

THE VICTORIAN HOUSE: ICON, INDEX, SYMBOL

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Abstract

The semiotic approach to the concept of the Victorian house as a triadic relationship reveals the house as a space of becoming, functioning either as an iconic, symbolic or indexical sign in relation to its inhabitants. The current paper aims at reconstructing the semiotic process/semiosis through which a house can act as an image for the owner, or can be experienced as a prison, or interpreted as a symbol. Textual support will be provided by 19th-century English novels such as Charles Dickens' Great Expectations and Dombey and Son, novels written by the Brontë sisters and Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native.

Keywords: approach, concept, Victorian house, space, sign

Rezumat

Abordarea semiotică a conceptului de casă Victoriană ca relație triadică ne dezvăluie casa ca spațiu al devenirii ce funcționează fie ca un icon, fie ca un index sau chiar ca un simbol în relația cu locuitorii săi. Lucrarea de față își propune să reconstruiască procesul semiotic/semioza prin care casa ajunge să funcționeze ca o imagine pentru proprietar, sau poate fi percepută ca închisoare, sau interpretată ca simbol. Exemple vor fi regăsite în romanele englezești ale secolului al XIX-lea, cum ar fi „Marile speranțe” și „Dombey și fiul” de Charles Dickens, romanele scrise de surorile Brontë și „Întoarcerea băștinașului” de Thomas Hardy.

Cuvinte-cheie: abordare, concept, casă din epoca victoriană, spațiu, semn

I. Generally speaking, a sign is “anything – a colour, a gesture, a wink, an object, a mathematical equation, etc. – that stands for something other than itself” (Danesi, 2004, p. 4). Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but, according to Peirce, whose model of the sign we are going to use for the current section of the paper, such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning: “Nothing is a sign unless we interpret it as a sign” (*apud* Chandler, 2007, p. 13).

There are two main approaches to the sign: the sign as a dyadic, linguistic entity (in Saussure's linguistics) and the sign as a triadic entity (C. K Ogden and I. A. Richards, Ch. S. Peirce, Ch. W. Morris, Th. Sebeok, J. Lyons)¹.

While focusing on linguistic signs (such as words), Ferdinand de Saussure defined a sign as being composed of a “signifier” (*signifiant*) – the form that the sign takes, the sound pattern – and a “signified” (*signifié*) – the con-

¹D. Roventă-Frumușani offers a comparative approach to the constitutive parts of the sign as a triadic entity; thus, the elements of the sign are: the *signifier* (*representa-*

cept to which it refers. Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1990, pp. 278-275, 2.230, 2.231, 1.313, 2.303) formulated a triadic model of the sign consisting of:

1. the *representamen*: the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material though usually interpreted as such) – called by some theorists the ‘sign vehicle’;
2. an *interpretant*: not an interpreter, but rather the sense made of the sign;
3. an *object*: something beyond the sign to which it refers (*a referent*).

According to Peirce’s own words: “A sign... [in the form of a *representamen*] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen” (*idem*, p. 269, 2.228).

The sign cannot exist without all these three elements, being a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant).

The Victorian house as a triadic relationship would imply the object (what is represented, which house), the representamen (how it is represented – for example, Peirce is known to have identified 66 types of signs, among which the *qualisign*, in the form of adjectives) and the interpretant (how the house is interpreted). The object in this triadic relationship would be, for example, in Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*, the house as the building, the corner house situated “between Portland Place and Bryanstone Square”, the representamen would be the house described as “large... with great wide areas containing cellars... barred windows, and leered at by crooked eyed doors leading to dustbins” (*Dombey and Son*, p. 24) and the interpretant would be the house as seen by Mr. Dombey, the house as a firm, a home-department, or the house as considered by the Victorians to be a symbol of social status and wealth, or a house whose location reminds readers of the place where Dickens himself lived from 1839 to 1851 in Devonshire Terrace.

Victorian houses and buildings were, from the very beginning, built according to the social status and wealth of the inhabitant, the rooms were, from the start, destined for the use of either masters, servants, clerks or prisoners; as far as the daily life of the rich is concerned, each room had its purpose very clearly defined: the drawing-room was dedicated to spending time with the family, parlours were destined to receiving visits, studios were reserved for business discussions, while the kitchen was meant for the servants.

According to the theoretical considerations of Bachelard (2005), Chartier (1989) and Hall (1971), the house as semiotic object signifies (Cmeciu, 2005, p. 88):

- 1) a collective representation whose signification is shared by all members of the Victorian society and which becomes known through language. The *house* can be thus studied as a system of significations on a historical axis: the first half of the 19th-century vs. the second half of the century, in texts written either by female or male writers; the conceptual metaphors (Lakoff *et alii*, 2003) reveal the differences which emphasize new characteristic ways of thinking: for a Victorian man, the house meant control and power, as for example for John Reed in Ch. Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: "'Say, <What do you want, Master Reed?> [...] 'you are a dependant, mamma says, you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg and not live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years'" (Brontë, 1992, pp. 5-7) or for Mr. Dombey in Ch. Dickens' *Dombey and Son*; for a Victorian woman, the house is a cage/prison, as for Jane Eyre in Ch. Brontë's novel, or a tomb for Paul's mother in Dickens' novel;
- 2) a desired/imagined/sought for object within the walls of which daily life, customs, traditions and their social construction takes place (women are in search of the house as shelter, orphans are looking for a home, men regard the house as a sign of influence, of exerting authority over the others, of empowerment);
- 3) a bunch of attitudes as a set of cultural manifestations of subjectivity (the way in which the house, as a whole, and its different components are used by those sharing the same territory, or by those fighting for ownership over a specific property);
- 4) cultural practices shared by all the members of a community/family, be they masters or servants (inside and outside the house, on its surroundings: on the lawn, in the gardens, parks or fields).

This is how Jane Eyre describes the social and domestic practices taking place at Gateshead, from which she was, of course, excluded: "Christmas and the New Year had been celebrated at Gateshead with the usual festive cheer; presents had been interchanged, dinners and evening parties given. From every enjoyment I was, of course, excluded: my share of the gaiety consisted in witnessing the daily appareling of Eliza and Georgiana, and seeing them, descend to the drawing-room dressed out in thin muslim frocks and scarlet sashes, with hair elaborately ringleted; and afterwards, in listening to the sound of the piano or the harp played below, to the passing to and fro of the butler and footman, to the jingling of glass and china as refresh-

ments were handed, to the broken hum of conversation as the drawing-room opened and closed" (Brontë, 1992, p. 21).

Of course, everybody and everything in the house had to be visibly 'exhibited', as a mark of wealth and power, on such occasions: from expensive clothes to expensive objects, from servants to poorer relatives kept in the house and treated almost as servants. In a similar way, Dombey has very strict rules concerning the duty of a wife living in his house: a wife is not only supposed to be exhibited as a pretty doll dressed in expensive clothes and wearing rich jewels, but she is supposed to 'exhibit' herself actively and happily for the welfare of the family business: " 'I am sorry, madam,' said Mr Dombey, 'that you should not have thought it your duty - ' [...] ' - your duty, madam,' pursued Mr Dombey, 'to have received my friends with a little more deference. Some of those whom you have been pleased to slight to-night in a very marked manner, Mrs Dombey, confer a distinction upon you, I must tell you, in any visit they pay you' " (Dickens, 2002, p. 479).

On the other hand, only certain people suited to the alleged criteria of respectability are allowed into a respectable house or a certain room, as is the case of the way in which Linton intends to receive Heathcliff: " 'What, the gipsy - the plough-boy?' he cried. 'Why did you not say so to Catherine?' [...] 'Here', he said, 'into the parlour?' 'Where else?' she asked. He looked vexed, and suggested the kitchen as a more suitable place for him. [...] 'You bid him step up,' he said, addressing me; 'and Catherine, try to be glad, without being absurd. The whole household need not witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother' " (Brontë, 1985, pp. 134-135).

The approach to the concept of house as a triadic relationship distinguishes between building, the way it is described and the qualities it is endowed with, and the way these qualities are interpreted so as to identify and define relationships established between the house and its inhabitants (and guests), the relationships among the inhabitants of the house (and between inhabitants and guests), the relationships between the objects inside a house or the surroundings and its inhabitants, because all these connections are established upon a social, but also personal, individual view of a certain house.

II. Starting with the constitutive elements of the sign as a triadic entity (representamen, interpretant, object), Peirce established three trichotomies of the sign, based on the criteria of quality, representation and relation². Al-

²Based on the criterion of *quality* (the characterization of the sign itself), Peirce (Peirce, 1990, pp. 274-284) distinguishes between: the *qualisign*: a quality that functions like a sign (for example, the colour or texture of a coat); the *sinsign*: a token, a specific spatio-temporal thing or event that functions like a sign; the *legisign*: a type, a conventional sign, or the abstract model of the sinsign. The second trichotomy, that of *representation* (the sign-object relationship), leads to the identification of: the

though Peirce indentifies 66 classes of signs, the most popular one is the classifications of signs into icons, indexes and symbols. We shall further enlarge upon this classification when dealing with the Victorian house as a space of becoming.

Houses – particularly the process of changing houses, of moving from one house into another – together with the process of decorating houses according to one's tastes and personality represent a technique preferred by 19th-century male and female writers to gradually reveal the characters' process of becoming, both on the social as well as on the private levels.

As collective representation (Cmeciu, 2005, pp. 90-91), the discursive elements of the *house* focus upon the following verbal paradigms: to live in/to enjoy comfort vs. to survive; to own (a house) vs. to be homeless; to leave vs. to reorganize a house; to be proud vs. to be humiliated; not to be capable of 'entering' or 'getting out' vs. changing, becoming another/somebody else/different from the other, recreating. It is from here that the roles fulfilled by the inhabitants, the positions attributed to them and the emotions they experience emerge. In "Jane Eyre", the roles and positions allow for a certain differentiation between masters/men and dependants/women, each group experiencing a set of emotions ranging from disdain, contempt and violence (for masters) to humbleness, anger and pride (for the dependants) (*idem*, p. 90). In "Wuthering Heights", the metaphorical discourse of the house is based on change, on the tumultuous passing of the self through emotional crisis until "losing [oneself] inside the other" (van Ghent, 1961, p. 165). Cultural and natural elements come together into a space where the human

iconic sign: by some kind of analogy, the properties of the sign correspond to the qualities of the object; for example, a photograph, a diagram, a painting are all iconic signs; the *indexical* sign: the sign is really affected by the object; for example, a knock on the door is the index of a visit; the symptom of an illness is the index of that illness; the *symbolic* sign refers to its object by virtue of a general and effective law, a convention of the community; for example, banknotes, passwords, tickets to a show and the words of a language are symbols. The third trichotomy, that of *relation* (the sign-interpretant relationship), distinguishes between: the *rhetic interpretant*: the sign of a qualitative possibility; in implementing the relationship between the representamen and object, it does not refer to anything "else" but the qualities of the representamen, which are also the qualities of a whole class of possible objects; the rheme is neither true nor false; it is equivalent to a variable in a functional proposition. It functions like a form with blanks to be filled in or a space on a questionnaire: "... is red"; the *dicisign*: the sign of an actual existence, *hic et nunc*; it functions like a logical proposition, which establishes a relationship between constants [a subject (what we are talking about) and a predicate (what we say about it)] and it is either true or false. For example, a person's portrait with an indication of his/her name; the argument: the thesis that proves the truth, unlike the dicisign which only states the existence of the object.

body becomes the house of conflicting passions. Helen Huntingdon's decision – in "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" – of getting rid of her alcoholic husband's tortures and putting an end to the destructive effects of their marriage upon their son is expressed through the roles that she plays (of mistress of the house and saviour of her husband's soul) and through the position of decent woman and mother that she needs to protect. Her repairing and redecorating Wildfell Hall, her interest in rearranging the garden and the outdoor spaces and her belief in her power to change people around her symbolize a change in the Victorian mentality concerning women's role in bringing peace and comfort to a home.

The verbal paradigms mentioned above offer, on the one hand, a triple image of the house (in the sense of 'where', inhabited space, psychic space, metaphorical space) and, on the other hand, they reveal the traits of those inhabiting such places. The novels "Jane Eyre" by Ch. Brontë, "Wuthering Heights" by E. Brontë and "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" by A. Brontë contain, in their first chapter, the relationship between people/inhabitants and house/room: Jane Eyre is "dispensed from joining" the family group and slips into the adjoining breakfast-room where she hides herself in the window-seat (Brontë, 1992, p. 3); Lockwood, Heathcliff's tenant at Thrushcross Grange, is inhospitably received at Wuthering Heights with a welcoming filled with a "Go to the Deuce" (Brontë, 1985, p. 45) sentiment from the part of the owner and a "sourly" look from the part of Joseph; and Gilbert is seen ascending to his room, being met by her pretty sister Rose and then entering the parlour together to have tea with their mother, "that honoured lady seated in her armchair at the fireside, working away at her knitting, according to her usual custom, when she had nothing else to do" (Brontë, 2001, p. 10). "Great Expectations" begins, first of all, with the churchyard where Pip's family rests, and with "our marshes" (Dickens, 1983, p. 35); Joe's forge and the wooden country house are briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 and Pip is to "experience" later the house of Miss Havisham (*idem*, p. 85), with its inhabitants, an experience which will unleash his desire to become a gentleman and to decorate the chambers he later rents in London (*idem*, p. 241).

We shall further attempt to approach the house as a space of becoming by using Peirce's distinction between icon, index and symbol. For example, we shall try to prove such assertions as: Satis House is an icon of Miss Havisham in Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, or the Red Room is an index for prison in Ch. Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, while the window functions as a symbol in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*.

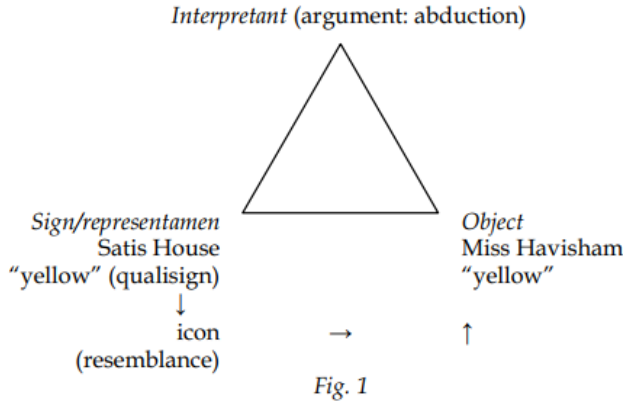
According to Everaert-Desmedt (2006), the representamen can be: a qualisign, meaning a quality that functions like a sign; a sinsign, meaning a specific spatio-temporal thing or event that functions like a sign; or a legisign,

meaning a conventional sign. Examples of legisigns include passwords, insignias, tickets for a show, traffic signals, and the words of a language. However, legisigns cannot act until embodied as sinsigns, which are "replicas". For instance, the article "the" is a legisign in the English language system. But it can only be used within the medium of the voice or the text that embodies it. It is embodied in sinsigns (its occurrences, occupying different spatio-temporal positions), but also includes qualisigns, such as the intonation of the oral replica, or the shape of the letters of the written replica.

The reference between a sign and its object is *iconic* if the sign *resembles* the object. An icon may have as its representamen a qualisign, a sinsign or legisign. For example, the feeling (qualisign) produced by playing a piece of music is the icon of that piece of music; someone's portrait (sinsign) is the icon of that person, and a model (sinsign) is the icon of a building. A drawing of a glass (sinsign) is the icon of a glass, but if it is placed on a crate, then it belongs to the pictogram code and becomes a replica of the legisign signifying 'fragile' through iconic portrayal of a species (a glass) that is part of a genera (fragile objects) (Everaert-Desmedt, 2006).

In "Great Expectations", Satis House acts as an icon for Miss Havisham. In this case, we consider that the sign - the house - resembles the object - Miss Havisham. The rule joining the representamen to its object (i.e. the argument³) is, in our case, abduction: formulating a rule in the form of a hypothesis that would explain the fact. Our hypothesis is that Satis House is an icon of Miss Havisham because they are both described through a very similar choice of words, particularly through the very frequent use of the colour "yellow". Thus, the icon's representamen is a qualisign: the colour "yellow"; the rule of abduction establishes the fact that the colour "yellow" also defines Miss Havisham - the object; therefore the sign - the house, resembles the object - Miss Havisham. To better illustrate these relationships, we have attempted to construct a schema (see Fig. 1).

³According to Peirce (Peirce, 1990, pp. 278-279, 2.252), an argument is a sign interpreted at the level of thirdness (firstness is a conception of being that is independent of anything else, secondness is the mode of being that is in relation to something else and thirdness is the mediator through which a first and a second are brought into relation) that formulates the rule joining the representamen to its object; depending on the nature of the rule that binds the representamen to its object, the argument may be: deduction (the rule may be imposed on the facts); induction (a result of the facts); abduction (a rule in the form of a hypothesis that would explain a fact).



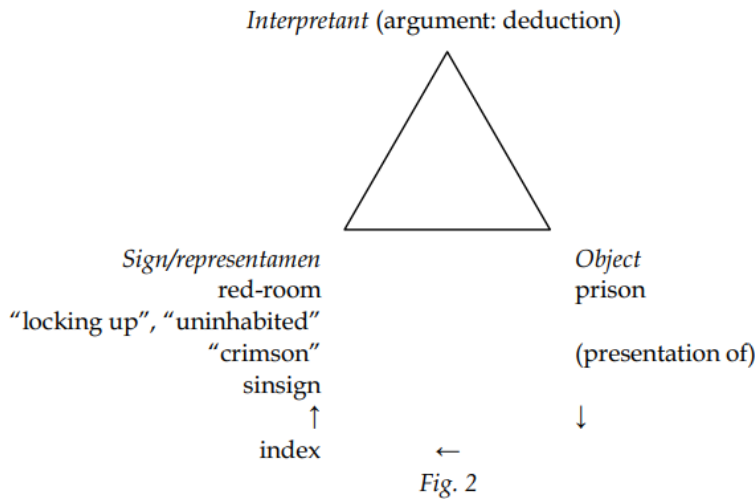
To support our analysis, we shall resort to textual support: “she had left a candle burning there. She took it up, and we went through more passages and up a staircase, and still, it was all dark, and only the candle lighted us. [...] I entered, therefore, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles” (Dickens, 1983, pp. 85-86).

The yellow light from the candle is the only thing which casts some light upon the room and its occupant. It also shows that the yellow things within the room are not only the result of an impression – caused by the yellow light of the candle – but they are a reality, the effect of the passing of time: “But I saw that everything within my view, which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow” (*idem*, p. 86), then Pip’s fancy: “I saw a figure hanging by the neck. A figure all in yellow white” (*idem*, p. 94), and the room with the bridal cake: “Certain wintry branches of candles on the high chimneypiece faintly lighted the chamber [...] as I looked along the yellow expanse out of which I remember its seeming to grow, like a black fungus ...” (*idem*, p. 113); “So unchanging was the dull old house, the yellow light in the darkened room” (*idem*, p. 152). It is not the yellow of the sun and gold, of youth, eternity, warmth, love, wisdom or royalty, it is the yellow of adultery and jealousy, broken marriage, the colour of the deceived and the rejected, the colour of cruelty, double-dealing and vanity (Evseev, 2007, p. 159; Chevalier *et alii*, 1969, pp. 81-84).

The red-room is an index for prison in Ch. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. According to Peirce (Peirce, 1990, p. 277, 2.248), the reference between a sign and its object is *indexical* if the sign is indeed *affected* by the object. For example, the position of a weathervane is caused by the direction of the wind; it is the index of the wind direction. An index cannot have a qualisign as its representamen, because there is only “sameness” in this relationship, and no contextual contiguity; therefore, a qualisign is always iconic. An index may have as its representamen a sinsign, as in the examples above, or a legisign, as in certain words known as “indexical” words (“this”, “that”, “I”, “here”).

The representamen of the red-room as index (prison) is represented, first of all, by two sinsigns: the act of locking Jane up in it and the fact of never being inhabited (which implies coldness, darkness and loneliness, the main attributes of a prison. The word "crimson" – a legisign which acts as a sinsign by 'embodying' itself through such occurrences as: "curtains of deep red damask", "the carpet was red", "the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth" (Brontë, 1992, pp. 8-9). Unlike the iconic and symbolic signs (which characterize the object), the index does not characterize what it denotes, it is in fact affected by the object to which it sends (Roventă-Frumușani, 1999, p. 97). Similarly, the red-room does not characterize the prison, but the red-room is affected by prison, the object to which it sends. But while icons and symbols represent, analogically or not, the referent, the index implies the presence of the object with which it entertains a relationship of correct contiguity (e.g. smoke towards fire).

The red-room is affected by the object of 'prison', which is presented (and not represented)⁴ by the representamen through its sinsigns. "They went, shutting the door, and locking it behind them. The red-room was a square chamber, very seldom slept in, I might say never, indeed [...] This room was chill because it seldom had a fire; it was silent because remote from the nursery and kitchen [...]. The housemaid alone came here on Saturdays [...] and Mrs Reed herself, at far intervals, visited it" (Brontë, 1992, p. 9).



The rule (argument) which links the representamen to the object is, in this case, deduction: it is imposed on the facts (every time the door is locked, the room is a prison): "I was not quite sure whether they had locked the door

⁴The fundamental distinction between icon and symbol on the one hand, and index on the other hand, resides in the representation (icons and symbols) vs. presentation (index) distinction (Morris, 1938, pp. 24-25, *apud* Roventă-Frumușani, 1999, p. 97).

[...] Alas! Yes: no jail was ever more secure" (p. 9). Figure 2 graphically resumes the ideas we have just mentioned.

The "crimson" colour also suggests, besides the positive ideas of love and life, fire, hope, beauty, strength (Evseev, 2007, pp. 354-355; Chevalier *et alii*, 1968, pp. 171-174), death, interdiction, war and oppression.

The window functions as a symbol in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. According to Peirce (Peirce, 1990, pp. 277-278, 2.249), a sign is a *symbol* when it refers to its object by virtue of a *code*; passwords, tickets to a show, banknotes, and the words of a language are symbols. The symbolic rule may have been formulated *a priori* by convention, or *a posteriori* by cultural habit. A symbol's representamen is necessarily a legisign, but the legisign cannot really act until it is embodied in a replica, and from that point on, the symbol implies an index. For example, in the traffic code, the red light in the abstract is a symbolic legisign, but each one of its replicas is an indexical sinsign.

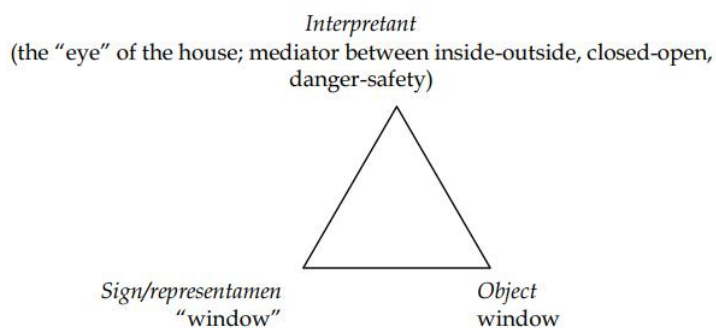


Fig. 3

In Figure 3, we have tried to represent the sign "window" functioning as a symbol: the representamen is the word "window" which denotes the real object of the window; the interpretant is what the window signifies in the novel, particularly for Eustacia: she is frequently seen wandering about with a telescope.

At one instance, she is looking towards a window from the Inn of the Quiet Woman: "the window, or what was within it, had more to do with a woman's sigh [...]. She lifted her left hand, which held a closed telescope. This she rapidly extended, as if she were well accustomed to the operation, and raising it to her eye, directed it towards the light beaming from the inn" (Hardy, 1994, p. 62). She is in fact trying to see whether Wildeve - her former lover, now engaged to another woman - is coming to see her in response to her lighting a bonfire, their mutual way of signaling to each other from afar.

According to Evseev (Evseev, 2007, p. 143), the window is the "eye" of the house, a mediator between inside-outside, closed-open, danger-safety. It is also the place of 'unregulated' enterings, for which reason it was believed to be the place through which evil spirits could enter the house - this significa-

tion is clearly related to Eustacia being seen as a witch by country-people and by her frequent act of looking towards the windows of other houses.

Eustacia's act of looking out the window when Mrs. Yeobright comes to their house, and all the following events – her not opening the door and leading Wildeva to the back door of the house, thinking that Clym must have heard the knock and opened the door has a triggering effect upon the ensuing course of the story. On the other hand, Mrs Yeobright has seen Eustacia at the window and, believing that neither she nor her son wants to welcome her, she turns away and leaves. This is one of the most significant functions of the window: it isolates the inside from the outside with everything these concepts imply, but it also offers the possibility of seeing from one 'realm' into another, and seeing means knowledge, while knowledge means either power or vulnerability, depending on who uses it and under what circumstances. In this case, the window acted according to a malicious, devious plan.

III. In conclusion, the semiotic approach allows us not only to connect the concept of the house with the inner life of the character, but also to see the way in which the Victorians' interpretation of the house is reflected in their cultural and social practices, and also their development as individuals.

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