Ioana BOGHIAN

HOUSES *in* VICTORIAN NOVELS

A semiotic approach

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Ioana BOGHIAN

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Foreword

Approaching the house as a sign of identity from a semiotic point of view supports investigating the way in which a house signifies on different levels. The cultural and semiotic approach to the concept of the Victorian house helps analyse aspects such as: the house as a cultural product of a certain society in a certain age; the interactions and relationships between inhabitants and guests; the Victorian house as both a private and public space; interactions and relationships among inhabitants and/or between inhabitants and outsiders as indicators of social, domestic and moral hierarchies.

Semiotics, the main approach applied in this study, supports in crossing the boundaries of academic disciplines. A psychological approach to the house would have provided only the possibility of connecting the concept of the house with the inner life of a character; semiotics allows not only this, but also to see the way in which the Victorians' interpretation of the house is reflected in their cultural and social practices, as well as their evolution as individuals. Analysing the house as a semiotic object supports the identification of cultural spaces and cultural paradigms, social and domestic roles and positions as part of the house's process of signification and the way in which the resulted meaning is communicated to readers by means of Victorian novels.

With these purposes in mind, the author has structured the book into chapters focused on different aspects related to the concept of the house: the semiotic approach reveals the concept of the house as a triadic relationship, functioning either as an iconic, symbolic or indexical sign in relation to its inhabitants; the cultural approach applied to the concept of name and naming houses reveals criteria for the act of naming,

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as well as types of house-names and their origins; the semiotic approach to the relationships established within the Victorian house enables the elaboration of a classification of houses, owners, inhabitants and guests into subjects, objects and agents; the concept of relatedness is discussed as an act of signifying (everything within and outside a house generates meaning); the relationship between nature and culture is analysed as another element of the signification process which contributes to constructing the identity of a Victorian house and its inhabitants; through semiopoetics, the author has addressed the concept of the house as a metaphor for the text and for the human body; the ekphrastic representation of houses highlights the function of paintings and portraits of characters in Victorian houses and novels. The texts selected as textual support include novels by Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters and Thomas Hardy. The presence of several paradigms within the same house (home, prison, shelter, tomb etc.) is what determines the richness of significations arising from the concept of the house during the 19th-century Victorian culture.

The models of interpretation and analysis may be applied to other texts, as well. The book appeals to students and researchers in literature, cultural studies and semiotics.

Associate professor Elena Ciobanu
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău

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Abbreviations

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Dickens, Ch. (2004). *David Copperfield*. London: Penguin Books. Abbreviated as *DC*.
Dickens, Ch. (1983). *Great Expectations*. London: Penguin Books. Abbreviated as *GE*.
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Introduction

Approaching the house as a sign of identity from a semiotic point of view gives us the chance to investigate the way in which the house signifies on different levels. Victorian novels provide rich material suitable for demonstrating certain hypotheses.

Chapter 1 focuses on the concept of the house approached from a diachronic and synchronic cultural (Lotman, 1974, 2001) perspective: the diachronic perspective traces the evolution of the modern house as a building, and explains the changes in the spaces of the house effected throughout centuries; the synchronic approach highlights the Victorians' unique view upon the house which, no matter the architectural style, was supposed to reflect the owner's social status and wealth. The semiotic approach reveals the house as a triadic relationship, (Peirce, 1990), functioning either as an iconic, symbolic or indexical sign in relation to its inhabitants; the two major significations of the house are those of space of social practices and space of becoming. The three levels of semiosis reveal the significations of the house interpreted as a sign: at the very lexical level, houses signify loneliness, or self-confidence on the semantic level; on the syntactical level, the house as sign sends to a web of modalities foregrounding desire, knowledge, capability and doing.

The identity of Victorian houses given by their names (Anderson, 2007) is discussed in Chapter 2: a cultural approach is applied to the concept of name and naming houses to reveal criteria for the naming act, as well as types of house-names and their origins. The semiotic approach to the act of naming Victorian houses reveals what the name of a house – as a sign –"stands for". The act of naming houses is also discussed as

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opposed to the act of numbering houses; the main question to which this section of the paper tries to answer is whether only the act of numbering houses (and not that of naming them, too) implies an economic value. Approaching Victorian names of houses also aims at highlighting how these names function as objects (used by people), and as agents (house names achieve an authority of their own and by this they may associate the owner(s), inhabitant(s) and guest(s) with a certain reputation).

A semiotic approach is applied to the relationships established within the Victorian house as sign in Chapter 3. The object/house-subject/dwellers relationships differ and are classified and defined according to such criteria as sex, age, and social position; on the same citeria, the subject-subject relationships have been categorized as symmetrical and asymmetrical (Genette, 1978; Dijk, 1989, 1994). Ownership is revealed as the act of allowing and mediating a shift between positions, particularly in the case of asymmetrical relationships. The Victorian house is further analysed as an agent (Brémond, 1981), and the inhabitants as patients suffering the effects of the agent's 'actions': this interpretation emphasizes two contrasting roles of the house as agent, that of prison and shelter, while the honour of occupying the fireplace area is given only to the privileged. The object-object relationships concern relationships among houses; one concept selected as criterion for defining such relationships is time: time "told" by different houses in Th. Hardy's *The Return of the Native*.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the concept of relatedness (Greimas, 1975, 1966, van Leeuwen, 2005, 2008) as an act of signifying; everything within and outside a house signifies: types of objects (ornaments, tools) and how they are distributed in space reveal a character's profession and personality (objects as extensions and projections of the self). The nature-culture relationship is analysed as another element

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of the signification process which contributes to constructing the identity of a Victorian house and its inhabitants. In E. Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, human faces look like the surrounding landscape, and emotions are metaphorically expressed as natural phenomena. Culture serves to distinguish between good taste and kitsch: the Victorian garden, park and conservatory are boundaries between culture and nature. A further analysis is directed at the physical boundaries of a Victorian house, their signification and functions (yards, gates and fences), as well as at imaginary boundaries 'created' by characters 'walking' within a continuous shift between the concepts of spatial appropriation and spatial exclusion; this analysis also involved identifying and contouring Victorian cultural types; the web of codes supporting the interpretation and construction of all this array of significations is also specified.

The approach used in Chapter 5 is semiopoetics (Chandler, 2007, Danesi, 2004): the concept of the house functions as a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, Ricoeur, 1984) for the text and for the human body. Concepts such as the paratext (Genette, 1997), chapter titles, plot levels and narrative labyrinth are approached in metaphorical terms as the thresholds, doors, corridors and stairs of the text. The metaphor of the human body as a house stresses the important place that the mind occupies in the human body and how it is associated with the highest, but also most intimate places of the house. The minds of characters are depicted as rooms 'furnished' with and 'sheltering' thoughts. The section dedicated to characters as architectural constructions is particularly concerned with explaining 19th-century novelists' preference for describing characters by means of architectural discourse (Varey, 1990). Clothes and furniture are analysed as extensions of the human body and house: besides the function of covering and protecting the body, clothes also act as

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boundaries and 'magnifying' instruments, while furniture becomes a critera for distinguishing between, for example, gendered rooms.

Chapter 6 focuses upon the ekphrastic (Doody, 1997, Barthes, 1987, Hamon, 2009) representation of houses. There are discussed Victorian painters representing houses in their work, the relationship established between real and fictional houses, the presence of paintings in Victorian houses and portraits of characters in novels and their functions, characters as painters and the meaning of what and how they paint.

The analysed texts include novels by: Charles Dickens (*Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation* – the house as a firm, a family business; *David Copperfield* – exclusion from home, traversing different houses as an attempt to define oneself; *Great Expectations* – the house as a tomb; *Oliver Twist* – the 'it' as the product of the workhouse system; Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights* – houses embodying the nature-culture dichotomy); Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre* – the house as prison); Anne Brontë (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – the house as shelter; Thomas Hardy (*The Return of the Native* – the house as a trap). Associating the concept of the house with a certain e paradigm that we consider to be representative within the context of the respective novel does not exclude the presence of the same paradigm with other houses in other novels; examples of houses as prisons, shelters, traps or tombs are identified in almost all of the novels under discussion; this generates the richness of significations arising from the concept of the house in the 19th-century Victorian culture.

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1. A CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO VICTORIAN HOUSES

1.1. A cultural approach to Victorian houses

There is no stable or single version of *cultural studies* – a term formally introduced into the British university system in 1963 – but most of the definitions (Payne, 1997: 127-8; Barnard & Spencer, 2002: 203-5; Mikics, 2007: 76-7; Barker, 2006: 42-3) mention the purpose of cultural studies as that of analysing cultural products in the form of literary works and not only, and human interactions in a diversity of spaces and places. Raymond Williams was among the first theorists to emphasize the "need to move beyond the canonical definitions of textuality, to locate the culture of literacy in a wider social context." (Barnard & Spencer, 2002: 203). The object of cultural studiesis, therefore, any cultural product belonging not necessarily to the elitist 'high-culture', but to all types of cultural production. By using sociology, literary and anthropological approaches, culture was defined as a way of life, in contrast to aesthetics or appreciation. Cultural studies focus on aspects of culture such as: national identity, mass culture, class, ethnicity; for example, for Bourdieu, "questions of aesthetic preference cannot be adjudicated with reference to literary or artistic tradition, but instead must be grasped as effects of snobbery and social prejudice" (Mikics, 2007: 76). Theorists following Bourdieu's view focus on the correlation between one's social position and one's cultural practices: habits, tastes, etc.

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The author has structured the book into chapters focused on different aspects related to the concept of the house: the semiotic approach reveals the concept of the house as a triadic relationship, functioning either as an iconic, symbolic or indexical sign in relation to its inhabitants; the cultural approach applied to the concept of name and naming houses reveals criteria for the act of naming, as well as types of house-names and their origins; the semiotic approach to the relationships established within the Victorian house enables the elaboration of a classification of houses, owners, inhabitants and guests into subjects, objects and agents; the concept of relatedness is discussed as an act of signifying (everything within and outside a house generates meaning); the relationship between nature and culture is analysed as another element of the signification process which contributes to constructing the identity of a Victorian house and its inhabitants; through semiopoetics, the author has addressed the concept of the house as a metaphor for the text and for the human body; the ekphrastic representation of houses highlights the function of paintings and portraits of characters in Victorian houses and novels. The texts selected as textual support include novels by Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters and Thomas Hardy. The presence of several paradigms within the same house (home, prison, shelter, tomb etc.) is what determines the richness of significations arising from the concept of the house during the 19th-century Victorian culture.

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