

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Getting the Message: On the Semiotics
of Literary Signification*

Article 2

9-1-1981

Semiotic Consequences

Jonathan Culler
Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Culler, Jonathan (1981) "Semiotic Consequences," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1624>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Semiotic Consequences

Abstract

This paper outlines the semiotic perspectives of Saussure and Peirce and the points at which these quite different theories intersect. It considers the implications of these points of intersection for literary studies and uses the example of *Oedipus Rex* to illustrate the semiotic character of acts and facts.

Keywords

Saussure, Peirce, Oedipus Rex, acts, facts, semiotics, intellect, philosophy

SEMIOTIC CONSEQUENCES

JONATHAN CULLER

Cornell University

If one is interested in the consequences of semiotics for the study of literary signification, one needs a reliable account of what semiotics is or says; and for that it may be important to reflect on the strange consequentiality of semiotics itself, for semiotics is not a continuous discipline with a progressive historical evolution.¹ Thinkers have often produced major insights about signs and signification, but semiotics is not the sum of insights about the sign. It comes into being when the problem of the sign is brought to the fore, made to organize a field—a consequential intellectual development.

One consequence of the advent of semiotics is the creation of precursors and thus of a history. The history of semiotics involves not an ordinary causal sequence but that special historical relationship which Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, whereby an experience not understood at the time it took place (such as witnessing a Primal Scene) is later invested with traumatic meaning and, as trauma, can then be treated as a cause of later events.² Semiotics now identifies, as the trauma which determined its character, the activities in the early years of this century of a strange couple, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce.

They are an ill-sorted couple. Saussure was a successful and respectable Swiss professor who had doubts about the foundations of linguistics as then practiced and therefore wrote practically nothing; but he did argue, in lectures that have come down to us through students' notes, that since language was a system of signs, linguistics ought to be part of a larger science of signs, «a science which would study the life of signs within society. We call it

semiology from the Greek *semeion*. It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be, but it has a right to existence; its place is ensured in advance.»⁷

These suggestions were not taken up, and only later, when various disciplines had taken structural linguistics as a methodological model and become versions of structuralism, did it become evident that the semiology Saussure postulated had begun to develop. At this point he became a powerful influence, partly because he had written little and because the program outlined for semiotics seemed easy to grasp: linguistics was to serve as example and its basic concepts applied to other domains of social and cultural life. The semiotician is attempting to grasp the system (*langue*) which underlies and makes possible meaningful events (*parole*). He is concerned with the system as a functioning totality (*synchronic* analysis) not with the historical provenience of its various elements (*diachronic* analysis), and he must describe two kinds of relations: contrasts or oppositions between signs (*paradigmatic* relations) and possibilities of combination through which signs create larger units (*syntagmatic* relations).

Peirce is a very different case. A wayward philosophical genius, denied tenure by Johns Hopkins, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to «semeiotic,» as he called it, which would be the science of sciences, since «the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs.»⁸ If the universe consists entirely of signs (and he argued that even man was a sign—not the word *man* but man as category or individual), then there is a great deal of classifying to do. Peirce's voluminous writings on semiotics remained unpublished and unreadable until recently. Only with the growth of semiotics in the last few years have our levels of tolerance risen to the point where we can read Peirce, but it is still difficult, since the laboriously produced *Collected Papers* did not recognize semiotics as a field of enquiry and disrupted by their arrangement Peirce's attempts to constitute it through his writing. The failings of this edition have doubtless confirmed many in the view that «who steals my Peirce steals trash.» His revaluation will not be accomplished until the new, semiotically-oriented edition of his works appears.

Peirce's writings are full of proliferating categories (in arguing that men are like other signs he cited the fact that both men and signs procreate): distinctions combine to produce such species as «rhematic indexical sinsign.» There are, he decided, ten

trichotomies by which signs can be distinguished, giving us 59,049 classes of sign. Fortunately, there are redundancies and dependencies so that one only need deal with 66 categories, but even this has proved too much for all but the most masochistic theorists, and this excessive or impractical character of Peirce's ambitious constructions has prevented him from exercising the influence he might have. Today, it is becoming increasingly evident that he is a radical theorist of the first magnitude.

Peirce is a philosophical pragmatist. He defines truth not as correspondence with some objective reality but as what works: to call a judgement objectively valid is to predict that eventually «all the world will agree in it.»⁵ Reality is what is presented in the opinion which will prevail. Peirce shows, in an argument worthy of Nietzsche or Derrida, that «external reality» is something we postulate in order to account for our conviction that investigation will lead to agreement. The reality of things is the postulate we make in order to explain our belief that people will, after discussion and investigation of alternatives, when all the evidence is in, reach agreement. We account for this conviction by assuming that there is an independent, external reality that will induce agreement. «This involves,» Peirce says, «no error, and is convenient for certain purposes, but it does not follow that it affords the point of view from which it is proper to look at the matter in order to understand its true philosophy.»⁶

Those who do not know Peirce well and simply cite him to buttress an argument sometimes assume that since he is known as a pragmatist he must be above all a practical man, a believer in brute facts, suitable guru for a practical American semiotics which would repudiate the excessive theorizing of Europeans, especially the French. On the contrary, Peirce, much more than Saussure, is the brilliant, speculative theorist, delighted to pursue ideas wherever they may take him. Deciding that the answer to the question «what is man?» is that he is a symbol or sign, Peirce works towards a more specific answer by asking in what respects a man differs from the word *six* (this is a fascinating lecture in which, incidentally, he concludes that the differences are primarily physiological).⁷

Peirce and Saussure are very different (at sixes and sevens, one might say) but recent theoretical work, such as Umberto Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* and the papers by Sebeok and Eco in the 1975 Peirce symposium, has shown that their teachings are congruent or complementary on a surprising number of matters.⁸ Indeed, a major achievement of recent semiotic theory is to have made it im-

possible to oppose Peirce to Saussure in a simplistic way. As Thomas Sebeok, doyen of American semioticians, has noted, «the distinction between the traditions has lost its force.»⁹ Occasionally someone still will appeal to one parent against the other, as children trying to get away with something will do, but usually this can be shown to rest on a misunderstanding of Peirce: that he is practical while Saussure is theoretical. There are at least four important points on which the approaches of these two founders of semiotics meet and form a tradition. The first two points are not directly related to the study of literature but the last two are.

1. The first point is presented by Peirce's claim that «the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs.»¹⁰ Since the late nineteenth century, a series of eminent thinkers has insisted that our world be discussed in terms not of physical objects and events but of social and cultural facts: objects and events with meaning, which is to say, signs. Philosophers, sociologists, psychologists have shown that even the most elementary processes of perception themselves are already semiotic, involving social and cultural matrices, categories, distinctions. It has become almost banal truth that there is no perception, in the sense of unmediated presence of objects: the perceptual object is already a sign. We perceive an example of a chair.

Semiotics can take no credit for these discoveries about the symbolic nature of all human experience, which have been made in other fields. Semiotics is the systematic culmination of this perspective. As Peirce says, it is not that we have objects on the one hand and thoughts on the other; it is, rather, that we have signs everywhere, «some more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular.»¹¹ The task of semiotics is to describe the various systems of signs and sign processes which make up the world and, in particular, to study the ways in which semiotic systems and activities create the cultural units which are the objects of our world.

Here the basic semiotic principle is what Saussure called the arbitrary nature of the sign. Occasionally people think this means only that the signifiers of forms used to express concepts are arbitrary: determined by convention rather than by any natural affinity between form and concept. To restrict the principle in this way is to fall into an error which Saussure frequently warned against, the error of thinking of a language as a nomenclature which supplies its own names or forms to denote concepts or classes given in advance. Students and teachers of languages are, of course, only

too aware that each language has not only its own system of signifiers but also its own system of signifieds, its own concepts. Languages articulate the world in different ways, which is why translation cannot be undertaken by looking up each foreign word in a dictionary and writing down the English word which stands for the same concepts—it doesn't work because the concepts are never quite the same. Each language articulates a system of signifieds which are, in Saussure's terms, arbitrary and conventional: arbitrary because not determined by an independent reality (French and English are equally valid articulations of the world); conventional because however natural they seem they are always determined by social rule, semiotic convention. This is the fundamental principle of semiotics.

It is perhaps worth adding here that the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign should not be confused with the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language determines thought. On the contrary, semiotics insists that there is a whole range of cultural activities and practices—not just language—semiotic in nature, which create categories that will find a place as signifieds in natural languages. Thus the rules of basketball create categories which English then names as «dunk-shot» or «foul.» Clearly it is not the case that because «foul» is a sign of English there will be fouls in basketball. The rules of the game are a semiotic sub-system which interacts with the language. For semiotics, we live among a series of systems of this kind which articulate a world. What we think of as things or events are semiotic constructs, cultural units.

2. I have already broached the second point which defines the heritage of Peirce and Saussure and which bears on the relation of verbal signs to non-verbal signs. Peirce, in one of his ten trichotomies, distinguished *symbols* (which were purely conventional and best represented by linguistic signs) from *indices* (where signifier is related to signified by causality or contiguity) and *icons* (where there is a relation of resemblance). Saussure too noted that there were different sorts of signs, but he argued that however natural the relationship between signifier and signified may appear in non-verbal signs, there is always a convention which semiotics must investigate.¹² Semiotics must always resist the tendency among members of a culture to take their signs as natural, as based on a non-conventional relation. Recent work on Peirce's concept of the icon by Sebeok and Eco has shown how much Peirce agreed with Saussure:¹³ whether we are dealing with maps, paintings or diagrams, every material image «is largely conventional in its mode

of representation.»¹⁴ It is only after taking for granted a great many complicated conventions that one can suggest that a map actually resembles what it represents. The task of semiotics is to uncover these conventions on which our everyday activities depend. The principle of the arbitrary and conventional nature of all signs is the guarantee against sloppiness and delusion.

I have said that these two points did not relate directly to the study of literature, but they do confirm something which students of literature already know to be the case. If a poem tells us that the beloved wore a silver gown, we do not think that this sequence simply represents an extra-linguistic reality which has determined the sequence. We know that what is represented here is itself part of a sign system, so we ask what this means and how it fits in with the rest of the poem. In literature we are free from the delusion that signs are determined (and accounted for) by realities which are simply there prior to any semiosis. Semiotics is a codification of this understanding of sign systems which literary critics, for the most part, already have.

3. The third point on which Peirce and Saussure would agree is that semiotics is not a method of interpretation which can be applied to a text to produce new readings. It is, rather, a theoretical framework within which the study of signifying processes of all kinds takes place. It asks not «what does this work mean?» but «how is the process of signification organized here?» It is important to note, though, that rigorous attention to the signifying procedures that a work establishes and to the work's own representation of the signifying process can yield subtle and penetrating interpretations of literary works. This kind of criticism, which involves a scrupulous analysis or taking apart of the logic of signification in a text, is now often called «deconstruction.»

4. Finally, by posing the problem of what kind of sign processes are at work in texts, semiotics ought to have one very important consequence: it ought to make criticism confront a problem which it has always tried to sweep under the rug, the problem of the relationship between signification and communication.

This is a central issue in semiotics. Those who see semiotics as studying communication are content to think of meaning as what is communicated by signs, and this view has its virtues in some cases. We are not likely to object to the notion that a word's meaning is what it means to speakers of the language, but those who want semiotics to deal, as Peirce did, with all kinds of correlations among semiotic phenomena, find that the attempt to treat meaning

as what is communicated does not suffice in practice. As soon as we look at actual texts or situations we begin to make discoveries, to see relationships and correlations which had not previously been noticed and which have not therefore been communicating anything to anyone. If one were to study the behavior of undergraduates—highly codified and ritualized, always communicating to those in the know—we might discover, for example, that the fad of «streaking» coincided with the Watergate cover-up.¹⁵ Whatever we think of this correlation, it seems wrong to reject it on the grounds that this meaning was not communicated to spectators at the time. When we come to literature, the critic certainly will not be content to reject a pattern or correlation he has just discovered on the ground that it has not been communicating meaning to previous readers. On the contrary, literary criticism as a semiotic activity has been predicated on the attempt to discover and interpret new patterns, structures, and correlations.

However, criticism has usually tried to avoid facing this semiotic problem. The New Criticism, by identifying the intentional and affective fallacies, simply denied the relevance of a communicational perspective and assumed that literature involved signification which was inherent in the structures of the work and which patient study might discover. Recent ventures into what has come to be called «reader-response criticism,» whether sophisticated as in Stanley Fish or bathetic as in versions based on ego psychology, simply reverse the claim: there is no signification, no meaning to be discovered. Meaning is simply the experience of each reader, what is communicated to him. This is not only false to literary criticism, which has been able to make discoveries about meaning that have become part of our knowledge of literature, but also false to the classroom situation on which it claims to focus. What we find in a classroom, when you give a class a poem, is not 25 students projecting their unique personalities onto works and each producing a complex interpretation which precisely reflects his personality, but rather varying degrees of incomprehension, interpretations carried over from previous classes, etc.—until discussion begins; patterns, structures, and correlations are pointed out; and students begin to make discoveries about meaning and come to see interpretive possibilities which their teachers had not envisioned. That we are dealing with complex structures and an interpretive competence becomes clear in the work of Stanley Fish. Though Fish says he is recording the experience of an informed reader like himself, that is improbable, for any real reader, as he started on his

14th «self-consuming artifact,» would not have the experience Fish describes—the experience of being surprised and disturbed to see the work question its own categories and negate its own claims.¹⁶ On the contrary, he would expect this and be pleasantly gratified to see his expectations confirmed. What Fish presents as meaning communicated is in fact significance discovered.

Semiotics, with its focus on the problem of meaning, ought to make critics aware of the necessity of working out a dialectic between signification and communication, constructing a theory that accounts for the possibility of discovering meaning, instead of either rejecting the communicational perspective or else arguing that criticism has been an elitist activity which ought to stop *studying* works and simply record what they mean to those who have not yet learned to read carefully and skillfully.

So far I have proceeded without examples, except for that bare reference to streaking, and to put some clothes on this naked form I should like to conclude with some remarks about a work well known to most readers, a work which our culture has interpreted as central to our definition of the nature and situation of man: *Oedipus Rex*. Freud, one of millions of enthusiastic readers, describes the play as follows:

The action of the play consists of nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement (a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home.¹⁷

Freud emphasizes that the play involves the bringing to light, the revelation, of an awful deed—the event *par excellence*—and this event is so powerful that it imposes its meaning (Oedipus is «appalled»), irrespective of any intention by the actor. This is what has always been communicated by the play: the event is revealed; it makes Oedipus guilty; and he attains true human dignity in accepting the meaning imposed by the revealed event.

But this reading fails to account for an interesting element in the play, discussed in a different perspective by Sandor Goodhart.¹⁸ When Oedipus first asks whether anyone witnessed Laius's death he is told, «All died save one who fled in terror and could tell us only one clear fact. He said that robbers, not one but many, fell in

with the King's party and killed them.» And later, when Oedipus begins to wonder whether he may in fact have killed Laius, he tells Jocasta that all hangs on the testimony of this witness, whom they await. «You say he spoke of robbers, that robbers killed him. If he still says robbers, it was not I. One is not the same as many; but if he speaks of one lone traveller, there is no escape: the finger points to me.» To which Jocasta answers, «Oh, but I assure you, that was what he said. He cannot go back on it now; the whole town heard it, not only I.»

The only witness has publicly told a story that is incompatible with Oedipus's guilt. This possibility of innocence is never effectively eliminated, for by the time the witness arrives Oedipus is busy discovering that he is the son of Laius and asks only about his birth, not about the murder. The witness is never asked whether the murderers were one or many.

I am not suggesting that Oedipus was really innocent and has been falsely convicted for 2400 years. I am interested in the significance of the fact that the possibility of innocence is never properly dispelled: the whole action of this play is the revelation of the dastardly deed, but we are never confronted with the deed itself, given the testimony of the eyewitness. Oedipus himself and all his readers are convinced that he is guilty, but our conviction does not come from revelation of the deed. Where *does* it come from? From a repetition of prophecies, from signs. It was prophesied that Laius would be killed by his son; it was prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father; and Tiresias, asked who is guilty of murder, prophesies that it will prove to be Oedipus. Given this conjunction of signs, this textual interweaving of prophecies, when Oedipus discovers that he is the son of Laius he leaps to the conclusion that he is the murderer.

He becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light but by deeming the act to have taken place: by assuming that what the signs claim must have happened, by appropriating what the signs represent. The network of signs which the prophecies have woven leads to the affirmation of the event which those signs predict. And we as readers cannot escape this process either: the text compels us to affirm the truth of the paricide.

I offer this beginning of a reading of *Oedipus* to support my claim that literary criticism must not limit itself to what has been communicated but must preserve the possibility of discovering meaning by reinterpreting elements previously disregarded. But

from a semiotic point of view what is important here is the play's implicit commentary on the relation between meaning and event, between signs and the «realities» often thought to be independent of them. On the one hand, in working toward revelation of the murder, the play implicitly claims that the revealed event will determine meaning. If it took place, then Oedipus is a parricide; and the play compels readers to affirm, with Oedipus, that because it did, he is. But the play also shows that this deed is not revealed as such but inferred from signs. We are given not a deed from which we infer meaning but meaning from which we infer a deed. Peirce identified «external reality» as what is inferred from our belief in agreement, and we find much the same position here. We are not wrong to think Oedipus is guilty, but it can be shown that the event which we take as imposing is already a consequence of signs and not a reality independent of *semiosis*. In the beginning was the word. We are not wrong to think that there are events, that they create meaning, but whenever we try to grasp a thing or event said to have determined meaning, we discover that the thing or event is already a product of signs, already enmeshed in *semiosis*. We cannot get outside textuality.

What I offer here is not a semiotic reading of *Oedipus*—there is no such thing— but a reading attentive to the logic of signification and in that sense a reading made possible by semiotics. Here as elsewhere, one consequence of semiotics is the demonstration that events, the originary events which we always seek to discover, are themselves already semiotic consequences.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally written for a Forum on semiotics at the December 1977 meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago. It bears some traces of that occasion, particularly in its attempt to criticize proleptically the general position espoused by Robert Scholes in a paper, «Semiotics: The American Way,» for the same Forum—a position which I believe he no longer holds.

2. See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), chapter IX, «Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative.»

3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1973), p. 33. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974), p.

16. For further discussion see Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

4. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), V, 448.

5. Peirce, VII, 259.

6. Peirce, VII, 335.

7. Peirce, VII, 583-4. The lecture is entitled «Consciousness and Language,» VII, 579-596.

8. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Eco, «Peirce's Notion of Interpretant,» *MLN*, 91, No. 6 (Dec. 1976), 1457-72; and Thomas Sebeok, «Iconicity,» *Ibid.*, pp. 1427-56.

9. Sebeok, «Ecumenicalism in Semiotics,» in *A Perfusion of Signs*, ed. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 182.

10. Peirce, V, 448.

11. Peirce, VII, 570.

12. Saussure, *Cours*, pp. 100—101; *Course*, p. 68, Cf. Culler, *Saussure*, pp. 98—9.

13. In addition to the articles by Eco and Sebeok cited in note 8, see Michael McCleskey, «Conventions,» *Diacritics*, 7, No. 3 (Fall 1977), 54—63.

14. Peirce, 2, 276.

15. Alan Dundes, «Projection in Folklore» *MLN*, 91, No. 6 (Dec. 1976), 1526.

16. For further discussion see Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, chapter 6.

17. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Avon, 1965) p. 295.

18. Sandor Goodhart, «Who Killed Laius», unpublished Ph.D. dissertation SUNY-Buffalo, 1977. See also Goodhart, «Oedipus and Laius's Many Murderers,» *Diacritics*, 8, No. 1 (1978), 55-71; and my discussion in *The Pursuit of Signs*, chapter 9.