Semiotics of Butterfly in Modern Amerindian Prose

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Abstract. The paper focuses on linguistic and semiotic aspect of interpreting the meanings hidden in the character of literary image in modern Amerindian prose (prosaic texts of contemporary American Indian writers). Based on the statement that literary image incorporates different cultural codes the author suggests the semiotic model of such image. Due to the fact that the central heroes of the texts under analysis appear between two worlds – native world, the world of father's, and another world, modern industrial society, the semiotic model of such image is constructed in the form of butterfly which has two wings and at the definite period of its development comes through some transformations. The domain cognitive and linguistics procedure of this transformation is metamorphosis.

Keywords: Amerindian prose, cognitive and linguistics procedure, linguistic and semiotic aspect, metamorphosis, semiotic structure.

The butterfly (fig. 1) is a symbol of powerful transformations. By analogy to the development of this animal, the meaning associated with the butterfly emphasizes the ability to move from one state, perspective, lifestyle to another.

When the butterfly comes into your life as spirit guide, you may be going through or expect important changes in your life. More than changes in your environment, the transformation the butterfly totem points to are more internal: They could be related to your own perspective on a subject, aspects of your personality, or personal habits. Personal transformation is emblematic of the butterfly symbolism.

Interpreting animal symbolism is a powerful way to connect with nature, and learn lessons from her creatures - lessons that we can apply to our own lives. Observing the butterfly and learning her symbolic meanings offers us an opportunity to apply her movements to our own lives. For example, we can relate the butterfly's stages of life to our own life-phases: growing pains, times of ravenous hunger, times of vulnerability, moments of miraculous expansion. The more we seek symbolism in nature, the more we realize we have a lot in common with animals, insects and life in the wild realms. Indeed, we are intimately connected with the animal kingdom - inseparable from nature and her movements.

Overwhelmingly, cultural myth and lore honor the butterfly as a symbol of transformation because of its impressive process of metamorphosis.

From egg, to larvae (caterpillar), to pupa (the chrysalis or cocoon) and from the cocoon the butterfly emerges in her unfurling glory.

What a massive amount of transition this tiny creature undergoes. Consider for a moment the kind of energy this expends. I daresay if a human were to go through this kind of change we'd freak out!

Imagine the whole of your life changing to such an extreme you are unrecognizable at the end of the transformation. Mind you, this change takes place in a short span of about a month too (that's how long the butterfly life cycle is).

Herein lies the deepest symbolic lesson of the butterfly. She asks us to accept the changes in our lives as casually as she does. The butterfly unquestioningly embraces the chances of her environment and her body.

This unwavering acceptance of her metamorphosis is also symbolic of faith. Here the butterfly beckons us to keep our faith as we undergo transitions in our lives. She understands that our toiling, fretting and anger are useless against the turning tides of nature - she asks us to recognize the same.

American anthropologist Edward M. Bruner claims that “Every telling is an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory, in that we highlight some causes and discount others; that is, every telling is interpretive. The concept of an experience, then, has an explicit temporal dimension in that we go through or live through an experience, which then becomes self-referential in the telling” [1, p.7].

From Bruner’s words it may be inferred that there is a reality our experience or consciousness of that reality and then our interpretation of that reality follows through verbal expression.
Meaning is not inherent in objects, objects do not signify by themselves. Meaning, rather, is constructed by what is known as a competent observer, that is, by a subject capable of ‘giving form’ to objects [5, p. 10].

Donald Sandner explains that “Life symbols make of a culture what it is specifically, and govern the thoughts and feelings of the people who are part of it” [ 6, p. 14-15 ].

Sandner reminds us, referring to an American anthropologist Leslie Alvin White, “All human behavior originates in the use of symbols” [6, p. 15].

In modern prosaic texts created by such contemporary Amerindian writers as Navarr Scott Momaday, Lesli Marmon Silko, Gerard Visenor center images find themselves on the border of two different worlds – native and another, alien to them in way of life, behaviour, attitude to people, animals and so on so forth. Each of these worlds influences on the character of central hero and changes his inner world in some way.

For instance, it occurs with a central hero in novel-myth “House Made of Dawn” who behaves, thinks and feels differently in different narrative situations:

Narrative situation 1 “Hero and his native world”: “In the morning sunlight the Valley Grande was dappled with the shadows of clouds and vibrant with rolling winter grass. The clouds were always there huge, sharply described, and shining in the pure air. Such vastness makes for illusion, a kind, a kind of illusion that comprehends reality, and where it exists there is always wonder and exhilaration [...] Then he saw the eagles across the distance, two of them, riding low in the depths and rising diagonally toward him. He did not what they were first, and he stood watching them, their far, silent flight erratic and wild in the bright morning. They arose and swung across the skyline, veering close at last, and he knelt down behind the rock, dump with pleasure and excitement, holding on to them with his eye.” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 16). Watching the birds behavior Abel is going to make magic contact with their souls: he kneels down and this sign means ‘I honor you and express deep respect’. Such deep feeling that looks like great estimation in attitude to the birds, which are considered to be sacred ones in Amerindian culture, is the expression of some magic interconnection between this human being and eagles, the signs of Great Spirit. So, in his native world the hero is strong, powerful Eagle.

Narrative situation 2 “Hero in another, alien world”: “Now, here [Лос Анджелес], the world was open at his back. He had lost his place. He had been long ago at the centre, had known where he was [...].” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 92). Anthithesis native world :: alien world is activated by means of literary details serving as triggers of the meaning that interpreter should “reread”: “Why should Abel think of fishes? He could not understand the sea; it was not of his world. It was an enchanted thing, too, for it lay under the spell of the moon” (“House Made of dawn”, p. 87). The narrator effects on the readers’ emotions using rhetoric question and giving the thoughts as if they were produced by hero himself. In such play he uses the words ‘fishes’, ‘the sea’, ‘not of his world’ to portray the picture of strange for the hero atmosphere. The word fish is a sign referring to the episode about fishes that was given by the author earlier and in such a way it triggers the mechanism of reverse perspective. Look at the sample taken from page 79 in “House Made of Dawn”: “There is a small silversided fish that is found along the coast of southern California. In the spring and summer it spawns on the beach during the first three hours after each of the three high tides following the highest tide. These fishes come by the hundreds from the sea. They hurl themselves upon the land and writhe in the light of the moon, the moon, the moon; they writhe in the light of the moon. They are among the most helpless creatures on the face of the earth. Fishermen, lovers, passers-by catch them up in their bare hands” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 79). In another world the hero is helpless fish.

Analyzing the given above narrative situations stimulates us thinking about metamorphosis of hero’s mind. At first he was alone: “Abel was running. He was alone and running, hard at first, heavily, but then easily and well. The road curved out in front of him and rose away in the distance. He could not see the town. It was dawn. The valley was gray with rain, and snow lay out upon the dunes. The first light had been deep and vague in the mist, and then the sun flashed and a great yellow glare fell under the cloud. The road verged upon clusters of juniper and mesquite, and he could see the black angles and twists of wood beneath the hard white crust; there was a shine and glitter on the ice. He was alone and running, running” (“House Made of Dawn”, Prologue, p. 1). And at the end of his symbolic running he became unsubdued: “He was running and a cold sweat broke out upon him and his breath heaved with the pain of running, but he was unsubdued. His legs buckled and he fell in the snow, but he was unsubdued and got up and ran on. The rain fell around him in the snow and he saw his broken hands, how the rain made streaks upon them and dripped snot upon the snow. And he was unsubdued, got up and ran on” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 185). Passing through many difficulties the hero remains unsubdued, he continues his running being strong, tough and full of willing to work for his people.

He passes through some internal changes that lead to another his world understanding and world perception. The following scheme illustrates the mechanism of such metamorphosis (fig. 2).

Outgoing image is revealed in the first narrative situation which I titled as “Hero is alone” (see the sample above).

Turning situation is developed in some narratives that contrast the central hero and his antagonist who is a white man: “The white man was large and thickset, powerful and deliberate in his movements. The white man held the rooster up and away in his left hand while its great wings beat the air. The albino was huge and hideous at the extremity of the terrified bird. It was then her eyes were drawn to the heavy, bloodless hand at the throat of the bird” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 39);

“He rode beside Abel, turned suddenly upon him, and began to flail him with the rooster. The white man was too strong and quick for him. The white man leaned and struck, back and forth, with only the mute malice of the act itself, careless, undetermined, almost composed in some final, preeminent sense. The bird was dead” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 39);

“The white man laughed and each time ended in a strange, inhuman cry. Abel grew silent, watching him,
with a hard, transparent mask upon his mouth and eyes” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 73).

Critical situation coincides with describing the hero’s feeling in another world, when he thinks of his past, of his being in the centre of events: “Now, here, the world was open at his back. He had lost his place. He had been long ago at the center, had known where he was, had lost his way; had wandered to the end of the earth, was even now reeling on the edge of the void” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 92); “He tried to think where the trouble had begun, what the trouble was. There was trouble; he could admit that to himself, but he had no real insight into his own situation. Maybe, certainly, that was the trouble…” (“House Made of Dawn”, p. 93).

And at last incoming image is highlighted in final running of the hero, when he is no longer alone and just the other way round he is unsubdued (see the sample above).

Interpreting the changes which happen with the hero on the basis of cognitive semiotic approach triggers some association dealing with metamorphosis of the hero.

In the paper I use the word trigger which consider to be a new linguistic term. This word is defined in Macmillan dictionary: “as a noun 1) the part of a gun that you move with your finger to make the gun fire; 2) something that produces an immediate result; as a verb 1) to make something happen; 2) to cause someone to have particular feelings or memories; 3) to cause someone to do or say something, as trigger a response / reaction” [4, p. 1537].

On linguistic focus in the paper the word ‘trigger’ is used in some cases: as a lexieme that is repeated in different narrative situations and serves as activator of reader’s attention; as a word that expresses ethnocultural symbol and is the necessary element in the mechanism of reverse perspective; as the cognitive procedure that activates such processes as association, analogy, comparison in interpreter’s mind.

The process of comparing the hero with a butterfly is also triggered by motifs, thoughts and feelings of the hero, his being in different worlds, his relationship with another characters of the text.

To explain the idea I turn to the vocabularies and dictionaries of symbols.

So, Macmillan Dictionary explains: “1. a flying insect with large colorful wings; 2. someone who keeps changing from one activity or person to another, and never stays long with any of them” [4, p. 186].

In the Dictionary of Symbols by Jack Tresidder [translated from English into Russian by S. Palko] we find the explanation of Butterfly as the symbol: “Бабочка в древности являлась символом бессмертия. Ее жизненный цикл стал превосходным примером этого: жизнь (яркая гусеница), смерть (темная куколка), возрождение (свободный полет души)” [8, p. 18].

The Butterfly in Amerindian understanding is “a very spiritual bug and represents the presence of good spirits. Butterflies signal change, metamorphosis, balance, harmony, grace, beauty, and spirituality. They are a good sign” [3, p. 136].

If realize that the butterfly is a sign, it may be approved the idea that such sign is a container of some information that in semiotics is the name of code. Roman Jacobson emphasized that the production and interpretation of texts depends upon the existence of codes or conventions for communication [2].

A code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework [2].

In cognitive semiotics perspective literary image is identified as sign which incorporates different codes. Decoding them helps to draw up his ethno-cultural implicatures and to make the link between image, sign and symbol.

A symbol is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object” [7].

The symbols serve as connectors to certain powers; or they are, indeed, certain powers that need to be “activated” [3, p. 37].

Since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Codes are not simply “conven-
tions” of communication but rather procedural systems of related conventions which operate in certain domain.

Symbols act powerfully, according to Sandner, to “change the psyche by converting energy into a different form, a form that can heal” [6, p. 14]. Jung in his analysis of numerous cultures came to the conclusion that symbols act as transformers, their function being to convert libido from a ‘lower’ into a ‘higher’ form. This function is so important that feeling accords it the highest value [6, p. 15]. This kind of psycho/social/spiritual healing processes thrust patients into liminal space – a space where the sick person is willing to leave one mode of being (a death) and enter into another (a rebirth).

So, on cognitive semiotic focus I consider the main hero as literary mythoric image [9, p. 11] and define him as a linguistic and cognitive textual construal, which incorporates cultural codes, interiorized via author’s consciousness and verbalized in the text by expressive means and stylistic devices characteristic of a certain author’s style. Taking into consideration all the arguments given above the semiotic model of the main hero has the form of Butterfly (fig. 3):

The semiotic square is a useful tool to illustrate the basic semantic or thematic oppositions underpinning a text. It also allows, however, a demonstration of textual dynamics by plotting essential stages or transformations in a story and following the narrative trajectory of the subject.

REFERENCES (TRANSLATED AND TRANSLITERATED)

ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL
10. Figure 1. http://www.whats-your-sign.com/butterfly-animal-symbolism.html