

**СЕМІОТИЧНІ ВИМІРИ ЛІТЕРАТУРНО-МЕДИЧНОГО
 ДИСКУРСУ ПРОЗИ США**

Юлія ЛИСАНЕЦЬ, Олена БЕЛЯЄВА, Інеса РОЖЕНКО

Зінаїда ТАРАН, Яніна ПРИХОДЬКО

Полтавський державний медичний університет, Полтава (Україна)
 u.lysanets@pdmu.edu.ua; o.bieliavaeva@pdmu.edu.ua;
 inviro@ukr.net, z.taran@pdmu.edu.ua, ya.prykhodko@pdmu.edu.ua

**SEMIOTIC DIMENSIONS OF THE U.S. LITERARY AND
 MEDICAL DISCOURSE**

Yuliia LYSANETS, Olena BIELIAIEVA, Inesa ROZHENKO,

Zinaida TARAN, Yanina PRYKHODKO

Poltava State Medical University, Poltava (Ukraine)
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0421-6362>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9060-4753>,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8334-5087>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0380-5870>
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2194-5369>

Лисанець Юлія, Беляєва Олена, Роженко Інеса Таран Зінаїда, Приходько Яніна. Семіотичні виміри літературно-медичного дискурсу прози США. Мета дослідження – проаналізувати семіотичні особливості американської художньої літератури, присвяченої медичній проблематиці. **Методи дослідження:** систематизація, узагальнення, наратологічний метод, методи семіотичного аналізу та рецептивної естетики. **Об'єкт дослідження** – корпус американських прозових творів, об'єднаних медичною тематикою (XIX-XXI ст.). **Наукова новизна.** У статті досліджено найважливіші знаки-символи в семіотичній системі літературно-медичного дискурсу прози США, виявлено авторські інтенції щодо використання цих знаків, а також очікуваний рецептивний потенціал читача. **Висновки.** Семіотичний код художньої літератури відіграє ключову роль в інтерпретації образів лікаря і пацієнта в прозових творах, присвячених медичній проблематиці, актуалізує читачьке сприйняття, оприявнюючи розподіл інституційних ролей та особливості спілкування в хронотопі клінічного середовища.

Ключові слова: *семіотика, знак, літературно-медичний дискурс, проза США, рецепція, авторська інтенція.*

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^{1,2,3}. The semiotic vision of literature involves the analysis of the text as a self-referential (autopoietic) sign system, which makes it possible to analyze structures and codes⁴. 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 process⁵. Hence, the task of semiotics can be considered the identification of connotations that are responsible for the aesthetic structure through the surface of linguistic signs⁶.

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

¹ Pohrebnyak I.V. “Semiotychna teoriya v literaturoznavstvi” [Semiotic theory in literary studies], *Vcheni zapysky Tavriys'koho natsional'noho universytetu imeni V.I. Vernads'koho. Seriya: Filolohiya. Sotsial'ni komunikatsiyi* [Scholarly notes of V.I. Vernadsky Taurida National University. Series: Philology. Social communications], 2018, Vol. 29(68), N 1, P. 163–167 [in Ukrainian].

² Kavun L. “Semiotychna literaturoznavstvo” [Semiotic literary studies], *Literaturnyy protses: metodolohiya, imena, tendentsiyi. Zbirnyk naukovykh prats' (filolohichni nauky)* [Literary process: methodology, names, trends. Collection of scientific papers (philological sciences)], 2012, N 1, P. 79–81 [in Ukrainian].

³ Lysanets Yu.V., Bieliavaeva O.M., Pavelieva A.K., Havrylieva K.H. “Theoretical aspects of comparing the semiotic properties of literature and cinema”, *Aktual'ni pytannya lnhvistyky, profesiyanoi lnhvodydaktyky, psykhohohiyi i pedahohiky vyshchoyi shkoly : zb. statey VI Mizhnar. nauk.-prakt. konf., m. Poltava, 25–26 lystopada 2021 r.* [Topical issues of linguistics, professional language didactics, psychology and pedagogy of higher education: coll. of articles of the VI International scientific and practice conference, Poltava, November 25–26, 2021], 2021, P. 212–214 [in English].

⁴ Pohrebnyak I.V. “Semiotychna teoriya v literaturoznavstvi” [Semiotic theory in literary studies], *Vcheni zapysky Tavriys'koho natsional'noho universytetu imeni V. I. Vernads'koho. Seriya : Filolohiya. Sotsial'ni komunikatsiyi* [Scholarly notes of V. I. Vernadsky Tavri National University. Series: Philology. Social communications], 2018, Vol. 29(68), N 1, P. 163 [in Ukrainian].

⁵ Eco U. *Semiotik. Entwurf einer Theorie der Zeichen* [Semiotics. Outline of a theory of signs], Muenchen, 1987. P. 155 [in German].

⁶ Pohrebnyak I.V. “Semiotychna teoriya v literaturoznavstvi” [Semiotic theory in literary studies], *Vcheni zapysky Tavriys'koho natsional'noho universytetu imeni V. I. Vernads'koho. Seriya : Filolohiya. Sotsial'ni komunikatsiyi* [Scholarly notes of V. I. Vernadsky Tavri National University. Series: Philology. Social communications], 2018, Vol. 29(68), N 1, P. 164 [in Ukrainian].

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 symbols⁷. 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 culture⁸. 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*"⁹.

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 section¹⁰. 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 Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders"¹¹. 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 war¹². 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 scrubs 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"¹³.

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 patients¹⁴. When

⁷ Peirce, C.S. *The Collected Papers*. Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1994, P. 369 [in English].

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Clement P. *Critical Condition*, New York: Fawcett Books, 2002, P. 199 [in English].

¹⁰ Lysanets Yu. "The Literary Identity of the Physician in the American Prose (19th-21st Centuries)", *Cultural Identities and Intersections: Imagological Readings*, 2019, P. 110 [in English].

¹¹ Hemingway E. *The Nick Adams stories*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972, P. 19 [in English].

¹² Lysanets Yu. "The Image of a Military Surgeon in "MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors" by Richard Hooker", *VI Vseukrayins'ka naukovo-praktychna internet-konferentsiya z pytan' metodyky vykladannya inozemnoyi movy: "Inozemni movy v konteksti suchasnoho rozvytku pryrodnychkh ta humanitarnykh nauk: mizhdystytsylnarnyy pidkhdid"*, *Zbirnyk materialiv konferentsiyi*, 17 bereznya 2020 r., Odesa [VI All-Ukrainian Scientific and Practical Internet conference on teaching methods of a foreign language: "Foreign Languages in the Context of Modern Development of Natural Sciences and Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Approach" Collection of materials of the conference], 17 March, 2020, P. 76 [in English].

¹³ Clement P. *Critical Condition*, New York: Fawcett Books, 2002, P. 13 [in English].

¹⁴ Lysanets Yu. "Khronotop likami v literaturno-medychnomu dyskursi prozy SSHA" [The chronotope of the hospital in the literary and medical prose discourse of the United States], *Naukovyy visnyk Mykolayivs'koho natsional'noho universytetu imeni V.O. Sukhomlyns'koho. Filolohichni nauky (literaturoznavstvo) : zbirnyk naukovykh prats'* [Scientific Bulletin of Mykolaiiv National University named after V.O. Sukhomlynskyi. Philological sciences (literature studies): a collection of scientific works], 2018, N 2 (22), P. 48 [in Ukrainian].

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")¹⁵. 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 workers¹⁶. 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"¹⁷. In fact, Samuel Shem legitimized the spread and popularization of medical slang – "the secret language of doctors", – in real-life communication¹⁸. 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 meaningless¹⁹. 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 proceeded to empty himself as follows, with *scientific relish*: "Without going too much into detail, madam – for you would probably not understand it, anyway – I concede that great care is going to be necessary here; otherwise *exudation* of the *esophagus* is nearly sure to ensue, and this will be followed by *ossification* and *extradition* of the *maxillaris superioris*, which must *decompose* the *granular surfaces* of the *great infusorial ganglionic system*, thus *obstructing* the action of the *posterior varioloid arteries*, and *precipitating compound strangulated sorosis* of the *valvular tissues*, and ending unavoidably in the *dispersion* and *combustion* of the *marsupial fluxes* and the consequent *embrocation* of the *bicuspid populo redax referendum rotulorum*"²⁰.

In *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) by Michael Crichton, medical terminology also serves as a powerful semiotic sign, representing the scientific and medical expertise necessary to combat a deadly extraterrestrial microorganism²¹. Throughout the novel, medical terminology is used to describe the scientific processes and procedures used to identify and study the Andromeda Strain. These terms create a sense of precision, objectivity and expertise, emphasizing the scientific rigor and professionalism required to study the Andromeda Strain. At the same time, the use of medical terminology in the novel also creates a sense of urgency and tension, as the characters work against the clock to contain the deadly microorganism.

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.

Лисанець Юлія – кандидат філологічних наук, доцент кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет. Коло наукових інтересів: світова література, гендерні студії,

¹⁵ Clement P. *Critical Condition*, New York: Fawcett Books, 2002, P. 97 [in English].

¹⁶ Lysanets Yu.V. "Naratyvni koordynaty zneoboblennya ta vidchuzhennya u literaturno-medychnomu dyskursi Semyuela Shema" [Narrative coordinates of depersonalization and alienation in the literary and medical discourse of Samuel Sham], *Zakarpats'ki filolohichni studiji* [Transcarpathian Philological Studies], 2018, Vol. 3, N 3 P. 50 [in Ukrainian].

¹⁷ Shem S. *The House of God*, London: Penguin, 2010, P. 388 [in English].

¹⁸ Goldman B. *The Secret Language of Doctors: Cracking the Code of Hospital Culture*, New York: HarperCollins, 2014, P. 25 [in English].

¹⁹ Lysanets Yu.V. "Narrative representation of the physician's image in the 19th century U.S. literature", *Aktualni pytannia suspilinih nauk ta istorii meditsini* [Current issues of social studies and history of medicine], 2018, N 3, P. 90 [in English].

²⁰ Twain M. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Harvard, 2015, P. 240 [in English].

²¹ Lysanets Yu.V. "Primum non nocere: Moral'no-etychna problematyka u literaturno-medychnomu dyskursi amerykans'koyi prozy XX stolittya" [Primum non nocere: Moral and ethical problems in the literary and medical discourse of the 20th-century American prose], *Filolohichni nauky. Visnyk Luhans'koho natsional'noho universytetu imeni Tarasa Shevchenka* [Philological sciences. Herald of Luhansk National Taras Shevchenko University], 2019, Vol. 2 (325), P. 194-202 [in Ukrainian].

медичний дискурс, наратологія.

Lysanets Yuliia – Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor, Associate Professor of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology of Poltava State Medical University. Focus of research interest: world literature, gender studies, medical discourse, narratology.

Бляєва Олена – кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент, завідувачка кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет. Коло наукових інтересів: лінгводидактика, методика навчання латинської та іноземної мови за професійним спрямуванням, термінознавство, тестологія, професійна педагогіка, лінгвокультурологія.

Bieliaieva Olena – Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University. Focus of research interest: linguodidactics, methods of teaching Latin and foreign languages for professional purposes, terminology studies, testology, professional pedagogy, linguoculturology.

Розженко Інеса – викладач кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет. Коло наукових інтересів: дидактичні й методичні аспекти вивчення та навчання латинської мови, процеси термінотворення в англійській медичній термінології.

Rozhenko Inesa – Lecturer of the Department of Foreign

Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University. Focus of research interest: didactic and methodological aspects of studying and learning Latin, processes of term formation in English medical terminology.

Таран Зінаїда – викладач кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет. Коло наукових інтересів: методика навчання латинської мови.

Taran Zinaida – Lecturer of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University. Scientific interests: methods of teaching Latin.

Приходько Яніна – викладач кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет. Коло наукових інтересів: лінгводидактика, методика навчання англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням.

Prykhodko Yanina – Lecturer of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University. Focus of research interest: linguodidactics, methods of teaching English for professional purposes.

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