



## **A Semiotic Analysis of a Text Play**

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### ***Abstract***

*The paper examines the various semiotic signs used in the play Parity State by adopting Sander Pierce's (1931) concept of semiotics. This research is significant because it will fill the existing vacuum in both semiotic and linguistic studies. Our findings revealed that the indexical sign is predominantly used in the play corroborating the fact that the play is strongly an effort to make reference to the life in the prison. Besides, the typology of signs \_ icons, indices and symbols deployed in the play point to the semiosphere of the prisoners' life which relates to parity, equality, an solidarity needed for the seemingly free outside world to attain meaningful social, political and economic progress. The paper concludes that without understanding the symbols, icons and indices including the representamen, object and the interpretant used in/of the text the audience will not grasp the significations of the play.*

**Keywords:** *indexical sign, symbols, icons, signs, signifier, signified, representamen, object and interpretant.*

## **Introduction**

According to Danesi (2004), the human species is consumed by a need to unravel the reason for its existence on this planet. This has led it to create

“signs” and “sign systems, “such as languages, myths, art forms, sciences, and the like, to help it do exactly that. The study of these and the laws that

govern them in cultures throughout the world comes under the rubric of semiotics.

Danesi (2004, p.3), opines that semiotics is the science that attempts to answer the question: What does X mean? And the X can be anything from a single word or gesture, an object, a place, a play, to an entire musical composition or film. The “magnitude” of X may vary, but the basic nature of the inquiry does not. The distinguishing characteristic of our species is its remarkable ability to portray the world in this way-that is, to use X’s such as colors, pictures, vocal sounds, hand gestures, and the like to refer to things. Semiotics as a discipline is simply the analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign system (Cobley and Janz, 1999, p. 2). What then are signs?.

### Signs

Danesi (2004, p.5) defines a sign as anything-a color, a gesture, a wink, an object, a mathematical equation, etc.-that stands for something other than itself. The word *red*, as we saw, qualifies as a sign because it does not stand for the sounds *r-e-d* that comprise it, but rather for a certain kind of color and other things. Ibid Danesi p.8, illustrates sign with the picture of a light bulb inside a bubble. That picture as a sign means “a bright idea.” Why is it indicative of this meaning? Answering this question Danes says it entails unraveling the cultural roots of each component of the sign. That symbolic sign derives its meaning based on culture agreement and convention. The use of light in the sign is consistent with the general view in our culture of light as an analogue for intellect and intelligence. This can be seen, for instance, in such expressions as “to become *enlightened*,” “to shed *light* on something,” and so on. The use of a “bubble” to enclose the light bulb (the source of light) is derived from the comic book tradition of putting words and thoughts into bubbles. This simple example illustrates the sum and substance of semiotic method.

There are two kinds of referents: (1) a concrete referent, such as the animal designated by the word *cat*, and (2) an abstract referent, such as the “bright idea” concept designated by the light bulb figure. The former is something that can be shown to exist in the real world--e.g., a “cat” can be indicated by simply pointing to one. The latter is imaginary and cannot be indicated by simply pointing to it-how would one point to a “bright idea” inside the brain. Signs allow us to refer to things and ideas, even though they might not be physically present for our senses to perceive. When we say or hear the word *cat* the image of the animal in question comes instantly to mind, even if the actual animal is

not around for us to perceive with our senses. The image itself is called a *concept*.

After determining what kind of concept a sign elicits, the semiotician then focuses on the concept itself, attempting to unravel what it entails culturally and personally. A sign can now be defined, more precisely, as *something that stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity*.

### **Signification**

According to Danesi (2004, p.12) the term *signification* has a specific meaning in semiotics, even though the terms *meaning* and *signification* are often used interchangeably by semiotician. Essentially, *signification* is what happens in our mind when we use or interpret a sign. The process of signification is, thus, the relation  $X = Y$  itself, as given by Saussure. It unfolds in one of two ways, known as *denotation* and *connotation*. Take, for example, the word *house*. This elicits in our mind an image that can be characterized as a “structure for human habitation.” The evocation of this type of basic image is known as *denotation*. Connotation allows humans to expand the application of signs creatively (Danesi 2004, p.12).

### **Charles Sanders Peirce Semiotic Model**

The brain’s capacity to produce and understand signs is called *semiosis*, while the knowledge-making activity this capacity allows all human beings to carry out is known as *representation*. Charles Peirce called the actual physical form of a representation,  $X$ , the *representamen* (literally, “that which does the representing”); he termed the  $Y$  to which it calls attention, the *object* of the representation; and the meaning or meanings that can potentially be extracted from the representation ( $X = Y$ ), the *interpretant*. The whole process of deciding the meaning of the representamen is, of course, called *interpretation*. As an example of what representation entails, consider *sex*, as an object.

This is something that exists in the world as a biological and emotional phenomenon. Now, as an object, it can be represented (literally “presented again”) in some physical form. For example, in our culture, common representations of *sex* include: (1) a photograph of two people engaged in kissing romantically; (2) a poem describing the various emotional aspects of sex; or (3) an erotic movie depicting the more physical aspects of sex (Danesi, 2004, p.16)

Each of these constitutes a specific kind of representamen. The meanings that each captures are built into each representamen not only by its maker, but also by certain pre-existing notions relative to the culture in which the representamen was made. Signs are made through coding system.

## **CODE**

Language, dress, music, and gesture are examples of codes. These can be defined as systems of signs (verbal, visual, gestural, etc.) that have specific properties and, thus, can be used over and over to encode and decode texts and their messages. Indeed, the words *encode* and *decode* reveal, by themselves, that the making and interpreting of messages involve use of a code.

Another type of code is called a *social code* (dress, gender, food, space, etc.). Such codes provide the structures for making messages about oneself in socially appropriate ways and for regulating interpersonal activities.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study is significant in filling the existing vacuum in the semiotic research into the use of the typology of signs in exploring the content/ message, intention of playwright, and meanings of play. Not much work has been done specifically on the use of semiotic tools to deconstruct the message of plays and also for the adequate construal of the dramatic texts.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This sub-heading shall review the existing literature on semiotics. First, we define semiotics. Semiotics, Eco (1976) posits is concerned with “everything that can be taken as a sign”. It involves the study of not only what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech, but also of anything that stands for something else. He further posits that semiotics as a branch of linguistics is not only a theoretical approach to cultural studies but it also teaches that reality is a system of signs which cannot be taken for granted as purely objective but also independent of human interpretations.

This linguistic concept was started by Saussure (a French linguist) before it was popularized by Sander Pierce (1931) According to Pierce (1931), human beings are meaning-makers who make meanings through their creation and interpretation of signs. Man and everything in his environment are meaning

potentials. In the opinion of Danesi and Perron (1999) and Chandler (2003), culture is a major factor in producing and interpreting signs.

Besides, semiotics is also “a branch of study which investigates the properties of signaling systems both natural and artificial, especially with regard to the meanings or messages that they convey. It focuses on communication through verbal and non-verbal signals / signs. “Sign” in a language have two broad compartments which are: (i) “Signifier” and the “Signified”. The “Signifier” expresses the sign, while the “signified” is the idea which the signifier evokes.

### **Basic Sign Theory**

Human intellectual and social life is based on the production, use, and exchange of signs. When we gesture, talk, write, read, watch a TV program, listen to music, look at a painting, we are engaged in using and interpreting signs. As Charles Peirce aptly remarked, human life is characterized by a “perfusion of signs.” The primary task of semiotics is to identify, document, and classify the main types of signs and how they are used in representational activities. Since they vary from culture to culture, signs constitute mental templates that invariably condition the worldview people come to have. The study of signs thus reveals that the age-old idea of an “objectively knowable reality” is something that may be elusive.

As stated earlier, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce are the founders of contemporary semiotic theory and practice. Their ideas make up the basic framework for describing and classifying signs, as well as for applying semiotics to the study of knowledge and culture systems (Danesi, 2004).

In the *Course*, Saussure described the sign as a binary structure that is, as a structure made up of two parts: (1) a physical part, which he termed the *signifier*, and (2) a conceptual part, which he called the *signified*. In terms of the  $X = Y$  relation discussed earlier, the signifier corresponds to the  $X$  and the signified to the  $Y$ :

### **Sign and Its Referent**

Danesi (2004) writes that **Icon**, as a sign is designed to represent a referent by simulation or resemblance (i.e., the referent can be reseen, reheard, etc., in the icon). **Index**, the sign is designed to indicate a referent or to put referents in relation to each other. **Symbol**, the sign is designed to encode a referent by convention or agreement.

## **Iconicity**

In the semiotics of the American philosopher C.S. Peirce, an icon is a sign which resembles the object it signifies (Martin and Ringham, 2006, p.101). A portrait, for example is an icon because it resembles the subject represented. Iconicity means resemblance to ‘reality’, to the natural world outside the text (Martin and Ringham, 2006, p.101). Iconicity abounds in all domains of human representation. Photographs, portraits, maps, Roman numerals such as I, II, and III are iconic forms designed or created to resemble their referents in a visual way. Onomatopoeic words such as *drip*, *plop*, *bang*, *screech* are vocal icons simulating the sounds that certain things, actions, or movements are perceived to make.

Iconicity is evidence that human perception is highly attentive to recurrent patterns of color, shape, dimension, movement, sound, taste, etc. (Danesi, 2004, p.29). In the adult world, icons serve a vast range of social functions. They are found on posters, on toilet doors indicating “male” and “female,” and so on.

## **Indexicality**

Indexicality manifests itself in all kinds of representational behaviors. Its most typical manifestation can be seen in the pointing index finger, which humans the world over use instinctively to point out and locate things, people, and events in the world. Many words, too, have been devised as indexes-for example, *here*, *there*, *up*, *down* allow speakers of English to refer to the relative location of things when speaking about them. There are three basic types of indexes: *Spatial Indexes*. These refer to the spatial locations of objects, beings, and events in relation to the sign-user. Manual signs like the pointing index finger, demonstrative words such as *this* or *that*, adverbs like *here* or *there*, and figures such as arrows are all examples of spatial indexes. *Temporal Indexes*. These relate things to each other in terms of time. Adverbs such as *before*, *after*, *now*, or *then*, timeline graphs representing points in time as located to the left and right of each other, and dates on calendars are all examples of temporal indexes.

*Person Indexes*. These relate the participants taking part in a situation to each other. A personal pronoun such as *I*, *you*, *he*, *she* or an indefinite pronoun such as *the one*, *the other* are examples of person indexes. Incidentally, the word index is used commonly and appropriately to refer to classification and referential practices (Danesi, 2004,p.30).

## **Symbolism**

According to Danesi (2004, p.31), a symbol stands for its referent in a conventional way. Words in general are symbols. But any signifier, an object, a sound, a figure, etc.--can be symbolic. A cross figure can stand for the concept "Christianity;" "*white*" can stand for "cleanliness," "purity," "innocence," and *dark* for "uncleanness," "impurity," "corruption," and the list could go on and on. These meanings are all established by social convention or through the channel of historical tradition.

Iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes of representation often converge in the creation of a sign or text. As an example, consider the common traffic sign standing for a crossroad: The signifier of this sign consists of two straight lines intersecting at right angles. The vertical line has an arrowhead. This cross figure is, clearly, iconic because its shape visually resembles a "crossroads." But since the cross figure could easily be used to represent a "church" or a "hospital" in other situations (without the arrowhead of course), it is also symbolic insofar as we need to know that it has been chosen, by convention, to constitute a particular type of traffic sign.

Finally, the sign is also an index because when it is placed near an actual crossroads it indicates that one is about to reach it physically, as indicated by the arrowhead. Political parties also use symbols for identification.

## **The Semiosphere**

The semiosphere is a concept originating in the work of the great Estonian semiotician Jurij Lotman (1922-1993). It is a term used in semiotics, as indicated in the preceding sections, to refer to culture as a system of signs. The semiosphere, like the biosphere, regulates human behavior and shapes evolution. But although they can do little about the biosphere, humans have the ability to reshape the semiosphere any time they want. This is why cultures are both restrictive and liberating. The artistic, religious, scientific, and philosophical texts to which individuals are exposed in social contexts, moreover, open up the mind, stimulate creativity, and engender freedom of thought.

## **Language**

Language is a mental code. It is a system of signs commonly delivered as vocal speech; but it can also be expressed through other physical modes--through

pictography, gesture, and so on. One can have language without speech (as do individuals with impaired vocal organs), because it exists in the mind. But one cannot have speech without language, because speech depends on the language code. Language probably developed before speech.

### **Methodology**

This researcher has painstakingly read the text, which we can call an unseen play because the cover page is not available to the researcher, and brought the signs that are instrumental to meaning negotiation of the text. Working title extracted from the play is given by the researcher as, **Parity State**. For the selection of data, random sampling technique was employed in selecting thirty-six (36) out of about one-hundred (100) different types of signs in the play. The participants' semiosphere was used in carrying out the semiotic interpretations of the utterance and different modes used in this dramatic discourse.

### **The Plot of the Play**

The play is set in a cell, Ikoyi Prisons precisely, called parity cell of which the inmates call parity state because they see the place as their own world where they enjoy parity or equality. In the state the inmates call themselves soldiers and officers because they see themselves as living the kind of regimented life lived by police and army officers. Each man's post is demarcated by a blanket folded to about 24 inches or less.

The squalid picture of the cell is painted: some have beds but these are on their last legs, being wobbly and having no springs, and no mattresses, only blanket strips strung together somehow. Most of the inmates are bare from the waist upwards. Some have their tattered dresses on nails stuck on the wall above their posts, while wearing pants also tattered in most cases, or strap blanket strips around their buttocks.

The picture of the leisure life of the cell is also painted in their various activities ranging from playing games like draughts, ludo, etc, drawn on the floor, or cards that have been smuggled into the cell, laughing, lighting short cigarettes, marijuana or wrapped paper and bits. Many of the inmates are seen at a point huddled to their corners. Some of the horrible experiences of the inmates are painted: some of them are inflicted by "craw-craw", that is, yaws, eczema, etc. the cell house a bath place and a latrine of which if any of them wants to bathe or defecate, he does it in the full glare of everyone else.



At one point in time or the other, some of them are bound to be called out by the warders whether on bail or on another detention or transfer, or to be tried in court. They exchange parting word with such and express that if the (outside) country is one by the time they meet again, they will shake hands and still be happy. One striking point about the inmates in the cell is that they seem to be happy and have a sense of freedom and liberty of an egalitarian society which they believe they don't enjoy outside the prison.

In the cell, at some point, one of them is seen singing a melancholic strain where he sends messages to his loved ones and that they be not told he is in jail, but gone to see the world and searching for wealth and for fame, never to reveal his offence as cocaine pushing/ sniffing and never to tell of his death sentence, never to tell them that he is in cell and about the new and retroactive decree which specifies his death. This melancholic strain was immediately resented by a leading inmate, the Provost marshal who sends sergeant, an inmate to tell, General, the one singing the melancholic strain to stop it and that it is putting the whole of the cell in melancholy which is against their semiosphere.

The inmates bear such pseudonyms as provost marshal, sergeant, general, R.P. etc. is part of their leisure, they go on parade as officers and in one of these, each of them relates what brings him to the cell. This, each of them does in songs. Their crimes include theft, robbery, rape and so on. Each of them is seen giving excuses for their crimes: unemployment (after "reading ten books" and got certified), trying to help others, poverty. Some of them get there as innocent and ignorant people. One of them reflects on the woes that have befallen his country and himself. They are from every part of the country to represent federal character.

They see themselves as coming from parents from the deprived section of the country who may be seen but hardly heard, whose only right to live is the right to serve, whose laughter is a breach of the peace, whose anger is treason, whose gesture is treachery. They declare, wretched are the poor, for suffering is their lot on earth. They are called the dregs of society yet they believe they could be good if given chance. They agitate that their condition is worsened there in the prison. Justice is denied and delayed and are made to suffer even before their guilt is ascertained. Their hearts, they express, become broken and sometimes hardened. They are herded, pigs to the sty, sardine in a tin, slaves in a ship, cows to the abattoir. They agitate that the food they eat is nothing but scum.

At intervals they get relieved when herded to the court in black maria. The heat inside it is like hell and the tiny barred windows show them a glimpse of the goodies deprived them. They lament that some of them might be missing forever. They are in detention without trial.

However, in all of these they have learnt to brave the storm by adjusting their conception, worldview of their condition. The justice machinery is so unreliable that they feel it is best to anticipate the worst.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Indexical Signs in the Play**

1. “PARITY CELL”: This is an indexical sign of the inmates’ solidarity and comradeship.
2. “The cell is overcrowded: this is an indexical sign of their unhygienic place of abode.
3. “..their beds are having no mattresses”: This is an indexical sign of deprivation and punishment.
4. “most are bare from the waist upwards”: This is an indexical sign of servitude and inmateship.
5. “. “ while wearing pants also tattered..”: This is an indexical sign of poor condition of life” .
6. “lighting short cigarettes, marijuana on wrapped paper and bits”: this is an indexical sign of drug abuse and thuggery.
7. “light is obtained by scratching the floor with pieces of iron and allowing the spark to fall on woolen wraps...”: This is an indexical sign of their crude life and not having access to matches.
8. “the cell door is barred...”: This is an indexical sign of restriction of the inmates.
9. “Inmates are sitting huddled to their corners”: This is an indexical sign of poor condition of life, privation and deprivation.
10. “the cell houses a bath-place and a bucket latrine”: This is an indexical sign of dirtiness, squalor and maltreatment.
11. “If anyone wants to bathe or defecate, he does it in the full glare of everyone else”: This is an indexical sign of loss of dignity, a common feature of prison life.
12. “Whether it’s a bail or another detention.”: this an indexical sign of incarceration.

13. “ in jail my offence is cocaine pushing: This is an indexical sign of criminality and drug abuse.
14. “I am to die”: This is an indexical sign of cocaine pushing.
15. “whatever brought you to this prison yard”: This is an indexical sign of incarceration.
16. “You will rot in jail this time”: This is an indexical sign of hopelessness, despair and despondency.
17. “ I stole them”: This is an indexical sign of evidence of the commission on the crime of theft,
4. 18. “federal character” : This is an indexical sign of adequate representation of tribes in the prison.
18. “where there is neither shelter, nor succor”: This is an indexical sign for prison where there is absence of comfort and human basic needs.
19. “I look for job, I no find job”: This is an indexical sign of joblessness and frustration.
20. “misery and unfathomable misfortune”: This is an indexical life of deprived, shattered life and dream.
21. “I read ten books, then a certificate”: This is an indexical sign of education level of the inmate.
22. “ I gave it to her, and the miracle was instantaneous”: This is an indexical sign of the rape the inmate committed.
23. “I come here”: Indexical referent of the prison.
24. “whose laughter is a breach of peace”: This is an indexical sign of denial of the fundamental human right.
25. “whose anger is treason”: This is an sign of denial of freedom of expression and agitation.
26. “because we do not have the opportunity...”: indexical sign of denial of access to basic human needs.
27. “our hearts have been broken and sometimes hardened”: This is an indexical sign of dehumanization.
28. “Herded pigs to the sty, sardine in a tin, slaves in a ship, cows in the abattoir”: These are indexical signs of prison life of enslavement and servitude. It points to inhumanity and horror like that faced by the slaves during the period of slave trade. They are also metaphors and symbols of prison life, despondency and inhumanity.

29. "The food we eat is nothing but scum": This is an indexical sign of malnutrition and poor health.

### **Symbolic Signs in the Play**

1. "some hang their tattered dresses on nails stuck on the wall above their posts: This is a symbolic sign of lack, bad condition and deprivation.

2. "dregs of the society": This is a symbolic sign for the poor, the less privileged and the marginalized.

3. "Black Maria": This is a symbolic sign of bondage and ill-treatment, incarceration.

4. "indeed black and bleak": This is a symbolic sign of despondency and helplessness.

### **Iconic Signs in the Play**

1. "those inflicted by crawl-crawl (yaws, eczema, etc)": This is an iconic sign of poor health and malnutrition.

2. "Sing with melancholy beats": This is an iconic sign of sorrow.

3. "I read ten books, then a certificate": This is an iconic sign of knowledge.

4. "Enclosed city": This is an iconic sign of prison, index of restriction, deprivation and incarceration.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

It is discovered in the study that indexical sign is predominant. This is because the play is intended to make reference to the terrible condition of life faced by inmates. The typology of signs - icon, index and symbol deployed in the play point to semiosphere of the prisoners' life and the motif of the playwright as a clarion call for the outside world to embrace parity in order to progress socio-economically and politically.

By and large, the representamen is the play as it is, is coded. The objects are the inmates and the prison artifacts. The interpretant is the horrific life of deprivation, dehumanization, violation, reduction and despondency they are subjected to, albeit in these, they have learnt to brave the storm. Overall, without understanding the symbols, icons and indices including the representamen, object and the interpretant used in/of the text, the audience will not grasp the significations of the play.

The people in the prison depict the people in the outside world. They are thus not different from the inmates because there is the dichotomy of the rich and the poor, the privileged and the less privileged. The rich have access to good things of life, facilities, infrastructure, protection, security, justice etc. The poor have the opposite and are subjected to horror in comparison with those in the prisons.

The society is void of parity and egalitarianism. The rich are becoming richer and the poor, poorer and the latter are subjected to perpetual servitude, injustice, denial of rights, brutalization etcetera. In parity state, they are all sufferers, yet equality is order of life. This is unlike the outside world where equality is alien to the system. Many are sufferers and still denied equality and justice.

### **Recommendations**

Emphasis should be laid on the teaching of the rudiments of semiotics in literature curriculum in the secondary schools, and possibly make it compulsory for all students to enhance their understanding of written texts and prepare them for a better tomorrow.

Subjecting the text to a semiotic analysis has helped in driving home one of the thematic preoccupations of the playwright of exposing the rot and decay in the correctional facilities of the country. This poses the challenge to our political leadership to address the issue, and make the facilities to correct rather than make worse the convicts.

It is not only the prison condition that was exposed, the play is also a direct reflection of what the Nigeria society is; the prevalence of dichotomy in the living condition of the citizens as stated earlier in the conclusion, which is perpetuated by the political class. It therefore behooves on the citizens to be weary of those they choose as their political leaders during elections.

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