

On the Semiotic Interpretation of the Epic Poems “David of Sassoon” and “Beowulf”

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The present article aims at uncovering the main semiotic peculiarities of the epic poems “Beowulf” and “David of Sassoon”. We deal with cross-cultural analysis which is termed in semiotics as “cross-cultural media activity”. Within the focus of our interest has been the study of the basic linguistic and non-linguistic signs that give a helping hand in semiological studies. Great attention is paid to the study of visual signs which enter into the system of semiosphere. The study in these lines has mainly been carried out on the level of opposition and comparison between two epic poems. The research shows a great number of similarities and a surprising degree of differences in the semiotic systems. This provides a great insight into the semiological system of these two epic poems and leaves much room for further scrutiny in the field.

It is worth mentioning that for each observer and researcher it takes a gigantic conspiracy to deal with such a challenging sphere like that of epic poetry. However, in case of strong will and great desire, the success will be at hand.

When trying to give a general outline of the epic poems, it is important to state the fact that they are the reflection of the given nation’s worldview, desires, ambitions, and deeds. Epic heroes are the nation’s beloved “sons” and “daughters” who together with their “parents” create and recreate their present and future in the light of their past deeds. Thus, epic poems become the ultimate achievements of the folklore, hence they are the mirror of national identity.

The only preserved manuscript about Beowulf dates from the 10th century. According to many scholars the main events described in the poem take place at the end of the 7th century or at the beginning of the 8th century (Newton 1993:10).

“David of Sassoon” is based on oral tradition that presumably dates from the 8th to the 10th century. It was widely known from the 16th through the 19th century and was finally written down in 1873 by Garegin Srvandzeanc (Encyclopædia Britannica, Entry on the Epic Poem “David of Sassoon”:258).

It has become quite obvious from the introductory parts that we are dealing with cross-cultural analysis of semiotic features of the introduced epic poems. In a semiotic fashion this analysis is termed as *cross-media symbolic activity* which focuses on the revelation of culture-bound semiotic features and interpretation (Irvine 1993:18). Thus the culturally bound sign system points to the existence of our larger contemporary and inherited semiotic system, or what some have termed a *semiosphere*, the whole universe of available and possible meanings in a cultural system (ibid. 20). If we pass all this knowledge to the framework of our analysis it becomes obvious that we deal with a very subtle and deep analysis of the semiotic systems of the social reality introduced in these two epic poems. In order to bring forth the role of signs in the epic poems under study, we would bear in mind Peirce’s definition of the sign, which follows as such: *Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign* (Peirce 2006:58). In this connection it becomes

important to give a general outline of the semiotic system introduced by Charles Peirce. He distinguishes between an *index* (a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way - physically or causally - to the signified), *icon* (a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified) and *symbol* (a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional; so that the relationship must be learnt (ibid.:74).

Pierce stresses the importance of icons, indices and symbols analyzed in ideological combination. The overlap of these sign types has led the researchers to study in depth the notion of *mapping* in epic studies. The feature of signs of being able to represent a map is of utmost importance since the map is both a continuous and discontinuous phenomenon. It presupposes the existence of both the territory/space and time. Thus spatial and temporal dimensions are the cornerstones of the realization of semiotic features in the analysis of the chosen epic poems. Therefore, in this connection sometimes the distinction is made between digital and analogical signs. Indeed, Angus Cameron declares that *no two categories, and no two kinds of experience are more fundamental in human life and thought than continuity and discontinuity* (Cameron 1987:417).

In fact all these semiotic features find their realization in epic poems where three lines of development are noticed; the notion, the very idea of world creation (people's preconceived idea about nature) and supernatural energy.

1. The form of telling - *mythical* which is mainly observed in non-Christian countries and *historical*, the latter is mainly witnessed in Europe.
2. The origin of heroes - heroes are basically of supernatural origin and if they don't have that power and supernatural strength they acquire it during their life (ibid.:420).

While dealing with epic studies, one cannot but mention the role and essence of objects that are always with heroes and serve as protecting means for them. Thus, in respect to this if we tend to the symbolic system introduced by Peirce we come to see lots of symbols referring to heroes' personal objects or places. Now we will observe the semiotic nature of some of them. In "Beowulf" we come to see *Heorot*, the royal palace which is full of treasure and luxury. As a sign it finds its representation in the linguistic interpretation which gives the following *Heorot* means "deer palace" (Newton 1993:78). This assumption is made due to the fact that the walls of the palace are decorated with deer fur. Besides, deer is also the symbol of ruling and great power. In "David of Sassoon" we see *Sassoon* as one of the main symbolic paces which carries the soul of its founders and their energy, is always thundering over its stones, stands apart from evil and doesn't let the anger and stormy winds enter it and undo the indissoluble links that are the basis of its foundations ("David of Sassoon" 1981:17).

Pierce's concept of the sign illustrates the ways in which the sign interaction of the poem through repetition and interconnection, forms networks of indexical association. One sign, for example, *a sword*, will point indexically, inevitably to an interpretant (a cognition produced in the mind of the interpreter), such as past enmity, which in turn produces another interpretant (future strife). In both epic poems the magic power of the sword is of great value for its carriers and for those who believe in its victory (Encyclopædia Britannica, Entry on the Epic Poem "David of Sassoon":260).

The phenomenon of world creation is widely expressed through numeric symbols,

like 14 (the number of Beowulf's soldiers representing collective strength and power), 10 (the symbol of the wholeness of universe), 4 (the symbol of continuity which serves to prove the fact that Beowulf goes to save Hrothgar and his people and to give them a new life), 7, which is of wide use in "David of Sassoon" and is the symbol of holly spirit and one of the basic symbols of Christianity. However it is also used while requesting for merci for the deceased - passed people to help them find their appropriate place and role in Heaven. The following shows the realization number 7.

*Hearken I shall sing, Hearken I shall sing
A requiescat for Younger Mher,
A requiescat for Lady Gohar ,
A requiescat for Voicy Hovan,
A requiescat for Uncle Thoros,
Seven requiescats for David I'll sing .
Cycle by cycle coming down we have
Now reached the cycle of Younger Mher.*
(Armenian Epic Poem in Four Cycles, 2002:317)

*Տի Կամ օղորմի՜ն Պարիկ Մերի՜ն ,
Տի Կամ օղորմի՜ն Գոհար Խանումի՜ն,
Տի Կամ օղորմի՜ն Չենով Հովանի՜ն,
Տի Կամ օղորմի՜ն Քեռի Թորոսի՜ն,
Տի Կամ օղորմի՜ն յոթ Այուդ Դավթի՜ն,
Ճղեճուդ էկանք վեր Մերի՜ն անդի՜ն:*
(“David of Sassoon” 1981:292)

As was mentioned above, it is very important to cast a glance at the heroes' history of birth. Each of the heroes is to have a mythic or supernatural origin, like Sanasar and Balthazar who are born from water, David of Sassoon, who is born by the virtue of God's will. The heroes get their strength in the course of growing old and old, like Beowulf.

*Thrust her hands in that life-giving fountain,
She got a drink first cupping both her hands,
Then another one cupping just one hand;
Anon the fountain dried up then and there.*
(Armenian Epic Poem in Four Cycles, 2002:23)

Thus, water as the source of life of the initial forebears of this epic, continues to be a dominant factor in imparting strength to the heroes and revitalizing them from battle. Tsovinar drinks water from Milky Fountain, David washes his face with water before going to battle with Melik. Beowulf also gets strengthened while swimming 40 days long in the sea. In "Beowulf" water is also represented as the place of evil and disgust for people. Here, the purity of water is opposed to people's inner evil and monster's outer evil.

We can witness that in both epic poems the main heroes are endowed with Godlike nature whereas their enemies are of hellward birth. In “Beowulf”, Grendel, who is also the symbol of hellward birth, carries the curse of all humankind. The curse is that of brothermurder.

Thus, for the interpretation of the semantic poems, the transportation and semiotic mapping of heroes and the main events is of utmost importance. In this case we deal with spatial and temporal continuity which is the basis of human life. In this domain the role of Fate acquires great significance since it is the cornerstone of the historical events and their interpretations. Armenian *kamy* (wind) and English *voice* echo the concept of speed in covering distances. They are the basic index that stand for the continuity and for the indissoluble links that keep the basis of digital mapping. Voicy Hovhan and Uncle Thoros are the indexes of continuity in “David of Sassoon”, and in “Beowulf” permanent is the index of water that brings new life and takes it away. In Beowulf Skild Skilding reaches the coast of Denmark on a boat full of gold and brings a new life for these people. When he dies the same continuous and discontinuous water takes him away on the same boat full of the same gold. Thus the phenomenon of Fate becomes very important for both Beowulf and Younger Mher. Fate is governed in one case by a dragon who guards the gold of its ancestors and in the second case it is governed and provided by the hero’s father who puts spell on his son. In case of the dragon we deal with a two-parted creature who lost its Godlike power and face and preserved the ability to fly and scrawl like a snake. As for Younger Mher we see heavenly and earthy qualities by two figures - Mher (earth) and Colt Jalali (the heaven). The fight with the dragon kills Beowulf since he has been preoccupied by taking the gold and giving it to his people. In case of Mher the father curses him and thus leads him to a spiritual death in contrast to Beowulf whose death is more physical than spiritual.

The ultimate realization of the semiotic sign in the two epic poems is the cave which is the symbol and the index of the two sides of the world, the earth and the underground world. One of the heroes passes it but the other is incapable of doing so and is sitting in between these two worlds.

*Mher’s stone opened, the shepherd went in,
Saw a man sitting; the shepherd asked him;
“When will you come out of this place, Mher?”
Mher said: “If I come out of this place,
The ground won’t be firm enough to bear me.
As long as the world is evil, wicked;
As long as the soil is rot to the core,
I can’t abide in this world, cannot.”*
(“David of Sassoon” 1981)

Mher continues to bear the curse and the whole bunch of human sins. Days pass, years roll, the soil becomes heavier under his feet, the load that the humankind is carrying is too heavy to be carried alone, since it becomes heavier and heavier. The salvation could be found either on this or the other side of the cave, but the burden dragged along centuries is grown into wheat as big as cankerberries.

Thus, within the framework of the present paper we have tried to present the main semiotic peculiarities of the two epic poems: “David of Sassoon” and “Beowulf.” The importance of the scrutiny of semiotic features found in these poems is due to the fact that we deal not only with an inter-textual but also with inter-cultural analysis. Since we deal with texts, it is of paramount importance to draw attention to the study of basic linguistic signs and how they are presented by individuals and the socium as a whole. The digital semiotic mapping and the principle of continuity and discontinuity are basic semiotic features. Heroes who are either born as supernatural or become supernatural are exposed to the creation of a new semiosphere and its crystal-clear interpretation.

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«Մասունցի Դավիթ» և «Բեովուլֆ» էպիկական պոեմների նշանային մեկնությունների շուրջ

Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում են նշանային այն առանձնահատկությունները, որոնք ընկած են «Մասունցի Դավիթ» և «Բեովուլֆ» էպիկական պոեմների հիմքում:

Քննության են առնվում լեզվական և արտալեզվական նշանային միավորներ՝ (նշան-բառ, նշան-սիմվոլ, նշան-արտահայտություն) դրսևորումները, որոնք առանց-բային դերակատարություն ունեն վերը նշված պոեմներում: