



SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF LONGING SYMBOLISM IN THE SONG “ABBEY” BY MITSKI

Nayla Ilma Fahri¹, Jihan Putri Johan¹

¹English Education, Tarbiyah and Teacher Training Faculty, Universitas Negeri Islam Alauddin Makassar

Email: Nayla.Ilma.Fahri@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the intricate layers of longing symbolism in Mitski's powerful composition "Abbey." Using a semantic analysis, we investigate how Mitski uses lyrical imagery, symbolism, and emotional depth to convey the complex feelings of desire and disconnect. The song is a powerful piece of commentary on the human experience of longing/yearning, encapsulating the anguish at the heart of longing. This paper found through an interpretation of themes and motifs that are inextricably linked to the lyrics themselves, Mitski's "Abbey" uses rich semantic symbolism to convey themes of longing, isolation, and self-discovery. Central metaphors like the abbey, hunger, and light/darkness reveal the narrator's emotional turmoil and existential search for meaning. The study highlights how Mitski's artistic choices serve to heighten the emotional engagement of listeners and thereby create a strong connection between the piece and the audience's personal experiences of longing and disconnect.

Keywords: semantic analysis, song, symbolism, Mitski

INTRODUCTION

Semantic is a branch of linguistic refers to the study of meaning in a language. It is a branch of linguistics that investigates how language conveys meaning and reveal a deeper meaning that are embedded in language. In 1957, Noam Chomsky introduces the concept of deep structure in his Transformational-Generative Grammar, which distinguish between surface level language and the underlying meaning by understanding the relationship between syntactic structure that carries semantic meaning (Jackendoff, 1972). According to Transformational-Generative Grammar, every sentence has a deep structure that represents its basic meaning, and this deep structure is converted into the surface structure of the sentence through a series of transformations. (Sugiharto et al., 2020).

Language is a complex system of communication unique to humans, enabling the sharing of ideas, emotions, and cultural values. According to Roberts & Kreuz (2011), it encompasses spoken, written, and signed forms, and is characterized by its ability to convey a wide range of expressions through productivity, recursivity, and displacement. Language serves as a way for human to express their deepest emotion and thoughts, often through artistic rendition such as music, movies, and books.

A song is a combination of music and language, frequently intended to be sung by the human voice. It is an organized art form that expresses complex thoughts and feelings, ranging from overwhelming happiness to deep sadness and longing that are indescribable using spoken language alone. Songs are considered a powerful tool of communication capable of fostering community, and supporting social movement. Songwriters often

shared their own personal experiences and struggle precisely because of this, hoping to feel understood and help other people in similar situation. To express this their message, songwriters often utilize literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism.

The song “*Bingung*” by Iksan Skuter exemplifies this intricate interplay of meaning. Through the use of language that expresses both personal sentiment and social critique, the artist crafts a lyrical narrative that relies on more than mere literal interpretation. A closer examination of the lyrics reveals how sarcasm functions not merely as a stylistic choice but as a rhetorical tool to challenge social norms and articulate internal conflicts. The relationship between literal (denotative) and implied (connotative) meanings in the lyrics invites listeners to engage in deeper analysis, uncovering the multifaceted messages embedded in the song.

Symbolism is one aspect of semantic refers to the use of symbols, words, phrases, or signs—that represent ideas, concepts, or meanings beyond their literal interpretation. Symbolism depicts concealed realities to communicate a particular messages or emotions. These symbols often require interpretation to be fully understood through a more evocative and suggestive language (Pristianingrum & Damayanti, 2022).

Music often serves as a medium for expressing complex emotions, with longing being a recurring theme in lyrical compositions. Scholars have explored how longing, as an emotional concept, manifests through linguistic and symbolic devices in various art forms, including music. For instance, longing in music is frequently communicated through metaphorical imagery, invoking abstract ideas such as distance, time, and unattainable desires (Sivuoja-Gunaratnam, 2003). These symbols allow artists to create narratives that resonate universally with audience. Furthermore, according to Juslin (2013), the symbolic representation of emotion in music is a complex phenomenon, as it involves the interplay of various modalities, including language, vocal expression, and instrumental accompaniment.

Semantic analysis is a critical tool for understanding the meaning and emotional weight of lyrics. Semantic theory enables the deconstruction of language to discover how words and phrases package meaning (Aisyah, 2021). This approach is especially applicable to song lyrics, where their brevity requires dense and multidimensional language. The study by Liu et al., (2019) epitomizes the application of semantic analysis in unveiling core themes, such as longing, through the examination of lexical choices, metaphorical patterns, and syntactic structures (Liu et al., 2019).

In the critique of longing symbolism, academics often emphasize the power of recurring motifs. For instance, Thomas (2013) indicates the frequent appearance of metaphors of space and isolation in melancholic music and argues that these symbols act as linguistic markers of longing (Thomas, 2013) This argument is akin to the symbolic arrangements found in the works of Mitski, where metaphors of physical and emotional separations are often at the center.

Existing literature such as Zyga, (2020) and Afriasti & Litaay (2022) suggests that the semantic analysis of song lyrics can yield valuable insights into the emotional experiences and conceptual underpinnings communicated through music. This approach allows researchers to delve deeper into the multilayered meanings and symbolic representations embedded within lyrical content. By examining the linguistic choices, metaphorical patterns, and syntactic structures employed by songwriters, scholars can uncover the

complex ways in which emotions, ideas, and cultural references are encoded and expressed through the medium of song. The semantic analysis of lyrics thus provides a powerful tool for understanding the nuanced emotional and cognitive dimensions of musical expression.

Although the existing literature concerning longing in music and semantic analysis offers significant insights, such as there exists a marked deficiency in concentrated investigations pertaining to Mitski's specific songs, especially those featured in her earlier albums. The objective of this study is to fill these voids by utilizing semantic analysis to reveal the symbolic foundations of longing within the song, thereby enhancing the overall comprehension of Mitski's lyrical craftsmanship.

A previous study by Umam et al. (2024) has explored the themes of longing and the use of symbols to express longing using a descriptive qualitative method. In the study, they identified eight emotional motifs and cultural settings within the song. The study provides a systematic structure for analyzing emotional expressions in Arabic music using semiotic analysis. However, the current study employed a descriptive qualitative method to conduct semantic analysis to understand the expression of longing through symbolism within the song. There are also previous studies about deeper meaning in Mitski's songs, such as one by Cash in 2024, but none about symbolism or about this particular song.

a This study is aimed at exploring the symbolism of longing in the song "Abbey" that was released in Mitski's debut studio album "Lush" in 2012. Mitski is an Asian-American singer-songwriter known for her slow, melancholy lyrics and use of vignettes heavy with painterly symbolisms in her songs. By analyzing the symbolism embedded within the song's lyrics, the author is hoping to understand the full scope of the creative expression through the lens of symbolism.

METHOD

Descriptive qualitative method is a method used to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. This method prioritizes understanding context of experiences by engaging directly with the subject through detailed observation and analysis. Descriptive qualitative method is also flexible, allowing researchers to adapt their method based on the data collected along the way (Kim et al., 2017). This method also does not rely on numerical form of information allowing researcher to explore deeper participants' subjective experiences, opinions, and behaviors (Colorafi & Evans, 2016).

According to Parse (2014), the research object refers to the object which is the study or analysis is performed on. The research object can be in form of entities, phenomena, or concepts and is the central focus of investigation. In qualitative research, research objects can be either tangible (physical items, texts, or documents) or intangible, in the form of concepts, experiences, or even social practices (Walker, 1987). In this case the object of the study is the lyrics of the song "Abbey" by Mitski. In this study is, the author will use descriptive qualitative method to conduct semantic analysis of symbolism of longing within the song "Abbey".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Abbey is chamber pop song composed and sung by Asian-American indie pop artist Mitski. The song was from her debut studio album "Lush" released in 2012. The song

explores emotions of longing, melancholy, and disconnection through subtle yet evocative lyrics and a haunting instrumental arrangement. This study focuses on the analysis of the symbolism use to express longing.

The title "Abbey" in itself is a powerful symbolic representation. An abbey as defined by the Cambridge dictionary is a building where monks or nuns live or used to live. By extension, an abbey can represent a sacred but secluded, contemplative space removed from the outside world. Within the context of the song, the abbey serves as a metaphorical space of seclusion, isolating and disconnecting the narrator from everyone else causing the narrator to long for something.

The first line of the verse "I am hungry" uses the word "hungry" which are often associated with physical hunger and need of food. But in this context, the "hunger" represents a metaphorical longing or craving. The second line, "I have been hungry" tells us that this longing has been a constant state for the narrator, and the third line "I was born hungry" suggests that this feeling of incompleteness has been present for a long time.

The next three line, "I am something", "I have been something", and "I was born something", followed a similar pattern, using the word "something" to convey a sense of lacking identity or purpose. The repetitive use of "I am", "I have been", and "I was born" emphasize that the narrator does not understand who they are and long to know their true self. These lines use simple, ambiguous language to evoke a sense of existential longing and search for meaning that goes beyond physical needs.

The first line of the chorus, "There is a light that I can see", use the word "light" to describe a glimpse of what the narrator longs for. But in the second line, "But only, it seems, when there's darkness in me", suggesting there is a powerful melancholy or inner turmoil that blocks this light from being seen. The "dream" mentioned in the third line of the chorus ("There is a dream that I sometimes see") can be understood as how the thing they long for feels unattainable, only exist as a dream.

In the first line of this second chorus ("There is a light, I feel it in me") the word "light" is referenced again. As previously stated, the light represents the glimpse of true self and purpose and that showed during tumultuous times of the narrator's life which is represented by the "dark" surrounding the narrator. The dream is now described as being "asleep" within the narrator ("There is a dream and it sleeps in me"), waiting to awaken. The dream represents out-of-reach true self and how it resides within the narrator all along. The last two line represent the internal longing that the narrator feels to be liberated from their state of disconnect and incompleteness. The repetition of the final line "And I awake every night, crying 'Set me free'" underscores the intensity and constancy of this longing that haunts the narrator, unable to find peace.

The semantic analysis of Mitski's "Abbey" reveals the powerful symbolism used to convey a profound sense of longing, identity crisis, and existential search. The central metaphor of the "abbey" as an isolated, sacred space symbolizes the narrator's detachment from the outside world and their own internal self. The lyrics use simple but evocative language to express a universal human experience of feeling lost, incomplete, and desperately searching for meaning and purpose

This duality illustrates the narrator's desire for connection and significance while simultaneously being confined in a self-imposed state of reflective isolation.

Semantic domains pertain to collections of terms that share a unified theme or concept. In the composition:

1. Hunger as a Metaphor for Yearning

The repeated employment of the term "hungry" in Verse 1 transitions from its literal context of physiological necessity to a metaphorical interpretation, symbolizing an emotional and existential desire. The phrases "I have been hungry" and "I was born hungry" imply a persistent, inherent condition of deficiency throughout life. By broadening the semantic scope of hunger to encompass aspects of identity, Mitski articulates the narrator's profound and enduring quest for fulfillment.

2. The Dichotomy of Light and Darkness as Semantic Constructs

The chorus presents a contrast between the semantic domains of "light" (representing hope and clarity) and "darkness" (indicative of turmoil and despair). The phrase "There is a light that I can see, but only, it seems, when there's darkness in me" semantically positions light as a representation of the narrator's authentic self or purpose. Nevertheless, this light is veiled by the encompassing darkness, which signifies emotional suffering and internal struggle. The interaction among these contrasting semantics shows the intrinsic tension within the narrator's desire, marked by passing instants of clarity that are aligned with turbulence.

3. Dreams as Elusive Aspirations

The "dream" presented in the chorus introduces an additional dimension to the semantic investigation of yearning. From a semantic perspective, dreams inhabit the domains of imagination or the unconscious, underscoring their abstract and elusive characteristics. The narrator's portrayal of the dream as "sometimes seen" and "asleep in me" accentuates its inaccessibility, thereby strengthening the motif of unattainable fulfillment.

At the core of the song structure are latent semantics, or implied meanings, which are woven throughout the lyrics. The song contains:

- The abbey, outwardly representing isolation, contains latently associated meanings of protection, mysticism, and introspection, thus setting up a contrast between security and loneliness.
- Light, while having an affinity with positivity, relies on the existence of darkness to make moments of understanding possible, only through trial.
- The idea of the dream, described as "asleep," suggests that the narrator's desires lie within, waiting for an awakening, which also heightens the inner nature of their longing.

Through the process of semantic analysis, it becomes apparent that Mitski constructs a narrative characterized by longing by infusing commonplace words such as "hungry," "light," and "dream" with nuanced symbolic implications. The interaction

between denotation (the explicit meanings) and connotation (the suggested meanings) enhances the emotional complexity of the song, rendering the narrator’s experiences both intimate and broadly relatable.

This study demonstrates how semantic analysis can uncover the multilayered meanings in contemporary song lyrics, offering insights into how language is used to evoke complex emotions. By exploring the semantic fields of longing and existential reflection, Mitski’s “Abbey” highlights the power of symbolic language in conveying the human condition.

CONCLUSION

The semantic analysis of Mitski's song “Abbey” illustrates how linguistic and symbolic elements intertwine to create a poignant narrative of longing, self-discovery, and existential reflection. By employing the titular “abbey” as a central metaphor, Mitski conveys the narrator’s isolation and yearning for connection, imbuing the lyrics with layers of meaning that transcend their surface simplicity.

The composition uses varied semantic tools: metaphoric representations of hunger, the play of light and shadow, and the concept of dreams as unattainable goals—to investigate themes linked to identity and emotional detachment. In that way, the lyrics repeat some of the phrases and latent meanings to bring about a deep sense of universality, where the challenges of the narrator can really be felt by the audience.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that “Abbey” exemplifies how semantic analysis can reveal the depth of meaning in contemporary music. Mitski’s use of symbolic language underscores the universality of human experiences, portraying the complexities of longing and self-awareness in a way that is both intimate and profoundly relatable. The song stands as a testament to the evocative power of language in capturing the intricacies of the human condition

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