

# A Semiotic Interpretation of the Totem Elements in Game of Thrones

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## Abstract:

*Game of Thrones* is an American fantasy drama television series produced by the HBO cable network. Producers Benioff and Weiss used many totem elements in this drama, such as family emblems and family flags, which enable the audience to interpret more about it. Modern semiotics shows that any material product is a sign. A sign is a carrier of information, as a visual language, is an object of design, and, linking the symbolic function with traditional geometry, labor studies and aesthetics, it is widely used in various fields. Based on semiotic theory, this thesis makes a detailed analysis of such totem elements as family emblems, family flags of Lannister, Stark and Tully, which appear many times in *Game of Thrones*, from the aspects of the signifier and the signified, and explains the symbolic meaning of these elements. As the signifier, those totem elements contain multiple levels of meaning of the signified such as the specific animal that has a special relationship with the family, the symbol of the family spirit and the pursuit of political status. This thesis expounds the basic theory of semiotics, analyzes the manifestation of semiotics in *Game of Thrones*, and gives examples of semiotic analysis of the totem elements in this drama, and finally explains and summarizes the cultural significance of totem design in the play. What's more, the study of semiotics will help designers better deal with the relationship between people, products, environment, society and nature, and better convey the cultural value of the artistic language and visual language in the film and television works to the audience.

## Keywords:

Game of Thrones, Semiotics, Totem, Signifier, Signified

## 1. Introduction

During the long historical changes and social development, human beings have created profound and varied cultural systems that contain the unique signs by different ethnic groups [1]. As an independent discipline, semiotics emerged in the West in the 1960s, creating new possibilities to solve the design problem in other fields in the 20th century. After a century of development, semiotics research has developed into a large number of related theoretical schools, such as structuralist semiotics, European semiotics, American semiotics, post-structuralist semiotics [2]. In addition, the

theoretical achievements of semiotics have been widely used in the study of film, literature, architecture, mass media, biology and other disciplines. Therefore, semiotics has shown a more distinct interdisciplinary characteristic and strong practicality.

Totems as signs represent and are associated with the gods and ancestors imagined by the early civil society [3]. The producers used many totem elements in *Game of Thrones* such as the family motto, family badge, family flags, clothing design, and the color of the clothes, which appeared multiple times in this drama. These elements are not randomly picked, but carry different intrinsic meanings. It might be worthwhile to explore the visual graphic design of several important totem elements in *Game of Thrones* from the semiotic perspective, such as the family emblems and family flags of Tully, Lannister, Stark, then expound their role in promoting the plot and their cultural significance.

Since *Game of Thrones* was broadcast, there have been many comments and articles on this drama by critics and online viewers but very few people analyze its visual elements. However, these elements form an important part of the unique artistic charm and commercial value of this successful 8-year television series. This thesis will select the three main representative images for the interpretation of the signs.

Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the visual graphic design of the important totem elements of three families in *Game of Thrones* from the semiotic perspective. Hopefully, this research may provide a better understanding of some artistic features of designs and more insight in how to effectively apply semiotics to visual communication, television works and other fields.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Review of Studies on Semiotic Theories

Ferdinand De Saussure is the founder of semiotics. Jorgen & Svend pointed out that in the history of linguistics, Saussure was the first to propose that symbols are the main objects of language, language symbols are composed of sound-image and conceptual meaning [4]. A linguistic sign unites, in Saussure's view, not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image (rendered as 'sound image' or 'sound pattern'). In such an understanding, the linguistic sign, according to Saussure, is viewed as a two-sided mental entity, which unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-pattern. Waşik has demonstrated that the domain of linguistic study is thus placed by Saussure in the border land where the elements of two orders are combined into a unity of linguistic form [5]. As one of Saussure's masterworks, *Course in General Linguistics* is the signal for the beginning of modern linguistics, which embodies Saussure's basic linguistic ideas and is of great significance for the development of modern linguistics. It influenced many linguistics school in the 20th century, such as generative grammar and structuralism linguistics. On one hand, Saussure's theories come up with a direction and task for modern linguistics. On the other hand, his theories become the theoretical basis for modern linguistics.

What's more, Saussure defined a sign as any motion, gesture, image, pattern, or event that conveys meaning. He defined *langue* as the structure or grammar of a language and *parole* as the choices made by the speaker to communicate that information. He also advocates the difference of signifier and signified. The signifier

is the pointing finger, the word, the sound-image. But a word is simply a jumble of letters. It is in the interpretation of the signifier that meaning is created [6].

Saussure argues that a word or image (the sign) comes in two parts. There is the sound it makes (or its graphic equivalent) which he terms the “signifier”; and there is the mental image that the sound or graphic equivalent produces in the reader/viewer - the signified [7].

Charles Sanders Peirce is one of the founders of modern semiotics. Peirce defined a sign as something which stands to somebody for something [8]. This semiotic idea advocated by Peirce had a great and far-reaching effect on the interpretation of certain aspects of natural language. Peirce also said that signs work only if there is an intelligence capable of learning from experience. Peirce’s conception of semiotics was triadic: sign, meaning, and interpreter. After Peirce, modern semioticians look at the entire network of signs around us that mean different things in different contexts, even signs that are sounds. Before Peirce, although there was extensive discussion about the differences between language symbols and non-verbal symbols, it was not until the manuscripts of the language semiotics of Peirce were published that linguists paid great attention to the structure and meaning of non-linguistic signs. Peirce’s theory mainly focuses on the logical relationship between different symbols. With the introduction of new and better editions of Peirce’s writings, his reputation has continued to grow and his theory of signs is probably the most frequently examined of the foundational theories of semiotics today [9].

Both signs and images are intermediaries that carry and transmit information to exchange knowledge, thoughts and emotions [10]. Any medium, including film, needs to convey artistic information to the audience with some kind of sign or image, and generate meaning and value through the audience's interpretation [11]. Metz, as the first person to apply the theory of semiotics to film research [12], holds that the nature of film is not a reflection of reality, but a system of symbolism of the artist’s restructure. Metz’s film semiotics can be summed up in one sentence: the film is not a real language, but it is a special language with ideographic code. Therefore, all non-linguistic symbology depends on language, and structural linguistics should become a blueprint of general semiotics and artistic semiotics [13].

In summary, Saussure and Peirce’s semiotic views are similar in many ways, but there are still some differences between them. The former holds that semiotics is basically an idea, but the latter seems to regard it as a practical activity to some extent. There are plenty of books that introduce the specific schools of structuralism, of European semiotics, of American semiotics and of post-structuralism, and open specific fields of investigation such as film, literature, architecture, mass communication, computer studies, biology, philosophy, linguistics. In a theoretical and analytical perspective, some of the books are more preoccupied with the limits of semiotics than its potentials. Many of these books date from the 1960s and 1970s and are still valid in their fields. They have continued to foster new discussions up to the present day.

## **2.2. Review of Studies on Game of Thrones**

Specifically, with the rise of the girl hero and other non-sexualized heroines in film, male viewers can consciously imagine themselves as films’ heroines, not just as films’ heroes who possess the heroines [14]. Hardy states in his essay that *Game of Thrones* follows the pattern, which presents a partly shocking, partly romanticized version of

the military history of real-world races and cultures as a means of framing the more Western values of Daenerys and the superiority of her proto-European “civilization.” [15]. In a word, researches on *Game of Thrones* in western countries is mainly about the military orientalism, female character, language and so on.

In recent years, since the American drama *Game of Thrones* was broadcast in China and achieved great success, many Chinese scholars have analyzed the reasons for its success and its characteristics. To a certain extent, the success of this drama increased the Chinese academic research on American drama. However, most current researches focus on its script adaptation, female characters, special effects works, marketing strategy, the reasons for its popularity and other surface factors, without really providing deep semiotic interpretation of the totem elements in *Game of Thrones* [16]. Luo states in his essay that *Game of Thrones* is an epic and fantastic masterpiece, but unlike most of those works which mainly focus on describing heroes, this TV series takes the depiction of female characters as one of the main threads, and creates many female characters [17]. It is those female characters who are not attached to the power of men that make this work more colorful and engaging.

As one of the important ideas of the 20th century, semiotics has a large system of its own, including different categories and research tendencies. The study of semiotics in the West started early and developed well. Now semiotics has become a scientific research and its theoretical achievements have penetrated into many other disciplines. Nevertheless, the number of image analysis is quite limited. A sign is the carrier of information, as the visual language, it can be the object of design. It also links the symbolic function of the product with the geometric and technical aesthetics, which can be widely used in design. What's more, as signs in the sense of semiotics, and the continuation of Western tradition, the totem elements can be analyzed from the aspect of semiotics.

### 3. Representative Totem Elements

Many countries in medieval Europe made family totem based on the image of animals. The emblem firstly showed up on the battlefield in the 12th century, mainly to distinguish knights who could not be identified because of their armor [18]. The emblem of the Earl of Anjo, the Duke of Normandy, Geoffroy V d'Anjou was the earliest in history. Today, many families will design their own emblems. For instance, Princess Kate, who married into the British royal family, asked the designer to design three oak-themed family emblems.

In *Game of Thrones*, the author Martin designed the multi-layered symbolism of the families, the signs of which are often connected to the character's families or houses. Each house has a badge, sign or symbol that represents the family. It shows the family colors, the slogans they believe in and certain qualities that define them. The importance of the emblem emphasizes that in a highly structured society, the birth of a person largely determines his or her fate [19]. Meanwhile, on the metaphorical level, the houses embody certain basic characteristics within human nature, which might exist in us all but are very conspicuous and even inheritable in specific houses or families. For example, the Lannisters embody selfishness, the Starks strength in adversity, the Targaryen inner vitality and the Baratheon anger.

Colors on the House emblems also play very important roles. A color is a sign that people can intuitively feel. Hue, clarity and saturation are three characteristics that constitute the extensional meanings of color signs [20]. A sign functions through a

combination of signifier and signified. In Saussure's view, signs are not only free from people, but also beyond the so-called "objective world". The signifier refers to the physical expression of the sign, the sound or the graphic that one can hear or see or touch, however, the signified, the mental image it creates, is related to the content of the sign, that is, the meaning given by human beings, the interpreter. For example, light and dark are produced by their contrast of lightness. The signified meaning of a color as a sign is not limited to the color itself; it can extend to such a wide scope that color symbols have a very rich connotation, since different colors can bring different psychological reactions. Red, for example, represents enthusiasm and vitality. These perceptions have been formed in the long process of development, but sometimes individual and geographic differences also play a part. Some colors are frequently used in their connotative meanings. For example, in daily life, red lights signal "stop", green lights means keep going. Red often represents prohibition, danger, and warning effect, while green stands for such meanings as pass and security. Therefore, color connotations can play a very important role in the communication of cultural value. For example, children's furniture usually has bright colors, because these colors not only can improve children's cognitive ability, but also can convey liveliness and activeness. So for the television programs, the designers also choose specific colors according to the functional characteristics of the show to meet the psychological needs of the audience. The colors used on the various emblems in *Game of Thrones* serve their purposes as designed.

Some of the above-mentioned emblems appear in almost every episode of the show, and as the plot progresses, each episode will bring in a different set, such as Pike Island, the seat of the Greyjoy family's castle, the slave city of Yunkai, featuring the ladder pyramids and the eagle-headed witches, and the most powerful Braavos in the free-trade city. These emblems have showed up in many scenes of the play, bringing the fans great joy as well as enthusiastic discussions over their historical archetypes. The following part of this chapter will analyze the totems on the emblems of three houses, along with their mottoes and colors.

### **3.1. Symbolic Animal: Direwolf**

Stark family totem is the first to show up in the play. The family castle is the northern capital of Winterfell, and the family emblem is a direwolf on the white snowfield. This direwolf, the signifier, creates a signified which involves not only a direwolf, but also the features of being strong, vigorous, tough, and not afraid of cold, living in the North, as well as other features related to the spirit of the Stark family inheritance. Like wolves, the Starks are loyal and fierce, and they do best in the pack. Over the seasons they struggle to survive but while separated, like the direwolf, they almost become extinct. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** The emblem of Stark family.

In the first episode, Ned Stark, head of House Stark, and his children find the little direwolf pups, and each child takes one. Each direwolf's characteristics and name reflect those of its owner, and the direwolf's fate symbolizes what will become of each Stark's fate, almost as if the direwolf were the soul of Stark child externalized. Meanwhile, stuck in the dead body of the parent direwolf is a stag antler, it is the cause of direwolf's death, which foreshadows Ned Stark's specific way of untimely death. Because the stag (Figure 2) represents the House Baratheon, and House Lannister has Ned Stark killed, the sign of the dead direwolf with the stag antler can be seen as signifying the future enmity between the Stark and Lannister family and the death of this head of House Stark.



*Figure 2. The emblem of Baratheon family.*

The names of the direwolves are also signs with rich connotative meanings. Sansa Stark, the eldest daughter of Lord Eddard Stark and his wife Lady Catelyn, names her direwolf Lady, as Sansa wishes to be a lady and marry Joffrey. In Martin's story, Lady is described as the prettiest, most gentle and trusted of the direwolves. The youngest female child Arya Stark names her direwolf Nymeria, after the warrior princess who led her people to cross the Narrow Sea and settle in Dorne. The name captures Arya's strong, wild warrior spirit. After Nymeria attacks Joffrey to protect Arya, the girl sends her direwolf into the wild to escape. Nymeria's getting lost also symbolizes that Arya is uncertain of her path. Joffrey demands that Lady be put down for Nymeria's crime. Lady's death represents Sansa's loss of innocence because of the brutality she experiences living with nobility in King's Landing, and with the loss of innocence goes her gentle and trusting nature. In the first episode, at first the family see only five direwolves, but soon Jon Snow adopts an albino direwolf, and decides to call him Ghost. Of course the name may make us think of the soul of a person after he dies.

The family motto of the Stark family is "Winter is Coming". They have lived for generations in the bitter cold of the Seven Kingdoms, but instead of surrendering to the harsh natural environment or just dying out, they keep farming, hunting, and survive for generations. With a respect to and awe of nature, they always keep in mind the words "Winter is Coming" and stand ready to fight. Similarly, it means the family's readiness for hardship of winter. They struggle against the harsh elements of the North and the enemies in Westeros. HBO's representation of the emblem makes the direwolf look like the armor, representing the Stark family's willingness to fight and the code of honor. On the family level, "Winter is Coming" foreshadows all the hardships the Starks will face, and the motto shows the family's closeness to dangers. The Stark's determination to face the brutal reality of life shows that they are different from other houses. They have been shaped by more difficult environment, and this hardship defines them. Sometimes the term Wolf blood is used to describe some of

the overwild personality of the Stark family members [21]. They are born in danger. Therefore, it is very reasonable that they choose the direwolf as the emblem.

Gray is a neutral color, the transition between black and white, it is stable, calm, quiet, reserved, never the center of the tension. It represents compromise and control. This color embodies the Stark family, their level-headedness, while the gloominess of gray illustrates the family's depressing fate.

White is the color of new beginnings, purity and innocence. Most obviously it is the color of snow, the symbol of the impending winter. The Starks also embody the discrepancy of color white: it seems pure, innocent and naive, yet it can also be cold and isolated. In season six, after Jon dies and is resurrected, Ghost is the first one to see him come back to life. They two are such a good match since Jon Snow is called The White Wolf, and Ghost is really pure white. What's more, after Jon becomes the king of the North, the colors on the Stark banner are reversed, as is custom when the bastard takes his family banner. The direwolf will be white – just as Ghost is – and the background is gray, since Jon's direwolf is the only white one, and the others are gray. This switch indicates that Jon may become the leader, King in the North, and his rule would change completely (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The comparison of Stark family flag before and after Jon become the King of the North.

### 3.2. Symbolic Animal: Trout

The lady of House Stark comes from the Tully family. The Tully family emblem is a silver trout, against the background of red and blue, with two silver lines in the middle making this fish seem to jump out of the river. While the family's fate in the play is tragic, Tully represents a force that has always been underestimated: adaptability, secularism, family values, and a sensitive political sense. (Figure 4)



**Figure 4.** The emblem of Tully family.

The Tully family differ from the other four families in *Game of Thrones*. Proud of their ability to adapt to the situation but not showing off their strength, they remind us that when someone is against us, putting ourselves in the first place is a top priority. When Bran Stark talks in the drama about the family motto "Family, Duty, Honor" of

the Tully, we can't help noticing the order of these values. For the Tully family, family always comes first. Unlike other families where competition and greed often outweigh the love between brothers and sisters, the Stark brothers and sisters do not fight for power, but support each other. Thus, we cannot underestimate the love their mother Catelyn Tully gives them.

Red is the color of blood and love, echoing the blood kinship greatly valued by the Tully family. The background is half red, which represents blood, and the fish seems to be leaping out of the blue water, it reminds us of a proverb: blood is thicker than water. Their family features also echo the red color: Sansa inherits red-brown hair from her mother, and the color red reminds us of all the bloodshed in the Family.

Blue represents loyalty, and we can associate the blue of the emblem with the Tully insistence on family, duty and honor, even though there are such dangerous waves in the blue water blurring these three values and trying to drown them.

Likewise, the color silver also has its symbolic meaning, which reminds us of the moon, and is also associated with the waves, the color that combines mystery and intuitiveness. It is more feminine than the gold, which symbolizes masculinity. On the other hand, silver is associated with flexibility, emotion and sharpness, thus we might think that the Tully are more likely to be good negotiators. What's more, silver is one of the precious metals in reality, but it is not used to forge the Crown gold, which indicates that the Tully family can never be a king.

In fact, the Tully family act like a fish, not by roaring and spitting, but by being at ease. Despite their lack of natural defense and its poor fighting power, the Tully are bent on family continuity, maintaining their political position by strategic marriage. Other families fight with swords, but the Tully fight with family marriages. They often stay far away from home because of marriage, the trout on the emblem can also be understood as the fish leaving the water. The trout of the Tully family seems to be jumping out of the water and at the same time falling back on to the surface, and the family's situation seems to be the same: a dilemma.

While we may regret the tragedy of the Tully family, we can appreciate their efforts to survive in a cruel world. We can also know from the drama that a small trout will become a big fish. Their unnoticed adaptations, negotiating skills, and women's intuitively sensitive political sense are far more powerful than they seem.

### ***3.3. Symbolic Animal: Lion***

The Lannisters are the richest of the Seven Kingdoms, and after the War of Five Kings, they have become the most powerful family. Both Tywin and his daughter Cersei show a great desire for power, and they are eager to occupy the land and take the throne [22]. Their family totem is a solemn and ferocious carnivore—lion, whose family motto is “Hear Me Roar”. (Figure 5)

Lannister's emblem is a golden lion running on a crimson field, symbolizing royalty and nobles. “It is only our last name that goes on, only the family forever, not your personal achievement or glory, but the whole family.” Tywin's father, Tetos, is known for his weakness and incompetence, and even taunted and exploited by his mistress. An incompetent man nearly ruined the family and the surname, thus Tywin decides to gain a good name for his family, and he cares most about what the world would think of the Lannister family.

The key to Lannister's nature is that they can wander between perfect appearance and ugly inner heart. The Lannister family represents self-will and self-interest as well as "self-love", and other houses are enemies. In a word, the lion on the Lannister's coat of arms indicates that Lannister likes to take himself as the ruler of the kingdom, and the lion does not care about the thought of a sheep. The king of the jungle not only symbolizes wisdom, power and dignity, but also symbolizes the royal family.



*Figure 5. The emblem of Tully family*

This ethnic motto also emphasizes the strength and ferocity of the Lannister family, but it is rarely used. Behind the closed family door, Lannister has an unofficial motto: A Lannister always pays his debts. To some extent, it's a reminder that the Lannisters are rich, and wealth gives them the right to make trouble, and they are supercilious. They believe that in this extremely political world, fame is everything. Besides, they are willing to use their wealth and reliable reputation to trade things they want.

Literally, the Lannisters are always paying their debts, which means they can be trusted to repay. But there is also a negative side to this maxim, and once bullied, the Lannisters will come to revenge, a reputation that is equally valuable. Lannisters want people to see their royal image, and what they value most is their possessions, their tactics and their sense of revenge.

The colors on the Lannister's emblem are gold and crimson, indicating their desire to be a member of the royal family. Gold is the color of the crown, the color of precious metals or currencies, so gold symbolizes maturity, abundance and domination. It's a striking color, just as the Lannisters boast that they are superior to everyone else.

Gold is also associated with male power, such as the sun, and wisdom. We usually think that gold illuminates the surroundings just like the sun, which is what the rich and powerful Lannisters expect. The Lannisters' good looking and blond hair echo their false appearance, which is such a contrast to their cold hearts.

Crimson represents nobility and political position, and this advanced color is mixed with a purple which represents nobility. In Elizabethan Britain, only the royal family and spouses could wear clothes of this color. Tywin is the king's prime minister, Jaime is the king's guard, Cersei has married Laub, and their children are destined to become kings. This symbolism of colors does not tell us the true personality of Lannister, but tells us what they want to be and what they want to be regarded as by others.

Crimson and gold reflect the strong desire of the Lannisters to rule over others, to put the family interests first. However, Lannister's emblem also has two sides, their external image symbolizes noble lineage, imperial power and legal inheritance, but

their inner world is shamed by money, secrets, resentment, illegitimate children. The Lannisters will never give up their power grabs and high-profile actions.

Thus, the totems of these great houses in *Games of Thrones*, together with the graphic designs including colors and mottos of the family emblems produce various conceptual meanings, connotative meanings, reflected meanings and son on, which enable multiple levels of interpretation for the viewers and enhance the attraction of the drama.

#### **4. Conclusions**

According to semiotics, every artistic image can be regarded as a sign. Therefore, in order to understand the art works such as television series, we must first understand this sign with its aspects of signifier and signified. In the American drama *Game of Thrones*, the signifier of the totem elements is achieved through the graphic design involving the drawing of such totem animals as direwolf and lion and other elements like the mottos and colors. The signified, the mental images created in the audience on multiple levels by these signifiers, have brought out various kinds of meanings such as conceptual, connotative, affective, reflected meanings. Thus, the Lannister's roaring lion, and the Stark family's direwolf and Tully's trout symbolize the different powers of each family. To a limited degree, the audience, as well as the characters in the drama, know what to expect of each family, but are unable to predict what will really take place because of the interactions among them. This expertly use of the totem elements has helped greatly the development of the plot and characterization and contributed to the success of this TV drama.

This paper not only reveals the mystery of semiotics, but also illustrates its unique artistic beauty. In order to produce the intended effects on the audience, the designers of *Game of Thrones* have certainly drawn on knowledge of the bountiful signs in the history and culture of Western society in their choice of the elements for their design of the artistic image. As a methodology, there is little application of semiotics in totem design in general, so it is of great significance to guide the practice of film and television design with semiotics to innovate and develop continuously. Because the traditional western culture has a very rich semiotic connotation, the study of totem elements is deeply rooted in this cultural background. Thus, we need to explore deeper how to use the semiotics to analyze the totem elements in the graphic design of film and television works, with an inspiration for design by semiotic theories, and how to guide the world trend.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

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