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Semiotics of Tobacco: the Case of Runeberg's Pipe

Summary. The essay introduces an approach called *the semiotics of tobacco* by analyzing one narrative poem. The analyzed poem is *Fänrik Stål* (1848) by Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the national poet of Finland. *Fänrik Stål* is traditionally considered nationalistic and patriotic. When analyzed in the context of semiotics of tobacco, the traditional way to interpret it is challenged. In the end, this case analysis of Finnish literature is used as an example of broader problems in representing tobacco in literature in order to establish the approach of the semiotics of tobacco.

Keywords: semiotics, tobacco, literature, narrative poem, Runeberg

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This essay considers the cultural meanings of tobacco in literary representations in the context called *the semiotics of tobacco*. The main focus is on the representations of pipe smoking and, more precisely, I will outline the specific cultural meanings of tobacco by analyzing the depiction of pipe smoking in one literary work from classic Finnish literature. The analysis focuses on the meanings of pipe smoking in the narrative poem *Fänrik Stål* by Johan Ludvig Runeberg, the national poet of Finland. Finally, this case analysis of Finnish literature is used as an example of the broader problems involved in representing tobacco in literature in order to establish the approach of the semiotics of tobacco.

In Runeberg's *Fänrik Stål*, pipes, pipe smoking and pipe smokers have an especially important role in the structure and plot of the narrative and, furthermore, the pipe smoking depicted in the poem also functions as a thematic device by which certain contents and themes can be presented and emphasized. In terms of pipe smoking, the main theme of the poem is the question of identity, and, in this case especially, the question of male identity. Thus, the aim of the analysis is especially to point out how pipe smoking in fiction is represented with respect to forms of identities, and to subjects and their selfhoods. But additionally, as already stated above, there are more general aims than that since the purpose is to sort out how literature (in general) represents all kinds of tobacco use and, especially, how tobacco in literary representations can, inevitably, be understood as a sign and a symbol in the cultural sign-system.

However, when considering tobacco as a sign, there are two aspects of the sign that have to be taken into account. On the one hand, it must be emphasized that this "tobacco-sign" can have confusingly multiple meanings, which all can change depending on the contexts.¹ On the other hand, however, it is necessary to notice that at the same time tobacco carries very conventionalized meanings with which the receivers and interpreters of the sign are usually very familiar. This duality coincides with the controversial nature of tobacco as a substance: through its history, since arriving in Europe, there has been a discursive struggle over the cultural meanings of tobacco.²

As a kind of a *pharmakon*,³ tobacco's meaning has always been unclear and controversial. For centuries, tobacco was considered both medicine and poison at the same time because, until recently, it was not obvious at all that this substance was so deadly as we now know it is. Also, in the contemporary world, tobacco is controversial – but almost only in terms of representation. It is a problem particularly for health care and legislation; since the poisonous nature of tobacco is now an undeniable fact and since there is no question whether or not *nicotiana tabacum* is a very addictive substance, smoking should not be presented in a positive light or as a sensible lifestyle choice. Nevertheless, the problem is that cultural meanings of tobacco are very hard to restrict totally or to censor, precisely because the representations of smoking have such a long history in literature, art, films, and in the entire

¹ J. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, transl. P. Kamuf, Chicago & London 1992.

² P. Hakkarainen, *Tupakka. Nautinnosta ongelmaksi*, Tampere 2000; M. Hallila, *Merkkillinen tupakka ja polttava minä. Tupakan merkkipuolue ja kirjallisuuden identiteettirepresentaatiot*, „Kulttuurintutkimus” vol. 1, 2011, pp. 43-55; L. Hutcheon, M. Hutcheon, *Smoking in Opera*, in *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking*, eds S. L. Gilman, Z. Xun, London 2004, pp. 230-235.

³ J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, transl. B. Johnson, London & New York 2004.

culture. Smoking is always more than just smoking, which is due to the sign-nature of tobacco.

In the analysis at hand, the acts of pipe smoking are thus discussed as signs; and since I am scrutinizing the meanings of tobacco in such a manner, the theoretical framework is based on a new idea which is called the semiotics of tobacco. It concerns all forms of tobacco and all smoking habits in the culture(s). Its main premise is that tobacco is a sign carrying meanings that people have learned and are competent to read and understand. Tobacco is a sign which people are using to signify numerous different things: tobacco produces meanings.⁴ Hence, I am now reading Finnish fiction in the context of this sort of semiotic approach – although the borders of the theoretical framework are intentionally left blurred. In its present state, the semiotics of tobacco is more of a theory in progress than a definite framework for research. Nevertheless, it should turn out to be a functional theory when analyzing the cultural meanings of tobacco in literature.

Is this not a pipe?

Before starting an analysis of the literary representations of pipe smoking, it is necessary both to discuss some of the meanings and attributes of the pipe as a cultural object and to highlight its functionality in the world of signs. First of all, it should be noticed that although the pipe is an everyday object as such, there is much more to it than just utility values or aesthetic aspects. Because of this, it has to be added here that the facts about the cultural history of tobacco or pipe smoking presented in literature – as absorbing as some writers may have found them⁵ – are usually banal from my point of view. From the approach of the semiotics of tobacco, the cultural meanings of pipe smoking are very rich, various, ambiguous, and manifold; and they have to be interpreted within cultural contexts and with knowledge of the theories of culture and not (only) from the historical point of view, which in some cases might have almost a too impressionistic stance.⁶

When starting to think of the pipe in a cultural sense, at least one famous artwork might immediately come to mind: René Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* which is a picture of the pipe with the French text "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). This painting is most often found fascinating by scholars and art theo-

⁴ J. Derrida, *Given Time...; Smoke: A Global History...*

⁵ R. Lahtinen, *Savun lumo. Tupakan kulttuurihistoria*, Jyväskylä 2007; J.K. Silvennoinen, *Tämä on piippu*. In *Mitä tupakka tarkoittaa?*, ed. V.J. Sutinen, Savukeidas 2014, pp. 41-73.

⁶ J.K. Silvennoinen, *Tämä on piippu...*

reticians (and as a matter of fact, by the painter himself for the same reason, too) because it leads one to think of the complexity of the interrelationship between the representation and the represented object and between the sign and its referent. The picture of a pipe is not a pipe as it is just a picture (but still of course: of a pipe). One can smoke the pipe but one cannot smoke the picture of the pipe. Even if and/or because it is an imitation and a mimetic repetition, it could never be the object itself; according to many interpreters of Magritte's work, it specifically denotes this very fact. It is common sense that the presentation is not the object presented.

Nevertheless, it is as relevant to claim that, on the level of significance, the picture of the pipe as well as the word "pipe" in literature should still be considered similar to real pipes. This does not mean – at least it does not mean *only* – that the mimetic and the imitative do not differ from that which is being presented, but it means, for instance, that the viewers of pictures or the readers of literature are always using their world experience and encyclopedic knowledge about real-world objects and issues when interpreting representations. For the audience walking around in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Magritte's painting recalls actual pipes and everything that pipes (for each of them as an individual in that moment) signify.

There are plenty of cultural, social, historical, and other meanings of the pipe articulated in the painting, and the spectator will bring her/his understanding of real-world pipes to the situation in which she/he is looking at the picture. In this sense – even though "just" representations – pictures as well as words and any other forms of representation carry the cultural meanings of the objects. Art and literature are in many respects worldly in a sense of "worldliness," as they are part of the same world with the objects and issues they are representing. Within this "worldliness" the materiality of the symbolic always haunts,⁷ and to this zone also belongs the semiotics of tobacco and all those meanings that I call the cultural meanings of tobacco. I would argue that the pipe represented in fiction is the same sign as the actual pipe due to tobacco's ability to signify in the cultural sign-system and in terms of the semiotics of tobacco.

From national to tobacco

Fänrik Stål is a narrative poem which has an essential role in Johan Ludvig Runeberg's *Fänrik Ståls sägner*,⁸ because it is the framing tale of the whole work. *Fänrik Ståls sägner*

⁷ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005; M. Lehtonen, *Maa-ilma. Materialistisen kulttuuriteorian lähtökohtia*, Tampere 2014.

⁸ J.L. Runeberg, *In The Tales of Ensign Stål*, transl. C.W. Stork, C.B. Shaw, C.D. Broad, Helsingfors 1907, pp. 6-13.

– which is considered Runeberg's major work – is a collection of narrative poems, and it forms an epic narrative of the events of the Finnish war, which took place from 1808-1809 (between Russia and Sweden-Finland). Most of the poems in the collection present the male heroes of the Finnish war, and albeit there are a couple of female characters amongst these gory warlords, the reader can smell the testosterone throughout the collection. By introducing various different types of soldiers of the Finnish war, *Fänrik Ståls sägner* glorifies masculinity and combines it with the war and with patriotic nationalism.

These poems have such a strong nationalist ethos especially as they were written in the period of the construction of the romantic and nationalist idea of the Finnish nation and nationality. Runeberg's poems were part and parcel of the ideological struggle on behalf Finnishness and the identity of the nation. Traditionally, *Fänrik Ståls sägner* is often seen as a patriotic and nationalist literary work of art: as Finnish literary historian Kai Laitinen states, it was due to the publication of this work that Runeberg, the sensitive nature poet and writer of the miniature epic, reached the position of the esteemed national poet of Finland. The work itself became part of Finnish cultural memory.

In the project to construct the Finnish nation and Finnish national identity, and together within the master narrative of Finland as a nation, *Fänrik Ståls sägner* achieved a remarkable position as an ideal of Finnishness. This ideal has of course been criticized and denied during the many, many decades of the Finnish literary tradition, for instance, by such early realists as Minna Canth and Juhani Aho to the postwar national author Väinö Linna and his contemporaries, but the shadow of the Runebergian tradition was always there to be challenged when representing Finnish national identity.⁹ However, as demonstrated below, the analysis of the cultural meanings of pipe smoking can question the assumed thematic importance of national in *Fänrik Stål*: the cultural meanings of tobacco challenge the ways the poem has been traditionally interpreted.

Binary smokers and the nostalgia of youth

When considering pipe smoking in *Fänrik Stål*, there are at least two main perspectives that should be taken into account. First of all, the poem itself is about two men – a young man and an old man – meeting and smoking pipes together while the old man tells stories of his youth in the war to the young one. It is thus clear that aspects

⁹ J. Nummi, *Jalon kansan parhaat voimat: kansalliset kuvat ja Väinö Linnan romaanit Tuntematon sotilas ja Täällä Pohjantähden alla*, Helsinki 1993.

of masculinity, manhood and male bonding are relevant topics of research. Second, the poem itself is a narrative based on the memories of these two men. In the poem, the different temporal phases are intertwined due to memories, especially due to the nostalgic act of remembering one's youth. The narrative situation in the poem is interesting in particular because the poem is temporally multi-dimensional. In the temporal sense, the narration is based on the remembrance of youth and feeling nostalgic towards it. In the beginning of the poem, the old poet (the alter ego of Runeberg and the narrating voice of the collection) starts to reminisce himself as a young man in the period when he met Ensign Stål. Here are the first three verses of the poem:

What joy it is alone at night,
 To feel my thoughts returning
 To youthful years, wherein the light
 Of friendly stars are burning!
 Who'll join me on the road I take
 To Näsijärvi's dusky lake?

'Twas there I learned to know a man –
 An ensign's rank he'd won him
 In soldier days, but now the ban
 Of ill luck was upon him.
 He'd come to live, the Lord knows why,
 At the same countryplace as I.

My station left me naught at all
 To wish, in my opinion.
 I was a tutor at "the hall"
 Was truly fortune's minion.
 On great folks' fare I freely fed;
 The old man lived on parish bread.

What, above all, can be found here are the oppositions between the two ages and the two periods of life of the men: Stål is old and the poet is young; the narrator is older than his younger self who met Stål in those "youthful years," and there is also a reference to Stål's youth when he was a soldier, to the period of his life about which he tells the young poet. Each man – the young and the old one – are here placed in opposition in the first place. It is, moreover, noteworthy that the poem constructs an opposition between the young man who acted in past time and the old one who is remembering things past in present time – since also, in the same manner, elsewhere in the poem there appears the same kind of oppositions between young and

old; there appears the oppositions between the young and the old poet, between the young poet and old Stål and between young and old Stål. In these first verses, the narrator is older than his younger self who met Stål in those "youthful years," and this kind of remembering of the things from the past is essential when considering the composition of the whole poem.

Furthermore, there is an act of nostalgia at the beginning since the narrative begins when the old poet alone at night once again in his mind returns to his own youth. This is the time-level on which the narrating voice of the poem starts remembering, and it is the first significant gesture towards the nostalgia of youth. Similarly, as with these first verses, almost the whole poem thematizes different oppositions between the young poet and Stål. Later on, the poem describes the maturation process of the young poet, and at the end of the poem the oppositions between the two men are deconstructed in the name of the advantage of Finnish nationality, in the name of the common fatherland.

Other oppositions, in addition to those already mentioned, which can be found from the poem's first three verses are between the wealthy and the poor and between the educated and the uneducated. The young poet is upper class, Stål is lower class. The young poet is told to feel like he is much superior and a much more important person than Stål. The poet feels like a king or even better than a king whereas Stål is nothing but an ensign, as is said directly in the poem:

My thoughts ran wild in everything;
He was but ensign, I a king.

In the fourth verse, the differences between the young poet and old Stål are, among other things, said to be due to the differences in their tobacco use. Both men are similarly smoking a pipe, but the young poet has a fine meerschaum pipe and the finest tobacco quality in contrast to Stål who is so poor that he only has a most unpretentious pipe, and sometimes he cannot even afford home-made tobacco but has to smoke moss in his simple pipe. Here is the fourth verse of the poem:

I smoked a mixture with a crest,
A meerschaum pipe I flaunted;
Old Stål had only plug at best,
And that supply was scantied,
So that quite often, at a loss,
He'd stuff his birchen pipe with moss.

This is when pipe smoking is mentioned for the first time in the poem. Tobacco is here a significant issue as the poem again emphasizes the several oppositions between the poet and Stål: the young man smokes fine quality tobacco, the old man smokes bad quality tobacco or even moss. Via the representation of pipe smoking, the poem once again brings forward the binary differences between the characters of the poem. However, in fact, tobacco is here much more than just one symbol that highlights these oppositions since the significance of tobacco both changes and increases when the narrative goes on.

Just two men smoking pipes

The pipe smoking has great importance when interpreted in this context, as it seems that the poem is really not so much about being patriotic than it is about being a man amongst men. Pipe smoking as an act in *Fänrik Stål* is about an initiation to manhood, and because of that there are also strong feelings of nostalgia when remembering youth. For before anything else, the young poet wants to reach manhood and to fulfill the criteria of being a masculine man. This fact comes out in the fifth verse, telling us that the biggest problem of the young poet is the lack of masculinity, or strictly speaking, the lack of a moustache. And, naturally, here we can hear again the tone of nostalgia in the voice of the old poet:

O age of gold, O life that gleams
 With purest joy and pleasure,
 When one is young, and student dreams
 Fill every rift of leisure,
 And one's worst worry is the fear
 That one's mustache will not appear.

Before the true turning point of the narrative, the young poet teases and mocks old Stål all the time for his own amusement. Stål gets angry towards the poet, but he always relents and forgives him when he gets some fine quality tobacco as a gift from the poet. The young poet's fine tobacco always settles the quarrels between the men. It happens repeatedly in the narrative that the proud and thoughtless young poet gives tobacco to Stål. This is told in the following verses of the poem:

He'd jump up, yell "Be off with ye!"
 But soon his wrath abated;
 A pipeful, an apology,

And I'd be reinstated.
I'd saunter in next day, and then
The comedy'd be begin again.

That he, like me, had had what youth
So lavishly provided,
And that he knew far more, in truth,
Of what life meant than I did,
All this I was by far too wise
In college lore to recognize.

There is a significant reference to Stål's youth when he was a soldier since that was the very period of the ensign's life about which he finally will tell stories to the young poet. Here, the opposition between the two men is emphasized in many different aspects such as age, class, education, and wealth. The young poet is told to feel himself a superior and much more important person than Stål. He feels like a king or even better than a king whereas Stål is nothing but an ensign, as is said directly in the poem. There is a quarrel between the men, but, as is said, the substance that can even out the quarrels and contradictions is the fine quality tobacco. In these verses can again be found a hint of the significance of Stål's youth and war, yet the actual turning point of the narrative is not until the moment when the young poet reads a book about the Finnish war which is told in the following verses of the poem. The young poet gets an enthusiastic patriotic feeling from reading the book:

Oh what a land, what men were these,
How resolute, how glorious!
An army that could starve and freeze
And yet remain victorious!
Onward and ever on I spred;
I could have kissed each page I read.

[...]

So much there was to ask about –
But maybe Stål could help me out.

In the last two verses above, the young poet understands that since he is a man of a certain age, Stål must also have been one of the soldiers of this very war. In order to find out more about the war and in order to share the feeling of belonging to the Finnish nation, the poet wants to hear about the war from Stål. Hence, Stål now gets a new high value in the eyes of the poet. And after getting Stål to promise to tell him

about the war the young poet is ready to lose his pride in the name of the Finnish people and the common fatherland. The oppositions between Stål and the poet are deconstructed or turned the other way around, now Stål is a king, and the young poet only his student:

I sat there listening on and on
 In silence, breathless-hearted,
 And the long night was nearly gone
 When I at last departed.
 He rose and saw me to the door,
 Pressing my offered hand once more.

[...]

He was a sage, and I a fool,
 A king he was, and I at school.

When comparing this to the first parts of the poem, there is a change in the oppositions constructed earlier. In the beginning of the poem, the oppositions are unquestionable – even if there is some irony already due to the temporal phases of the nostalgic narrative situation and the reader already knows that in the narrative's present time the poet is older and does not feel the same anymore – but, actually, the old poet is just amused about the thoughtlessness of his younger self. But not until the turning point of the poem is the moment from which starts the process of deconstruction of the constructed oppositions: it is the exact moment when the young poet reads a book about the Finnish war. After that, Stål gets new value in the eyes of the young poet. And after getting Stål to promise to tell him about the war the young poet is ready to lose his pride in the name of the Finnish people and the common fatherland. The oppositions between Stål and the poet are deconstructed or turned the other way around: now Stål is a king, and the young poet only his student.

The obvious interpretation of the poem is that finally the opposition between the upper social class and the lower social class, between the people and the establishment, is deconstructed. The advantage of the Finnish nation requires that all Finns should come together and work on behalf of the fatherland. Of course, this does not change the fact that the soldiers will have to fight against the enemies, and that the poets will have to sing about the soldiers' bravery. At the end of the poem, the tales of Stål are said to be a gift to the fatherland. Therefore, this gift is a gift from the people and it is disseminated by the Finnish national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg himself. The essential meaning and function of the pipe smoking in this process is revealed in the last verses of the poem:

From that time my visits came
 To be a daily fixture;
 Our joys, our sorrows were the same,
 We both smoked my good mixture.
 He was a sage, and I a fool,
 A king he was, and I at school.

These tales I've sought to give in rhyme
 Are what the ensign told me;
 Beneath his flaring pine-torch time
 An time again they'd hold me.
 Here in the simplest words they stand.
 Take them, beloved fatherland!

The various pipe smoking sessions between the young poet and Stål function as a male-bonding ritual between these men when the ensign narrates the stories to the young poet as he himself remembers them. At the same time, the old poet is telling his story of his own youth to his own audience (to the readers) as he himself remembers it. On different temporal levels of the narrative, the old men are both longing for and glorifying their own youth. As the stories of old Stål are, eventually, the same narratives which the old poet now begins to retell, and as the end of the poem is nothing but the beginning of the stories of the war and war heroes of the collection, there are quite interesting levels of remembering and feeling nostalgic in *Fänrik Stål*.

It is evident that pipe smoking has a more crucial function in this patriotic Finnish poem than could be seen at first sight or in the light of the traditional way of interpreting it as first and foremost a nationalistic poem. In terms of the semiotics of tobacco, it can now even be claimed that tobacco is the cause and effect of everything that happens in the poem's narrative. As stated before, tobacco is a very ambiguous sign in terms of its meanings: in this poem, tobacco's meaning quite obviously is special in its value as a luxurious pleasure outside everyday life, and, furthermore, in the fact that tobacco use in the nineteenth century, was considered proper only for men. As Jacques Derrida, in his analysis of Charles Baudelaire's short story *Counterfeit money* points out, tobacco represents the symbolic contract between men:

The offering and the use of tobacco give access to honor and virtue by raising one above the pure and simple economic circulation of so-called natural needs and productions, above the level of necessary. It is the moment of celebration and luxury, of gratuity as well as liberty. [...] smoking symbolizes in fact the symbolic, namely here

the alliance and contract, it does so between men (note that we say between men, apparently between men, both in the sense of humanity and of masculinity, and of a humanity better represented, as always in this exemplarist logic, by the example of men, than by that of women).¹⁰

Tobacco in *Fänrik Stål* has a great importance, as the poem is really not so much about being patriotic as being a man (in the sense of masculinity). Furthermore, one really interesting question is: Why tell this story in the way that Runeberg does? Why use so many levels of remembering? Why leave doubts about whether the story being told is remembered truthfully? If one is paying attention to the fact that the narrator's voice in the poem is quite amused and nostalgic when he talks about his youth, and that the lack of a moustache means the lack of full manhood and masculinity, and especially if paying more and more attention to tobacco – to pipe smoking—when interpreting this poem, it can be stated that the main point of the poem is more about pursuing the traditional values of masculinity via nostalgic memories and by acts of pipe smoking than about the patriotic and nationalist aims of giving the gift of the fatherland as the (old) poet claims.

The meaning of pipe smoking in *Fänrik Stål* is much more important than one –when thinking in a traditional manner – could suppose: to smoke the pipes together, to share the good quality tobacco with the other, is to be a man connected to other men and generations of men – and it supposedly is more important than giving lyrical gifts to the fatherland. If there is a “gift” it is a smoky change of manly values between men in the economics of symbolic exchange and within the semiotics of tobacco.

Conclusion

In the same manner as is shown in the analysis of *Fänrik Stål*, the idea of the semiotics of tobacco in general is to bring out how it is possible – in a new manner—to analyze and interpret the cultural meanings of tobacco in literature, art, and culture. This approach is intended as a framework for research in order to analyze both the cultural meanings of tobacco (and its use) and all those cultural meanings of the aspects of social life which are expressed via (the depictions of the use of) tobacco. The semiotics of tobacco concern any forms of tobacco use that are represented culturally. The challenge is to apply this approach in a way which can provide something new for interpretation – both in terms of the knowledge about the different cultural mean-

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Given Time...*, pp. 114-115.

ings of tobacco and in terms of the themes of the work in which the uses of tobacco is represented.

The analysis of *Fänrik Stål* is one example of the endeavor to establish the semiotics of tobacco. In the poem, it can be seen that pipe smoking as such carries the meanings that can be found when focusing on the question: What is the meaning of tobacco in the poem? This gesture led us to a well-argued, anti-traditional interpretation of the poem. The same question can be asked in any work of literature or art in the context of the semiotics of tobacco. Therefore, the semiotics of tobacco is an approach giving a perspective through which there is a better chance to comprehend the ways in which tobacco has an impact on our culture. In the contemporary world, this is in no way a meaningless effort since the (re)quest for ways to get rid of tobacco and tobacco culture via education and legislation would not be enough and still there has to be some other way than censorship to deal with the hundreds of years of the cultural representations of smoking.

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