

# A Semiotic Study of Roland Barthes' Order of Signification in *Gravity Falls Season 1* Animated Series by Alex Hirsch

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## Abstract

This study constitutes a semiotic analysis of the signs used in the first season of Alex Hirsch's *Gravity Falls* animated series. This research aims to uncover the order of signification of the signs in the first season of the *Gravity Falls* animated series. The analysis of the numerous sorts of signs that occur, as well as the discovery of the denotation, connotation, and myth of the various types of signs that have been uncovered, are done using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory approach. The method used in this research is a qualitative method that involves collecting selected data from 6 episodes from a total of 20 episodes in the first season of *Gravity Falls* and an in-depth analysis of how signs are constructed and used in a narrative context. The main findings of this study highlight the diverse use of signs in the first season of *Gravity Falls*, including the use of signs to reflect social values, history, and stereotypes, as well as critical commentary on certain issues.

**Keywords: Semiotic, Order of Signification, Animated Series**

## A. INTRODUCTION

"Animate" and the related words, animation, animated and animator, all derive from the Latin verb *animare*: "to give life to." Animation is a moving image in the form of a set of objects arranged regularly following a predetermined movement at each increment of time. Animation is a form of visual means of communication as well as a means of entertainment. Messages or information conveyed through animation are more interesting and easy to remember with expressive and imaginative stories that we usually won't find in the real world (Wells, 2011:15).

Animation is a medium that displays unique concepts and can convey complex ideas and emotions through lively and imaginative storylines and visuals. In its history, animation has not only developed in terms of visuals but many animations present new stories that have never existed before. Animation seems to have received more attention in recent years,

especially from academics interested in researching semiotic topics in the field of literature, especially in media studies. Cartoons and animated shows have a rich history of using symbolism to convey meaning and messages, making them ideal subjects for semiotic analysis.

One of the animated television series that has caught the attention of researchers is Gravity Falls. In particular, Gravity Falls is an American popular mystery comedy animated television series created by Alex Hirsch. The show was rated consisted of two seasons, the first season was aired on the Disney Channel from June 15, 2012, until August 2, 2013. The second season was aired on Disney XD on August 1, 2014, until February 15, 2016. Gravity Falls has a Y7 rating which means that this animated series can be enjoyed by viewers from the age of 7 and above. The storyline of Gravity Falls is focusing on twin siblings Dipper and Mabel adventure who are dropped off from their home in Piedmont, California, to the mysterious fictitious town of Gravity Falls, Roadkill County, Oregon, to sent to spend the summer with their great-uncle or “Grunkle” Stan who runs a tourist trap called the “Mystery Shack.”

Despite the show’s popularity, there isn’t much academic research on Gravity Falls that examines how signs are used in the narrative. As a result, researchers are interested in using Gravity Falls as an object for semiotics research. The researcher also finds out that signs in the first season of Gravity Falls have interconnected meanings between each other, both in textualization and visualization. The researcher then decided to use the semiotic theory by Roland Barthes (1967,1972,1977) to reveal the meaning of those signs. The researcher takes semiotics as a basis of the idea, which will help the researcher to review the forms or signs of communication and to express the meaning in this animated series.

To facilitate this research, several previous studies have been selected to support and as a comparison of this research, some of the previous reviews and related studies for this article are as follows. The first is an article entitled *Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes Pada Poster Film Parasite Versi Negara Inggris* (2021). Written by A’yun Nikmatus Shalekhah and Martadi from Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The paper analyzes the meaning behind the English version of the Parasite movie poster. The article uses Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory and focuses on finding the denotation, connotation, and myths in analyzing the signs. A qualitative descriptive method was adopted for the research and the study found that the movie has numerous objects that depict two families from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds.

The second study is an article entitled *The Meaning of Denotation, Connotation, and Myth used in Ariana Grande's God is A Woman Song Lyrics* (2021). Written by Jafar, et al. From Universitas Halu Oleo. The research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic theory by analyzing the denotation, connotation and myth from the lyrics of the song. This study used a qualitative descriptive method and the result of the study found that the lyric of the song contains the writer's campaign for gender equality, highlighting women's energy and independence.

The third is an undergraduate thesis entitled *Roland Barthes' Denotation, Connotation And Myth In The Change Of Four Starbucks Logo: A Study Of Semiotics* (2018). Written by Rifa Nadira from Universitas Darma Persada, Jakarta. This study aims to analyze the changes that occur in the Starbucks logo and find the denotative, connotative and myth meanings contained in the Starbucks logo. This research uses qualitative methods and Roland Barthes' semiotic approach which includes denotation, connotation, and myth. The results of this study reveal several findings that Starbucks has made four changes to the logo that have become a characteristic of Starbucks.

Barthes (1972:110) defined semiotics as a "science of forms." In that sentence, Barthes defines semiology as a science that studies the forms or signs themselves, regardless of the content or meaning contained therein. This means that rather than emphasizing the meaning or substance of a sign, semiotics focuses on the forms or messages themselves and how they are employed in communication. In semiotics, experts study how signs are generated, encoded, and interpreted by humans. They analyze the systems of difference and conventions that exist in language, symbols, icons or other representations to understand how meaning is formed and transmitted and it is important to study the forms or signs themselves to understand the meaning contained in them. In this context, the object can be anything from text, images, actions, body language, or even physical objects. Semiotics involves an in-depth analysis of the signs in the object, both verbal and nonverbal, to understand how these signs are generated, exchanged and interpreted in a cultural or social system (Barthes, 1967:9).

Barthes (1967:14) analogised the sign to a "coin" which has a certain value in terms of the number of items that can be purchased with it. However, coins also have a value relative to other coins, either greater or lesser in value. In the same way, like a coin, a sign has a certain value or meaning that can be received or understood by the recipient of the message. For example, text, images, actions, body language, or even physical objects in language are signs that have a certain value and meaning. However, the comparison with coins then illustrates that

the value or meaning of a sign is not absolute, but depends on the context and its relationship with other signs. Depending on how a sign interacts with other signs in the communication system, its value or meaning may vary more or less. This implies that any sign that appears on an object may be related to others, and the combination of these signs may then establish and communicate a concept or message.

Furthermore, Semiotics according to Barthes, consist of three essential levels: denotation, connotation, and myth which Barthes calls the “Order of Signification”. This concept refers to the hierarchy of signs in the formation of meaning which allows us to understand a message or signification in a more comprehensive and sophisticated way. According to Barthes, a sign does not have an inherent or fixed meaning, but its meaning depends on its position in a system or sign structure (Barthes, 1967:94).

The term “denotation” comes from Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory and refers to a sign or symbol’s literal or objective meaning. Denotation is the first-order system which refers to a sign’s most fundamental and universal meaning, which can be specified specifically and is comprehended by speakers of the same language.

Connotation according to Barthes (1967:30) is the second-order system of meaning that refers to the connections, feelings, or additional meanings that a sign can evoke, which may not be obvious in its denotative meaning. Barthes sees connotation as a system consisting of three elements: the signifier, which refers to the physical or linguistic aspect of a word or sign; the referred meaning (signified), which is a connotative meaning or associated with the signifier; and the process of unification of the two (signification). In the context of the connotation system, these elements are closely related to each other and form a connotator, a connotative marker consisting of one or several signs associated with one connotative meaning (Barthes, 1967:91).

“Myth is a type of speech.” Barthes (1972:107) defines Myth as a “system of communication.” Moreover, he explains that myth is a mode or form of meaning (signification), which must be studied and analyzed as a form before being given historical bounds and conditions, and related to the society that created and used the myth. In this case, Barthes describes myth as a symbolic system that involves certain conventions in the use of language, images, and other symbols, which form a form of message or mode of signification that functions in a particular society.

Based on the introduction provided above, this article will concentrate on identifying the denotation, connotation and myth in the Gravity Falls Season 1 animated series by using semiotics theory by Roland Barthes (1967,1972,1977).

## B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the qualitative research method because it can be used to explain and deliver the meaning behind the signs in the show with more detail and in a more subjective and interpretive manner. The data sources then 6 episodes out of a total of 20 episodes in the Gravity Falls Season 1 animated series, with the following description; (1) Episode 1: Tourist Trapped, (2) Episode 4: The Hand That Rocks Mabel, (3) Episode 6: Dipper vs. Manliness, (4) Episode 8: Irrational Treasure, (5) Episode 17: Boyz Crazy, (6) Episode 19: Dreamscaperers.

## C. ANALYSIS



**Figure 1. Question Mark (?)**

(Source: researcher's screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 1: Tourist Trapped*)

**Denotation:** A question mark according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is a punctuation mark used to mark an interrogative sentence or question in a written text.

**Connotation:** The use of a question mark (?) involves the communicative and emotional aspects associated with the question. In this episode, question marks that appear also indicate uncertainty, curiosity and unknown.

**Myth:** Question marks (?) in this series represent the adventures, exploration and revealing of the mysteries hidden in the city of Gravity Falls, which is the main theme of this series.



**Figure 2. Gideon Riding a White Horse to Pick up Mabel**

(Source: researcher's screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 4: The Hand That Rocks Mabel*)

Denotation: A horse, defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a large solid-hoofed herbivorous ungulate mammal, that has been domesticated since prehistoric times and utilized as a working animal, a beast of burden, or for riding.

Connotation: When Gideon rides a white horse, it indicates that he is attempting to conceal his wicked motivations or that he wishes to present himself as pure and good.

Myth: By riding a white horse and being well-dressed, Gideon wants to present an image of himself as a good person and mask his true character as much as possible. This creates a myth about the importance of appearance and image to the character rather than actual behaviour.



**Figure 3. Manotaur**

(Source: researcher's screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 6: Dipper vs. Manliness*)

Denotation: Minotaur according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is a mythical monster in the form of half man and half bull.

Connotation: The word “Man” in Manotaur illustrates a metaphor that refers to a male. The tattoo of the male gender symbol on his right hand also reinforces this and seems to state that a man must have a masculine appearance as shown by the Manotaur.

Myth: The idea that men should have courage, toughness, strength, and masculinity is implied by the Minotaur’s image as a powerful and dangerous character, which represents society’s perception of what men should look like.



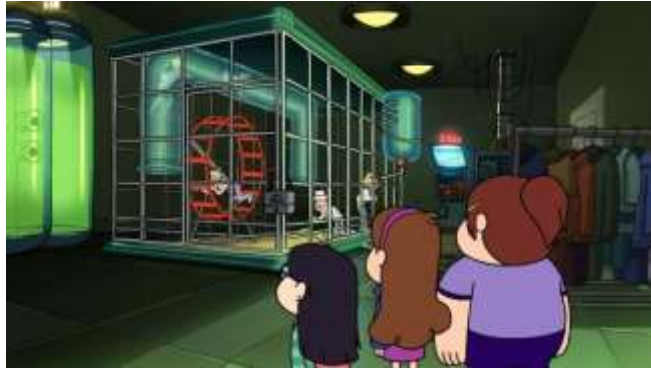
**Figure 4. Stan in Stocks**

(Source: researcher’s screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 8: Irrational Treasure*)

Denotation: Stocks according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary a tool for publicly disciplining criminals that are made of a wooden frame with holes where the feet or feet and hands can be locked.

Connotations: Stocks represent power, justice and societal control, where this punishment is a symbol of authority that imposes physical restrictions on criminals as a form of punishment or control.

Myth: In history, stocks were used as a public display of individuals which served as a means of social control, reinforcing societal norms and deterring others from engaging in criminal behaviour. Offenders sentenced in stocks will usually be placed in public as a form of humiliation for what they have done.



**Figure 5. Sev'ral Timez Locked in a Big Hamster Cage**

(Source: researcher's screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 17: Boys Crazy*)

Denotation: A cage according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is a box or enclosure with some open space used to confine or transport animals.

Connotation: The cage symbolises the limitations, oppression exploitation and extortion of the idol members, where they are utilised by their producer for commercial gain without regard to their welfare or rights as individuals.

Myth: The confinement of space and expression, mirroring the mistreatment of some artists by their agencies and the entertainment industry. This mistreatment and exploitation can lead to mental health issues, drug abuse, and improper behaviour, as exemplified by the group Sev'ral Times' animalistic behaviour due to the stress of such treatment.



**Figure 6. Bill Cipher**

(Source: researcher's screen capture, *Gravity Falls Season 1, Episode 19: Dreamscaperers*)

Denotation: Bill Cipher according to Gravity Falls Wiki is an interdimensional being and the main antagonist character that appears in this animated series. He is depicted as a yellow triangle with one eye, a top hat and a bow tie.



Connotation: Bill Cipher's presence hints at the power and supernatural world in the story. This character brings a mysterious and supernatural feel to the storyline.

Myth: Bill Cipher's unique character design reflects the ambiguity of his character, where he is a mysterious and elusive figure.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

From the analysis that has been done, some of the signs that appear in the analysis have an important role in conveying messages that are interconnected, which ultimately form an in-depth plot framework. Through this analysis, it can be seen that these signs are not just visual or narrative elements, but also strategic tools to build a rich and complex story.

In this series, the signs that appear are carefully used by the creators to create layers of meaning that are multi-dimensional. These signs not only perform a decorative function but also act as a powerful medium of communication. There are strong symbolic and thematic connections between the various signs that appear in the story. The messages conveyed through these signs not only have individual meanings but also connect with other messages to form a well-structured narrative. Overall, Signs in Gravity Falls Season 1 not only serves as a storytelling tool but also as a tool to convey messages associated with culture and society. The signs that appear reflect social values, history, and stereotypes, as well as critical comments on certain issues.

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