Problem statement. The language used in the literary and medical discourse of U.S. fiction is rich in symbolism and meaning. Understanding the semiotic features of this discourse is crucial for disclosing the author’s intentions, as well as the reader’s intended response. Therefore, in this article, we will apply the semiotic approach to modern fiction, focused on medical issues. Through this analysis, the study will identify the ways in which authors use symbols and signs to convey meaning and influence the reader’s perception. We will explore the nature of signs and provide their interpretation in medical fiction as exemplified by the corpus of the 20th and 21st-century U.S. prose. In such a manner, we will substantiate the relevance of semiotics to the studies of the literary and medical discourse.

The study of the meaning and interpretation of signs has been a subject of interest to scholars from various fields, including linguistics, semiotics, and literary studies. The semiotic vision of literature involves the analysis of the text as a self-referential (autopoeitic) sign system, which makes it possible to analyze structures and codes. Umberto Eco emphasizes the idea of Roland Barthes about the importance of unlimited openness of literary works and interprets them as an interaction of freedom and determinism – on the one hand, the text must have a structure, on the other – the reader decides which codes and semantic boundaries can be used for the text, which affects subsequent update of meanings in the reading process. Hence, the task of semiotics can be considered the identification of connotations that are responsible for the aesthetic structure through the surface of linguistic signs.

The aim of the research is to explore the major signs in

the semiotic system of U.S. medical fiction and reveal the author’s intentions of using these signs, as well as the reader’s expected receptive potential. The material of the research is the corpus of 20th and 21st-century U.S. prose, which includes a diverse range of literary works that address medical topics, such as illness, disability, and healthcare practices. The research methodology relies on the semiotic approach to analyze the selected literary works, along with the methods of systematization, generalization, narratological method, and receptive aesthetics. The analysis examined the signs present in the selected literary works and their meanings, in order to understand the semiotic dimensions of medical fiction and the intentions of the authors in using these signs. The analysis was conducted through a close reading of the literary works, identification of recurring patterns in the use of signs, such as metaphors, symbols, and images related to medical themes. The results of the analysis were then categorized and interpreted in order to identify the major signs and themes present in the semiotic system of medical fiction. By examining the various signs used in a work of fiction, we can gain a deeper understanding of the characters, the plot, and the themes that the author is exploring.

The semiotic framework is based on the concept of signs, which include linguistic and non-linguistic elements that convey meaning in communication. According to the classification of signs as developed by semiotician Charles S. Peirce, there are three categories based on their relationship between the signifier and the signified: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble or imitate the object they represent, indexes are physically connected or associated with the object they represent, whereas symbols have an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified that is learned through social convention and culture. The literary and medical discourse of the US prose largely relies on the semiotic symbols.

Presentation of the research material. One can observe vivid semiotic symbols in Peter Clement's novel Critical Condition (2002). Historically, the relationship between the doctor and the patient was characterized by asymmetry and the one-sided authoritative influence of the doctor, who completely controls and coordinates the treatment process (Parsons' paternalistic model). As a result, medical instruments acquire special semiotic significance in the metaphorical heroization of the doctor's struggle with the patient's illness: “Listening attentively, she marched the stethoscope toward the left like an attacking rook on a chessboard”.

In the short story Indian Camp (1924) by Ernest Hemingway, a profound symbolic meaning is embedded in the protagonist’s jack-knife, by means of which the skillful physician manages to successfully perform the caesarean section. The use of a jack-knife in the context of the story can be interpreted as a sign of the harsh and primitive conditions of the Native American camp, which is set in contrast to the more modern and civilized world of Nick's father, who is a highly skillful surgeon: “That’s one for the medical journal, George. Doing a Caeserian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders”.

The fact that Nick's father has to use a jack-knife to perform the caesarean section on the woman highlights the lack of medical resources and facilities in the camp, as well as the urgency of the situation. The jack-knife is an instrument that is commonly used for cutting, but in this context, it takes on a more symbolic meaning as a tool for bringing life into the world. However, the jack-knife is also used to reveal the darker side of life and death, as the woman's husband ultimately commits suicide with a straight razor, an act that is in stark contrast to the birth of the baby. The use of the jack-knife in the story thus serves as a powerful symbol of the fragility of life, as well as the harsh realities of birth and death that are inherent in the human experience.

In MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors (1968) by Richard Hooker, the scalpel can be interpreted as a symbol of the power and responsibility that comes with being a surgeon in the midst of war. Throughout the novel, the characters are forced to confront the realities of war and the difficult decisions they must make in order to save lives. The scalpel, as a tool of their trade, becomes a powerful symbol of their ability to wield life and death in their hands. The novel highlights the toll that war takes on the human body, and the scalpel serves as a reminder of the doctors’ commitment to do all they can to heal and repair the damage done. Overall, the scalpel serves as a multifaceted symbol in MASH, representing both the power and responsibility that comes with being a surgeon in a warzone, as well as the importance of the doctors' duty to preserve life.

The white coat is another “protective barrier” and an integral institutional attribute of the doctor in the medical semiotic system. For example, in Peter Clement's novels, the medical uniform has a special symbolism, emphasizing the professional affiliation of the character, “encoding” their specialization and place in the clinical hierarchy, as well as reflecting his/her emotional state: “Everyone was more or less color coded – nurses of both sexes sporting pale green, orderlies powder blue, personnel from the OR and critical care areas garbed in scraps of darker tones to better mask the stains from all the bodily fluids. Doctors wore white coats of varying length – short jackets for students, mid-to-long ones signifying increasing seniority”.

In One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) by Ken Kesey, the character Nurse Ratched frequently wears a white uniform, which represents the power and authority of the mental hospital staff. The white coat becomes a sign of oppression as Nurse Ratched uses it to control and manipulate the patients. When

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8 Ibidem.
she puts on her white coat, she becomes a symbol of the oppressive forces that are keeping the patients trapped in the hospital. The coat represents her power over the patients and her ability to manipulate them into conforming to her wishes. Hence, the white coat is a visible symbol of the staff's authority over the patients. When the staff wear their white coats, they are seen as figures of power and control, and their instructions are often unquestioningly followed by the patients. The coats represent the staff's ability to make decisions and enforce rules. They are also a way of creating a sense of uniformity among the staff.

In Peter Clement's novels, the use of technical language and Latin terms is an equally important method of encoding the doctor's speech, for example, "Dr. Steel! We need you in OR "C" stat!" (OR – "operation room"; stat – from Latin statim – "immediately")

This strategy culminates in The House of God (1978) by Samuel Shem. For instance, the writer uses the abbreviation "GOMER", which stands for "get out of my emergency room", and is used to refer to an elderly patient who visits hospitals too often, "abusing" the services of health workers. At the end of the novel, the author provides an extensive glossary of medical slang, so that the reader can easily navigate, e.g.: "SIEVE: an intern in the Emergency Room who admits too many patients, opposite of WALL; WALL: an intern in the Emergency Room who keeps patients from being admitted to the House of God; opposite of SIEVE". In fact, Samuel Shem legitimized the spread and popularization of medical slang – "the secret language of doctors" – in real-life communication.

Hence, the unique status of The House of God: the slang semiosis had a direct impact on live communication in a real clinical environment, demonstrated the ability to format the non-textual reality, and eventually became an integral part of American hospitals. The symbolic signs of medical slang are aimed at detachment from patients and indicate the gaps in doctor-patient communication.

In Those Extraordinary Twins (1894) by Mark Twain, the pompous physician misuses his technical vocabulary, resulting in his speech becoming utterly meaningless. The narrator highlights the physician's disconnection from his patients due to the accumulation of medical jargon and pseudo-medical terminology: "He examined Angelo's wound <…> and the accumulation of medical jargon and pseudo-highlights the physician's disconnection from his patients due to his speech becoming utterly meaningless.

The house of God legimized the spread and popularization of medical slang to the House of God; opposite of SIEVE. Hence the unique status of

In conclusion, semiotics plays a crucial role in analyzing the literary and medical discourse of US fiction. Through the examination of semiotic features in modern fiction, particularly those focused on medical issues, we are able to reveal the author's intentions and the reader's intended response. The literary and medical discourse of the US prose largely relies on the semiotic symbols, such as medical tools, doctor’s white coat, doctors’ slang, technical language and Latin terms. The use of semiotics in fiction analysis can reveal the underlying themes and messages and uncover hidden meanings. Overall, the application of semiotics in literature can help readers to engage more deeply with the text and appreciate the nuances of the author's message, as well as illuminate the ways in which fiction designs our comprehension of the surrounding world.

Thus, by means of examining the semiotic dimensions of the U.S. literature, we have disclosed the features of the doctor-patient dichotomy, i.e., their established relationships and reconsideration of the institutional roles in the clinical setting. For instance, medical instruments are frequently used in medical fiction to signify the medical profession and the authority of the doctor. The white coat, another significant sign, represents the power dynamics in the clinical setting, where the doctor assumes the role of the authority figure, while the patient is expected to follow the doctor's orders. The paper also analyzes the use of technical language and Latin terms in medical fiction and how they reinforce the power dynamic between doctors and patients.

We believe that the profound objective of depicting the above-mentioned "barrier" signs is the authors’ intention to restore the lost rapport in doctor-patient communication and ultimately return to the deep roots of medicine – the most humane craft, whose goal is to understand people and eventually comprehend oneself. By examining the semiotic dimensions of U.S. literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between doctors and patients, the social and cultural contexts of the time, as well as the importance of effective communication in the clinical setting.

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