

Solitary Freedom in Bradley Cooper's *A Star is Born* (2018)

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Abstract

This study proposes the revelation of meaning through signification process in a film entitled 'A Star is Born' directed by Bradley Cooper and released in 2018. The research intends to discuss the signification process in creating meaning and representation of freedom and loneliness in two major characters. Signification is a process to find meaning and sign is created by generating the matter from objects, images, or sounds. As a qualitative research, this study is conducted by explaining, deciphering, or making representation in order to gain findings. The findings include major signifiers that signify the signification of freedom such as character's ability to sing and play instruments; and loneliness such as alcohol addiction.

Introduction

Movie is always attractive to see for it can visualize wonderful moments which leave marks on audience. Even after years of transformation, movie still evolves to meet viewers' expectation and it seems that the need is insatiable. Among many themes, 'love' still holds a strong attraction because this is a preferred choice taken most of the time. This triggers moviemakers to create more memorable love-theme movie and so than love story lingers longer.

A Star is Born is one of movies that offers a love story of two persons, Jack and Ally, who support each other to expose their talents as singers. The popularity is gained for they can finally express their talents to the world. Romantic part in a movie can become everyone's favorite, but bitter love one cannot be explained in the same way and this occurs when Jack and Ally eventually meet painful end after a long struggle.

In order to expose the challenges in the characters' life as celebrity, semiotic study is used to decipher meanings through signification process. According to Saussure, "...sign opens a space for deconstruction, which is one

way 'beyond' semiotics...but not a way to get 'outside' it since in fact it comes from within, belonging to semiotics if only as a potential force or direction" (Lucy, 2001:4). Signification and the finding of meaning through this theory can be done through the analysis within the text, not emphasizing the finding of meaning outside of it.

Jack and Ally aim the free and happy life by channeling their talent and becoming popular. Being famous is the decision they make as a way to achieve their freedom. Additionally, how their loneliness foreshadows that freedom is a rising question to be answered through this study.

Literary Review

Ferdinand de Saussure: Semiotics

As one of the prominent linguists, Ferdinand de Saussure had helped diving into the deep search of meaning in language. Known as one of the founders of the science of sign, he also stated that language is part of the system of signs linguistics that should become division of a broader science of sign and a science that can be involved in studying the life of signs within society (Culler, 1981:25). Thus, semiotics helps to form the meaning or to offer representation of matter.

Signs could be found in any places, objects, gestures, images, situations and more. As a study of sign, semiotics helps to reveal the meaning or message every object or circumstance might bring. Saussure classified the sign into two: *signifier* and *signified*. Saussure pointed out, "...the mental nature of the signified by calling it a concept: the signified of the word *ox* is not the animal *ox*, but its mental image..."(Barthes, 1986:43). Signified is what an individual forms in his or her mind after hearing or reading particular word which is called as mental image, it does not refer to the real physical form of it. Therefore, he emphasized further that signified can be explained only through a process of signification which means that it is '*something*' meant by someone who uses the sign.

The signifying process truly needs an involvement of *signifier*. Saussure remarked signifier as a mediator which underlines the argument that "...some matter is necessary to it" and that signifier is "*a mediator*". Furthermore, based on the semiology, signifier can also be related to "words" and it is then used to

differentiate *matter* from *substance*. This help to gain extensive understanding that signifier tends to be always material including sounds, objects, or images (Barthes, 1986:47).

Signifier and signified endure the process together in forming particular meaning which is known as *signification*. Since Saussure claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, the signifier does not have natural connection with signified. Throughout the signification process, the action that binds the signifier and the signified produces a sign.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative research that applies qualitative method in collecting data. Qualitative research is defined differently in each study, therefore Denzin and Lincoln offered definition, “*Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:3). This method expects researcher to study particular objects in their natural settings and try to interpret as well as to deploy an extensive area of interconnected interpretive practices in order to gain a better comprehension of the subject matter under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:4).

The research employs three steps of research process. Initially, proposal design is organized and this stage involves theories and method used. Data collection, data process, and data analysis become parts in the next stage. The data are collected from a movie’s subtitle entitled *A Star is Born* directed by Bradley Cooper and released in 2018. The movie is in the form or original DVD. Furthermore, the collected data are analyzed in the process of data analysis. By applying qualitative method, the data are described in words and interpretation is conducted to provide the result.

Discussion and Findings

Popularity and the challenges for being popular are parts of what *A Star is Born* offers. Two main characters in the movie, Jack and Ally, endure the life in a celebrity world and hold popularity as singers. Jack and Ally are like two sides of a coin, the opposite is viewed in personality and course of career. Jack as an

already-popular singer helps and encourages Ally to bravely show her talent to the world, this brings Ally to her peak of popularity. However, being popular takes them to finally meet unavoidable problem which is loneliness.

The popularity and the loneliness are two factors that lead to the solitary freedom suffered by the characters. Popularity is the result of how Jack and Ally can finally express their freedom through music. On the other hand, their freedom apparently does not reflect the true freedom they think it is because loneliness becomes critical reason that troubles them.

Through semiotic, signification process shows how solitary freedom is revealed in Jack and Ally, as shown through the data below:

Scene 1

Ally : I think the way the guitar just started, and....
Jack : I thought maybe I set it in the wrong key, and then
The tempo was too fast.
Ally : No, it was so beautiful, and....
Jack : I wasn't sure...

Guitar as mentioned in Scene 1 refers to Jack's guitar. As a singer, Jack plays instrument to support his performance. When *guitar* plays role as signifier, it decides particular part in Jack as character to form meaning. First, *guitar* signifies Jack's freedom as individual. Playing guitar by himself while singing allows Jack to control the tone he wants. He escorts himself to the melody that he intends without interference. This freedom is a basic need that he gets as a singer. Moreover, as a lead singer in his band, other band members follow his lead through his guitar playing, therefore his freedom gains approval from the others.

Subsequently, in the similar discussion, Jack's freedom is represented through a decision making as found in data below:

Scene 2

Bobby : Truth is, I didn't deliver.
Jack : Well, it's a good thing I know how to play the guitar.
It's fine, I'll do it.
Bobby : You're gonna do it?
Jack : Sure.

The signifier *guitar* in Scene 2 offers signification on Jack's decision to take a role in certain occasion as an additional player. This is a role which is actually

objected by Bobby, Jack's half brother. Jack's fame becomes the reason of Bobby's disapproval for it would be humiliating to see Jack playing minor role. However, Jack makes the decision for himself, as he knows what he does as he says, "...*I know how to play the guitar.*" The way Jack ignores the possibility that his role may hurt his reputation is his self-determination. It is the struggle to do what he loves, playing his guitar.

Playing music and singing are essential parts in Jack's life. This is his freedom. However, the liberty upon the popularity does not get along with his own feeling.

Scene 3

Jack : This is a bar, right?

Ramon : Yeah, but I don't know if this is your kind of place.

Jack : They got alcohol?

Ramon : Well, yeah, but...

Jack : Alright it's my kind of place.

As found in Scene 3, Jack notices his need of alcohol as he asks Ramon, a bar host, whether alcohol is served. Jack realizes that he is unable to let himself go of the drink. The film shows several scenes where Jack is involved with alcohol and being drunk. Even he has been drinking for ages, as mentioned by Bobby, "*All Dad ever did for you... is make you his... drinking buddy.*" (00:51:45). This quote intensifies the detail about Jack's drinking problem. The line also means that Jack goes the same path with his father and has a drinking habit because he craves for his father's love and attention, and he will do anything to get it.

Alcohol has become a way for Jack to escape his problem and what he believes a miserable life. In Scene 3, *alcohol* signifies Jack's loneliness since even when he is in the most crowded place, he still seeks what makes him happy, alcohol. He even confesses, "*I'm Jack, I'm an alcoholic*" (01:40:48). Hence, it means that he does not deny his choice for being one as he finds peace whenever he is drunk.

Loneliness turns out to be a serious problem for Jack because people surround him notice that. Ally also realizes the situation.

Scene 4

Ally : I don't know, I guess I just thought... You know, it's like...
 There's Jack ...

Jack : Wait, wait, wait. Why would you say that?

Ally : I don't know. I guess.. I wondered without the booze, you know, if you would want to come home. Cause when you met me you were drinking and now you're not.

Jack : I wasn't drunk the whole time we were together.

Ally : I know, but... It got bad when we were together. It's okay, I mean, it's fine. I just was wondering, that's all.
 Whatever you want is okay.

The words *booze*, *drinking*, and *drunk* have similar reference which is to alcohol. Scene 4 provides the same problem faced by Jack which is drinking habit. Ally who then becomes his wife realizes that it seems impossible for Jack to live without alcohol, even when with her around. As she says, "*It got bad when we were together*," it implies that she becomes conscious that even her presence cannot distract Jack from his loneliness since he keeps craving for alcohol. Jack denies what Ally feels but she has her doubt still. Alcohol as signifier has consistently signified Jack's solitary life upon his popularity.

Jack as major character in the movie cannot neglect his true feeling. His biggest problem which is his need for alcohol foreshadows his loneliness. Sadly, the celebration for his fame through his successful songs and expected concerts are unable to cure his heart. Although he tries his best to be happy by marrying Ally, he fails it anyway. Although he gains freedom by becoming what he wants to be, a star and a husband, loneliness is apparently still unavoidable.

In further discussion, Ally is another major character in the film who also finds her freedom through music. Similar to Jack, she sings and plays instrument as well.

Scene 5

Jack : Listen, you know what I think it is – I think it's because you need your piano. I think if you're playing it and singing it... and then with the rhythm...

Ally : I always play it on the piano.

Jack : So I'm just gonna have them fly one in, and we'll try it there... and see where it goes.

Based on Scene 5, Jack understands that Ally can only sing perfectly with her playing a piano, so that he suggests her to play it. In response, Ally agrees that piano makes her perform well. Playing piano helps Ally to find her true self and

confidence. Previously, she does not think that her songs are worth listening and that she is physically attractive. Therefore, *piano* in the quotation above is a signifier that signifies Ally's kind of freedom in expressing herself.

It appears that Jack is not the only one who knows that piano means the world for Ally because so does her father.

Scene 6

Ally : How many times did you carry my piano up the stairs?
How many times did you sit there while I wrote a song?
Lorenzo : Always.

Ally reminds her father, Lorenzo, how many times he has motivated and encouraged Ally to keep playing piano and writing songs. The way Lorenzo never stops the attempt to support Ally means that he learns what she needs in her life. Therefore, the word *piano* above is a signifier towards Ally's freedom. It signifies Ally's freedom in preserving and improving her ability under his father's approval and bless.

Jack is not the only one who suffers from the loneliness although he lives in a great public recognition. Compared to Jack, Ally does not have a convenient childhood. Her father is loving, an opposite to Jack's father. Ally is not an alcoholic either. However, she suffers from the similar problem particularly after being famous like Jack.

Scene 7

Ally : Have you been drinking? Are you fucked up right now?
Jack : I'm out a couple.
Ally : It's the morning.
Jack : Yup

The word *drinking* refers to the detail that Jack returns to his habit and it gets worse because he does it anytime he wants. His drinking habit becomes so uncontrollable. Ally is angry for finding out that Jack chooses his alcohol instead of her, therefore she feels betrayed and abandoned. In this point, the *drinking* or the alcohol becomes signifier, not only towards Jack's loneliness, but also Ally's loneliness for being abandoned.

Ally's career is on top, but Jack falls down from the peak of his popularity for being an alcoholic. Even so, Ally tries to accept him out of his bad habit

although he gets worse from day to day. As the patience takes its toll, Ally sarcastically tells Jack, “*Yeah just keep drinking. That’ll give you the answer*” (01:27:51). Her statement refers to the detail that she is not happy because whenever Jack gets drunk she feels abandoned. In addition, she also shouts to Jack, “*You want me to be your dad. Be your drinking buddy*” (01:28:53). The word *drinking* which is repeatedly uttered by Ally constantly signifies Ally’s loneliness which is caused by Jack’s alcohol addiction. Even in the close end of the film, Jack decides to end his life by previously taking drug rather than attending Ally’s concert and singing with her. Jack’s suicide worsens Ally’s loneliness as he leaves her forever.

Conclusion

Semiotic study helps to elaborate deeply the search of meaning and it is tremendously helpful in exploring the process of signification. *A Star is Born* provides relevant data that can be treated as signifiers to allow the meaning creation make sense. It includes how the two characters, Jack and Ally, meet both freedom and loneliness which then transform into their own personal type of solitary freedom.

Jack clearly shows that his thriving career is haunted by his alcohol addiction and he lives his long life being alcoholic. Escaping his dark childhood, he finds his passion in music that encourages him to embrace the freedom as individual. Becoming a star gives him the best life, which is what most people think, however he is stuck in his own loneliness and finds peace through alcohol. Even though his freedom is there to feel, he keeps feeling lonely after all.

Ally faces her own version of solitary freedom. Initially, she is free to do what she loves as a musician but she cannot avoid herself from the loneliness caused by Jack’s ignorance. At the beginning, Jack opens the opportunity for Ally to chase what she wants which is being a singer. She finally feels free to express her ability and being confidence for her writings and physical appearance. However, apart from the freedom she achieves after being famous, Ally faces her own loneliness because Jack’s alcohol addiction. Jack’s drinking habit causes the feeling of being abandoned and neglected to even worse situation. Ally’s solitary

freedom emerges because of the loneliness caused by Jack's addiction. Thus, Jack's addiction has grown to be a major cause for the loneliness suffered by both of them.

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