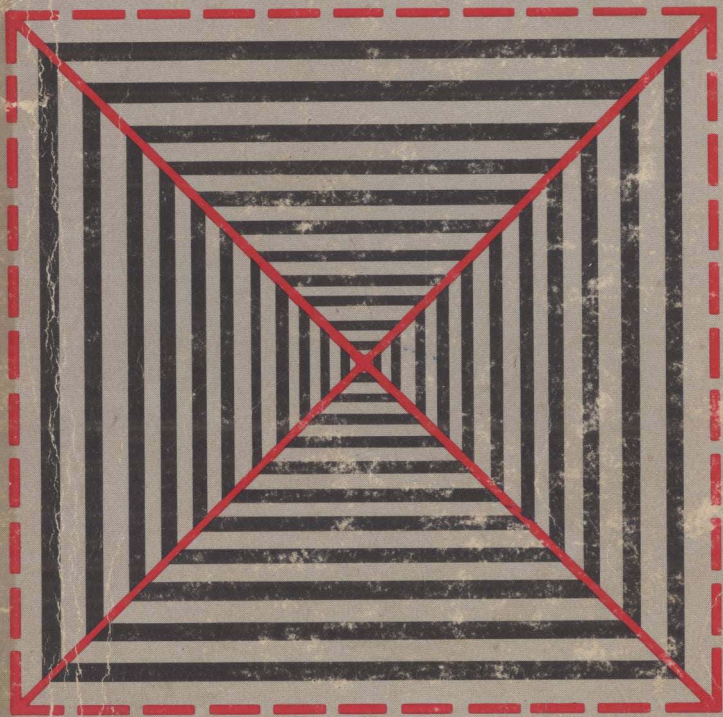


SEMIOTICS AND

INTERPRETATION



ROBERT SCHOLES

# **SEMIOTICS AND INTERPRETATION**

**ROBERT SCHOLES**

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I want to dedicate this book to the teachers in whose classrooms my interest in poetics and semiotics was both stimulated and tested:

*Miss Jennings*, who taught an unwilling and ungrateful boy not only the texts of Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil, but the rudiments of grammar and rhetoric as well.

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## PREFACE

This book is intended as a companion piece to my earlier study, *Structuralism in Literature* (Yale, 1974), but it differs from its predecessor in a number of respects. The study of structuralism was primarily theoretical, and its individual chapters were mainly devoted to discussions of the contributions certain Continental writers had made to the development of structuralism as an intellectual position. This book, on the other hand, is mainly demonstrative, and most of its individual chapters are concerned with particular texts and the ways they may be read or interpreted.

The texts studied include poems, stories, films, a scene from a play, bumper stickers, and a portion of the human anatomy. The approach used throughout is to some extent impressionistic and personal, because this is inevitable in the interpretation of individual texts, but insofar as these interpretations are united by a common methodology, that methodology is semiotic and is often specifically indebted to a range of writers in the semiotic tradition of literary studies. I shall mention these writers and acknowledge some other forms of indebtedness before concluding this preface, but first it will be well to say something about semiotics.

Usually defined as the study of signs (from a Greek root meaning *sign*), semiotics has in fact become the study of codes: the systems that enable human beings to perceive certain events or entities *as* signs, bearing meaning.) These systems are themselves parts or aspects of human culture, though subject to constraints of biological and physical sorts as well. (Human speech is limited by human vocal and aural capacities, and by the behavior of sounds in atmosphere, but each human language is peculiar to a specific historical culture.)

As an emerging field or discipline in liberal education, semiotics

situates itself on the uneasy border between the humanities and the social sciences, where it is often perceived as too rigid by humanists and too lax by social scientists. Its founding fathers—Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics and Charles S. Peirce in philosophy—were brilliant innovators, each of whom had a powerful streak of eccentricity in his makeup. In his later years Saussure began to find in texts hidden messages—“anagrams”—that no one else could perceive. Peirce was addicted to opium and to terminology, producing systems of thought beyond the grasp of most other mortals. Yet these two men had truly fertile minds, and the “semiotic” developed by Peirce, along with the “sémiologie” projected by Saussure, have led toward a discipline that seems blessed by their creativity, though threatened with their oddity as well.

This new field of study has one interface with literature, and that is the one I attempt to explore. All human utterances are enabled and limited by systems or codes that are shared by all who make and understand such utterances. If the English language is one such system, it is not the only one. Within English, legal discourse and medical discourse have their own rules, which involve not only the interpretation of messages but also the establishment of who is entitled to utter them and who may act upon them. A prescription must be encoded by a physician and decoded for action by a pharmacist, and these rules are parts of the discourse of medicine. The media or physical systems by which messages are conveyed also influence what can be conveyed in them—not so much as Marshall McLuhan claimed, but in very real and important ways. Literary texts are both produced and interpreted through the mediation of generic codes as well as through language itself. And there are other codes that influence less premeditated forms of utterance. Casual expressions of a very “simple” sort may in fact be governed by both conscious and unconscious impulses toward communication. If everyday life has its “psychopathology,” as Freud so eloquently argued, we can perceive this and interpret the speech of the unconscious only when we understand the codes that govern unconscious utterance.

As the study of codes and media, semiotics must take an interest in ideology, in socioeconomic structures, in psychoanalysis, in poetics, and in the theory of discourse. Historically, its develop-



ment has been powerfully influenced by French structuralism and poststructuralism: that is, by the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, by the neo-Marxism of Louis Althusser, by the “archeology” of Michel Foucault, by the neo-Freudianism of Jacques Lacan, and by the grammatology of Jacques Derrida. An interesting book could be written discussing these important figures, and, indeed, an excellent one has appeared, in which most of them are considered very acutely: *Structuralism and Since*. But my purpose here is to do something different. I wish to show what happens when a practicing semiotician enters the traditional domain of literary interpretation.

There are a number of risks involved in this project, beyond the elementary one that the job may not be done very well. One is that the semiotician’s interest in collective structures—genres, discourses, codes, and the like—will cause the uniqueness of the literary text to be lost. Another is that, by entering the domain of “reading” as such, the critic will so fall under the weight of interpretive practice or the spell of personal response that any consistent *semiotic* methodology will be lost in the exegetical tangle. I have tried to guard against these dangers, but I am not certain I have always succeeded. Nor have I even attempted to cover all the literary forms or to illustrate all the things that can be done to literary works in the name of semiotics.)

(One of the great temptations to which semioticians succumb more often than others is that of terminology. Two others are the use of logical or algebraic symbols and the deployment of elaborate diagrams. I have reduced this paraphernalia to a minimum—in some cases to zero. And I have done this not merely in deference to the gentle reader, but because I have a low tolerance for these things myself. I know how the eyes can begin to glaze over at the appearance of a huge tree diagram on the page. (My feeling is that the great usefulness of semiotics to literary studies will not be found in its elaborate analytical taxonomies, but rather is to be derived from a small number of its most basic and powerful concepts, ingeniously applied.)

The most elementary terms of Saussure and Peirce (Saussure’s signification and value, for instance, or Peirce’s icon, index, and symbol) have proved the most useful. In literary semiotics, Jakob-

son's six-part diagram of a fundamental act of communication has proved immensely fruitful—not because six features are all that can be discerned in human communication, but because six are about all we can handle analytically, because they are so clearly differentiated, and because in Jakobson's hands they are immediately used to make important and interesting distinctions among major modes of discourse. I refer to Jakobson's diagram again and again, so that certain chapters might even be called variations on a theme by Roman Jakobson. The contemporary semiotics of literature is founded on Jakobson's work. The select bibliography appended to this book will give fuller citations, but I should like to mention here those other members of the international community of literary semioticians upon whom I have leaned most heavily in undertaking the demonstrations that follow: Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Julia Kristeva, and Tzvetan Todorov in Paris, Umberto Eco in Italy, Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky in the Soviet Union, and Seymour Chatman and Michael Riffaterre in the United States.

It will be apparent to all who read on that I am concerned with the interpretation of literary texts not simply as an end in itself, but as an aspect of liberal education. Interpretation—"reading" in the large sense—is one of the great goals of humanistic study, and the reading of literary texts is one of the best methods—perhaps *the* best—of developing interpretive skill in students. Without continually insisting on this argument, I intend my demonstrations and discussions in the following chapters to enhance the case for the role of semiotic studies in the teaching of interpretive competence. This book is addressed primarily to those who care about such matters: to the men and women who study and teach language and literature, and beyond them to all who care about how these matters are studied and taught.

The eight chapters that follow are not so rigidly arranged that they must be read in their order of appearance, but they do follow a certain pattern. The first two are largely theoretical. In Chapter 1, I try to situate semiotics in relation to criticism in general and to the teaching of literature in particular. In Chapter 2, I attempt to define literature from a semiotic perspective, emphasizing some of the features of literary texts that will be examined later on. Chapter 3



deals with the interpretation of the short poem, with examples from W. S. Merwin, William Carlos Williams, and Gary Snyder. Chapter 4 develops aspects of the theory of narrative, with brief examples based on several American films. Chapter 5 looks at irony as a source of pleasure in literary texts, with attention to the way ironic coding depends upon both genre and ideology. In Chapter 6, I illustrate how the specific methodologies of Todorov, Genette, and Barthes may be combined for a relatively full analysis of a single short story by James Joyce. In Chapter 7, I employ semiotic methods more freely to analyze a single story by Hemingway, and in Chapter 8, I move from purely literary concerns to examine the way literature and language itself shape and control such a "natural" thing as the human body. Chapter 8 illustrates also the affinity between semiotics and feminism as critical methods, which is based on their common interest in the revelation of hidden codes that shape perception and behavior. Taken as a whole, these studies are meant to illustrate, though not to exhaust, the possibilities of a specifically semiotic approach to the practice of textual interpretation. (Versions of Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6 have been previously published in, respectively, the *Michigan Quarterly*, *Critical Inquiry*, the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, and the *James Joyce Quarterly*.)

(My debts are many and it is a pleasure to acknowledge them here. I have mentioned some already and will be more specific about such written sources in the bibliography. My teachers are acknowledged in the dedication. Here I wish to mention those friends and colleagues whose conversation has stimulated, enriched, encouraged, or corrected my thinking on the materials presented in the body of this book. My collaborator in various pedagogical and compositional ventures, Nancy R. Comley, had an important share in developing the interpretation of Williams's "Nantucket" in Chapter 3 and the Hemingway story in Chapter 7. Her essay on Hemingway in *Novel* (vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 244-53) also helped. My colleagues in the Brown University Program in Semiotic Studies, Michael Silverman and Mary Ann Doane, have focused my thinking in many ways, especially by argument. Useful trains of thought and various forms of criticism and encouragement

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R.S.

June 1981

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# 1

## THE HUMANITIES, CRITICISM, AND SEMIOTICS

The humanities may be defined as those disciplines primarily devoted to the study of texts. As the physical sciences concentrate on the study of natural phenomena, and the social sciences on the behavior of sentient creatures, the humanities are connected by their common interest in communicative objects, or texts. Human beings are text-producing animals, and those disciplines called "humanities" are primarily engaged in the analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and production of texts. Where there are texts, of course, there are rules governing text production and interpretation. These sets of rules or customs, with their physical or cultural constraints—variously described as languages, media, codes, genres, discourses, and styles—may also become the objects of humane study. It is worth noting, however, that because the study of texts themselves is privileged in the humanities, the study of codes governing text production and interpretation is often resisted as "nonhumanistic," if not inhumane. This is understandable, but it is a position that becomes less tenable with the growth in our knowledge of the processes governing the encoding and decoding of texts.

Still, it must be acknowledged that our familiar distinctions among the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities are not merely the jurisdictional boundaries between those political fictions we call "departments." There are major differences of methodology which divide the great fields of study, and these differences are themselves rooted in the nature of the materials studied and the temperaments and abilities of those people who are drawn to each field. The interpretive skills shown by the best students of artistic texts involve tacit and intuitive procedures which

have proved highly resistant to systematization and hence difficult to transmit in any direct and formal way. Yet they lie at the center of humanistic study because the artistic text is (by cultural definition) the most valuable text, for its own sake, produced by any human culture, and therefore the text that encourages or requires the most study and interpretation.

Setting aside many difficult and interesting questions (such as the relationships among artistic, religious, and legal texts—and their interpretation), I wish to concentrate here on the situation of literary interpretation at the present time. That is, taking the literary text as representative of all the texts studied by humanists, I wish to consider what advice and examples are currently being offered us for the study of literary texts. And throughout my inquiry I shall try to keep in mind four of the possible social roles that we may currently adopt in relation to such texts: author, critic, teacher, and student. Obviously, the same individual may play any or all of these roles in relation to literary texts—but not at the same time in relation to the same text.

These four roles or functions can be arranged in a regular pattern or syntagm, the elements of which always appear in the same order in relation to any particular text: author, critic, teacher, student. The author produces a primary text. The critic produces a secondary text which is evaluative or interpretive of the primary text. The teacher also produces secondary texts, some of which are ephemeral because they are delivered orally in the classroom, and some of which—in the form of handouts, written assignments, and tests—take a more durable form. Finally, the student produces texts, too, either in the form of oral discussion or as written documents prepared in response to assignments or examination questions.

The syntagmatic chain I have described takes us into the heart of a procedure which is essential to humanistic pedagogy. As professional educators we are all situated in a socioeconomic structure in which our livelihood is dependent upon our functioning in this particular syntagm. And at times we have played—and may play again—any one of the four roles in relation to any particular text. For most of us, however, the two extreme roles are not so likely as the two central ones. That is, we are not likely to be authors of pri-

mary texts or students whose responses to the primary texts are guided by instructional assignments. We are all, however, teachers, and on some occasions most of us perform as critics also, whether we publish our critical responses or simply recount them to friends and colleagues. The same person, indeed, is often at different times both critic and teacher with respect to the same text. But the functions are not the same.

In a sense, both critic and teacher aim at eliminating their roles in some way. The critic, having had a say about a particular text, hopes that later interpretations will assimilate that "say," incorporating it into an interpretive tradition. Thus the critic expects to move on perpetually from one text to another. Attempts by critics to assert ownership over texts are misguided at best and ludicrous or obscene at worst. Similarly, the teacher expects to move on perpetually from one student to another. Ideally, this should happen when the student has assimilated the interpretive or evaluative strategies of a particular teacher and can apply them himself (or herself). In practice, we often fail to achieve this end, but we must still hold to it as an aim. This whole process is justified only by the extent to which the student can finally eliminate both teacher and critic in order to become a critical reader of a wide variety of texts.

In considering the state of critical thinking today, I wish to keep this simple pedagogical process in mind while asking two questions. First: What, if anything, have we learned about textual interpretation that has direct implications for pedagogical practice? And second: What specific interpretive attitudes and strategies that are currently active offer us the best models for the interpretation of literary texts?

We may believe that we know all kinds of things about the pedagogy of textual interpretation, but many of our "beliefs" contradict one another or defy all attempts at demonstration. If we set aside all our supposed knowledge, however, and search, in the manner of Descartes, for a fundamental principle for humanistic study, we find not a "cogito" but a "scribo." This at least is what all the modern critical theories can agree upon. I am a humanist not because I think, still less because I read, but because I write—because, finally, I produce texts. Behind the verbal persiflage of Roland Barthes on behalf of the writerly text, behind the



grammatological convolutions of Derridean deconstructivism, behind the aphoristic barrier that is the discourse of Michel Foucault, behind the deceptive depths and opaque surfaces of Jacques Lacan's insistence on the letter, and more explicitly in the writings of many Anglo-American critics—we can find one, and perhaps only one, common principle, and that is the principle of *scribo, ergo sum*. I produce texts, therefore I am, and to some extent I am the texts that I produce.

In terms of the simple pedagogical model I have been discussing, this means that the process of interpretation is not complete until the student has produced an interpretive text of his or her own. This is perhaps the place where psychoanalysis has the most to teach literary pedagogy. Both Freud and Lacan stress the importance of the patient's "putting into words of the event" (Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, [Baltimore, 1968], p. 16) in order for any therapeutic effect to be obtained. It is never enough simply to tell the patient what must have happened, to raise his consciousness, so to speak. The patient must verbalize for himself. As Freud and Breuer put it in 1893, "The psychical process which originally took place must be repeated as vividly as possible; it must be brought back to its *status nascendi* and then given verbal utterance" (Standard Edition, II, 6, quoted in Wilden's notes to Lacan, p. 103). I am not suggesting that psychoanalysis and literary interpretation are the same thing, or even that they are highly analogous processes—only that psychoanalysis has demonstrated consistently for over three-quarters of a century that there is a significant difference between the states of consciousness involved in receiving a text and producing one. Specifically, the text we produce is ours in a deeper and more essential way than any text we receive from outside. When we read we do not possess the text we read in any permanent way. But when we make an interpretation we do add to our store of knowledge—and what we add is not the text itself but our own interpretation of it. In literary interpretation we possess only what we create.

I hope I am saying nothing new here, only articulating what every teacher of literature has always known: that it is no use *giving* students interpretations; that they must make them for themselves; that the student's productivity is the culmination of the

pedagogical process. Without this productivity, in fact, the process of humanistic education is incomplete. This is something often overlooked in academic institutions that adopt or try to adopt models from the world of manufacture and commerce. If a school is a factory, then the administrators are "managers," the teachers are "workers," and the students are turned out as "products." Thus, the more students turned out, the higher the productivity of the teachers and the better the management of the administrators. From a certain limited point of view, this is perfectly accurate. What it ignores, of course, is the productivity of the students. The first thing sacrificed in the processing of large numbers of students is the productivity of the students themselves: their production of texts. And since such productivity is the essence of their humanistic training it is the one thing that cannot be sacrificed without damaging the students *as products*. Doubtless TV sets could be produced more quickly and cheaply if those awkward picture tubes could be left out. . . . Unfortunately, products of a humanistic education with the humane essence left out are less easy to detect than TV sets lacking picture tubes. But the loss to society is real and will take its toll.

I digress, but digression is often a feature of humanistic discourse. To pick up the thread, contemporary critical theory tends to confirm our intuitions about the importance of the production of texts by students of literature. The student must produce interpretive discourse to complete the process of literary study. This raises two subsidiary questions: *How?* and *What kind?* The answer to *How?* falls, I believe, into the area of what we *know* about literary study, and I will therefore discuss it first. The answer to *What kind?* is more controversial and will best be saved for later.

All the modern schools of criticism, however much they disagree about many things, accept the notion that the production of texts involves the acceptance of rules that are already in place. That is, one does not simply learn English and acquire the ability to produce any kind of text in the English language. To acquire a first language is to enter an elaborate cultural situation. Such an event may in itself be traumatic and will in any case have important effects on perception and cognition. To produce texts in a language, moreover, involves accepting a second level of cultural con-

straints: the codes that govern the stylistic possibilities open to any particular type of discourse. This, too, because it involves a sacrifice of freedom for the sake of obtaining a power, may have its traumatic dimension. We call our studies “disciplines” for the very good reason that they require precisely this sort of sacrifice and submission. The power to speak at all depends upon our giving up the entropic freedom of noise in order to manipulate a small number of phonemes in a conventional way. Similarly, the power to produce any particular kind of discourse—such as that of literary interpretation—requires an acceptance of the conventions of that discourse. The question I am raising now is simply that of the best way to accomplish this for the student of literature.

What is immensely clear is that our practice is presently not in conformity with our knowledge on this point. We have been behaving as if we thought it possible simply to read a text and then produce interpretive discourse about it by inspection and intuition. But we *know* better. And here again the most disparate and mutually disputatious schools of critical thought tend toward agreement. We know that both inspection and intuition are *already* the products of discourse. We read as we have been taught to read and until we have been taught to look for certain things we will not see them. And we write—always and inevitably—on the basis of the models of writing we have already encountered. The ability to be “creative,” whether in the discourse of criticism or in the discourse of poetry, is not given to the novice but is earned by mastering the conventions to the point where improvisation becomes possible and power finally is exchangeable for freedom once again.

In short, the student who is properly expected to produce interpretive discourse must be exposed to models of such discourse as well as to the literary texts that will become the subject of interpretation. It is even easier and more reasonable to ask a student to interpret poem X in the manner of critic Y than to ask the same student to simply look at the poem and into his or her own heart and write. This latter request, which seems so reasonable and natural, is in fact much harder and more perverse than the apparently artificial one proposed first. This is so because the novice student, like the novice poet, has no “heart” to speak of, for what we are talking about here is not some ontological essence but a discursive quality,