



## 8. FIGURATIVE, THEMATIC AND AXIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### SUMMARY

Figurative / thematic / axiological analysis is based on a semantic typology formulated by Greimas. An element of content (a seme or an isotopy) may be figurative, thematic or axiological. Figurative elements include anything that evokes perception, whereas thematic ones are characterized by their strictly conceptual nature. For example, love is a theme, and its various concrete manifestations (flowers, kisses, etc.) are figures. The figures and themes of a text derive from an axiology: that is, they are correlated with a value in the category euphoria/dysphoria (in non-technical terms, pleasure/displeasure or positive/negative). For instance, the themes love/hate are generally associated with euphoria and dysphoria, respectively.

### 1. THEORY

Greimas' semantic theory (his linguistic semantics, at least) is based on the seme, which is an element of a signified. The repetition of a seme creates an isotopy. On the textual level (or discursive level, as opposed to the word and sentence levels), a seme – like the isotopy it defines – may be figurative, thematic or axiological<sup>1</sup>.

#### 1.1 FIGURE AND THEME

In figurative, thematic and axiological analysis<sup>2</sup> the theme is opposed to the figure. "In a given universe of discourse (verbal or non-verbal)", figurative elements include "anything that can be directly registered by one of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch; that is, anything that relates to *perception* of the external world." Conversely, thematic elements are "characterized by their strictly conceptual nature"<sup>3</sup> (Courtés, 1991, p. 163). For instance, love is a theme whose various perceptible manifestations are figures: flowers, kisses, etc.

#### 1.2 AXIOLOGY

Axiology is based on what is known as the thymic category, that is, the opposition euphoria/dysphoria (or in less technical terms, positive/negative or attractive/repulsive). From this initial opposition, the inventory of axiological values may be created. The primary values are euphoria, dysphoria, phoria (euphoria and dysphoria simultaneously, that is, ambivalence) and aphia (neither euphoria nor dysphoria, that is, indifference). For other values, and an elaboration of axiological analysis, refer to the chapter on thymic analysis.

NOTE: ICONIC/ABSTRACT AND SPECIFIC/GENERIC SUB-CATEGORIES

Figurative elements are classified as iconic/abstract, while thematic and axiological elements are classified as specific/generic<sup>4</sup>. The first term of each opposition is the more specific (e.g., iconic figurative); the second term is the more general (e.g., abstract figurative). The classification of an element as iconic/abstract or specific/generic depends on the relations involved. Thus, /movement/ is an abstract figure relative to /dance/, which is an iconic figure; but /dance/ becomes an abstract figure in relation to /waltz/, which is an iconic figure. The thematic opposition virtue/vice is generic relative to generosity/selfishness, as generosity is only one of many possible virtues. According to Courtés (1991, p. 243), the axiological category euphoria/dysphoria is generic relative to joy/sorrow or calm/rage.

NOTE: PARALLELS BETWEEN FIGURATIVE/THEMATIC SIGNIFIEDS AND SIGNIFIER/SIGNIFIED

There is a distinction to be made concerning signifier/signified and figure/theme. The signifier is the "perceptible"<sup>5</sup> part of a sign (for example, the letters *v-e-l-v-e-t* of the word "velvet" can be perceived visually.) The signified is the content, the understandable part of the sign (e.g., the signified for "velvet" refers to the idea of a fabric and softness). The figure is an element of content that evokes sensory perception (in the content of the word "velvet", we have the idea of touch, for instance). The theme is an element of content that does not suggest sensory perception (the

<sup>1</sup> While it is theoretically possible to classify any seme or any isotopy univocally as figurative, thematic or axiological, this is not true for groups of semes (signifieds and molecules). For example, the signified 'red' is admittedly figurative in nature, but if it contains an axiological evaluation (e.g., dysphoria, as in Rimbaud's "Sleeper in the Valley"), then it also derives from axiology.

<sup>2</sup> This is what is known as thematic analysis in Greimasian semiotics, and is Courtés' particular area of expertise. However, because there are other kinds of thematic analysis used in other theoretical frameworks, we prefer not to use this term in order to avoid ambiguity. Elsewhere, Greimas and Courtés use the terms "axiological" and "axiology", but in order to avoid confusion with the philosophical acceptations of these terms (axiology being a field of study in philosophy), we advocate using the terms "thymic" and "thymic evaluation". In the chapter on thymic analysis, we have elaborated to some degree on axiological analysis, especially in light of contributions from Rastier's dialogics.

<sup>3</sup> For a theoretical critique of the figurative/thematic opposition and of dual semantic typologies in general, see Rastier, 1987, pp. 167-174 and Hébert, 1999. What matters to us is the functional value of this kind of analysis, and this we cannot contest.

<sup>4</sup> The names "specific" and "generic" have no direct relation to the terms of the same name in interpretive semantics (see the chapter on semic analysis).

<sup>5</sup> In actuality, the signifier and the signified are both mental constructs, but one must concede that signifiers (e.g., phonemes, the subject of phonology) have direct correlates in the physical world (e.g., when phonemes take form as particular sounds, which is the subject of phonetics), and as such, are part of perception.

content of the word "glory" does not suggest sensory perception, at least not directly). In other words, despite being quite distinct, figure and signifier are similar in that they are matters of perception, whereas thematic content is in some ways the quintessence of content, because, like the signified, it belongs to the realm of understanding, rather than perception. In short, there is a homology: the signifier is to the figure as the signified is to the theme.

Courtés (1991, pp. 161-176) observes the homology between signifier/signified and figurative/thematic signifieds, although he qualifies it. The relation of reciprocal presupposition that is said to underlie the sign – homonymy and polysemy apart, any change to the signifier must produce a change in the signified and vice versa (compare "moose" and "noose", for instance) – does not exist between figure and theme. For example, the figure /tears/ may be related to a theme of either joy or sorrow. There are also figures not attached to any theme and themes with no figures. However, recursivity (the repetition of the signifier/signified structure) does not stop there. As we have just seen, the figure and theme categories of the signified are in turn divided into the iconic/abstract and specific/generic sublevels, respectively. According to Courtés, the iconic figurative element is the signifier's homologue, since it is the figure that yields the best referential illusion (illusion of reality) and elicits the greater sensory response. The same would apply, although to a lesser degree, to the thematic and axiological levels. In summary, the various levels and sub-levels would be ordered in the following way on a scale from most perceptible to most conceptual: iconic figure, abstract figure, specific theme, generic theme, specific axiology, generic axiology.

### 1.3 THE RELATIONS BETWEEN FIGURES, THEMES AND AXIOLOGY

It is generally helpful to try and group the figures into oppositions, and the themes as well<sup>6</sup>. In this way, the figure /day/ implies /night/, and the theme /love/ implies /hate/. As for axiological values, although the opposition euphoria/dysphoria is readily accepted, other combinations of axiological values, such as phoria/aphoria are not so easily set in opposition, and are subject to debate.

Listed below are some of the relations between the different types of content. Various relations may arise between figurative, thematic and axiological content. We shall focus on the figure-theme relation, although the same principles are valid for figure-axiology and theme-axiology relations. We have the following:

- (1) One figure may relate to one theme (especially in the case of stereotypical symbols, as in a horseshoe for luck).
- (2) One figure may relate to several themes, which may or may not be grouped into opposition(s) (as in the color green representing hope and "Irish-ness").
- (3) Several figures, which may or may not be grouped into opposition(s), may relate to a single theme (to take the same example, a horseshoe and a four-leaf clover for luck)<sup>7</sup>;
- (4) One or more figurative oppositions may relate to one or more thematic oppositions. These oppositions would be homologous with each other (for example, the figurative opposition high/low with the thematic opposition ideal/reality).

#### NOTE: AXIOLOGY AND HOMOLOGATION

The thymic category is often homologized with a figurative and/or thematic category; for example, in the thematic category love/hate and the figurative category caressing/beating, one of the two terms will be euphoric (usually love and caressing) and the other two will be dysphoric<sup>8</sup>. But many other kinds of relations are possible. There are two reasons for this: (1) figures and themes are not necessarily grouped into oppositions (for example, the figure "boat" may well be present in a given text without any opposite); (2) even when they are, they may not necessarily be homologous with the axiological opposition (for example, the figurative opposition day/night may be associated solely with euphoria, or one of its terms may be associated with euphoria and the other with aphoria).

<sup>6</sup> Greimasian semiotics distinguishes two possible ways in which an opposition can be manifested: by contrast (where both terms of the opposition are present) or not (where only one of the two terms is present). For example, in a given text, the opposition between black and white can take form as a contrast (if both colors are mentioned) or not (if only black or only white is present).

<sup>7</sup> Courtés writes (1991, p. 176): "Of course – and this is unarguably the most important point – any thematic categorization seems to lead invariably to the establishment of an axiology: while each of us is free to mark this or that value as either positive or negative, we are not free to leave them unmarked. Even the most objectivized discourse, such as scientific discourse, cannot seem to avoid a minimum of axiology. We observed earlier that very often the figurative demands to be thematized, and in addition [...], to be axiologized. This seems to be valid primarily for the iconic figure, whereas it is quite possible that the abstract figure does not require thematization – in which case it almost certainly calls for a well-defined axiology at the very least. This is why so many narratives are amenable to categorization at the deep level by the abstract figure "life"/"death", with absolutely no reference to any corresponding intermediate theme: the opposition euphoria/dysphoria thus allows us to mark the two terms (life/death) in a different way." Moreover, in contrast with the figurative, "the thematic level can have a completely autonomous existence, but only under certain conditions and in certain cases. Thus, natural languages are capable of explaining the thematic level with absolutely no reference to any figurative representation; this is in fact characteristic of mathematical or logical discourse, and of philosophy as well, even though it occasionally uses concrete, figurative examples" (Courtés, 1991, pp. 164-165). It seems to go without saying that for Courtés, an axiological value cannot exist in isolation, that is, outside of its application to a figure and/or a theme.

<sup>8</sup> "Axiology", says Courtés, "is in fact nothing more than a spontaneous preference, shall we say, when faced with a thematic (or figurative) category, for one term over the other" (Courtés, 1991, p. 173). The preferred term will produce euphoria, and the other, dysphoria. We are persuaded that homologation between a figurative or thematic opposition and the opposition euphoria/dysphoria is actually only one of many possible axiological relations.

## 1.4 SYMBOLIC, SEMI-SYMBOLIC AND SEMIOTIC RELATIONS

When a figurative opposition is tied in with a thematic opposition, such as day/night (figures) with virtue/crime (themes), the relation is known as a semi-symbolic one in Greimasian semiotics<sup>9</sup>. It is tempting to extend the semi-symbolic relation to figure-axiology relations (e.g., day/night and euphoria/dysphoria) and theme-axiology relations (hope/despair and euphoria/dysphoria)<sup>10</sup>. The common factor in semi-symbolic relations of any kind would then be to establish a homology between two oppositions, one of which is more sensory (perception) and the other of which is more conceptual (understanding). However, the differentia between perception and understanding emerge most clearly in the figure-theme relation. Let us conclude by mentioning that a semi-symbolic relation is always a homologous relation, but that the reverse is not true (see our chapter on homology).

When a one-on-one relation is established, we call it a symbolic relation: for example, /boat/ as a figure and /journey/ as a theme, in a case where the boat is the only figure associated with the journey in that particular semiotic act. In all other cases, we use the term "semiotic relation", for example, a relation that ties an element to an opposition (in the same text, tears as a figure may go with euphoria in one case (tears of joy), and dysphoria in another).

## 1.5 RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

The inventory of figures, themes and axiological values, as well as the relations between these three kinds of content, can and do vary according to the culture, the discourse, the genre, the specific semiotic act, the observing subjects (author, narrator, character, etc.), and the particular moment in a given temporality (whether it involves real time (for example, historical time) or thematized time (time as presented in a text or a painting) or some other type of time).

## 2. APPLICATION: "I MISS THE LAND" BY GEORGES BOUCHARD

\* \* \*

"I Miss the "Land."

Georges Bouchard (1917, pp. 70-71, translated)

To His Honour Judge Pouliot

Thirteen year-old René, face haggard with consumption. He shields his chest with an emaciated hand as if to keep life from pouring out in the fits of coughing. Faintly, these barely spoken words slip out:

"I miss the land."

Poor little flower of the fields, all withered in the city! His father left the farm five years ago to come and work in the factories of Victoriaville.

You are not the only one who feels this way, my little tad...

He stares at me, his big eyes languid from suffering, the lights of eternity already flickering there.

"I miss the land."

This is the unspoken cry, smothered by pride, rising out of the depths of wretched souls in the destitution of the city. The war adds even more poignancy to their grief, creating distress of an intensity never seen in the countryside.

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<sup>9</sup> The principle of the semi-symbolic system was formulated by Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of the myth as an opposition between two figures associated with an opposition between two functions. Greimas has defined the semi-symbolic system as one of the three possible semiotic systems, whereas Jean-Marie Floch uses it as the primary instrument for image analysis (Fontanille, 2003, p. 137). We have borrowed the term *semi-symbolic relation* from Courtés (1995). The advantage of this term is to bypass the theoretical problems associated with the expressions *semi-symbolic system* (a system characterized according to the type of relation between the plane of signifiers and the plane of signifieds) and *semi-symbolic coding* (which, strictly speaking, operates between the thematic level and the figurative level on the plane signifieds). Although there is no relation of reciprocal presupposition between figurative and thematic, this does not prevent Courtés (1991, p. 168), like Floch, from extending the application of the semi-symbolic system to the internal rapports on the plane of signifieds (between figure and theme). Technically speaking, a system is semi-symbolic only when a category of the signified is associated with a category of the signifier. To take a pictorial example, we have a semi-symbolic system if the category (the opposition) white/black (signifier) corresponds to the category life/death (or any other category of content).

<sup>10</sup> We do this by applying a principle that is explicit in Greimasian semiotics (as exemplified in the theory of the generative trajectory of meaning – the interpretive trajectory being its mirror image): the progression on a scale from concrete (perceptible, thus analogous to the signifier) to abstract (conceptual, thus analogous to the signified). This takes us from figurative to thematic to axiological elements (progressing through iconic or specific levels toward abstract or generic ones).

"I miss the land."

This is the innocent confession of the children suffocating in the tiny courtyards of urban dwellings, starving for air and light. For these youngsters, the wide-open fields, the verdant hillsides and the snowbanks where they first cavorted are a memory that calls out incessantly.

"I miss the land."

This is the deep scar that cuts to the heart when the factory worker in the city recalls the freedom of being in the fields. Gaiety, tenderness, intimacy, domestic peace – these are rural products that often perish when exported.

"I miss the land."

This is the truth that emanates from the works of many famous writers who have made their homes out in the fields and woods, like Botrel, Mercier, Bazin, ...

"I miss the land."

This is the cry of longing that shrouds the gentle soul, full of dignity and ideals ... without ever being voiced.

— My boy, you miss the land, but soon you will go live in the gardens of Paradise...

You miss the land... So do I.

\* \* \*

Let us present a brief application of figurative, thematic and axiological analysis for "I Miss the Land", a narrative from French-Canadian rural legend (for further analysis, see Hébert, 2000). We will identify just a few of the figurative, thematic and axiological elements present in this text and see how they are organized.

We consider the central figurative opposition to be a spatial one: country/city. Another important figurative opposition corresponds to this one, which is heaven/hell<sup>11</sup>. The figure /heaven/ is explicit: "soon you will go live in the gardens of Paradise." (p. 71). The figure /hell/ is implicit; it crops up in expressions like "wretched souls" (p. 70) and "calls out incessantly" (p. 71). These two oppositions are associated with a third figurative opposition: life/death<sup>12</sup>. The land would have brought life to René, the dying hero of the short story; and as for heaven, isn't it generally considered to be the abode of those who have "eternal life"? Yet another important figurative opposition is the one between nature and culture. In the anthropological sense of the term, any typically human production belongs to culture (a chair, agriculture, war, theatre, etc.). The dominant theme appears to be the opposition between spiritual and temporal. Let us examine the axiology of the figures and themes we have identified. We have formulated our oppositions so that the first term is the one viewed as euphoric in this text. The euphoric elements are: country, heaven, life and nature; conversely, the dysphoric elements are: city, hell, death and culture. These oppositions all appear to be homologized with each other (meaning that the terms on the left are all interrelated and the terms on the right are all interrelated). Even life, in the biological sense of the term, is associated with the spiritual realm, since the countryside, an earthly paradise, promotes health.

*Thematic, figurative and axiological structure in "I miss the land"*

Axiology	euphoria	dysphoria
Themes	spiritual	material
Figures	nature	culture
	life	death
	heaven	hell
	country	city

The main ideological concern of the text is René's position in one of the four spaces (temporal death, of course, allows him to go from temporal spaces to spiritual ones). The move from a positive space to a negative space is represented here as an exile. The opposition stay/leave, which is applicable in the first space, turns into

<sup>11</sup> We must distinguish "real" from "perceptible". Unreal elements like heaven and hell are nonetheless traditionally depicted as places of sensory delight and torture, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> One postulate of standard Greimasian semiotics is that the oppositions life/death (an individual opposition) and nature/culture (a social opposition) are found in any semiotic act. For Courtés, life/death and nature/culture are not themes, but abstract figures (1991, p. 232) that he classifies as existential figurative (1991, p. 237). We can quibble at length over this classification, especially for nature/culture, but in any case, we have classified both of these oppositions as figures. Moreover, the dual semantic figure/theme typology, which is debatable from a theoretical standpoint (why would there be two kinds of meaning *a priori*?), is very nicely wedded to the religious background of the text, in that it forms a hypostasis of the oppositions body/soul and literal/figurative meaning, which come from biblical exegesis (see Hébert, 1999).

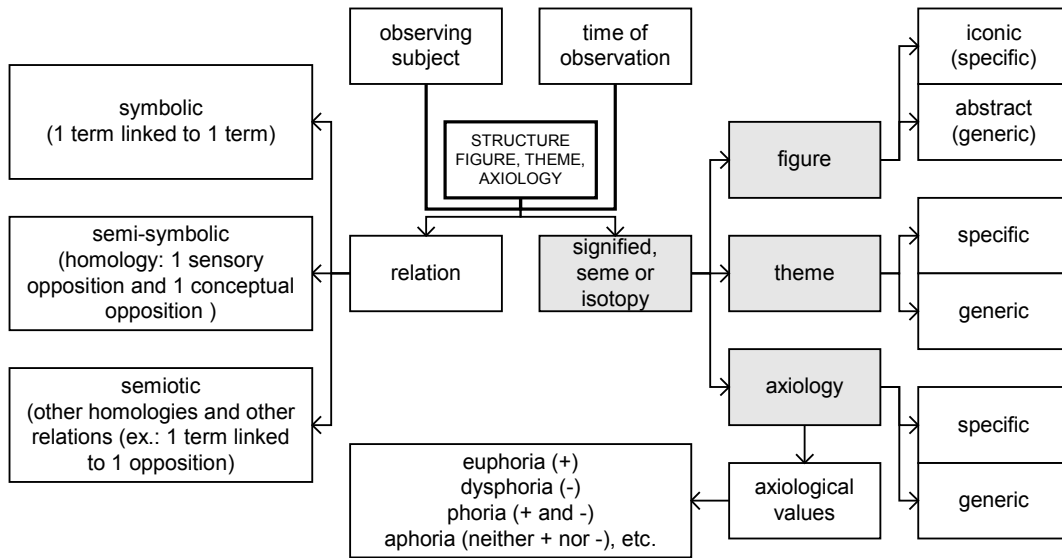
stay/return in the second space (returning from exile). Spatial change is not dysphoric in itself (although nomadism, which is associated with the figure of the trapper, among others, is generally dysphoric in French-Canadian rural legend); staying, leaving and returning are euphoric or dysphoric depending on the starting and ending points we have in mind. The temporal exile cannot help but evoke a spiritual exile. No one needs to be reminded that the earthly paradise from which Adam and Eve were banished is described as a garden. Thus, there is a double exile: the farmer from the countryside, and man from paradise. René, who has been exiled for five years from his land, will be definitively cut off from it by his death. However, he will attain a homologous object of higher value: "the gardens of Paradise". A preference for nature under man's dominion shows through in the higher value attributed to the land and the "gardens of Paradise": we are a long way from the forest, and for good reason! In the ideology of rural legend, the forest (a place for trapping and logging) is perceived as a breeding ground for moral straying and perdition. (For example, in *Maria Chapdelaine*, a famous work of French literature, the seductive trapper-logger François Paradis is presented as morally inferior to the dull farmer, Eutrope Gagnon)<sup>13</sup>. The story and its genre (and the ideology underlying them) exalt nature, but it is nature as ordered by man, a sort of nature-culture. Notice that René will turn from a "flower of the fields" (that is, a wildflower) into a flower in the "gardens of Paradise", in other words, a cultivated flower (in the anthropological sense as well). The land (and also the garden) is simultaneously in the position of culture relative to the forest, and nature relative to the city. These two dyads can be merged in a semiotic square (see the corresponding chapter): the land and the garden are not just simple contrary terms relative to the forest, but complex terms, simultaneously representing nature and culture. The absolute opposite of the city is the forest. The ancient and classical *topos* ("common-place" motif) of the happy medium seems to play on this spatial triad.

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<sup>13</sup> The text speaks highly of writers who live out in the "woods". But it is always as though the term were being used in the "literary" sense to mean a wooded area of smaller size than the forest (see the *Petit Robert*), not in its French-Canadian meaning, where "woods" is a synonym of "forest" (as in "*coureur des bois*" [trapper, literally "woods runner"]). Being smaller in area, the woods are more cultural than the forest, and closer to man. One thing is certain: that the text mentions "dwellings" in the woods, not a nomadic way of life in the forest. A retreat from active life in this case is not the least bit harmful, since its purpose is simply to pursue contemplation and to transmit the fruit of this contemplation in writing. This is the aesthetic counterpart of a monastic retreat.

### 3. SUMMARY DIAGRAM

*Diagram summarizing figurative, thematic and axiological analysis*



**LEGEND**

1. Vertical arrows: components (for ex., figurative, thematic and axiological structures are composed of a signified, a seme or an isotopy, and the relations between them)
2. Horizontal arrows: classifications (for ex., an axiology is classified as specific or generic)
3. Bold-face link with no arrow: other relation

The results of the analysis depend on the time of observation and the observer (subject) whose point of view is being reported.