

A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE CRANBERRIES “ZOMBIE” LYRICS

Anisyah Putri Febriyani^{1*} & Dewi Sri Kuning²

^{1,2}English Education Department, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi

Corresponding Author: Anisyah Putri Febriyani E-mail: 2288203017@umko.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the semiotic meanings embedded in the song “Zombie” by The Cranberries using the semiotic framework proposed by Roland Barthes. The study employs a qualitative semiotic approach with a descriptive-interpretative design to examine how meaning is constructed through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The data consist of selected lyric units obtained from the official album *No Need to Argue* (1994) and verified lyric sources. Data selection was conducted using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, including lexical repetition, symbolic expressions, references to violence and conflict, and linguistic indicators of agency. The analysis was carried out through a systematic procedure involving segmentation, coding (D–C–M), and multi-level interpretation. At the denotative level, the findings indicate that the lyrics explicitly represent violence, suffering, and the impact of armed conflict. At the connotative level, the song conveys deeper emotional and cultural meanings such as trauma, grief, anger, and the loss of humanity. At the level of myth, the analysis reveals how the lyrics construct and simultaneously challenge ideological narratives that normalize violence as an inevitable condition. The findings also demonstrate that linguistic features such as repetition, pronoun usage, and lexical choices function as key semiotic mechanisms in meaning construction. Methodologically, this study contributes by operationalizing Barthes’ semiotic model through a structured and replicable analytical framework. The study highlights that song lyrics function not only as artistic expressions but also as cultural texts that construct and critique ideological meanings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication media has evolved rapidly, spanning technologies from television, radio, and magazines to the internet. These technological advancements have enabled messages to be conveyed through various forms, including music. In music, messages are delivered through lyrics supported by instrumental arrangements. Furthermore, music serves as a medium for ethnic identity and religious rituals, it is a form of expression for human thoughts, interpreting the heart’s desires and emotions through vocal or melodic compositions (Rustandi et al., 2020). Music is a form of communication through sound that conveys messages in different ways. Therefore, music is a means of expression to convey and express feelings and thoughts that contain the values and norms of a culture, thereby reflecting the culture of the community that supports it (Metamorfosa et al., 2021). A song will not be created if pitch, melody, and harmony do not form a harmonious combination; the fundamental aspect of a song is pitch (Semiotika et al., 2021).



Semiotics, as the study of signs, provides a framework for understanding how meaning is formed and interpreted. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign consists of a signifier and a signified, which together produce meaning within a system of differences. Based on this concept, Roland Barthes expanded the theory of signification into two levels denotation and connotation, which can further develop into myth as a second-order semiological system (Chandler, 2017). Barthes theory is especially relevant for analyzing cultural texts such as song lyrics because it allows researchers to uncover ideological meanings embedded in everyday language.

The song “Zombie” by The Cranberries is an important example of popular music influenced by the experience of political conflict in Northern Ireland. The song was written by Dolores O’Riordan in response to acts of violence, particularly the IRA (Irish Republican Army) bombing in Warrington, England, in March 1993, which killed two children, Jonathan Ball and Tim Parry. The song serves as a protest against the conflict known as “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland, which is considered to reflect recurring themes since the 1916 (Easter Rising). Although the lyrics appear direct and simple, ‘Zombie’ is rich in metaphors and symbolic elements that represent broader social and political realities, such as trauma, ignorance, death, and violence on Jalil, A. 2018, <https://abduljalil03.wordpress.com/2018/01/24/review-lagu-the-cranberries-zombie/>

Previous studies on song lyrics have widely employed semiotic approaches to explore meaning and symbolism, however many of these studies tend to focus on general thematic interpretation or social criticism without systematically applying Roland Barthes three levels of meaning denotation, connotation, and myth. In addition, research on “Zombie” by The Cranberries mostly emphasizes its historical background or political message, while limited attention has been given to how ideological meanings are constructed through linguistic signs at different levels of signification.

Therefore, to address this gap and provide a more systematic semiotic interpretation, this study applies Roland Barthes’s framework to analyze the lyrics of the song “Zombie” by The Cranberries. By examining the layers of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings contained in the lyrics, this study aims to reveal how the song represents violence and constructs an ideological narrative through language. Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the denotative and connotative meanings in the lyrics of “Zombie” by The Cranberries as interpreted based on Roland Barthes’s semiotic theory? and (2) What myths or cultural/ideological meanings are conveyed through the song’s lyrics? This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the fields of semiotics and linguistics, as well as practically to students and researchers seeking a structured model for analyzing song lyrics using Barthes semiotics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Semiotics

According to Alex Sobur, etymologically, semiotics derives from the Greek word “semeion,” which means “sign.” Another name for semiotics is semiology. Furthermore, from a terminological perspective, semiotics can be defined as the science that studies signs. A sign itself is considered the basis of social conventions and possesses a specific meaning. A sign is defined as something that, based on previously established social norms, can be considered to



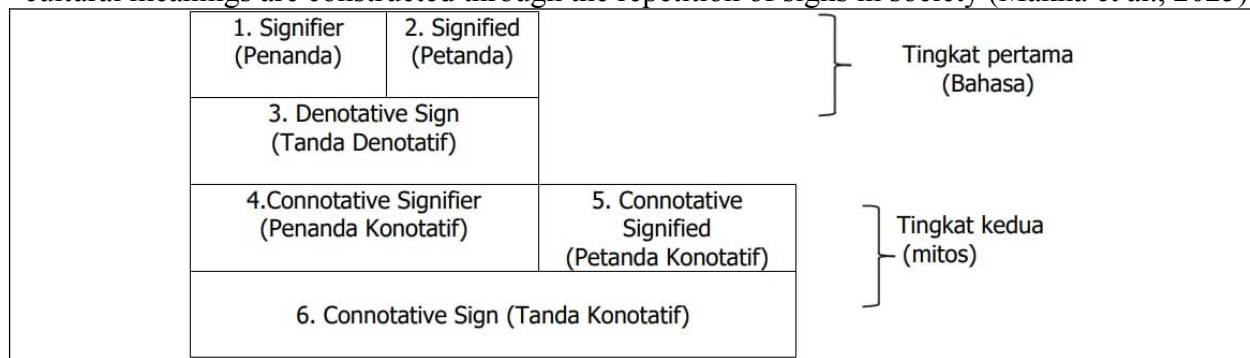
represent something else (Rais et al., 2025). Semiotics is the study of signs, their functions, and the processes by which they generate meaning, including how these signs operate, their relationships with other signs, and the mechanisms through which they are conveyed and received by user (Tinarbuko, n.d.).

According to Saussure, semiotics is the study of signs in social life and the laws that govern them. He strongly emphasized that signs possess specific meanings because they are heavily influenced by the role of language. Barthes is also considered one of the leading figures in the field of semiotics. In his view, semiotics is the science used to interpret signs, where language is also a collection of signs that convey specific messages from society. Signs here can also take the form of songs, dialogue, musical instruments, symbols, conversation visuals, logos, images, facial expressions, and even body movements (Kevinia et al., 2022)

Semiotic analysis is often used to uncover hidden meanings in texts and how those texts represent a society’s ideological values. Barthes’s semiotic theory can be used to analyze texts, images, song lyrics, music videos, and artists’ visual representations within a musical context. Researchers can use the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth to uncover hidden meanings and the ideologies communicated through music(Chandler, 2017).

2.2 Roland Barthes Semiotic

Roland Barthes, a leading figure in modern semiotics, introduced two levels of sign systems: denotative and connotative meanings. In his works *Elements of Semiology* (1967) and *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes explained that a sign is formed by a signifier and a signified, which create denotative meaning (primary meaning). This meaning can then develop into a myth or connotative meaning (secondary meaning), which is often laden with ideological content. Barthes also introduced the concept of myth as a second level semiotic system, in which certain cultural meanings are constructed through the repetition of signs in society (Makna et al., 2025).



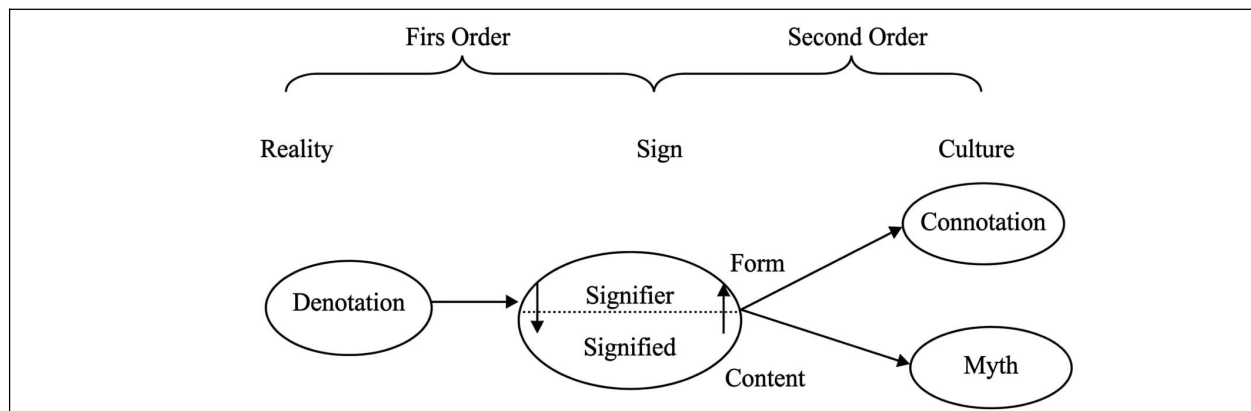
Picture 1. Sign Map of Roland Barthes (Source: Sobur, 2006)

From Picture 1 of Roland Barthes sign map, it is evident that the denotation consists of the signifier and the signified. However, at the same time, the denotative sign is also the signifier of the connotative. In other words, it constitutes the material element. In Roland Barthes’s concept, the connotative sign does not merely possess an additional meaning, but contains both components of the denotative sign that underpin its existence (Sobur, 2006).

In Barthes book *Elements of Semiology* (1967), Roland Barthes distinguished between denotation and connotation by referring to Louis Hjelmslev's opinion using the term orders of



signification. Denotation is the first order of signification (Barus & Siregar, 2025). In other words, denotation can be understood as the literal or primary meaning of a sign, which is direct, objective, and commonly recognized through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. At this level, the meaning produced represents the basic and apparent meaning of the sign. However, at the next level, the denotative sign can function as a new signifier that generates connotative meaning. Connotation refers to secondary, associative meanings influenced by emotions, values, as well as cultural contexts and individual social experiences. Therefore, meaning at the connotative level is no longer neutral but is shaped by more complex interpretations. Furthermore, Roland Barthes explains that myth is a culturally constructed meaning, functioning as a system of belief that naturalizes and reinforces dominant ideologies within society (Sabila, 2024).



Picture 2. Two Orders of Signification Roland Barthes
(Source: Fiske et al., 2004;127)

Picture 2 illustrates that first-order signification refers to the relationship between the signifier and the signified within a sign that represents external reality. The signifier denotes the physical form of the sign, while the signified refers to the concept or meaning it conveys, together they form what is known as a sign. In the second stage of signification, signs no longer produce only literal (denotative) meanings but also develop connotative meanings influenced by emotions, values, and cultural and social contexts (Pawito, 2008). Within the framework of Roland Barthes, these connotative meanings can further develop into myth, which is understood as a culturally constructed system of meaning. Myth functions as a form of communication that extends beyond language, encompassing symbolic and visual representations that often simplify complex realities into more accessible narratives. Moreover, myth is dynamic and subject to change over time; however, it fundamentally serves to naturalize and reinforce dominant ideologies, making certain values appear normal and unquestionable. Therefore, myth should not be seen as an objective truth, but rather as an ideological construct that functions to maintain social structures and power relations within society (Yan & Ming, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY



A qualitative approach is a research method used to study the natural conditions of a subject, in which the researcher serves as the key instrument (Sugiyono, 2018). This study employs a qualitative semiotic approach with a descriptive-interpretative design grounded in the theory of signification proposed by Roland Barthes. A qualitative approach is appropriate because this research focuses on interpreting symbolic meanings, ideological constructions, and linguistic signs embedded in song lyrics rather than measuring numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The descriptive-interpretative design enables a systematic analysis of how meaning is constructed across three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth (Karya et al., 2023).

The primary data of this study consist of the official lyrics of the song “Zombie” by The Cranberries (1994) which is treated as a cultural text containing signs that reflect socio-political realities, particularly the Northern Ireland conflict. To ensure textual accuracy and reliability, the lyrics were obtained from the official album liner notes of *No Need to Argue* (1994) Remastered and cross checked with verified lyric database accessible on the Spotify. <https://open.spotify.com/track/2IZZqH4K02UIYg5EohpNHF?si=KqS2EVgLQ1GXbdNGtHEg>. This specification of sources enhances transparency and reproducibility. In addition to primary data, secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, website, and other scholarly sources related to semiotic theory particularly the works of Barthes as well as literature discussing song lyric analysis and the socio-historical context of the Northern Ireland conflict.

This study applies purposive sampling in selecting the data, therefore not all lyric lines are analyzed (Sanjaya et al., 2025). The selection of data is based on explicit analytical criteria, including: (1) lexical items or lines that exhibit repetition (e.g., “zombie,” “head,” “violence”), (2) lines that refer to violence, victims, trauma, or conflict, (3) linguistic elements indicating agency, blame, or positioning, such as pronouns “you” and “we”, and (4) figurative or symbolic expressions that suggest ideological meaning. These criteria ensure that the analysis focuses on linguistically and semiotically significant units while avoiding arbitrary interpretation.

The unit of analysis consists of words, phrases, and lines of lyrics that function as semiotic signs. Each unit is treated as a sign composed of a signifier (the form of the word or phrase) and a signified (the concept it represents), which are analyzed within Barthes’ two orders of signification. To operationalize the analysis, this study employs a three-level coding system: D (Denotation), C (Connotation), and M (Myth). Each lyric unit is annotated through a structured process that includes identifying the signifier, determining the signified, and mapping the relationship between first-order meaning (denotation) and second-order meaning (myth through connotation). This procedure ensures that interpretation is systematic, transparent, and analytically grounded.

The data analysis process is conducted through several systematic stages. First, the researcher performs repeated close reading of the lyrics to achieve familiarity with the data and identify salient linguistic features. Second, the lyrics are segmented into analyzable units based on the predefined criteria. Third, key signifiers such as lexical choices, repetition, and pronoun usage are identified. Fourth, denotative analysis is conducted to determine the literal meanings of each unit. Fifth, connotative meanings are interpreted by examining emotional, cultural, and symbolic associations. Sixth, myth analysis is carried out to reveal how connotative meanings function as ideological signs that naturalize certain beliefs, particularly those related to violence



and conflict. Finally, the findings are interpreted by relating them to the socio-historical context in a balanced manner.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, this study employs several validation strategies. First, theoretical triangulation is applied by relating the analysis results to relevant semiotic theories. Second, comparisons with previous studies are conducted to ensure consistency of interpretation. Third, an audit trail is implemented by systematically documenting each stage of the research, from data selection to analysis. These strategies aim to enhance the transparency, reliability, and rigor of the study.

The socio-historical context of the Northern Ireland conflict is used as a supporting analytical lens rather than a determinant of meaning. The analysis prioritizes textual evidences such as lexical patterns, repetition, and linguistic structure ensuring that meaning emerges from the data rather than being imposed externally. This approach avoids overdetermination and maintains a balance between textual analysis and contextual interpretation. The results of the analysis are presented in a descriptive-interpretative manner, supported by analytical tables, to address the research questions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the semiotic analysis of the song “Zombie” by The Cranberries using the theoretical framework proposed by Roland Barthes. The analysis follows the procedures described in the methodology, including purposive data selection, segmentation, and coding into three levels of meaning: denotation (D), connotation (C), and myth (M). Within Barthes’ semiotic framework, meaning is not fixed but constructed through layered processes of signification.

4.1 Denotation

First order of signification, the analysis identifies the literal meanings of linguistic signs based on their direct reference. Several lexical items such as “*violence*,” “*bombs*,” “*guns*,” “*dying*,” and “*children*” explicitly refer to acts of physical aggression and their consequences. For instance, the line “*Another head hangs lowly, child is slowly taken*” denotes a situation where a person lowers their head and a child becomes a victim of violence.

Through the coding process (D), these expressions are classified as denotative signs representing observable realities of conflict and human suffering. At this level, meaning appears objective and descriptive, aligning with Roland Barthes concept of first-order signification, where the relationship between signifier and signified produces a direct and commonly accepted meaning (Chandler, 2017).

4.2 Connotation

Second-Order Signification, meaning develops through cultural, emotional, and symbolic associations. Lexical elements in the lyrics function as carriers of meaning that go beyond their literal reference. The phrase “*in your head*” does not merely refer to a physical location but also signifies psychological trauma and the persistence of violence in collective memory. Similarly, the word “*zombie*” is not interpreted literally as an undead figure, but as a symbol of individuals who have lost empathy, moral awareness, and humanity due to prolonged exposure to violence. Based on the coding process (C), repetition plays a crucial role in reinforcing connotative meaning. The repetition of “*zombie, zombie, zombie*” intensifies emotional impact while



emphasizing the normalization of numbness toward violence. In addition, the use of pronouns such as “you” and “we” reflects social positioning, implicit blame, and the distribution of responsibility in conflict, indicating social fragmentation and moral distance within society.

According to Roland Barthes, connotation represents the second level of meaning shaped by cultural and ideological influences (Chandler, 2017). Therefore, the connotative meanings in the song lyrics are not merely linguistic but are formed through cultural associations and emotional responses within a specific social context.

4.3 Myth

At the level of myth, the analysis reveals that connotative meanings function as ideological signs that naturalize particular values within society. Through the coding process (M), the recurring imagery of violence in the song constructs a narrative in which conflict is perceived as continuous and seemingly unavoidable. The symbol of “zombie” represents a society trapped in an endless cycle of violence, where individuals become desensitized, lose critical awareness, and unconsciously perpetuate conflict.

According to Roland Barthes, myth operates by naturalizing ideology so that it appears normal and unquestionable. However, the analysis shows that the song does not merely reproduce this myth but also critiques it. The repetition of traumatic imagery and emotional expressions disrupts the normalization of violence and encourages listeners to question the legitimacy of conflict. Therefore, the song functions as a form of ideological critique, supporting the view that cultural texts can serve as a medium for deconstructing dominant ideologies (Storey, 2009).

The following table presents the results of the coding process (D–C–M), illustrating how each selected lyric unit was analyzed across three levels of signification.

Lyrics	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Another head hangs lowly, child is slowly taken	A person lowers their head	Represents deep grief, anger, and social trauma caused by ongoing violence. The song does not merely narrate a single event but portrays a recurring cycle of suffering.	The lyric shows how violence becomes normalized, so that the deaths of innocent victims are perceived as something ordinary. It highlights the inhuman nature of war and emphasizes that recurring conflict ultimately destroys human values and the future of the next generation.
And the violence caused such silence, who are we mistaken?	Violence causes silence and confusion, who raises questions about who is to blame.	Suggests fear, trauma, and the inability of society to respond or speak against violence.	Criticism of the normalization of violence and the inheritance of hatred in political conflicts that make society accept violence as something normal.
But you see, it's not me, it's not my	Someone states that they and their family are	Implies denial, indifference, and a lack of empathy toward	Individualism and moral detachment are normalized in conflict situations.



family	not involved in an event or conflict.	others' suffering.	
In your head, in your head, they are fighting	Fighting occurs in someone's mind.	Refers to psychological trauma and inner conflict that persist in the collective memory of society. Violence not only occurs physically but also remains in people's minds and emotions.	That prolonged political conflict implants hatred and trauma across generations. Violence becomes internalized and treated as a normal and inherited social condition. And also continues ideologically and psychologically even when physical violence ends.
Another mother's breaking heart is taking over	A mother is heartbroken by loss.	Symbolizes the collective grief of families affected by conflict. The word "another" implies that such tragedies recur rather than occur as isolated incidents.	The suffering of mothers becomes a recurring and normalized consequence of war. It builds the myth that suffering and loss among families become normalized consequences of ongoing conflict.
It's the same old theme since 1916	Violence has existed since 1916 (Easter Rising) in Ireland.	Suggests that violence and conflict continue to repeat from the past to the present. The same pattern of conflict persists across generations.	Deconstructs the myth of heroic struggle often associated with political conflict. Instead, it reveals how violence has been normalized and inherited as a continuous and seemingly inevitable pattern, treated as a natural historical cycle.
With their tanks and their bombs, and their bombs and their guns	Weapons are used in war.	Represents militarism, aggression, and political domination that create destruction and fear within society.	Critiques the ideology of militarism that normalizes armed violence as a solution to conflict. Weapons become symbols of power that are treated as natural or justified within political struggles.
In your head, they are crying	Crying voices inside someone's head.	Represents the emotional trauma and profound sadness that continue to haunt individuals and communities after unspoken acts of violence.	Suggests the myth that the effects of conflict never truly end. The suffering of victims remains alive in collective memory, allowing violence to persist psychologically across generations.
Zombie, zombie,	A fictional undead or	Individuals who have lost empathy, moral	It represents a society trapped in a cycle of hatred, numb to violence,



zombie	lifeless figure.	awareness, humanity due to prolonged exposure to violence.	and	and repeating it without critical reflection. Conflict is seen as something natural and inevitable. However, the lyrics of this song debunk this assumption by showing that violence actually destroys human values and reinforces the cycle of hatred.
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Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Lyrics of “Zombie” by The Cranberries
 (<https://open.spotify.com/track/2IZZqH4K02UIYg5EohpNHF?si=KqS2EVgLQIGXBdNGtHEg>)

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the song “Zombie” by The Cranberries has layered meanings that can be understood through Roland Barthes’s three levels of semiotics: denotation, connotation, and myth. The song’s lyrics not only depict violence literally but also convey deep emotions such as trauma, sadness, anger, and suffering. At the mythical level, the song critiques how violence becomes normalized and perpetuated in society, illustrated through the “zombie” metaphor as a symbol of human insensitivity to conflict.

Importantly, this study demonstrates that the use of a structured analytical framework through purposive sampling, coding (D–C–M), and step-by-step analysis enables a more rigorous and transparent interpretation of song lyrics. This methodological contribution distinguishes the study from previous research that tends to rely on general thematic interpretation.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach is effective in revealing the relationship between language, emotion, and ideology in song lyrics. However, this study focuses on only one song, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, semiotic analysis is interpretive in nature, meaning that the results are heavily influenced by the researcher’s perspective and subjectivity.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anisyah Putri Febriyani is an English Education student in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi. Her research interests include linguistics, semiotics, and song analysis.



Dewi Sri Kuning, S.Pd., M.Pd is a lecturer in English Education at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi.

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