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# A Semiotic Perspective on Cemeteries: Interpretation, Art, Scenery

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## Introduction

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This paper is oriented to provide discussion on elements of North American cemeteries through a semiotics [[47]] focused lens. Each section, bar the introduction and conclusion, will investigate some aspect of cemeteries according to one or more semiotic concepts.

The second section of this paper titled “A Historical Rest In Peace”, will provide historical context for cemeteries found inside the continental united states. Explanation will be given regarding the various types of burial/ cemetery practices from cultures in many times and places across the modern-day United States. Cemeteries are evidently “marked” places, carrying with them varying degrees of significance for those whose cultures and traditions relate.

The third section of this paper, titled “Perceptions of Cemeteries”, explores the perceptions associated with exploring cemetery spaces. Care will be taken to discuss elements of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]] are illustrated in cemetery spaces; specifically, through a lens of natural beauty and emotion of cemetery space ((7)).

The fourth section of this paper, titled “Symbology in Cemeteries”, explores the connotation [[6]] and denotation [[9]] of etiquette, inscriptions, trinkets, and monuments/ structures commonly practiced and found in cemeteries ((2, 10)).

The fifth section of this paper, titled “Functions of Communication in The Cemetery”, relates the emotive [[13]], connotative [[3]], referential [[43]], poetic [[38]], phatic [[37]], and metalingual [[27]] functions of communication present between cemeteries and the living.

The sixth section of this paper, titled “Grave Traditions in Cemeteries”, delves into the changes in attitude and interpretation of cemeteries regarding the significance of symbolism in cemeteries. Specifically, such symbolism will be analyzed under the lens of postmodernism [[39]], with emphasis on pessimism, abstraction, individualism, and the challenging of social constructs with respect to one’s choice of inscription on their grave.

The seventh section of this paper, titled “Changes in Cemetery Scenery”, analyzes the transition of cemeteries from urban spaces to a more private environment. Special care will be taken to discuss the change in the general public’s paradigmatic [[34]] perception, image schema, [[21]], and proxemics [[42]] of rural cemeteries as they are seen today.

The eighth section of this paper, titled “Last Landscapes” explores the paradigms [[34]] and syntagms [[61]] regarding the signs and physical spaces of cemeteries. Specific exploration will be made regarding what constitutes a category of a cemetery with respect to its signs and landscape ((3)).

The conclusion of this paper summarizes the semiotic concepts which this document applied to cemeteries throughout each section.

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## A Historical Rest In Peace

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**I want to write about** a brief history of cemeteries in the continental United States, ranging from Native American burials to sites used to bury slaves and other such cemeteries that align with conventional tropes. **I plan to focus on** the cultural differences and evolutions between cemeteries, describing their layouts, architecture, and beliefs surrounding the dead. **I would like my reader to** gain a deeper understanding regarding the variation in cemeteries throughout American history.

¶ I will write about the history of cemeteries, with influence from Native Americans, American Colonists, and European entities such as England and Spain,

¶ I will discuss the significance of cemeteries as they relate to Native American culture.

¶ I will discuss the significance of cemeteries as they relate to European colonial culture.

¶ I will discuss the significance of cemeteries as they relate to the enslavement of people.

¶ I will discuss ways in which demand was met for burying the dead on an ever-increasing population, touching briefly on the artistic liberties of graveyard designers.

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## Perceptions of Cemeteries

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**I want to write about** the perceptual change undergone by cemeteries during the rural cemetery movement.

**I plan to focus on** the perception associated with the rural cemetery under a Peircean lens. **would like my reader to** gain a deeper understanding of levels of Peircean perception regarding cemeteries.

¶ I will discuss the relationships between the Saussurean levels of perception as they relate to cemeteries.

¶ I will discuss instances of one’s isolated perception and feelings regarding cemetery spaces.

¶ I will discuss the relative perceptions of space regarding cemeteries.

¶ I will discuss instances of learned/ conventional perception regarding cemetery spaces.

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## Symbology in Cemeteries

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**I want to write about** the importance and background of symbols in cemeteries, and the various forms of cultural etiquette, inscriptions, grave trinkets, monuments/ structures, and symbolic visualization. **I plan to focus on** the denotation and connotations surrounding symbols typically found in cemeteries. **I would like my reader to** gain a deeper understanding of the context regarding symbols in cemeteries.

- ¶ I will discuss the semiotic usefulness of symbolism in cemeteries from denotative and connotative positions.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and connotation of cemetery etiquette.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and connotation of inscriptions found in cemeteries.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and connotation of trinkets commonly offered on or near a grave.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and connotation of monuments/ structures found in cemeteries.
- ¶ I will discuss the denotation and connotation of visual symbolism found in cemeteries.

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## Functions of Communication In The Cemetery

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**I want to write about** the representation of cemeteries in the societal collective consciousness with a transition from places of grief and mourning, such as they are today, to a community-oriented space. **I plan to focus on** the cultural aspects of cemeteries from a community-oriented perspective with emphasis on the functions of communication cemeteries have with western (American) society. **I would like my reader to** gain perspective on the Jakobsonian functions of communications as they relate to the understanding of cemeteries.

- ¶ I will introduce Jakobson's functions of communication, including definitions and examples of each.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the emotive function.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the connotative function.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the referential function.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the poetic function.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the phatic function.
- ¶ I will discuss the communication between cemeteries and humans via the metalingual function.

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## Grave Traditions In Cemeteries

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**I want to write about** trends in cemeteries which incorporate more personal and individual forms of memorial. **I plan to focus on** aspects of postmodernity in cemeteries with respect to changes in cemetery trends. **I would like my reader to** gain a better understanding and appreciation of postmodernity as it appears in cemeteries.

- ¶ I will discuss how pessimism is portrayed in cemeteries.
- ¶ I will discuss how abstraction is portrayed in cemeteries.
- ¶ I will discuss how social constructs are portrayed and challenged in cemeteries.
- ¶ I will discuss the portrayal of individualism in cemeteries.

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## Changes In Cemetery Scenery

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**I want to write about** the change in the public perception of cemeteries experienced during the “Rural” cemetery movement, and explore the locational change made during this time. **I plan to focus on** the image associated with cemeteries in addition to the symbology of the physical space between graves, the living, and the dead. **would like my reader to** understand the shift in cemetery schema and the choice/ use of space in “rural” cemeteries.

¶ I will describe the contexts of the implementation of symbols and space in cemeteries.

¶ I will describe the significance of the change between rural and traditional church/ city-based cemeteries.

¶ I will write about the conceptual imagery typically associated with rural cemeteries.

¶ I will write about the implications of the organization and placing of graves in cemeteries.

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## Last Landscapes

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**I want to write about** the varieties of landscapes present in cemeteries and burial grounds for the dead. **I plan to focus on** the syntagmatic and paradigmatic variations in cemeteries. **Would like my reader to** build a deeper understanding and appreciation of the placement and organization of cemetery signs and spaces.

¶ I will discuss the role paradigm plays in cemetery signs and spaces.

¶ I will discuss the constitution of paradigm regarding cemetery signs and spaces.

¶ I will discuss the role syntax plays in cemetery signs and spaces.

¶ I will discuss the constitution of syntax regarding cemetery signs and spaces.

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## Conclusion

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This paper covers some significant ideas from the perspective of a semiotician and applies them to a relatively focused lot of phenomena associated with cemeteries. The specific semiotic concepts discussed in this paper considering cemeteries under a fresh lens is found in the following list, which summarizes the topics and discussions in each section.

- Cultural background and history regarding cemeteries in the USA, describing how the markedness of cemeteries has evolved, noting specific differences between burial grounds of different societal systems.
- Saussurean elements of firstness, secondness, and thirdness as they can manifest themselves within cemeteries. With a specific example of thirdness being the myth and representation regarding kinesics and gestures seen in cemeteries both in person and through art.
- The connotative and denotative notions with respect to cemeteries were used to distinguish between the “face-value” and subjective meanings regarding symbolism of the dead.
- Roman Jakobson’s six functions of communication, those being the emotive, connotative, referential, poetic, phatic, and metalingual functions, were all defined, and applied to gain a better idea of the relationship(s) between the living and cemeteries.
- Elements of structuralism and poststructuralism were discussed; specifically, regarding notions of pessimism/ optimism respectively, and abstraction/ conventionality with respect to cemeteries. Additionally, elements of structuralism and the overall presentational nature found in rural cemeteries such as the Oswego Rural and Riverside Cemeteries.

- Both the image schema regarding cemeteries and the presence of discursive symbols as they appear in said cemeteries. Examples of cemetery codes being followed were also discussed.
- Paradigm and syntax were described as they relate to cemeteries, with additional commentary being made with respect to codes and how they relate to the layouts and categories of cemeteries.

This document aims to serve as an example of how one might consider aspects of cemeteries from the perspective of a semiotician. Such a task is achieved by applying a semiotic-oriented mindset to the culture, inscriptions, and landscapes typically associated with spaces of the dead. Ideally, this paper may introduce or enhance one's appreciation, knowledge, and understanding of the complexities of cemeteries as they are today.