
ANALYZING ILLUSTRATIONS FOR “THE OVERCOAT” AS A SIGNIFIER

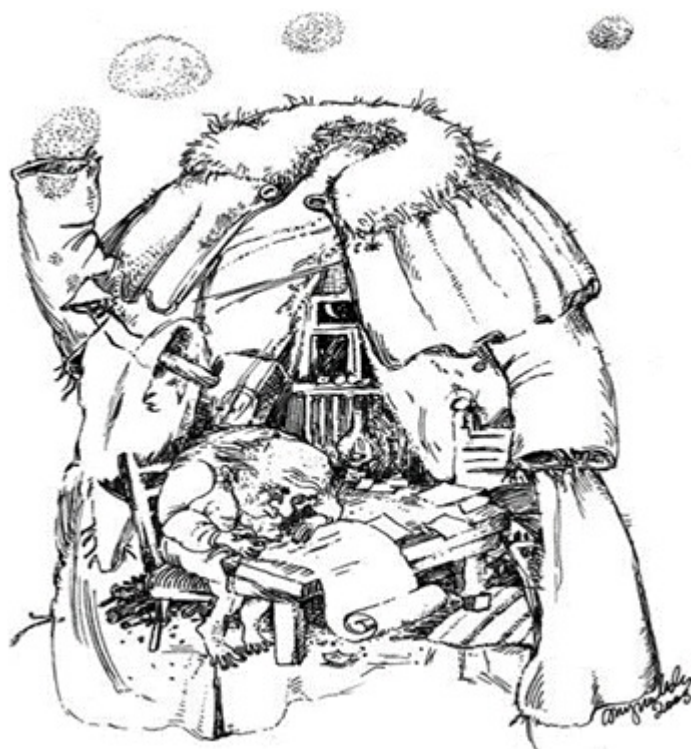
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There can be no words without images — Aristotle

Abstract: Signifier can be not only verbal, but also visible and acoustic. By analyzing image as a signifier we can see that a great meaning can be represented by image without using any word. Sometimes one picture is worth a million words or even more and people get more impressed by picture rather than words. I have chosen illustration from classic story “The Overcoat” by [Nikolai Gogol](#) in order to make visual semiotic analysis of this images based on literary concept of the novels themselves. Because it is interesting for me how can pictures denote meaning without using a word. I will try to make syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis using communication test. Considering image as a visual, material signifier, divide image into smaller units, try to decode signs. It is impossible to make complete analysis of these illustration of a story by Nikolai Gogol without knowing the the story because making superficial analysis. “The overcoat” by Gogol is already known as an icon of " a helpless, little man“. Such kind of people still live among us, people without any aim in their life without motivation. I have chosen these two personages similar to each other and at the same time completely opposite of each other. We know that the poets and authors used metaphor and satire or tragedy to criticize the main problems of that time. The authors used their personages to reveal social problems and in order to make the novels more complete there were used illustrations for these personages. The meaning of visual representation is social problems of that time, which are actual in present also. To draw conclusion I will decode the sign from image analyzing the illustration using qualitative method.

Key Words: *semiotic analysis, visual sign, metaphor*

Semiotic analysis of the illustrations for the story “The overcoat”



Picture 1

Now let's make semiotic analysis of the illustration for the story "The overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol. Here the main personage is Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin (Акакий Акакиевич Башмачкин). As it was mentioned above he was a clerk and worked for the government. Akaky was dedicated to his job and fulfilled all his tasks carefully. In spite of the fact that he was quite poor and had no family, he was satisfied with his life. But his life was more like existence. Akaky is like opposite of Don Quixote. It seemed like he was afraid of changes, did not want anything more, never tried to improve his life and even never had thought about it. For that reason his existence ended senselessly. After that bad event when his overcoat was stolen, he went to the high-ranking general and asked him for help to find his "treasure". But the general shouted at him, as he was really angry that Akaky had disturbed him with such a miserable request. Akaky went home and died of disappointment.

Gogol wrote this story under impression of a sad story, which people told him as a joke. This story is about a hunter which wanted to buy a good gun and saved money for it for a long time but as soon as he bought it he lost it in the hunting. The hunter was so depressed that he died.

The personage of Akaky represents "a little man", preferring obedience rather than defend the interests of his. In my opinion Akaky is the metaphor, denoting miserable life of most of ordinary people, who live without any purpose and sense. And even when they die their death is almost invisible just like their life.

In the picture number three we can see the main idea of the novel. Here, the overcoat is described in much more bigger size rather than the personage of Akaky. From this picture there is an impression like, the overcoat is the main personage, although it is just a clothing. We can clearly see that in this picture the overcoat is more significant than its owner — Akaky, as its position is higher in this picture. Then we have a humpbacked, old man. His shape described in the small-size, which in turn confirms his unimportant existence. Almost bald, Akaky bowed his head, in the whole his appearance and especially in his eyes we can see humility and obedience. As it was mentioned in the novel Akaky did almost all his paper work at night as during day time he was busy at the office. Here we can see description of this process: humpbacked man writing his documents under the moonlight, because he saved money for the new overcoat and did not even buy candles. Although we can see only the part of the room under a huge figure of overcoat, it is obvious that the personage of Akaky lived in poor conditions.

Here the image of Akaky represents a signifier, which denotes a miserable, pointless and useless life of most people of that time. And nowadays we still can find such people.

Conclusion

In my work I have analysed the illustrations of the masterpieces of Gogol and Cervantes. I have made semiotic analysis with the connection of the analysis of the main personages of the novels. The authors described and criticized the main problems of that time, which are still actual. In their works Gogol and Cervantes have metaphor and coding in the main personages. These novels may seem as comedies at first sight, but in fact they represent difficult problems of people. The painters of the illustrations for these novels, described the personages very "alive". Both the author and the painter feel sorrow for the main personages, their life. We can see in the works of the Cervantes and Gogol the message of the author to the readers. The authors could not write about political and social problems because of censorship. So they use coding methods in order to tell about them through personages. The words of the authors are spoken through them. And the painters also did their best in order to capture all significant signs in the illustrations.

In the illustration there is a clear connection between syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis. As it was mentioned above the authors used a system of codes in their works. In order to decode the signified I have

used a visual sign, represented by illustrations. In all of the illustrations we can see absence of colours, but it did not make a bad influence on the images, on the contrary. I think that the black and white colouring in the pictures also serves as a signifier. What is the reason of using such kind limitation in colours. In order to find an answer for this question we must first find an answer to another question: Why do people use colours in the pictures. Colours are also signifiers, denoting different meaning like, love(red roses), parting(yellow roses), youth(green colour) and so on. I think that the authors of the illustrations did not used colour not to limit signifier but in order to avoid wrong ideas, not to let an audience to disturb themselves on the colours and not to pay necessary attention to the figures of the characters, besides it is difficult to say that the lives of our characters were very colourful, especially the life of Akaky. If we use colours to make the illustration of Akaky more bright, we will destroy a signified by making signifier fake and give to it wrong concept.

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