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TEXTUAL SEMIOTICS AND SOME ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF LITERARY CRITICISM IN VIETNAM

Nguyen Quoc Thang[*]

Abstract: In this study, we wish to point out the relevance of textual semiotics to the modernization of literary criticism based on its corpus in Vietnam. Many approaches such as textual linguistics, textual psycho-linguistics, cognitive psychology of text analysis have attempted to produce interpretative models. By using the basic concepts of textual semiotics, the article analyzes some of the achievements of semiotic criticism in Vietnam. That may open up some potential research directions. The purpose of this article, on the one hand, is to establish relationships for textual semiotic approaches (here, literary text), on the other hand, to analyze critical texts related to the theoretical scope.

Key words: textual semiotics; symbolic semiotics; textual semantics; aesthetic sign; literary figure.

1. Rationale

Semiotics, in brief, is the study of meaningful products (in the broadest sense: a word, a text, an image, etc.), that is to say, the study of the way of conveying meaning. In the process of its development, semiotics constantly expands the object of research on sign systems and signification. The extension of semiotics can be distinguished into three main trends[1]:

-The first trend focuses on understanding the mechanism of the process of transforming from sign to symbol by the logical abstraction of semantics; it considers the logical system as the basis of semiotics [Granger, 7]. This direction of development is often called *symbolic semiotics*. This subdivision sets out the task of studying sign theory in relation to aspects of linguistic philosophy (especially formal aspects).

* Corresponding author
Nguyen Quoc Thang
LECLA Doctoral School, Bourgogne University, France
Email: thang_nguyen-quoc@etu.u-bourgogne.fr

Semiotics in the Peirce's tradition is closely linked to this research direction.

[1]This classification is of course not intended to determine the scope and field of semiotics in a whole, but to outline briefly the facts related to the semiotics. On the other hand, there are many terms related that we have not had conditions to discuss in this study. Typically, in the tradition of semiotics in France during twentieth century, the notion "semiotics on story" is often used instead of textual semiotics when the objects of analysis are narrative corpus. This issue has become quite a focus in the research when discussing whether to distinguish analytical objects as text, work, or merely just information to find out the characteristics of each manipulation. See: Rastier (2012), *Text semiotics: Between philology and hermeneutics - from the document to the work*, Semiotica - Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, N° 192.

- The second trend focuses on the correlations of different sign systems with communication. Typical studies of this area are those of Barthes [2] and Metz [21]. The central issue of this approach considers semiotics as semantics. Barthes, by introducing the concept of isologue, considered semantics to be the center of this "multimedia" semiotics [2].

-The third trend, different from the first two trends, sets the research task as the field of linguistic sign with

the process of semantic transformation from words to text. Typical works by Hjelmslev [11], Greimas [8], [9] and Rastier [26] have clearly defined the object of this semiotic subdivision as text. These works provided methods of analysis on fiction or non-fiction text based on linguistics[2]. This research trend of course has a fundamental difference of epistemology in compare with semiotics on sign-symbol, but on the other hand is the development from the foundation of structuralism, and approaches into sign systems in languages. Furthermore, text semiotics studies the system of the signified, the process of interpreting textual objects; at the side of them, it aims to describe the dynamics of sign in the interaction between these signs in a system.

Thus, the textual semiotics not only opens important perspectives on the aspect of epistemology, that is, matters related to the meaning of linguistics and cognitive science but also contributes to the formation of operation to describes language realities in applications to textual analysis. The relationship between the aspects: form (form of form, content of form) and content (form of content, content of content) is elucidated through the actors a regular interpretation in the whole system of a corpus.

[2]In European tradition, semiotics of literary texts are often called literary semiotics. However, the concept of textual semiotics is still used in the case of analyzing literary texts with the intention to emphasise analytical manipulations of semantics. When using the terminology *literary semiotics* to study literature, the object of its research also aims to focus on the signal characteristic of other elements such as images, layers of theme, …

2. Textual semiotics

2.1. The basic principles in textual semiotics

Based on the theory of semantics and the perspectives of textual semiotics developed by Greimas and Rastier[3], we conducted a general presentation and analyzed the basic principles of textual semiotics derived from the correlations between semiotics and interpretative semantics. Textual semiotics sets out the

task of analyzing the two basic processes: 1) the description of the signified from word to text: the dynamics of the lexical content and the formation of structural meaning of text (isotopy and seme); 2) the definition of rules for realizing semantic content, challenging the literal of text. This speciality focuses on clarifying semantic components, syntactic functions (syntactics) and strategies to signify of the text. Those aspects are considered both at the signal level, the system of signs and the semiosis. When analyzing, the texts will be attributed to different types:

- The typology of signs can not suffice: the type of a sign, alterable with the situations and modes of interpretation. ("Thus an index can function as a symbol or as an icon depending on the context".) [9, p. 212]

- The typology of sign systems complements and exceeds that of signs, but it skips the poly-signs character of languages: a punctuation sign does not function as a morpheme; a type of morpheme as another type of morpheme; a morpheme like a lexicon; etc.

The evolution of a text, according to Greimas, is formed by agents (called *actants* or *agonists*, Rastier called "proliférer"). The two areas related to the agents are:

[3]Typical works of Greimas: *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (1966) [1983], *On Meaning* (1970) [1987]; of Rastier: *Meaning and Textuality* (1997).

- Relations between levels of codification as dialect, sociolect, idiolect and the typology of semes. The idiolect is a system of textual norms specific to an emitter[4]. It is the idiolect that makes the theme outstanding.

-The theme is, on the one hand, defined as "a structured set of semes" and, on the other hand, composite or simple generic themes [27, p.177]. Generated structures do not conflict with isotopy that arises from isotopy. For Rastier, characteristic themes

are always formed by a group of structural semes. "A theme, when it can be defined semantically, is no more than a semic molecule" [27, p.223]. Any recurrence of seme identifies a theme based on a series of opposites: background / form, continuous / discontinuous, global / local, or even unicity / multiplicity (the high density of generic isotopies induces the impression of their uniqueness and continuity).

The purpose of textual semiotic analysis is to clarify the semantic form on the basis of mastering the principles:

- Text is the main fact of the interpretative process, it is both a starting point and a destination; the core structure of the interpretative process is the semes and components that provide semantic features of the starting point whose content is realized by means of interpretation.

-The unified description, from word to text, is fixed on the balance / regularity / validity formed on cultural standards (genre and types of text), which texts are experiential objects.

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[4]The concept *idiolect* is really useful in determining a writer's "style", although that style is always influenced by certain language models that come from tradition, that is, from the community. This concept invites us to search for messages that exist at the borders of language, i.e forms of literary discourse. Rastier determined, "The idiolect is a system of textual norms that are characteristic of a sender. Although all speakers have their own habits and peculiarities, they do not all possess systematized idiolectical competencies. The norms of an idiolect can in fact contradict and transgress those of a genre (which stem from a sociolect), and even of a language. It is in literary texts that one finds the most developed examples of idiolectical formations". [26, p.29]

-The description of semantic content is formed that based on the characteristic paradigm, including all the opposites between the semes that the process of creating the basic structural levels of the signification.

In relation to symbolic semiotics, firstly, textual semiotics is the semiotics of content; however, the dynamic aspects and the interpretive process allow it to

become close to the logical scope of the symbol, but still preserve the experiential subject as text.

Textual semiotics and symbolic semiotics

The opposition between textual semiotics and symbolic semiotics is primarily manifested into the modes of description and management of the content of signs. For a symbolic semiotics, it is indeed the referential and hierarchical approach which dominates, whereas the textual semiotics rests on the differential description - thus contextual - of the signified. While the symbolic semiotics is perpetually confronted to the problem of the reference of the sign, which is in fact its fundamental problem, the textual semiotics, especially in its differential aspects, is confronted to a dual problem: the projection of the non-linguistic in the linguistic sign. In other words, how does an opposition between the signified give rise to a specific seme in a given interpretative context? This projection, which results from the interpretative process or from a fixed version of the interpretation defined as reading, is not accessible to systematization. Indeed, if one can project elements of knowledge into the lexicon, it is a direct consequence of the central role of the text in the interpretative process, in particular the fact that the "encyclopedic" knowledge activated during the interpretation, can be deposited in the lexicon and make a return to the text; the only possible systematisation is a posteriori, and is based on the principles of genre and normality.

Textual semiotics is based on a combination of hierarchies (semantic classes), of specific and distinct categories, and related to cognitive semantics. The studies of Rastier (1973, 1991) clearly explain to the correlation between syntactics - semantics and pragmatics is the basis of extension on dimensions of textual semiotics.

In textual semiotics, every analysis is directed towards creating semantic layers in context and formalizing opposites in semantic layers. Only opposites have the ability to identify the particular paradigm, especially when opposites present outside all contexts. Regarding the expressive layers, we can derive from the basis of the distributive analysis, the analysis of each case, i.e. based on the tradition of commutation[5]. However, there is the fact that reader's inductive ability always seems to overcome the

analytical ability of textual semiotics. This makes us look back on the concept of "set of events" ("collection of accidents") of Rastier, that is, a text has potentiality is a text that always has variable values.

In the field of studying literary texts based on textual semiotic theory, it can be implemented in many areas: studying aesthetic symbols, studying characteristic sign of image, studying literary communication, studying the semiosis of the narrative structure, studying the isotopy, studying the model of agent,...

Above all, we have presented the basic problems of textal semiotics. This content, though not yet introduced in Vietnam, but when the authors study literary texts from a semiotic perspective, they are more or less aware of these theoretical aspects. Although the signification of textal semiotics has not been fully expressed, but surveying studies on signs and characteristic sign of image, we have seen remarkable achievements.

3. Achievements on the application of textual semiotics in literature research in Vietnam

3.1. Research on aesthetic sign

If the semiosis problem is the central range of semiotics then the aesthetic sign problem is considered the center of literary semiotics. In literary semiotics, the concept of aesthetic sign implies a concept of semiosis because it always poses a question: by which process does the sign become aesthetic symbol? When we discuss on literariness, aesthetic value, literary value, this means that we are actually discussing on aesthetic sign.

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[5]In semiotics, commutation test is a change of a certain factor on the plan of the signifier (expression) to see whether the plan of the signified (content) changes or not. Since then, according to Hjelmslev, there have been changes from commutation tests that lead to change of meaning and there are multiple tests that show when there is a change in the plan of expression, there is still no change in content.

Aesthetic sign is a concept that is mentioned a lot in studies about art. The works by Khrapchenkô [17], Lotman [19, p. 64-65], Jakobson [16, p.125], Moles [22, p. 189 - 253], Francoeur [6, p. 209-223] aim to establish the concept, the structure of action, explain to its characteristics in many different artistic forms, in particular the literary text. In Vietnam, the common point of the works by Hoàng [12], Hoàng [13], Đỗ [5],

Nguyễn [23], Trần [32], Bùi [3], Hoàng [14], Mai [20] have analyzed the formation of this category from the basis of linguistic signs, relations of linguistic signs and aesthetic signs in literary language, aspects of aesthetic sign research and specific text analysis to prove the characteristics of aesthetic signs.

In the first content, the remarkable achievements of these works have identified the level of meaningful products of two types of signs. From defining the levels of text according to two components: the signifier and the signified:

The works correctly affirm that the aesthetic sign contains the complexity of levels or in other words the appearance of many meaningful layers of the aesthetic sign in artistic texts. The aesthetic sign analysis is to find the characterisitc "dual", which is their function of expression and shaping. On the other hand, it is necessary to put them in the distribution of syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic relations as well as the context and consciousness of the community.
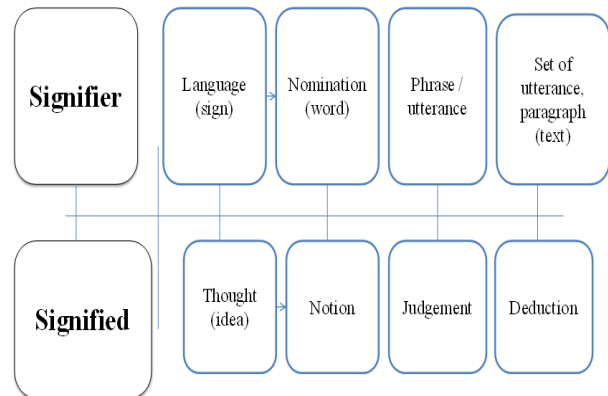

Figure 1. *Levels of the meaningful product of text*

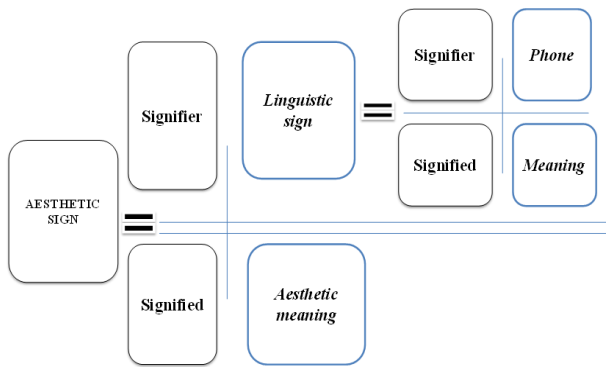the authors sketch the elements of aesthetic sign:

Figure 2. *Elements of the aesthetic sign*

In the second content, given the relationship between the language sign and the aesthetic sign in literary language, the works focus on elucidating the process of transforming from language signs to aesthetic symbols, considering the aesthetic sign is a special language genre, secondary language overlaps natural language. This transformation not only belongs to the creator but also expressed in the reception's journey governed by the culture of the reader itself[6]. In our opinion, this is actually a matter of language and speech, code and message. Or in Jakobson's words when he discusses "duplex structures" [15]: the task of studying this transformation is to consider two interchangeable components or overlapping, and it is actually investigating code in the collision with the message to clarify the form of literary discourse.

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[6]However, because of simplifying the process of creating the meaning of aesthetic signs, many authors have seen the aesthetic signs that is essentially the aesthetic meaning that the sign conveys. Diagram by Bùi [4, p.149]:

Aesthetic sign in literature		
Signifier		Signified
Signifier of linguistic sign	Signified of linguistic sign	Aesthetic meaning
Phone (writing)	Linguistic meaning	

is accepted by many researcher but has not implied the refractive elements of the semiosis to create the aesthetic sign.

In the analysis of the aspects of the aesthetic sign, the works put it in different areas to determine the problem of analysis. In literary theory, aesthetic signs are mainly considered as a component to clarify the characteristics of literary language. In teaching literature, the works determine the role of the aesthetic sign in the channel to receive and transmit the nature of literary works. In addition, many authors consider aesthetic signs in the dimensions based on semiotics theory: syntactics, semantics and pragmatics. At the semantic level, the aesthetic sign is considered as a means of translation to create new meaning or second meaning. At the level of syntactics, the aesthetic sign is defined by its characteristics and properties through relations with other aesthetic signs in an artistic work. At the level of pragmatics, aesthetic signs are considered based on the context in which they form and promote their role in the process of receiving by readers. Many works based on the constancy and variation of the language have focused on analyzing the properties of aesthetic signs through combination variations, vocabulary variations. The determination of the scope of analysis as above is just in line with the spirit of semiotics, as well as the right trajectory of textual semiotics.

The most remarkable thing in the study of aesthetic signs is that some works have explained in detail the opposition between the linguistic sign (associated with arbitrariness) and the aesthetic sign (motivation). It is based on a certain basis and method to select a signifier to express a certain aesthetic meaning, often based on their similarity.

In the final content, the remarkable achievements of the works are through the analysis of concrete texts to prove the characteristics of aesthetic signs; the works have taken operations to determine the meaning of aesthetic signs in literary works. These applications not only contribute to the establishment of the aspects of theory on the aesthetic sign in a well-grounded manner but also to help the researchers advance further in determining the usefulness of analytical application paths to analyse a text.

In summary, in the study of aesthetic signs, research works in Vietnam have analyzed many aspects of conceptualization and application of its characteristics in the analysis of concrete works. We need to note the

legitimate proposal by Trương [34] about possibility and necessity to establish a dictionary of aesthetic signs (symbolic dictionary). Literary term dictionaries focus on literary history or related to literary theory and criticism. Systematizing the types of aesthetic signs in a dictionary is essential for literary semiotics[7].

From the achievements of the aesthetic sign study as mentioned above, we can draw the basic problem of studying aesthetic symbols: "expression" of aesthetic symbols are tools and objects of literary interpretation. We know that Peirce himself was also interested in the aesthetic sign and its characteristic value for artistic forms: "In the light of the category theory (its phenomenology), I give that an object to be truly aesthetically required must involve a large number of relations between one and the other in a way that they reflect on all qualities that are direct, unique and absolute" [24, II, p.227]. Many semiotics researchers reserve special attention for this concept both on deeper levels and larger scales. The application model of Lotman has modeled interpretations aimed at bringing about *artistic representamen* [19, p.64-65]. For Lotman, the study of aesthetic signs is in fact directed to the establishment of the theory of information on aesthetic awareness [22], the complexity of the structure is in a direct proportional dependence to the complexity of the information transmitted. In this perspective, aesthetic signs not only become a means of communication but also information transmitted to the recipient by a special structure, in which the literary discourse is a pure nature language. Although it does not take the artistic communication as the focus of the sign, but the characteristic of aesthetics makes the researcher study many ideas, especially when we are in front of literary discourse, literariness, and the semiosis of cultural phenomena.

[7]Typical dictionaries that are commonly used in Europe and America are: Claude Aziza - Claude Oliviéri - Robert Sctrick (1978), *Dictionnaire des symboles et des themes littéraires*, Nathan, Paris; Michael Ferber (1999), *A dictionary of literary symbols*, Cambridge University Press; James Hall, Kenneth Clark (1974), *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art*, Harper and Row Publishers.

3.2. Research on the signal characteristic of image

The problem of literary images is considered the center of literary theory. Aspects of the study of literary image are often discussed in the literary theory paradigm in Vietnam, which is typification, concreteness and generalness, objective and subjective. Influenced by the reflection of Marxist theory, many research projects deny the signality of literary image. In the *Sign, Meaning and Literary Criticism* (1980), Hoàng criticizes the view of literary image as a sign, because if the writer is only the maker of the sign, they have no reason to exist. Nguyễn recognizes that signality only exists at the level of details in the work, not at the level of image [23]. The works by Khraptrenco [17], by Pospelov [25] have been translated into Vietnamese consider that the sign is different from the image in that the sign is created by repetition and is universal, the image is unique and creative. They only recognize the signality of details in life. Awareness of the role of linguistics in the study of literature as well as the influence of semiotics theory, especially since the 90s of the twentieth century, raises the problem of studying the signality of the image. This trend has facilitated the advent of interesting and useful research ideas. The achievement of the study of signality of literature also springs from this landmark.

The achievements of the study about signality of the literary image from the late 80s of the twentieth century can be recorded in three main contents: firstly, determining the causes and scope of the signality on literary images; secondly, establishing the thesis "literary image is a special sign"; thirdly, determining the structure of the literary image sign.

In the first place, the contributions of Trần [31], [32], [33] are very remarkable. The highlight of the works discussing this issue shows profound awareness of the transitional intersection of literary discourse from the linguistic aspect. The communication model of Jakobson and the Lotman's text analysis has created a basis for determining the origin of the literary image's signality. Because, in written communication, the absence of transmitter and recipient is also the cases of "taking their own case", completely different from language communication. Likewise, from the difference

between the linguistic sign and the non-verbal sign[8], verbal forms and non-verbal forms of communication, non-verbal communication in art, we can affirm that the image plays a special language role in communication, especially non-verbal communication. But that does not negate the role of language but in contrast affirms the position of language in literary texts. Because all literary images come from linguistic signs and also from the language in which those literary images create a system of signs with conceptual derivative language.

By establishing the thesis "a literary image is a special sign", studying the literary semiotics has clearly stated the specific characteristics of literary images. Literary images are a difficult form to differentiate based on the semiotics theories of Saussure or Peirce. It is not arbitrary. It does not belong to the linguistic sign or the non-verbal sign but the intersection between these two types of signs. It also does not belong to the icon, the index or the symbol. The literary image does not aim to express itself, which is introversive.

In the third content, to determine the sign structure of a literary image, the achievement of literary semiotics on this issue has raised three essential aspects to clarify its structure: the linguistic aspect, the shaping aspect and the meaningful aspect. These three aspects both affirm the multidimensionality of the signality of image and help the researcher become aware of the importance of speech, contextual issues, derivative meaning in the signification of this special sign type. The research achievements of La in the application of cultural semiotics theory to decode modern Vietnamese literary phenomena are meaningful contributions [18]. That achievement is not only the result of the awareness of the role of semantics in text analysis, but also of a whole process of theoretical experimentation.

Thus, the important issue in the study on image signality is to place images in different dimensions to be analysed. The systematized categories of semiotics such as the signifier/ signified, language/ speech, syntagmatic/

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[8]This distinction is systematized by Saussure. See: *Course in General Linguistics* [30].

system,denotation/ conotation not only allow the analyst to survey the characteristics of the image from the perspective of semiotics in a methodical judgment, but also allows the detection of many basic features of literary images, avoiding the "pure description" and promotion of content reflecting the reality of the image, which simplifies the problem of artistic images.

Hamon, in his well-known essay, *For a semiological status of the character* (Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage) [10], uses the concept of *topos* in Latin to refer to the autonomy of literary image. As a systematic unit, the image is considered as a double morpheme, represented by a discontinuity signifier, sent to a discontinuity signified, and the component of an original system created, by the message (the characteristic system of images gives the message). Hamon offers the regulations for the signality of images in the scopes: signifier (image expressed in the context of the text and by discontinuity signifier); signified (the image is a double morpheme), recognized as a sign; the image defined by its composition as well as its overall; motivation in the signifier and the signified of the image.

The regulation in the chain proposed by Hamon is essentially an encoding process to create literary images and to organize informational relations. Therefore, from the semiotic perspective, the image is considered a unit of communication by a separate "grammar". To analyse an image is "to decode" the signification of image.

4. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the aspects of textual semiotics (scope, principle, in distinction with symbolic semiotics), this study has focused on clarifying the achievements of literary semiotics in Vietnam. These aspects of achievements are objectively evaluated and, on the one hand, based on the synthesis of many research works in the literary criticism, on the other hand, based on the identification of problems concepts, scope and field of semiotics that we already presented in another previous study[9]. This direction has allowed us to make grounded arguments when relying on evidence to enable us to prove more clearly the theoretical

aspects that we have mentioned. These two dimensions aim to promote proper understanding of semiotics concepts as well as their application into concrete texts.

That, not only modeling the specific semiosis process of a text[10], but also allowing to specify the aspects of the content of the content, the form of the content, the form of the form and the content of the image as Hjelmslev suggested. This research direction offers a prospective perspective on the hermeneutical dimension of textual semiotics. Because each analytic technique generates a process of conceptualizing the world. Analyzing the situation of a literary text also involves reconstructing the language, thereby constructing a coherent organization of meaning. According to Greimas' hypothesis, these operations make it possible to go from the axis of meaning to the axis of signification.

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KÝ HIỆU HỌC VĂN BẢN VÀ MỘT SỐ THÀNH TỰU NGHIÊN CỨU KÝ HIỆU HỌC TRONG PHÊ BÌNH VĂN HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Trong nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi muốn đặt ra tính thích đáng của ký hiệu học văn bản với vấn đề hiện đại hóa của phê bình văn học dựa trên cứ liệu phê bình văn học ở Việt Nam. Nhiều cách tiếp cận như ngôn ngữ học văn bản, ngôn ngữ học tâm lý về văn bản, tâm lý học tri nhận về phân tích văn bản đã nỗ lực đưa ra các mô hình kiến giải. Bằng việc sử dụng các khái niệm cơ bản của ký hiệu học văn bản, bài báo phân tích một số thành tựu của phê bình ký hiệu học ở Việt Nam. Điều đó có thể mở ra một số hướng nghiên cứu tiềm năng. Mục đích của bài viết này, một mặt, đặt các quan hệ cho các cách tiếp cận ký hiệu học văn bản (ở đây là văn bản văn học), mặt khác, phân tích những văn bản phê bình liên quan đến phạm vi lý thuyết.

Từ khóa: ký hiệu học văn bản; ký hiệu học biểu tượng; ngữ nghĩa học văn bản; ký hiệu thẩm mỹ; hình tượng văn học.