

## Semiotic Analysis

### The Basic Assignment in Two Steps

**Choose a "text."** It can be almost any type of relatively short text. "Short" means something I could consume in under two hours, something like a print advertisement, a work of visual art, a short story, a movie, a TV show, a song or album, a speech, a news program, an article, etc.

Your text can be a longer (such as a novel or book-length work of science or philosophy), only if I've read it and you get approval beforehand.

**Analyze it.** Then, using some concept or model or approach that you learn from Chandler's *Semiotics*, perform a semiotic analysis on your text.

You will not have space enough to perform all the possible kinds of semiotic analysis that might be appropriate. So you'll have to choose. You might examine the four "master tropes" in your selected text, *or* study the paradigmatic and syntagmatic transformations that happen within your text, *or* decipher the most important codes in your text, *or* analyze the modes of address used, *or*, well, there are too many possibilities to list them all here. Chandler's book will provide you with a bunch of ideas and approaches. Choose something that seems interesting to you and appropriate to your selected text.

### One Piece of Advice

**Don't be boring.** As you would in a more traditional literary analysis, please don't dwell on something that is obvious: "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has male and female characters in it, and male-female is a binary opposition."

It will be much more interesting to explore how our interpretation of the play changes if we pay attention to a key binary opposition in it. For example: Are the terms in the opposition "aligned" with other key themes or structures in the play? If so, what seems interesting or surprising about the alignment? What kind of ideological or cultural work do the oppositions and their alignments do? Does the play treat the opposition in a consistent manner or does it fall apart at some point? How does attention to the play as a "text" (something that can be read as a system of signs that signify), rather than as a



literary "work" (an artistic product of a great literary mind, a "well-wrought" masterpiece that possesses an organic unity of form and content), change the play's meaning? And so on.

In short, you will need to answer the "So what?" question in your analysis, and you will probably want to do so explicitly. I do not think this will be super difficult at all. Semiotics has the power to open up texts and reveal unperceived meanings in really fascinating and surprising ways. Still, I want you to be sensitive to, open to, and insightful about what's unexpected, remarkable, and captivating about your "text" when it's read as a semiotician might.

### **Several Important Details**

***Proposals and Conferences.*** Please submit a brief proposal (a short paragraph) for this paper to me via email by Thursday, September 22nd. The proposal should let me know which text you've selected.

Alternatively, we can meet for a proposal conference to discuss the assignment and the text you'd like to use. (I'll have a sign-up sheet on my door in the time leading up to the 22nd.) I highly recommend a conference if you are not certain if your text will work for this assignment or if your text is long and you suspect I've never read it (like *War and Peace*, which I don't think I'd have time to read for this assignment).

***Reminders.*** The paper should have a good title. It should be typed and double-spaced. Please use MLA style to cite and provide information on sources. I care about editing and proofreading.

***Copies of Your Text.*** Please provide me with a copy of your text, unless you are certain I already have a copy. I will return unharmed all DVD's, CD's, original books or magazines, color photocopies, etc.

***Due Date.*** Wednesday, September 27.

***Length.*** 4-5 pages.



*Photographs: Charles Sanders Peirce (front), Ferdinand de Saussure (back).*