of their clothing and dwelling which as *signs-indexes* should enable the other to find their true face. They also leave *signs-traces*, that is, unconsciously forgotten prints that speak of their presence in the other's room. In that mutual interpretation of diary entries, Umberto Eco seems to confirm his thesis about compactness, but at the same time about the openness of each work to additional interpretations: "The work of art is a completed and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time it constitutes an open product due to its susceptibility to numerous different interpretations that do not violate its indestructible specificity" (Eco, 1979: 49).

The Distance and the Empathy of the Reader

In one of the final chapters of the novel, entitled *The Devil of the XIXth Century*, the meaning becomes openly subversive. Eco is radical in presenting one of the black masses of the sects to the reader, but perhaps this is the culmination of all the evil that pervades the novel. The evil of history, the evil of the characters, who, under the pressure of conscience, double down in order not to admit to themselves what they have done. As one of the characters in the novel, the Russian Rashkovski, says: "The sense of identity is based on hatred, on hatred towards the one who is not the same. That is why hatred should be nurtured as a passion of every citizen. The enemy is, in fact, the enemy of the entire nation. We always need someone to despise to comfort us with our own misery. Hate is the true primal passion. Love is, in fact, an unnatural state. That's why they killed Christ: he preached against nature. There is no love that lasts a lifetime... Hate, on the contrary, can last a lifetime. It is enough that the object of impatience is always before our eyes, because hatred warms the heart. " (Eco, 1979: 458-459). In an interview, Eco claims that the idea was to create a character, the worst protagonist in the history of literature. And indeed, the students cannot identify themselves with the character, his absence of morality and psychology reduces him to just a structure or a sign. From the very beginning of the novel, he is a bearer of hatred, a misogynist, a misanthrope, an anti-Semite, he despises all people and nations. Just as the character Rashkovski says that Europe needed the Jew to have someone to direct his hatred towards and avoid internal discord, so Simonini's diary writing allows him to sublimate hatred and overcome the doubling of the personality, so the record of history helps to overcome the hatred of the past. But can one know history ahead of time and write it as one writes a novel? And to what extent can the literary be an inspiration for the historical narrative? How does Eco's novel ask these questions? Between the individual and the collective identity, between the personal, historical and literary text, the unbreakable ties of love and hate are woven. Perhaps Eco's idea is similar to Freud's: that writing sublimates the negative drive that abounds in Europe's dirty past, and history presented by direct participants who know its pitfalls and entanglements is a kind of anamnesis of the past.

Conclusion

We have elaborated some of the student's conclusions from applying the semiotic method in literature. Instead of presenting the authors in class in the traditional way, starting from their biography, their bibliography and main aspect of their most popular work, we determine an adequate method for each work and interpret the work of the author using that specific terminology and structure. After couple of classes, the students were feeling more competent in analyzing literature and more confident to express their personal opinions regarding the books, because they knew that there is a method behind it and they do not risk a complete subjectivity.

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