

LA CONDITION HUMAINE/HUMAN CONDITION

A Literary Interpretation of “*Veiller sur elle*” through a Semiotic Reading of Tomasso’s *Story within a Story*

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Abstract

This article explores Jean-Baptiste Andrea’s novel “*Veiller sur elle*”, from a semiotic perspective and shows how complex themes and aspects of human existence are constructed and conveyed through narrative techniques such as symbols and stories within stories. Building on Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic triangle as a theoretical framework, this analysis reveals how symbols and imagery function as semiotic triggers that draw upon complex interpretations of the human condition. Linking semiotic processes to aspects of the human condition - such as the quest for knowledge, the power of imagination, the contemplation of mortality, the pursuit of artistic immortality and protection – this article shows how multifaceted layers of literary texts reveal universal human themes.

Keywords: semiotics; artistic creation; understanding human condition; narrative techniques; imagery

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Introduction

Jean-Baptiste Andrea’s novel “*Veiller sur elle*” - *Watching over Her* (own translation) -, “the story of two people who should have never met” (Andrea, 2024, 0:02-0.03), won the renowned French Prix Goncourt in 2023. The novel’s red thread follows two parallel mysteries; the first mystery is the unusual encounter and friendship between Mimo, a boy born in poverty and sent as an apprentice to a talentless sculptor, and Viola, the child of a very wealthy Genoese family, the Orsini. The second mystery is the creation and the destiny of an extraordinary statue which is hidden in the underground of an Italian abbey, after the Vatican forbade it from being

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seen, because it aroused strong, powerful emotional reactions in all those who saw it. In the narrative thread, the presence and unveiling of the story of this enigmatic and extraordinary statue, an absolute masterpiece of art, follow the unfolding of its creator's life, that is, Mimo's deeds, at the beginning of the 20th century.

The novel's chronology is also twofold. The first chronological thread presents events happening in 1986, in an abbey in Italy, where Mimo, a dying old man, is in a state of semi-unconscious coma, in bed, under the care of friars. But then again, the main narrative timeline actually begins in 1904, the year of Mimo's birth. The reader is immersed in early 20th century Italy to meet a young sculptor from a modest Italian family, brought up in France, and sent as an apprentice to a vain and cruel sculptor uncle. This young man's name is predestined and especially chosen by his mother in order to shape his destiny as a great master - Michelangelo. Michelangelo Vitaliani. In short, Mimo. This nickname suits him better because, although a genius, his mastery is not recognized in the first part of his life and of the novel. It is in Italy, in a remote valley known as Pietra d'Alba (Stone of the White) that Mimo meets Viola, the daughter of the wealthiest and most powerful family in the region. From this affectionate encounter, and from all its ramifications and implications, the mysterious statue Pietà will be born. All this in the context of an Italy between the World Wars about to be taken over by fascist ideology and Mussolini's power grab. The novel intertwines, thus, personal and artistic growth with historical tension.

1. Theoretical apparatus – methodology and literature review

The main research question of this study focuses on how semiotic elements - i.e. symbols, imagery, narrative techniques - construct and convey complex and universal human themes such as the pursuit of knowledge, the creation of immortal artistic representations, the role of the artist in society, women's rights - or lack of social rights - at the beginning of the 20th century, the status of the Vatican church and fascism in Italy, social class differences. To answer this research question and to support the proposed critical apparatus, the methodology of this research uses Pierce's *semiotics* as a medium for inquiry. From a methodological perspective, overlaying Pierce's triadic relationship over the novel's text leads to an

adequate understanding of the novel's complex narrative thread and its implicatures on the human condition.

Semiotic is the study of signs and symbols used in order to create, construct, and understand meaning. Price notes that essentially, all our thoughts and knowledge are derived from signs. A sign's main role is to make inefficient relations efficient by creating a general rule for their action. Knowledge makes these relations efficient, and understanding a sign helps us know more:

"It appears to me that the essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient, not to set them into action, but to establish a habit or general rule whereby they will act on occasion. (...). Knowledge in some way renders them efficient; and a sign is something by knowing which we know something more. With the exception of knowledge, in the present instant, of the contents of consciousness in that instant (the existence of which knowledge is open to doubt) all our thought & knowledge is by signs." (Pierce, 1977:31-32).

Peirce introduced a triadic model of the sign (symbol), consisting of the *representamen* (the form of the sign / symbol), the *interpretant* (the meaning derived from the sign / symbol), and the *object* (the thing the sign refers to). For example, in the expression "white marble statue", the representamen is embodied by the actual words "white", "marble", and "statue", the interpretant is the concept of a cat white marble statue, and the object is the actual white marble statue. On Pierce's semiotic trichotomy, Oehler states that a symbol is a representation, meaning that it stands for something, and is in relation to something (the interpretant), therefore, the symbol contains information. Moreover, Pierce's different types of representations correspond to his categories of Index, Icon, and Symbol:

"With remarkable self-confidence and control he [Pierce] organizes the approaches which are to determine this analysis of the sign (which he still calls "symbol"): that the symbol is a representation, that is, that it stands for something, but also that it stands to something, namely to its interpretant, and that the sign therefore contains information; that in addition the concept of representation implies the distinction of various sorts of representation from objects, at which point Peirce distinguishes sorts which effectively correspond to his later classification into Index, Icon and Symbol." (Oehler, 1987:2)

Linking the semiotic triangle *representamen – interpretant – object* to literary interpretation, helps providing a structured approach to how literary meaning is generated and interpreted. Methodologically, the actual application of the semiotic approach in literary interpretation can be constructed in a threefold manner (1) the examination of key symbols and of their signified meanings; (2) the analysis of how these symbols function within the narrative plot, in order to convey deeper themes; and (3) the consideration of the cultural and historical contexts that would influence the process of interpretation of these symbols. In literary works, the *representamen* (the form of the sign) would correspond to words, imagery and symbols. These create levels of meaning layers, whose function is to convey emotions and ideas, such as, for example, the sign / symbol of an exquisite white marble statue, in Jean-Baptiste Andrea's "*Veiller sur elle*". The *representamen* here is MIMO Vitaliani's *la Pietà*. In literary interpretation, analyzing the *representamen* involves examining the choice of words, literary devices, and imagery that the author employs. This can include looking at the diction, syntax, metaphors, and other stylistic elements that contribute to the text's surface meaning. In literary interpretation, the *interpretant* is the meaning or concept that these elements evoke in the reader's mind. It involves the reader's understanding and interpretation of the text, influenced by their own experiences, knowledge, and cultural context. For example, the sign / symbol of an exquisite white marble statue, the forbidden *Pietà*, evokes an artist's dream and aspiration towards a complete art masterpiece, towards an ideal. Its banning, its concealing in an underground basement could represent unattainable artistic goals and, ultimately, humans' illusion of accomplishing dreams. The *interpretant* may differ for the same *representamen*, leading to multiple interpretations of a literary work. The *object* in literary interpretation is the real-world reference or the deeper layer of understanding a text. It can be an abstract concept pointed out by the *representamen* and the *interpretant*. For example, the object that the exquisite banned white marble statue ultimately refers to is the broader themes of artistic creation and impossible love, and the inherent disillusionment that would arise from these. In literary interpretation, identifying the semiotic object involves digging beneath the surface text layer to uncover deeper meanings.

2. Reflections after reading

In 1986, in an Italian abbey, Michelangelo Vitaliani ponders on his life. He is known as “Il Francese” amongst monastics, in the monastery, and as “Mimo”, in his youth. Born in France, he is of Italian origin. Although his real name, deliberately chosen by his mother, Michelangelo, echoes the grandeur and artistic genius of the Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, the use of his nickname reveals a paradox. The Italian etymology of his nickname *Mimo* is of Latin origin, being the first-person singular present indicative of the verb *mimare*ⁱ, meaning, *to mime*. It therefore evokes the idea of a form of acting, a performance without words, that often is in the form of a farce. Miming is usually seen as a humble or less prestigious form of performance compared to grand theatrical productions. The nickname can be linked to the fact that Mimo is not actually destined for greatness, but for smallness - he is, in fact, a dwarf of humble origins. The paradox lies in the significant gap between the grandeur and expectations evoked by Michelangelo Vitaliani’s given name and the humble, diminutive reality implied by his nickname, looks and life circumstances. His physical smallness and humble background starkly contrast with the grandeur and genius implied by the name “Michelangelo”.

The indirect portrayal of Mimo’s father states that he was a sculptor who died in World War I. When Mimo is 12, his mother sends him to Italy, to Pietra d’Alba in his uncle Zio Alberto’s service. He would be his apprentice, but his life with his uncle is harsh and difficult, as the latter proves to be untalented, alcoholic, tremendously stingy and aggressive. It is in Petra d’Alba (also a symbolic denomination, as it can be connected to the whiteness of the marble stone used by sculptors) that Mimo’s destiny unfolds: on the one hand, he turns out to be endowed with a remarkable artistic talent and on the other hand he meets young Viola, the only daughter and the youngest child of the powerful family Orsini. This encounter transforms Mimo’s life completely.

The name Viola also carries a paradox in its etymology. Firstly, it evokes ideas of harmony, beauty, and art, as a *viola* is a string instrument in the violin family, known for its rich, mellow sound. It often plays a harmonious and supportive role in an orchestra, bridging the gap between the violins and the cellos. The same name is also the Latin name for a genus of flowering plants, which includes violets and pansies. These flowers are

delicate, beautiful, and often associated with modesty, simplicity, and natural beauty. Viola Orsini is neither simple, nor of a ravishing beauty. She is a strong young lady gifted with an ardent desire and ability to learn everything she reads, from astronomy to architecture, history and art of all previous ages. Viola Orsini has an amazing and genius encyclopedic thirst for knowledge. In essence, the paradox in the name “Viola” lies in the juxtaposition of its associations with both artistic harmony and natural delicacy, which conflict with Viola Orsini’s actual destiny. Viola, born into a wealthy and important Italian family, would be expected to lead a life of privilege, culture, and refinement. Her name, associated with beauty (the flower) and artistry (the musical instrument), reinforces these expectations of a refined and harmonious existence. Despite her privileged background, Viola would still be subject to the societal constraints placed on women at the beginning of the 20th century, when European women, regardless of their social status, faced significant limitations on their rights and freedoms. Women of this era had limited access to education and professional opportunities. Their primary roles were as wives and mothers, with little encouragement to pursue independent careers or personal ambitions. 20th-century societal norms would restrict Viola’s ability to explore or express her talents fully. Her potential for greatness, symbolized by her name, is paradoxically constrained by the very society that would praise her for such a noble heritage. In fact, this paradox torments her all her life. She tries to escape her family’s socially predetermined destiny (marriage and knowledge ban) through incessant reading and, ultimately, through inventing and creating an airplane. But in her first attempt at flight, she only crashes both her body and her dreams.

The background of Mimo and Viola’s bond is set in Italy’s tumultuous history between the World Wars and the rise of fascism. Mino’s artistic talent gains recognition through his connection with the influential Orsini family. Viola’s sole criticism within her family against the rise of Mussolini adds historical, cultural and societal depth to the narrative.

2.1 Interpreting the meaning of a *Story within a story* through a semiotic lens

The first encounter between the teenager Mimo and young Viola is at Villa Orsini, where Mimo works with his uncle Alberto and his friend-to-

be, Alinéa, on the roof. Trying to avoid a life-threatening fall, Mimo plunges through the window into Viola's room. Following this jump, Mimo and Viola's friendship evolves through deep, lengthy conversations carried out during long, regular walks at night, in the village cemetery. In the cemetery, to Mimo's initial turmoil, Viola lies on graves, as she believes she can listen to the dead and their stories. She explains to Mimo that she once fell asleep on a grave, during a funeral, and woke up with stories whispered from the realm below, and that this is her way of listening to those who might not have anyone else to listen to them:

"Je revis Viola trois fois au printemps 1918, toujours au cimetière. Malgré ses efforts, elle ne parvenait pas à me convaincre de participer à ses expériences nécromantiques - je refusais de m'allonger sur une tombe. Les morts ne lui parlaient toujours pas, de toute façon. S'ils l'avaient fait, j'aurais pris mes jambes à mon cou." (Andrea, 2023 :106)

The cemetery described in the novel is a place of significance and intrigue. It is the place where Mimo and Viola meet every night, where they can contemplate mortality and engage with the mysteries of life and death. Adding to its mysterious atmosphere, the cemetery is situated near a forest. Viola's fascination with the cemetery shows a deep connection to history and legends. This represents a bridge between past and present, the living and the dead. Viola also tells Mimo the story of her favorite grave - that of Tommaso Baldi, a 10-year village boy who disappeared almost a week after venturing into the woods to play his flute. A search was launched, and eventually Tommaso was found lying on the grass. Unfortunately, Tommaso had passed away, and he was still holding onto his wooden flute:

"(...) Tommaso Baldi, 1787-1797. Le jeune Tommaso faisait maintenant partie de la légende du village. En 1797, un habitant de Pietra d'Alba rapporta avoir entendu un air de flûte monter des profondeurs, sous sa cave. On le crut fou, mais le lendemain et les jours qui suivirent, d'autres habitants jurèrent avoir entendu une sublime mélodie de flûte sous les rues, sous le sol d'un salon, sous l'église pendant la messe. Puis une troupe de saltimbanques apparut, épuisés. Depuis plusieurs jours, ils cherchaient l'un des leurs, le petit Tommaso, qui s'était égaré dans la forêt. Il était parti travailler sa flûte, comme souvent. On ne l'avait plus revu depuis presque une semaine. (...) On entendit encore la flûte, très lointaine, une fois sous

la fontaine, une fois un peu avant l'entrée du village. (...). On le ramena en hâte au village, ses yeux grands ouverts brûlés par la lumière du jour. Il revint à lui peu après minuit, souffla qu'il était désolé, qu'il s'était perdu dans la grande ville sous terre, et rendit l'âme." (Andrea, 2023 :104)

Viola's story is that Tommaso had somehow found his way into an underground realm, a secret and mysterious continent beneath the surface, inhabited by pale people with white eyes, living under an earthen sky and clouds of roots:

« Viola était persuadée qu'il [Tommaso] n'avait pas déliré. Un continent secret et mystérieux gisait sous nos pieds. Nous marchions sans le savoir sur des temples et des palais d'or pur où un peuple pâle, aux yeux blancs, vivait sous un ciel de terre et des nuages de racines. Et qui n'a pas envie de découvrir un nouveau continent ? Elle passait beaucoup de temps allongée sur la tombe de Tommaso - ses pieds en dépassaient - dans l'espoir que ce dernier lui en indiquerait le chemin." (Andrea, 2023 :105)

From a theoretical perspective, applying the semiotic triangle to the legend of Tommaso Baldi, as seen through Viola's eyes, reveals how signs and symbols operate within the narrative to convey deeper meanings. By examining the relationships between the representamen, interpretant, and object, readers can delve deeper into the layers of meaning within a literary work. This framework not only enhances the understanding of the text itself but also enriches the readers' appreciation of the complex interplay between language, culture, and individual perception in the creation of literary meaning.

The *representamen* in Tommaso's story includes elements such as the flute's music, Tommaso's grave, and the imagery of the underground city. These symbols serve as tangible forms that readers encounter, prompting initial perceptions and interpretations. In this story, elements like the "flute", the "underground city", and "Tommaso's grave" serve as representamens. For instance, the flute, as a physical object in the story, is described as producing a sublime melody that comes from beneath the village, drawing villagers' attention and fascination.

The *interpretant*, in this case, is, firstly, Viola herself. She interprets signs and events according to her cultural and societal contexts and to personal experiences. Viola's belief in an underground city beneath the

village illustrates her desire to seek deeper meanings beyond the surface. The flute's melody evokes a sense of mystery and otherworldliness, suggesting a connection to the supernatural or the unknown. Viola's fascination with Tommaso's grave and her belief in a hidden underground world represent her interpretation of these signs. She interprets the flute's music as evidence of an underground city populated by mysterious people.

Further interpretants are the villagers and, eventually, the readers themselves. The semiotic method can also be illustrated by examining the villagers' reactions to the flute music. The representamen is the recurring sound of the flute emanating from various locations in the village. The *interpretant* for the villagers is a mixture of fear and curiosity, as they are eager to comprehend the source of the music. For Viola, however, the interpretant is a conviction that the music signals an entrance to an underground world. The *object* here encompasses themes of belief, fear of the unknown, and the human drive to explore and understand what lies beyond immediate perception. Like Viola, readers are interpretants who try to recreate and convey the deeper meanings of both the story and of the whole novel. More precisely, readers may interpret Viola's fascination for a world beyond, as a reflection of her own desire for discovery and knowledge. Just as the world beyond cannot be reached, it is a desire that cannot be fulfilled because of the societal values of the early 20th century imposed on a young woman. Viola's desire can be seen as symbolic of the broader movement for women's education and intellectual empowerment. Women in the early 20th century were fighting for access to education and the right to contribute to knowledge, breaking free from traditional domestic roles. Therefore, Viola's story in "*Veiller sur elle*" also recalls of women who were frequently excluded from intellectual and cultural spheres dominated by men. As in Viola's case, their contributions were undervalued, and their voices were often suppressed.

Even more, Tommaso's flute and the haunting melody symbolize the artist's dream of creating something that endures beyond their lifetime, highlighting the eternal quest for artistic immortality, resonating with Mimo's aspirations as a sculptor. Mimo's dream of becoming a renowned sculptor is fueled by his immense talent and passion for creating art that transcends time. His final masterpiece, "*La Pietà Vitaliani*", is the epitome of this ambition, representing his desire to leave a legacy that endures beyond his lifetime. This sculpture is more than just a piece of art; it is a

testament to Mimo's genius and a symbol of his quest for immortality, and of his relentless quest for Viola through his work.

Furthermore, Tommaso's story and the mysterious city under the village might reflect the uncertainty and sense of hidden dangers in post-World War I Europe. This can be seen as a premonition of the coming turmoil of World War II, where unresolved tensions would once again erupt into conflict. As mentioned in the literature review, the more interpretants there are, the more semiotic objects there are as well.

The *object*, which the signs ultimately refer to, encompasses themes such as the human quest for knowledge, the allure of the unknown, and the complexities of perception and interpretation. By analyzing the semiotic relationships between the representamen, interpretant, and object - the semiotic triangle provides a structured method to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within the legend, enriching the reader's understanding of how literature constructs and communicates complex themes and ideas. The object is the real-world reference or the deeper, often abstract concept that the representamen and interpretant point to. In Tommaso's story, the object could be the theme of the unknown and the pursuit of knowledge. The legend suggests that beneath the surface of everyday life lies a hidden world of secrets and mysteries, symbolizing the broader human quest for understanding and enlightenment. Viola's actions - spending time on Tommaso's grave, hoping for a revelation - illustrate the human desire to uncover hidden truths and gain deeper insight into the world around.

To illustrate and apply the semiotic triangle to Tommaso's legend from the novel "*Veiller sur elle*", one *representamen* is the flute's music heard from beneath the village. This sound is the physical form (representamen) that the villagers and Viola perceive. It serves as a sign that triggers curiosity and wonder among the characters in the story. The flute represents a connection between the surface world and the mysterious underground. Its music, which captivates the villagers and leads to the discovery of Tommaso, symbolizes the call of the unknown. The *interpretant*, in this case, is Viola's belief in an underground city and a hidden world. Viola interprets the flute music as a sign of a deeper reality beneath the village. Her interpretation is shaped by her desire for discovery and knowledge, influenced by her readings and personal beliefs. The semiotic *object* is the theme of the unknown, the pursuit of knowledge, and the desire to escape. The flute music and Viola's quest reflect broader

themes of human curiosity and exploration, in the broader context of an inter-world-war Italy. Viola lying on Tommaso's grave, hoping to find a way to the underground city, suggests her desire to escape. Viola's actions and beliefs can be seen as embodying the struggle of women at the beginning of the 20th century. Her persistence in seeking the underground city represents the determination of women to gain knowledge, freedom, and a place in history. Viola's fascination with the underground city reflects, in fact, a yearning for hidden truths and knowledge, paralleling women's quest for autonomy and intellectual freedom.

Applying the semiotic triangle to this story within a story allows, therefore, for a detailed literary analysis. The representamen, such as the flute, initiates the process by presenting a tangible element that readers encounter. The interpretant, shaped by cultural and individual contexts, reveals how characters and readers perceive and make sense of these elements. Finally, the object connects these perceptions to broader themes and meanings, such as the quest for knowledge and the unknown, in a turbulent historical and social context. The story within a story connects deeply with the condition of women at the beginning of the 20th century, the societal shifts post-World War I, and the looming threat of World War II. It underscores the breaking of social barriers, the pursuit of knowledge, and the artist's timeless quest for love and immortality through creation.

2.2 Further semiotic objects on protection

In summary, as the title of the novel itself suggests, "*Veiller sur elle*" - *Watching over Her* (own translation) - invites deep reflection on the human condition themes such as memory, the quest for knowledge, emancipation, and, ultimately, for love and protection. First and foremost, throughout the novel, Mimo dedicates himself to protecting Viola and her memory, all through his actions and art. The Pietà he creates, a symbol of beauty and memory, evokes intense emotions and fascinates those who contemplate it, carrying an aura of mystery and disturbance. La Pietà has the same effect on onlookers as Viola had on Mimo. The mystery within Vitaliani's marble sculpture of Virgin Mary and Jesus, that which provokes all those strong emotions in the public, is, in fact, the expression of all Mimo's feelings and love for Viola. At the end of the book the reader is revealed the mystery: protected in the arms of the Blessed Mary stands Viola's representation.

To develop the idea of protection expressed in “*Veiller sur elle*”, the narrative also weaves in the crucial thread of emancipation through knowledge. Mimo and Viola aspire to break free from social conventions and the rigid rules imposed by their era. Viola, in particular, refuses to conform to the traditional expectations placed on women. Her rejection of patriarchal norms is, in fact, her desire for an authentic life. Viola seeks to protect not only her freedom but also her right to fully be herself, despite societal pressures.

Tommaso's narrative, as shared by Viola in the form of a story within a story, adds a layer of folklore and legend to the novel. Set against the backdrop of the village and its traditions, Tommaso's narrative resonates with the themes of protection and memory. The legend of the flute sound heard in the village serves as a symbolic reminder of a past to be preserved within the community. It also symbolizes Mimo and Viola's struggle to protect their personality, artistry, creativity, freedom, and authentic self-expression under the social constraints of their era.

Conclusions

This article explores how symbols and storytelling techniques express deep human themes in Jean-Baptiste Andrea's novel “*Veiller sur elle*”, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triangle. By analyzing the novel through this framework, this research shows how symbols evoke complex interpretations of themes such as the pursuit of knowledge, imagination, love, and artistic immortality.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes how semiotic elements shape and convey these themes, prompting readers to reflect on memory, knowledge, and protection. The semiotic analysis of the story within a story in “*Veiller sur elle*” uncovers the novel's intricate layers and universal themes, highlighting the powerful interaction between symbols, narrative structure, and the human experience.

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