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Mind Versus Heart or Vice Versa: Semiotic Reading of *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract

This article proposes a comprehensive process approach to the reading of literary works to display a scheme on how a reader can develop literary competence by moving from the sense to the value, and consequently to the critique of the work concerned. Semiotic reading as a process approach to the reading of literary works is based on these three consecutive steps mentioned above: (1) reading for the sense, (2) reading for the value, and (3) reading for the critique. *Harrison Bergeron* is the literary work selected for the sole purpose of presenting the steps of semiotic approach, and the reader will be guided all the way through this systematic analytical reading process to acquire the dimension of depth necessary for deeper understanding of human nature by means of symbolic expressions of fixed thought patterns. Literature offers immense source of study on human nature; literary works simply hold up a mirror to reflect on the dark corners of human mind and heart. Through the objective in-depth study of the story the reader as the learner finds ample opportunity to develop a deep perception of life and a sharp awareness of social problems in a cruel, wicked world without dealing with fictional pseudo-facts of much communicative methodology.

Keywords: Semiotic reading, literature in EFL classes, pedagogical effectiveness of language teaching, stylistic and narrative analysis of literary works, (post)modernism.

Semiotic study of literary works has to do with developing a deeper understanding of what they communicate across by guiding the reader in a gradually becoming complicated reading process: (1) sense based on the literal meaning of the carefully selected words and phrases and how they come together in a particular configuration of ideas expressed in the natural domain, (2) value is the symbolic message hidden

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behind the whole text reached through second order signification process carried out in the symbolic domain, and (3) critique is the meaning proposed by the reader based on his own perception of the author's message reached through higher order signification process and what he can put forward against the author by evaluating and raising a counter argument (Kumral 31-44). The reader comprehends the text and then moves beyond it to find out what it really communicates, as words gain symbolic dimension meaning more than what they actually say. The reader as an active agent feels to bring more to what he finds in the text where these two world views represented by the author and the reader respectively converge in the narrative, the world created by the author (Eco 12-16). Sense is the first layer of meaning; it is the surface—literal meaning—reached through reading for comprehension, for words as verbal signs stand for what they refer to in the natural domain.

Sense

The narrative structure of the story Vonnegut published in 1961 is one simple action plot given through two different settings: the TV set showing the studio where the tragic end of Harrison broadcast live and the living room portraying a microcosm within a broader macrocosm representing the 21st century America and American society. Hazel, George and 14 year-old Harrison Bergeron, who is now in jail on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government, set an example of a stereotype kernel family of such a dystopian society. Hazel is a woman with a 'perfect average intelligence' for an ordinary woman who does not need any electronic device or some extra weight put on her body to be equal to anybody in the same society. George is made handicapped by a radio chip placed in his ear, as his intelligence is 'way above normal'. Hazel and George are watching television in the living room. On the screen are some ballerinas with masks hiding their beauty dancing, or rather, swaying like a willow because they are also made handicapped with metal scraps in order for them not to take any advantage of their beauty and/or grace. If they had such a chance to display any of them, it would cause 'competition' by violating the rule of equality. Then there comes breaking news, but the speaker cannot read it, as he himself is also speech impaired, another typical handicapped member. He simply hands the bulletin to a ballerina to read. She first reads it with a voice that sounds like 'a luminous, timeless melody'. Then she changes it not to sound as attractive as it can be, because she may cause trouble by arousing interest in the viewers, taking unfair advantage of her beautiful voice and violating the rule of equality among the fellow speakers. Meanwhile, Harrison escapes from prison with 300 pounds of scrap metal placed on his body likened to a walking junkyard, as he is 'an athlete, a genius and a dangerous revolutionary'. He goes into the studio, and challenges the government agents by breaking all chains and begins dancing with a ballerina who accepts his instant offer to become his empress. "A blindingly beautiful girl appears when he plucks the mental handicap from her ear, snaps off her physical handicaps and finally removes her mask." They dance for a while reaching the ceiling and

kissing each other as long as they wish. Then HG, Handicapper General, comes in and shoots both of them with a double-barrelled gun. They fall dead onto the ground. His parents feel sorry and even cry, for what they see is deeply moving (!) They look at the screen with blank eyes for a while as if they felt something sad inside but cannot understand what it is all about.

The scene narrated in the story seems to be the beginning of a process of questioning the system maintained by the constant vigilance of the agents of the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Clampers, modern Roman virgin goddess of the hunt and the Moon. The 3rd person omniscient narrator never mentions the absolute power that is invincible for being absolutely invisible but ubiquitous every where to observe what happens and take every measure beforehand to prevent any riot against the governing system. State is the real sender (S_1) of the HG ($O_1 \rightarrow S_2$) who conducts whatever necessary to keep the society under incessant control. All HG men ($O_2 \rightarrow S_3$) act upon the order of the HG to obstruct all the possible efforts through constant surveillance (Kurtul 81-92).

The semiotic analysis of the story with all the sign-based references helps clarify the sense relations in the first-order signification process. The second higher order signification process helps the reader to move onto the value as the all the signs turn into signified that gain symbolic dimension in the cultural domain meaning more than what actually say or refer to in the natural domain, the real or the fictional world depicted in the story. The Figure 1 given below indicates semiotic analysis with all these sign relations in place.

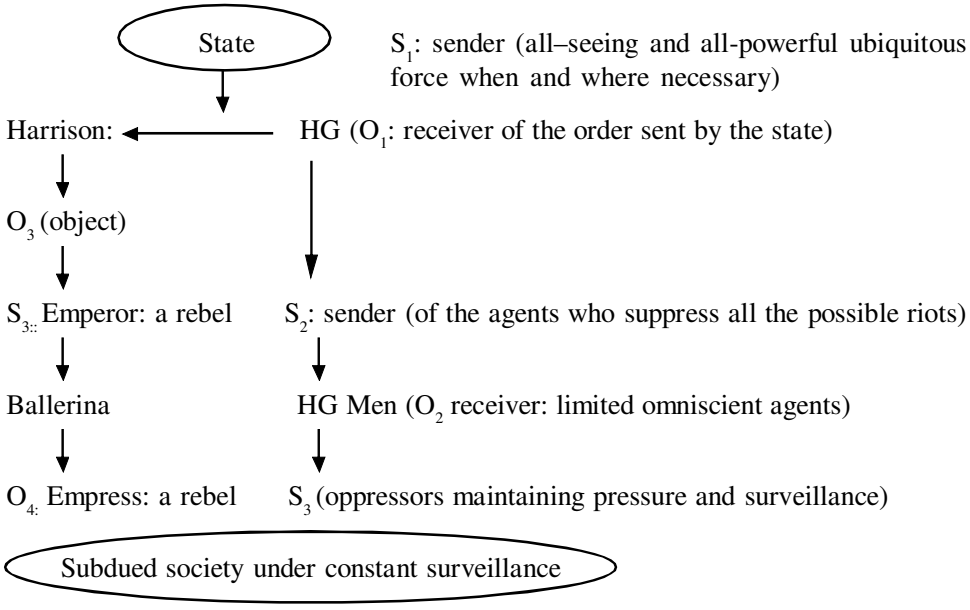


Figure 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Action Plot of the Story

The surface meaning is not enough to reach what lies behind the story, for the very fact that the reader is required to move from the said to the unsaid by interpreting what the author says on the symbolic plane. This higher order signification process, semiosis, "the active making of signs in social (inter)actions," helps the reader to probe deeper into what lies behind the story so as to find out more on what made the author decide to write such a text (Kress 54-55).

Value

Deprived of any opportunity to make a choice in his life, the protagonist, Harrison Bergeron, accomplishes a great shift in a monolithic society made up of people with perfect average intelligence and bearing almost identical features not to cause any competition that can lead to incessant social strife ruining the governing system based on the concept of sheer equality. In the existing governing system, the privileged few and the leaders of the party enjoy all the benefits of being in power unless otherwise a new order is decisively imposed. Their beauty, intelligence, physical strength, wealth and artistic talents would only make them different and irreplaceable regardless of race, colour, ethnic origin, political view, social class, religious belief, which do not all together require any unfair competition.

The reader might have felt disconcerted for being deluded by any other ending, if it were inserted with malicious intent to put the reader on the wrong tract. The characters, in accordance with their assigned roles, act out the tragedy of their lives in a cruel and uncaring world, because they are all caught up in a situation, an incessant chaos, over which they have no control. It is the human mind, represented by state as the absolute power that causes chaos and incessant strife to control whatever happens for the benefit of economic and political interests of the governing system. The whole system is based on one-way mandatory communication in their community created in line with their own principal values which foreground similarities and reject differences. In the process of time, the entire world turns into a global colony composed of monolithic wholes, too slow to change and too reluctant to admit that man, as the most individually distinctive being in the universe, does not ever recognize conspicuous unique identity of each individual. This universal truth means that no body can be superior to the other in terms of so-called freedom bestowed upon each member of the society controlled under constant surveillance. Total ignorance of the individual difference prevents him from recognizing the individual identity of everybody and appreciating the significance of creation. Concealed behind their religious beliefs are their hegemonic powers they relish to the fullest extent by exercising their absolute authority over the inferior, although they are all as equal before law as the ruling party or the members of the political power in a democratic society.

Purblind Doomsters are not the natural laws in force on high that create human destiny in a world ruled by chance, crass casualty, but rather those that exercise their tyranny over the governed lot for their own grim satisfaction. Due to lack of

belief in any sort of design, even a malevolent design would be a consolation to some extent; the whole universe is believed to be indifferent to man's existence on earth. However, it is not nature that is indifferent to man, but rather it is man that is indifferent to nature and even to his existence no matter how decisively he claims that he seeks happiness and peace in the world. In Freudian philosophy, as is often put in Latin, *homo homini lupus* is the oft-repeated precept observed in all avenues of life (Freud 69).

Critique

The story is an intellectual homily preached to warn the upcoming generations of the inevitable man's suppression exercised by man over man perhaps because men in their unending struggles will turn the whole world into a political arena, a colosseum so to speak, to impose their authority hidden behind lucrative designs, disguised every which way to coax, convince and manipulate human mind conditioned to work for the benefit of the governing elite. The governing elite, though they derive their just powers from the consent of the governed in a pseudo-democratic society, assume to have possessed God-like power that can exercise absolute authority over the governed without securing their fundamental rights and allowing any opportunity to challenge their authority and alter their governing system for the benefit of the governed. Mind, in its pompous victory over heart, never sees the dangers lurching in front in the process of moving from the medieval God-centred society representing dark ages of human history on earth to the modern, rationally designed, man-centred society promising absolute freedom of mankind in their penal colony.

Modern man, regardless of race, ethnic origin, beliefs, colour or sex is subject to hierarchical observation or *Panopticon* developed technologically as the base of 'a whole type of society' since it works as a laboratory to gather information about people. A new order can be based on a new system of punishment designed in accordance with the new technology so that it should, as Foucault puts it, "not be more humane but punish better by inserting power deeply into the social body" (Ritzer 467). Punishment is the inescapable result of discipline which is surely the outrageous display of the power governing the society or the globe, and the panoptic "Surveillance is another instrument or mechanism of power to which Victorian society is subjected" (Joodaki and Ghasemi 133). In fact all societies today and in the Middle Ages were subjected to disciplinary power maintained through all means of surveillance "which monitors and controls the way we behave, talk, hear, or see the world" (Joodaki and Ghasemi 133). Eye as the visionary power figure can see all that happens in the outside, the external world, which has its own reflective impact upon the inner world depicting the transformation of human body into designed, disciplined and interiorised monolithic societies.

The problem is that modern structural thought turns all the living creatures into objects, slaves of the demigods or deified tyrants, because beautiful human

mind appears decisively indifferent to man's own existence on earth by reducing emotional needs of man to fictional pseudo-facts of modern living and ignoring the private identity of each individual for their economic interests. Through traditional study of literature the whole world can become a common school of thought, enabling the reader to resist the wickedness, devouring aggression and non-stop tyranny triggered by prejudice and incessantly increased by pride and vanity.

Semiotic analysis of the story helps foreground the deeper understanding of life experience lying behind the moral of the story by providing deeper understanding of human conscience, emotions, beliefs, weaknesses as well as strengths and almost limitless human potential for good and evil. The significance of all the concepts derived from the deeper layers of meaning forms the backbone of the whole study and the fundamental principles of today's widely discussed philosophical issues as follows: (1) *Equality* as the central concept of the story, is carefully placed at the core of the study so that all the other related concepts can be figured out accordingly, among which are (2) *inequality* created out of equality-based administrative and social regulations in a totalitarian society, (3) *significance* of similarity-based modern monolithic society too reluctant to change for the benefit of all the governed, (4) prevailing influence of *injustice* in a pseudo democratic society, (5) *violations* of human rights endowed but never experienced properly as people may take unfair of advantage of their way above normal talents even at the expense of others' unavoidable misery, (6) *limited use of freedom* by chips of mental handicaps placed in their heads, and finally (7) *love* free from carnal pleasures is longed for but never cherished in human heart, because it is carefully stripped of all human feelings and emotions for being suppressed, controlled and subdued by intriguingly delusory human mind, which is absolutely responsible for the establishment of an uncaring, cruel and extremely wicked modern society dangerously limiting freedom when and where necessary.

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