Narrative Semiotics Vs Transactional Analysis as Methods of In-Depth Interpretation of Fiction

Florencia Del Co *, Larisa Del Co, Karavaitseva

Doctoral and master students at Higher School of Economics, School of Psychology in Moscow.

*Corresponding Author: Florencia Del Co, Doctoral and master student at Higher School of Economics, School of Psychology in Moscow.

Abstract

This paper applies theoretical instruments of narrative semiotics (NS) and transactional analysis (TA) to the analysis of the characters in Anton Chekhov's short story "Confession – or Olya, Zhenya, Zoya: A Letter". Firstly, we present the main features of the afore mentioned analysis methods and show with a few examples how they may be applied to the analysis of fictional characters. The analysis of the text of "Confession or Olya, Zhenya, Zoya: A Letter" from semiotics point of view results in uncovering the main ethical values underlying the story in the so-called semiotic grid or corral. Then we analyze the situations described by the letter's author in relation to himself and his beloved women through transactional analysis using TA defined ego-states of Parent, Adult and Child and the OK life positions corral. Finally, we identify the correlations existent between both methods. The conclusions achieved by the authors of the paper show that although both methods can be used when analyzing a literary text, only a combination of them ensures a true in-depth understanding of these fictional characters. Chekhov's masterly depiction of the main character's internal conflicts and reflections may lead to a reevaluation of real-life situations by readers.

Keywords: narrative semiotics; transactional analysis; texts interpretation; semiotic or greimas square; life positions, ok corral; actants; functional analysis

Introduction

In this paper the authors show how Chekhov's short story "Confession – or Olya, Zhenya, Zoya: A Letter" can be analyzed using two methods, one from the point of view of narrative semiotics and the other from a psychological point of view, that of transactional analysis (TA).

There are many approaches to the analyses of fictional texts. The unique approach of the authors of this article consists of the fusion of methods from two sciences —philology and psychology— which allows for a more in-depth comprehension of the text and a better understanding of fictional characters through a study of their patterns of Behaviour, thoughts and feelings.

Narrative Semiotics

The main aim of narrative semiotics is to identify the narrative components underlying the structure of the text. These components constitute the link between the superficial or shallow structure of the text and its deeper structure, namely the basic system of values built in the text. Once the reader grasps the intermediate narrative structures it becomes easier to understand the values which lay within an in-depth structure of the text.

According to A. J. Greimas, within the text it is possible to differentiate actants (roles), which push forward the story [3]. There are six actants: the addressee or receiver (it embodies the values and is related to the object towards which these values are extended), the sender (it represents the ideology of the text, that force which establishes rules and values), the subject (it is represented by the main character of the story), the object (this is the aim of the subject), the assistants or helpers (a supporting force to the subject, which helps him out to accomplish his objective), and the antagonist (an obstacle which stops the subject from achieving his goal). In V. Propps' structuralism these actants would be called *functions* of the story [4].

In this fabric or thread of narratives, the ideology of the characters' fate is conveyed by the voice of the story teller. In the example of Chekhov's short story Confession, the subject is the author of the letter, i.e., Makar Baldastov. The two influences acting on the subject are the isotopes of time and place, two axes on which the subject exists.

Thus, the main objective of the narrative structure analysis is to describe these 6 roles or acting elements and the two isotopes of the narrative.

As remarked above, a text is based on underlying values. In Chekhov's short story the values identified within the main character's relationships with his three fiancées are the following:

a.   Emotional support, in Makar's relationship with Olya. Olya becomes scared of the goose, comes to Makar's for supports and receives none.
b.   Knowledge, in Makar's relationship with Zhenya. As a result of not attaining success in knowledge, the story with Zhenya comes to an end, their separation being a consequence of Zhenya's disillusion and her rejection of Baldastov's love.
c.   Harmony, in the case of Zoya. Baldastov comes to see his beloved to propose but a steady hiccup stops him from getting through with his marriage proposal. Since Makar's hiccup remains, Zoya gets upset and they end up splitting up because of Zoya's lack of empathy or patience with his beloved's minor defect.

Transaction Analysis

In parallel to the narrative semiotics analysis, the authors decided to go through Chekhov's short story "Confession – or Olya, Zhenya, Zoya: A Letter" using the model of ego states from Transactional Analysis in psychology. According to the International Transactional Analysis Association, TA "is a theory of personality and a systematic psychotherapy for personal growth and personal change" [5]. The system of this theory, created by E. Berne in the 1950s, is represented in a three-fold model which is called model of ego-states. The Ego-states model or model of "Parent", "Adult" and "Child" is the basis of TA therapy. An ego-state constitutes a complex of interrelated patterns of Behaviour, thoughts and feelings which define the person as it is at present.

A few words on ego-states

Each ego state has its own pattern of Behaviour, thoughts and feelings.

Thus, the Parent consists of a set of Behaviour patterns, thoughts and feelings inherited from significant adults during childhood. The Adult is made of Behaviour, thoughts and feelings which come as a reaction to the here and now. The Child consists of Behaviour, thoughts and feelings inherent to childhood.

We have drawn parallels between the transactions of characters of Chekhov's "Confession – or Olya, Zhenya, Zoya: A Letter" and the transactions taking place between different ego-states of two individuals.

Ok position corral in TA vs Semiotic Corral

The main philosophical statement of TA, that "everyone is OK". This means that everybody is capable of thinking and each person self-determines his or her destiny and takes his own decisions.

E. Berne considered that each person has his own perception about himself and the people who surround him [1]. As a result, four types of ways of behaving were worked out which have been called life positions. F. Ernest offered a method of analysis of life positions and systematized them in a square called the OK corral [2].

On the other hand, the narrative semiotics method uses the semiotic or Greimas square in textual analysis in order to juxtapose opposite values existent within the text's structure [6].

In the case of Confession, the square can be represented with the following values – LOVE-HATRED (above), NOT HATRED-NOT LOVE (below). Love would in Chekhov's story's context mean marriage, a happy union of souls or family life, while both a lack of love (NOT LOVE) and indifference (NOT HATRED) end up leading to the separation of the lovers and to Makar Baldastov's existential loneliness upon which the main character reflects in the short story.

Following the OK corral logic, these would be the OK positions according to Ernest and applied to Chekhov's short story:

1.   Healthy position: I am OK; you are OK (cooperation). In Chekhov's story this position is the sought after but never attained, that of love and family life.
2.   Depressive position: I am not OK; you are OK (withdrawal). In Makar Barastov´s story this shows what happened with Zhenya where Makar was not ok since he did not manage to get his article published and was deemed as boring by his beloved.
3.   Sterile position: I am not OK; you are not OK (expectancy). In our short story this is the case with Zoya when Makar does not manage to propose because of his hiccup.
4.   Paranoid position: I am OK; you are not OK (riddance). This position is depicted in the story by the first love story with Olya who is labelled as a coward by Makar, gets disappointed with his beloved and decides to get rid of her.

Conclusion

The parallels drawn throughout this paper between two analytical methods from different scientific fields, namely philology and psychology, show how a combined, multi-disciplinary approach to textual analysis results in a better and more comprehensive interpretation of texts.

The universality of the models used by both scientific approaches, the semiotic grid and the ok-positions corral, allow not only for a more in-depth understanding of the textual fabric, but also for a better linguistical work with literary translation. The implications of this approach for textual analysis applied to literary translation remain to be explored in further exercises.

Last but not least, it should be pointed out that Chekhov's masterly depiction of Makar Baldastov's internal conflicts and introspection, as well as the author's voice present on a more subdued textual level, may lead to a reevaluation of real-life situations by readers, making this short story keep its relevance till the present day.

References

1.   Berne, Eric, M.D., (1970). "Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy", Social Psychiatry Seminars, *Transactional Analysis Bulletins*.
2.   Ernst, F. (1971). OK Corral, the grid to get on with. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 1(4), pp. 231-240
3.   Greimas, A.J., Landowski, E. (1976). Analyse sémiotique d'un discours juridique. Sémiotique et sciences Sociales / Ed. A.J. *Greimas. Paris: Seuil*. P. 79-128.
4.   Propp V. Ya. (1976). Principles of classification of folklore genres // Folklore and reality: Selected articles. - M.: Nauka.
5.   Stewart, Ian; Joynes, Vann. (1996). Modern transactional analysis / translated from English. Dmitry Kasyanov. *St. Petersburg: Socio-Psychological Center*, 332 p.
6.   Ticher Stefan, Michael Meyer, R. Vodak, E. (2017). Vetter. Methods of text and discourse analysis / trans. from German: H.*: Publishing House Humanitarian Center*, 356 p.

To Submit Your Article Click Here: **Submit Manuscript**

Ready to submit your research? Choose Auctores and benefit from:

- ➢ fast, convenient online submission
- ➢ rigorous peer review by experienced research in your field
- ➢ rapid publication on acceptance
- ➢ authors retain copyrights
- ➢ unique DOI for all articles
- ➢ immediate, unrestricted online access

At Auctores, research is always in progress.

Learn more https://auctoresonline.org/journals/psychology-and-mental-health-care