

Identifying “Hidden Meanings” in Vanda Rozenbergová’s Book *Freedom for Pheasants*



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Abstract

The study focuses on identifying hidden meanings in Vanda Rozenbergová’s short story collection called *Freedom for Pheasants* (2011). Being based on the concept of hermeneutic circle, the study aims to identify places of indeterminacy in the book, focusing especially on metaphors. The primary focus is on the meaning of the metaphor of birds, while relying on the theoretical solutions of Paul Ricoeur, George Lakoff and other authors, who have been dealing with this issue. It also follows up on the solutions of cognitive linguistics, especially the theory of prototypes. The study accents the role of metaphors of birds in the short stories, for instance the role of metaphor of the pheasant and swallow, while analysing their function as regards portraying the literary characters.

Key words

hermeneutics, places of indeterminacy, metaphors, Vanda Rozenbergová, pheasants, women

A metaphor is a kind o’ lie to help people understand what’s true.

Terry Pratchett

“The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding”, Leonardo da Vinci once said¹. While he likely referred to understanding the physical world’s contexts with the term ‘understanding,’ his quote can also be interpreted within the context of literature. It suggests that through literature, we gain insights into both others and the world around us. After all, one of the most common reasons why people read literature is the pursuit of a better understanding of the world around them, and one of the ultimate experiences that literature does offer is this deeper insight. In our study, we will focus on the issue of understanding a literary work by finding hidden meanings in the text. Our research will be based on hermeneutics, and we will focus

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particularly on how the reader can achieve a better understanding of the literary works by filling in the places of indeterminacy.

Theoretical Framework: Hermeneutics, Horizon of Expectations, Places of Indeterminacy

Traditionally, the term 'hermeneutics' has been associated with theological studies, focusing on the interpretation of sacred texts, but also with methodology of musical works interpretation. In our research, we adopt the interpretation of 'hermeneutics' as outlined by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. He defines it as a theory of methods, processes, and principles of searching for the essence and meaning of a works of art. Hermeneutics is an attempt to understand not only the apparent but also the hidden aspects and implicit meanings of artistic phenomena, including both rational and irrational, discursive and intuitive aspects of the work, according to him (Encyclopaedia Beliana – Hermeneutika). Gadamer based his comprehension theory on the concept of the hermeneutic circle, which he believed was crucial for the process of understanding. This concept elucidates "*how interpretation, measured against the 'thing itself,' unfolds*" (Gadamer 1994, 43). It is a process that takes place between the pre-understanding of the text that is given by its situatedness and the effort to understand what the text "communicates." The fact that the interpreter approaches the text with a certain expectation formulates the interpreter's prejudice as a necessary condition of comprehension. Even the first meaning emerges only because we read the text with particular expectations. The gradual adjustment of various meanings until the end – until the meaning in the work is grasped – is the process of understanding the text (Fridmanová 2005, 193). Central to Gadamer's approach is the recognition of the reader's prejudices as essential for comprehension. He claims that "*prejudices must be exposed in order to be confirmed or disconfirmed on the 'thing itself'*" (Gadamer 1989, 269). The relationship between interpretation and comprehension is to be understood as a dialogue in which meaning emerges through the dialogue between the interpreter and the text. The essential structure of this dialogue is a question-answer format in which not only the interpreter questions the text, but the text also questions the interpreter, thereby challenging their preconceptions. The 'fusion of horizons' is a term by which he names the method of dialogue, in which the interpreter successfully cancels his unproductive prejudices and manages to reach an authentic understanding of the text (Fridmanová 2005, 194). His belief that it is possible to contain the literary experience and the artistic character of the work is expressed by the category of horizon of expectation. If the work exceeds the horizon of the historical reader's expectations, the reader's horizon is modified. Thus, the aesthetic value of the work is indicated. If the work meets the horizon of the recipient's expectations, it only fulfils the function of distraction and pastime (Hyperlexikon literárnovedných pojmov – Hermeneutika).

Within the framework of hermeneutics, philosopher and literary theorist Roman Ingarden discerns between the inherent structure of a literary work and the responses elicited from the reader or perceiver. He bases his theory on the idea that a literary work shows conceptually definable linguistic constants, but he claims that it is also ambiguous and interpretable, or, in other words, concretizable (Zima 1995, 243). According to him, a literary work represents an “*organic whole*” (Ingarden 1976, 7); it is kind of a schematic entity whose purely “*schematic nature*” (Ingarden 1989, 329) can be objectively reconstructed. However, he perceives the literary work as a gap-shaped and ambiguous construct at the same time, which contains places of indeterminacy filled with meanings or concretized in the reader’s aesthetic experience (Zima 1995, 244). The concept of “places of indeterminacy” refers to the relative openness of the meanings of the work of art, i.e., the fact that the author of the work does not say everything explicitly. This openness of meaning allows the recipient to give particular expression to such places in the aesthetic perception of the work. Such concretization is necessary for the work to operate properly because it is only through this process that an aesthetic object is generated, meaning the artefact starts to function as a work of art (Estetický slovník – Miesta nedourčenosti).

Ingarden suggests that a literary work should be perceived as an intentional object, distinct from autonomously existing real objects. Human consciousness “does not create real objects, but intentional objects (characters, plots, events) in the case of literature. These intentional objects only “pretend” real existence” (Ingarden 1989, 223). The particularity of intentional objects is that they are not “complete” since they are schemas. They cannot be filled in, and therefore, they show places of indeterminacy, or, in other words, empty places. Thus, while real objects are completely knowable because they show no gaps, a literary work, as an intentional object, is “full of voids or places of indeterminacy that can never be removed because there is an indefinite number of them” (Ingarden 1989, 251). Ingarden distinguishes four different levels in the literary work as a schematic entity, with places of indeterminacy occurring in each of them. He states that the word sounds and phonetic formations of higher order may be found in the “layers of meaning units, various schematized aspects, and represented entities and their fates” (Ingarden 1989, 42).

Based on the views of these two literary scholars, we may assume that a deeper comprehension of literary work may be achieved by eliminating harmful biases as well as by filling in the gaps in the layer of units of meaning. What is more, the horizon of the reader’s expectations could be modified. The existence of these places could therefore contribute to the aesthetic value of the works in question, considering that literary works would not thus primarily fulfil the function of distraction and pastime, but their main goal would be to modify the horizon of the reader’s expectations and thus to stimulate the reevaluation of his attitudes (Hyperlexikon literárnovedných pojmov – Hermeneutika).

A similar theory was developed by Wolfgang Iser, who emphasized that places of indeterminacy form the basic starting point of the text’s effect. According to him, readers navigate the interpretative space, determining the implicit connections between various elements. The text offers participation in the process of creating a fictional reality in this way. If the number of places of indeterminacy in a fictional text is smaller, there is a risk that the work will bore the reader because it will confront him with an increasing degree of determination, which can also be ideologically or utopianly oriented. Only empty spaces allow the reader to participate in constituting the meaning of the event. When a text affords such opportunities, “readers are inclined to perceive the interpretations they formulate not only as plausible but as actual, since humans tend to regard their creations as tangible realities” (Iser 2001, 46-47).

Theoretical Framework: Aristotle's and Ricoeur's Notions of Metaphor

We focus on identifying and interpreting the metaphors in our study, therefore we will present Aristotle's and Ricoeur's notions of metaphor at first. Aristotle defines metaphor as “the transfer of a name from one thing to another, either from genus to species, or from species to genus, from one species to another, or the like” (Aristoteles 1980, 30). Metaphor, as conceived in this concept, involves substituting the proper name of one thing with a non-proper, borrowed name from another thing. The basis of this substitution is the perception of similarity; according to Aristotle, “to create good metaphors means to observe the similarity between things” (Aristoteles 1980, 30). The definition of metaphor, which is still widespread today, is based on this concept, which defines it as a “transferred naming on the basis of similarity”.

However, the literary scholar Paul Ricoeur defines his theory of metaphor against Aristotle's notion of metaphor as transferred naming based on similarity. He shows that Aristotle’s understanding fails to account for the phenomenon of a “living metaphor,” wherein a metaphor generates a novel statement that prompts a creative act of interpretation from the recipient. In Ricoeur’s view, a living metaphor is a creative aspect that goes beyond the established framework of the semantic fields of words. Such a metaphor is a process of the birth of a new meaning in the act of predication. The meaning does not appear to be static in a living metaphor. It is an event of the emergence of a new meaning, which Ricoeur calls “semantic innovation”. Ricoeur understands metaphor as a kind of challenge to find a new meaning. A living metaphor challenges us by saying that on a literal level, that is, in the space of established word meanings, it does not make sense. Metaphor thus appears as a “kind of absurdity or inadequacy requiring a solution” (Ricoeur 1993).

It can be said that metaphor is a “calculated mistake,” the result of which is the connection of things that do not belong together in ordinary life, thus introducing a new, previously non-existent, meaningful relationship. This collision of factual

contexts, which otherwise appear unrelated, stimulates the reader's imagination. One should be taken aback by the metaphor; only then can they appreciate how the extraordinary is connected with the mundane through it, offering an atypical, even bizarre interchange. The power of a metaphor lies in its semantic innovation; it creates a new, unexpected view of reality or an original arrangement. The metaphor cannot be interpreted literally because there is a shift in meaning. The meaning deviation that occurs tends to expand the original meaning by means of imagery. This indicates that words with their customary meaning are not enough to portray certain topics, so the author resorts to images (Orságová 2020, 25-26).

Searching for Meaning of Pheasant Metaphor

The objective of our work is to try to apply these theoretical aspects to a specific literary work that was published in recent years and was favourably received by literary critics. It is a collection of short stories called *Freedom for Pheasants* (2015) by Vanda Rozenbergová. However, since the issue of places of indeterminacy is too complex to be applied to the selected book within one article, we will focus only on the category of places of indeterminacy in the layer of meaning units. We will focus on that part of the process of understanding the work, which is represented by the completion of the place of indeterminacy in the title of the work, formed by a metaphor.

The very name of the collection of short stories, *Freedom for Pheasants*, which we want to address in our work, could be described as a living metaphor. Since this is a collection analysing the theme of interpersonal relationships, such a title really seems absurd or inappropriate in this context. Therefore, we decided to explore the pheasant metaphor in the context of this work.

The book is named after a specific short story in which the protagonist frees pheasants from the zoo and returns them to nature. In this way, the reader may not even think of searching for some deeper meaning. Thus, it could be argued that the readers initial prejudice (in the meaning as understood by Gadamer) could be the assumption that the title of the collection was simply derived from the title of the short story. However, when reading short stories from the collection, musical readers should not perceive this prejudice as something immutable. They should expose it to the fact that it can be confirmed or not in the process of communication with the text.

Similarities Between Pheasants and Characters in the Book

Upon closer examination of the protagonists within the collection, we would find out that even though they may seem to be simple characters at first glance, they are always specific in some way; their otherness is also emphasized by the choice of the "exclusive" names (Metod, Jenová, Kiril, Altaluna, Lino). Female characters in the collection often find themselves constrained by societal expectations as mothers or

wives, leading to feelings of unfulfillment and isolation (as depicted in *Explosion as Vigorous Exothermic Reaction*, *Rat*, *Robbers of Worlds*, and *Icelanders*). Meanwhile, male characters behave in a dominant, even despotic manner towards their surroundings (as depicted in *Art Techniques*, *Skin*). Animals play significant roles in the narratives but typically occupy passive positions. The narratives are mainly based on unique characters, and the story is told by various male, female, and kid narrators. The narrative perspectives change (as depicted in *Sauno Paulo*, *Freedom for Pheasants*, and *Altaluna*). Most of the stories take place in the space of the family and mutual family relationships (Sokolová 2016). At this point, we can think about the reason why a collection that analyses such topics is called *Freedom for Pheasants*. Thus, we challenge our initial prejudice regarding the name of the book. At the same time, we admit that it is a place of indeterminacy that we should fill in ourselves.

Given that the essence of metaphors lies in the fact that one conceptual area (target) is understood from the point of view of another conceptual area (source), while certain selected aspects of the entity from the source area are always highlighted and others are relegated to the background or ignored (Vaňková 2013, 27-28), one might assume that the pheasant entity is a metaphor for the protagonists in the collection, in which the very aspect of flightlessness is selected from the source area. This assumption also forms our new prejudice (as defined by Gadamer), which we will further verify in the reading process. Both the protagonists (mostly female protagonists) and these birds are somehow disadvantaged in comparison to others. They are limited in some way, and we can claim that they are on the periphery of the life they would like to live (or that would mean the use of their full potential). Our thoughts are based on the theory of prototypes by Eleanor Rosch as regards this process of filling in the place of indeterminacy and thinking about the meaning of the pheasant metaphor. Rosch introduced the notion of graded semantic categories. According to this theory, a semantic category includes members that form around prototypes (prototypical members that represent the category). Properties, or the attributes of other members, are usually graded, and a property or set of properties may not be shared by all members of a category (Rosch 1978, 2-3).

If we were to look at the pheasant as a potential member of a certain category, we would find out that it belongs to the semantic category of “birds,” the prototype of which might be, for example, the sparrow. The set of properties characteristic for this category would include properties such as “can fly,” “has feathers,” “lays eggs,” “feeds on insects,” and so on. When thinking about the position of the pheasant within this category, we would come to the conclusion that the pheasant – given that it does not have or has only a very weakly developed basic property characteristic of this semantic category – the ability to fly – will be on the periphery of this group. In our process of verification, we encountered a significant quote that ultimately reinforces our interpretation of the pheasant metaphor:

...When a pheasant flies for a long time, which is short compared to other birds anyway, it gets very tired, and if the hunter flushes it out of the bushes or from the hiding place three or four times in a row, it doesn't even take off anymore, it is completely done and it rather gets shot (Rozenbergová 2015, 196).

The characters, whether people or animals, from the short story collection *Freedom for Pheasants* are very similar to pheasants in this respect. There are abused women, animals, and, finally, dozens of hunted pheasants. These characters seem paralysed, as if they have given up trying to free themselves from the oppression of their partners; “it doesn't even take off anymore [...] it rather gets shot” (Rozenbergová 2015, 196). This tragic position of some women is illustrated in the short story *Robbers of Worlds*, for example. Here, the husband creates a kind of imaginary cage around his wife through his pragmatism in this story: “Anna Bergmanová lives on such a street, where everything is within reach. A pharmacy, a confectionery, a flower shop, even a library” (Rozenbergová 2015, 41). The position of this protagonist in relation to men is indicated by the perspective of her view: “...she watches people. She watches men, by the way, she looks at their legs” (Rozenbergová 2015, 41). This view from below intensifies the feeling of male dominance in the marital relationship and places the husband on an imaginary pedestal: “Her husband's shoes must always be clean and shiny. [...] She will stand behind the curtain, and she will look at his feet in clean, freshly washed sneakers” (Rozenbergová 2015, 41-42). The motif of physical and mental abuse can also be found in the short story *Art Techniques*, in which the abuse takes on a more specific form:

He locked my mother in the cellar. Even for the night. She was terribly afraid of the dark. [...] No one noticed her screams because of the cackling of the chickens and the sounds of the pig. [...] The father swore terribly and humiliated us; he shouted and cursed. Everything provoked him, every differently uttered sentence (Rozenbergová 2015, 96-97).

There is only one abused woman in the book who considers the possibility of revolt. However, she is unable to escape, and thus, she remains in the position of a submissive partner like all of the other women:

...it will be easy and quick; a small gap is enough for me because the wind resistance is strong, and I will flip out; I will get off during the ride. I'll get off during the ride. I didn't do it. I'm standing on the balcony again like the swallow; it's morning, half an hour after dawn (Rozenbergová 2015, 82).

The analogy between a swallow and an absurd woman who chooses to remain in a home with a bully may pique the reader's curiosity. After all, the swallow has diametrically different characteristics from the pheasant discussed in this

context (it can fly long distances to exotic countries). One could think about which features the author picked from the source area when constituting this metaphor. Swallows were dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite in ancient Greece, as they symbolized love and fidelity. Known for choosing only one mate for life, these birds are associated with loyalty and devotion. In addition, they appear in several Greek poems in connection with travelling or returning home. Since swallows appeared relatively close to land, their presence meant proximity to home for seafarers (Reese 2023, no p.). These traits of love, fidelity, and devotion to home, embodied in the metaphor of a swallow, seem paradoxical in relation to a frustrated female figure. Thus, even though staying with the family may outwardly appear to be a manifestation of the highest virtues, the metaphor becomes an ironic gesture accentuating the frustration of a woman, who, because of her acquired submissiveness, is condemned to live with a tyrant.

The pheasant’s inability to fly renders it an easy target for hunters, mirroring the vulnerability of the female figures and abused animals in the collection who fall victim to tyrants and predators due to their lack of resistance. After a longer period of being forced into activities that are not natural and beneficial for them (“if the hunter flushes it out of the bushes or from the hiding place three or four times in a row, it doesn't even take off anymore” (Rozenbergová 2015, 196)) they resign, which also means their death in a metaphorical sense.

Conclusion

In our study, we tried to bring a better understanding of the book *Freedom for Pheasants* by identifying and interpreting hidden meanings in the text. Our research was based on hermeneutics, and we focused particularly on how the reader can achieve a better understanding of the book by filling in the places of indeterminacy.

Since we recognized potential effects that filling in the places of indeterminacy in the literary work *Freedom for Pheasants* may have on the reader, we may assert that the function of these places does not have to lie only in the reader’s discovering certain hidden meanings and better understanding a particular literary work in its context by adding them – these places can also offer space to correct the internal attitudes of the reader. The fact that the reader can not only understand what the work of art is trying to convey but also becomes sensitive to it by filling in the places of indeterminacy in the context of the work also indicates the aesthetic quality of the literary work in question.

The significance of our study therefore lies not only in its contribution to interpretation the prose collection *Freedom for Pheasants*, but also in highlighting the particular elements in the book that seem to be aesthetic quality indicators.

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