

A Semiotic Analysis of Parent–Child Attachment Representation in Disney's Tarzan (1999): A Study of "You'll Be in My Heart"

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Abstract: Music in animated films plays an important role as a narrative tool to convey cultural messages and build emotional connections between characters. The song "You'll Be in My Heart" by Phil Collins in Tarzan (1999) is a clear example of how music can deepen the emotional bond between the main character, Tarzan, and his adoptive mother, Kala. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis-including three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth-combined with John Bowlby's attachment theory to explore psychological aspects related to affection and security. The main data consisted of transcripts of song lyrics and visual scenes from the movie, while supporting data were obtained from recent literature, such as the studies of Tanzil & Andriano (2024) and Cheung, Leung & Huang (2021) that highlighted the representation of parent-child relationships in Disney popular culture. This study focuses on how song lyrics and visual elements shape emotional attachment narratives within a popular culture framework. The findings show that the song functions as an effective cultural text in articulating an inclusive family ideology, while demonstrating how popular media can be a means of learning emotional values that cross generational and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: *semiotics, emotional attachment, Disney, popular culture, song lyrics, Tarzan*

INTRODUCTION

Music plays an important role in animated films because it does more than accompany visual scenes. It helps express emotions, supports storytelling, and strengthens the relationship between characters. Through the combination of lyrics, melody, and visuals, songs communicate cultural values and emotional messages that influence how audiences understand the story. Therefore, music has become an essential narrative element in many animated films, particularly those produced by Disney (Cohen, 2022; Steiner & Marshall, 2023).

Previous studies have explored the representation of family relationships and emotional attachment in Disney animated films. Tanzil and Andriano (2024) examined the mother–daughter relationship in Turning Red using Barthes' semiotic theory and found that emotional meanings were constructed through both verbal and visual signs. Likewise, Cheung et al. (2021)

discussed how Disney films portray parenting through love, care, and emotional support rather than biological relationships alone. Frith (2021) also argues that song lyrics function as cultural texts that communicate values and emotions within popular media. These studies demonstrate that Disney films consistently represent family relationships through symbolic elements.

Although previous studies have discussed family representation in Disney films, most of them focus on recent films such as *Turning Red* and *Encanto* or emphasize character development and visual narratives. Comparatively, *You'll Be in My Heart* from Disney's *Tarzan* (1999) has received limited scholarly attention. In addition, few studies examine how song lyrics and visual scenes work together to represent parent-child attachment by combining Barthes' semiotic theory with Bowlby's attachment theory. This gap highlights the need for further research on the emotional and symbolic meanings conveyed through both verbal and visual signs in *Tarzan*.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to analyze the representation of parent-child attachment in *You'll Be in My Heart* through the song lyrics and selected scenes from Disney's *Tarzan* (1999). Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework and John Bowlby's attachment theory, this study explains how verbal and visual signs represent love, protection, caregiving, and family values in popular culture. The findings are expected to contribute to the discussion of semiotics, attachment theory, and the representation of family relationships in animated films.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Roland Barthes' Semiotics in Song and Film Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs and the ways in which they generate and communicate meaning within specific social and cultural frameworks. While the foundational ideas of sign systems were introduced by early theorists, more recent scholarship has continued to expand and refine semiotic analysis to suit modern media contexts. One widely used approach builds on the classification of meaning into three levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (emotional or cultural meaning), and myth (deep ideological meaning) (Chandler, 2017; Paolucci & Fortunati, 2018). This tripartite model is particularly effective in analyzing complex media such as film and music, where meaning is constructed not only through isolated symbols but also through narrative structures, repetition, and the interplay between audio and visual elements.

Recent studies confirm the continued relevance of this semiotic framework in analyzing emotional and cultural representation in animated media. For example, Tanzil and Andriano (2024) employed this approach in their study of *Turning Red*, interpreting gestures, color palettes, and spoken dialogue as symbolic representations of the mother-daughter bond. In the present research, a similar semiotic model is applied to examine how the lyrics of the song "You'll Be in My Heart" intertwine with the visual elements of Disney's *Tarzan* (1999) to communicate emotional themes of maternal love, protection, and attachment between Kala and Tarzan.

2. John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Emotional Representation

Modern developments in attachment theory emphasize the significance of emotional bonding between a child and their primary caregiver as a foundation for healthy psychological development. Secure attachment is characterized by consistent presence, emotional responsiveness, and the experience of being accepted and loved factors that contribute to a child's sense of confidence and emotional stability (Cassidy & Shaver, 2018). In the context of film, particularly animated narratives, this theory can be applied to examine character dynamics and reveal the emotional depth conveyed through visual and musical storytelling

In the animated film *Tarzan* (1999), the bond between Kala gorilla and Tarzan a human child illustrates a powerful and emotionally resonant example of interspecies attachment. Although they are not biologically related, their relationship exhibits many of the core characteristics found in secure parent-child attachments, such as emotional responsiveness, physical closeness, and protective behavior. Kala adopts Tarzan as her own son, providing him not only with physical safety but also with consistent emotional support, comfort, and affection. This portrayal strongly aligns with psychological models of secure attachment, which emphasize the importance of a caregiver's consistent presence and emotional availability in fostering a child's development and emotional regulation.

The song "You'll Be in My Heart," which plays during a critical bonding scene between Kala and baby Tarzan, serves as a symbolic narrative device that amplifies the emotional depth of their relationship. Lyrics such as "I will protect you from all around you" and "Just look over your shoulder, I'll be there always" communicate themes of unconditional love, emotional security, and enduring presence. These musical elements work in tandem with the film's visual storytelling such as soft lighting, close physical contact, and Kala's soothing gestures to create a layered representation of attachment that transcends species boundaries.

According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), popular media such as film and television can effectively transmit psychological concepts, especially those related to emotional attachment and caregiving. Through characters, plotlines, and symbolic imagery, media narratives can embody and reinforce models of secure attachment, enabling viewers to connect emotionally with representations of care, empathy, and protective love. In this sense, *Tarzan* not only entertains but also functions as a vehicle for communicating attachment-related values to audiences across cultures and generations.

By showcasing the emotional bond between Kala and Tarzan, the film challenges traditional notions of family that rely solely on biological ties. Instead, it promotes a more inclusive and psychologically grounded vision of family based on emotional connection, mutual trust, and consistent care. The integration of music and animation in portraying this relationship further enhances its impact, illustrating how attachment theory can be effectively visualized and emotionally conveyed through popular media.

3. Popular Culture Representation and Disney Narratives

Recent scholarship in media and cultural studies emphasizes that representation in popular culture not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to it. Representation is understood as an active process in the construction of identity, values, and ideology within a given society (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017). In the context of Disney animated films, ideas about family, love, and caregiving are embedded within dominant cultural narratives that influence collective perceptions of social relationships. These representations play a crucial role in reinforcing or

challenging societal norms by framing emotional and familial roles in ways that resonate across generational and cultural boundaries.

Cheung, Leung, and Huang (2021) note that since the early 2000s, Disney films have increasingly emphasized the role of parental figures in supporting children's emotional and moral development. Tarzan serves as an example of a narrative that portrays a non-traditional yet emotionally resilient family structure where the bond is formed through affection and caregiving rather than biological ties. The song "You'll Be in My Heart" plays a crucial role in this portrayal, as it not only reinforces the relationship between characters but also conveys an ideological message about inclusive family values and unconditional love.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the representation of parent-child attachment in You'll Be in My Heart, a song featured in Disney's Tarzan (1999). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on interpreting meanings expressed through song lyrics and visual scenes rather than measuring numerical data. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory served as the primary analytical framework, while John Bowlby's attachment theory was used to interpret the emotional relationship represented in the film.

Data Source

The primary data for this study consisted of the official lyrics of You'll Be in My Heart and selected scenes from Disney's Tarzan (1999). The lyrics were taken from the film's official soundtrack and verified against the movie subtitles to ensure their accuracy. The analysis focused only on scenes featuring the complete performance of the song and direct interactions between Kala and Tarzan, as these scenes clearly portray parental care, protection, affection, and emotional attachment.

The secondary data were gathered from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other academic publications related to semiotics, attachment theory, Disney animation, and popular culture. These sources provided theoretical support and served as references for interpreting the research findings.

Data Collection

The data were collected using document analysis as the primary data collection technique. The researcher began by examining the official lyrics of You'll Be in My Heart and watching the selected scenes from Disney's Tarzan (1999) several times to gain a clear understanding of the narrative context. During this process, relevant verbal and visual signs, such as song lyrics, facial expressions, gestures, body language, and interactions between the characters, were identified and recorded. Afterward, the collected data were systematically organized according to the research objectives to facilitate the analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, verbal and visual signs related to the relationship between Kala and Tarzan were identified from the selected data. Second, each sign was interpreted using Roland Barthes' three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Finally, the findings were interpreted through John Bowlby's attachment theory to explain how the lyrics and visual scenes represent parent–child attachment and communicate family values in popular culture. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the interpretations were supported by relevant scholarly literature and verified through source triangulation by comparing the song lyrics, visual scenes, and previous studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis focuses on the lyrics of *You'll Be in My Heart* and selected scenes from Disney's *Tarzan* (1999). Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the findings are presented through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The interpretation is further supported by John Bowlby's attachment theory to explain how the relationship between Kala and Tarzan represents parent–child attachment through verbal and visual signs.

A. Denotative Level: An Expression of Love and Protection

At the denotative level, the lyrics present a straightforward message of love, care, and protection. Phrases such as "You'll be in my heart" and "I will protect you" literally express a caregiver's promise to remain emotionally present and provide continuous support. In the film, these lyrics accompany the scene in which Kala rescues the infant Tarzan and accepts him as her own child. Her actions, facial expressions, and physical embrace clearly illustrate parental affection and responsibility.

These literal meanings establish the foundation of the relationship between Kala and Tarzan. According to Barthes, denotation refers to the direct and explicit meaning of a sign. In this case, both the lyrics and the visual scenes explicitly portray the role of a mother who offers protection, comfort, and unconditional love regardless of biological differences.

B. Connotative Level: Nurturing Figures and a Sense of Security

At the connotative level, the lyrics convey meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretation. The repeated promise that Tarzan will always remain in Kala's heart symbolizes emotional security, trust, and a lasting attachment rather than simply physical protection. The emotional atmosphere is strengthened through Kala's gentle gestures, eye contact, and nurturing behavior throughout the scene.

From the perspective of Bowlby's attachment theory, these signs represent characteristics of secure attachment. Kala consistently provides emotional warmth, reassurance, and protection, allowing Tarzan to experience safety and acceptance. This finding is consistent with previous studies that describe Disney films as emphasizing emotional caregiving over biological relationships. The combination of lyrics and visuals therefore reinforces the idea that family is formed through affection, commitment, and emotional support.

C. Myth Level: The Idea of Alternative Family and Unconditional Love

At the mythological level, the song communicates a broader cultural message about the meaning of family. Rather than defining family solely through blood relationships, *You'll Be in My Heart* presents the idea that love, care, and commitment are the true foundations of

parenthood. This cultural meaning reflects contemporary values that recognize adoptive families and non-biological caregiving relationships as equally meaningful.

The interaction between Kala and Tarzan challenges traditional assumptions that motherhood depends on biological connection. Instead, the film promotes the belief that parental identity is shaped by emotional responsibility and unconditional love. Through Barthes' concept of myth, these representations become cultural messages that encourage audiences to view family from a broader and more inclusive perspective.

Overall Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the lyrics and visual scenes in *You'll Be in My Heart* work together to construct the representation of parent-child attachment. At the denotative level, the song expresses literal messages of love and protection. At the connotative level, it symbolizes emotional security and secure attachment between Kala and Tarzan. At the mythological level, it communicates the cultural belief that family is defined by love and commitment rather than biological ties. These findings support both Barthes' semiotic theory and Bowlby's attachment theory while extending previous studies on family representation in Disney animated films by specifically examining the interaction between song lyrics and visual storytelling.

Lyric	Denotative Level	Level Konotatif	Connotative Level
"You'll be in my heart, from this day on, now and forever more"	The promise of eternal love from a mother to her child	Emotional closeness, boundless love	True family love is not defined by blood relations, but rather by emotional bonds
"I will protect you from all around you, I will be here, don't you cry"	Protection and attendched statement	A sense of security and comfort from a mother figure	The mother's role as protector and source of comfort is a universal value in culture
"Just look over your shoulder, I'll be there always"	Promise of constant attendance	Invisible but tangible emotional support	Mother's love is eternal and transcends time and space.
Visual of Kala hugging baby Tarzan	Physical gestures of affection	Symbol of attachment and emotional warmth	The ideal mother: empathetic and present, even without biological ties
Visual: Warm lighting soft facial expression	Visual beauty that supports the atmosphere	Shades of warmth, love, and security	Disney aesthetics to communicate inclusive family values

Audio: Phil Collins' soft voice, soft instrumental harmonies	Soft soothing music	A soulful tone, symbolizing intimacy	Music as a tool to convey cross-cultural values of affection and attachment
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CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of parent–child attachment in *You'll Be in My Heart* from Disney's *Tarzan* (1999) by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and John Bowlby's attachment theory. The findings show that the song lyrics and visual scenes work together to communicate meanings of love, protection, care, and emotional security. At the denotative level, the song expresses a mother's promise to protect and support her child. At the connotative level, it reflects a strong emotional bond between Kala and Tarzan despite the absence of biological ties. At the mythological level, the film conveys the idea that family is built through love, commitment, and caregiving rather than blood relationships.

This study contributes to the understanding of how verbal and visual signs in Disney animated films construct representations of parent–child attachment. By combining Barthes' semiotic framework with Bowlby's attachment theory, the study provides a broader perspective on how emotional relationships and family values are represented through music and visual storytelling in popular culture.

Future research could expand this study by comparing the representation of parent–child attachment across Disney films produced in different periods to explore how family values have changed over time. In addition, future studies may examine audience responses to Disney songs and animated films to better understand how viewers from different cultural and social backgrounds interpret emotional narratives and family relationships.

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