Interpreting Cartoon Characters as Signs in the Lyrics of Livingston's *Fairytale*: A Peircean Approach

Attalah Rizky Akbari Sutoyo[1] ✉, Itsna Syahadatud Dinurriyah[2]
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya[1,2]
✉ *attarizky7@gmail.com*

Abstract:

This study examines the representation of cartoon characters in Livingston's song *Fairytale* through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs, highlighting how these characters convey the tension between childhood expectations and the realities of adult life. The analysis focuses on the roles of cartoon characters as representamen, object, and interpretant within Peirce's semiotic theory. The data for this study were obtained from the lyrics of *Fairytale* and analyzed through qualitative descriptive method. The findings reveal that cartoon characters function as metaphoric symbols that express the song's deeper reflection on growth. In conclusion, this study shows that the song effectively conveys the emotional tension between childhood and adulthood, and it is hoped that these findings will inspire further analyses of *Fairytale* from different fields of study.

Keywords: semiotic; cartoon character; metaphor; fairytale

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi tokoh kartun dalam lagu *Fairytale* karya Livingston melalui kerangka Triadik Model Tanda dari Charles Sanders Peirce, dengan menyoroti bagaimana tokoh-tokoh tersebut merepresentasikan ketegangan antara ekspektasi masa kanak-kanak dan realitas kehidupan saat dewasa. Analisis difokuskan pada peran tokoh kartun sebagai representamen, objek, dan interpretan dalam teori semiotika milik Peirce. Data penelitian diperoleh dari lirik lagu *Fairytale* dan dianalisis menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif. Temuan dalam penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa tokoh kartun berfungsi sebagai simbol metaforis yang mengekspresikan refleksi mendalam lagu mengenai proses pendewasaan. Sebagai kesimpulan, penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa lagu tersebut secara efektif menggambarkan ketegangan emosional antara masa kanak-kanak dan kedewasaan, serta diharapkan temuan ini dapat menginspirasi analisis lebih lanjut terhadap lagu *Fairytale* dari berbagai bidang kajian.

Kata kunci: semiotika; karakter kartun, metafora, fairytale

INTRODUCTION

This study examines how cartoon characters as signs convey meaning in Livingston's song, *Fairytale*, through Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs. Through its lyrics, the song highlights the tension between childhood imagination and the reality of growing up. To describe this tension, Livingston uses well-known cartoon characters to

set the settings. In other words, these characters function beyond their literal appearance as cartoons; they also help shape the emotional tone and depth of the song.

Fairytale is a song that was written by 17-year-old Drake Jon Livingston Jr. or better known by his stage name, Livingston. It was released on 19 February 2020 as Livingston's debut single. Livingston was born on the 11th of July 2002 in Dallas, Texas. His career as a singer and songwriter began during the quarantine when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. During this time, he began posting music covers on his social media, particularly on TikTok. His covers went viral and quickly gained public attention. This momentum led Livingston to a bigger stage; Elektra Records, an American music company, take an interest in him and want to sign a contract with him. On 19 February 2020, the same day his debut single was released, they agreed on a contract (Borden, 2023; Gonzalez, 2021).

Since its release, *Fairytale* has been attracting a substantial number of viewers on many streaming platforms. Spotify and YouTube for example, in the fourth quarter of 2025, the song had been played over 50 million times on Spotify and viewed over 3 million times on YouTube. It is followed by a significant number of positive reactions; for instances, on YouTube, @potatolovers5088 commented, "This song can relate to so many people. I love this song," Another listener, @Tornado557-c1h, wrote, "So true. I so wish the stories and childhood fantasies were like life—so happy and joyous," while @TheRealMilkIndeed added, "The references hit in this song." This positive feedback appears because the song is highly relatable to many listeners. Additionally, the use of famous cartoon characters helps the audience engage with and better understand the song's message.

Therefore, this study focuses on how cartoon characters found in the lyrics of Livingston's song *Fairytale* illustrate the conflict between childhood and adulthood through Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs, analyzing each character in terms of representamen, object, and interpretant. This study is limited to the interpretation of cartoon characters as signs found in the song's lyrics and does not extend its scope to the musical elements of the song, such as the melody, tone, rhythm, nor to the visual aspect of its music video. This analysis is important because it provides a wider view on how cartoon characters are able to convey human emotions when they are brought into a song.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher has not yet found any academic study examining Livingston's song *Fairytale*. However, several previous studies have successfully applied Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs in the analysis of song lyrics. For example, *Semiotic Analysis of Taylor Swift's 'Midnight Rain' Using Peirce's Triadic Model Signs* by Yusuf & Afifuddin (2023) explores symbolic meanings within the lyrics of Taylor Swift's *Midnight Rain*, identifying key symbols that convey themes of regret and transformation through Peirce's semiotic framework.

Similarly, *Implicit Meanings of Jentaka Lyrics Song and Video Clip: A Semiotic Analysis* by Nurchaerani et al. (2024). examines the song *Jentaka* by For Revenge along with its lyric video, revealing layered meanings of the song's themes by applying the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure.

Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs

Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is produced through any form of representation, such as symbols, images, and words. Within the field of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs is one of the most influential frameworks. In Peirce's view, the creation of meaning involves three essential elements. The first element is the representamen; the representamen refers to the form in which a sign appears. It may take the shape of a word, an image, or a sound. It is the element that catches the audience's attention and encourages them to think of something beyond its actual appearance. The second element is the object; the object is the referent of the sign. It is the actual idea, thing, or concept that the sign stands for. The third element is the interpretant; the interpretant refers to the understanding or meaning that arises in the audience's mind when they encounter a sign. In this process, the audience functions as the interpreter. The meaning that emerges may vary, depending on each interpreter's experiences, knowledge, and background (Atkin, 2006; *Charles Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs*, n.d.).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method. This method was specifically chosen for its suitability to the research focus, as it allows for a detailed examination of signs and meanings within song lyrics. A qualitative descriptive method focuses on providing clear, straightforward explanations of a phenomenon without relying on

numerical data or complex theorization (Kim et al., 2017). The primary data source of this research is the lyrics of Livingston's *Fairytale*. Supporting references include related cartoon movies, scholarly works on semiotics, and previous studies that have applied Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs to song lyrics.

Data collection involved close reading of the lyrics to identify potential signs, in this case references to cartoon characters, followed by categorization into representamen, object, and interpretant according to Peirce's framework. In addition, the researcher watched the related cartoon movies to understand the broader context of the characters and to interpret how their presence in the lyrics contributes to conveying the theme of the song.

The data analysis process consisted of three stages. First, key symbolic elements were identified, specifically the cartoon characters that appear within the lyrics of Livingston's *Fairytale*. Second, these elements were classified into Peirce's triadic components of representamen [R], object [O], and interpretant [I]. Third, the relationships among representamen, object, and interpretant were interpreted to uncover the deeper meanings of the song. This stage also involved comparing the symbolic roles of the characters in the lyrics with their situations in the original movies, as well as relating these interpretations to the broader condition of adult life.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The lyrics of Livingston's *Fairytale* follow a structural pattern consisting of [Verse 1], [Pre-chorus], and [Chorus]. This sequence is repeated with [Verse 2], [Pre-chorus], and [Chorus], before concluding with an [Outro]. For ease of reference, the lyrics are presented below:

[Verse 1]
At age of nine I lived through Pixar on a screen
And every single problem seemed so little then to me
'Cause Flik still saved the anthill even though I couldn't see beyond
The kids at school that hated me and my insecurity

[Pre-chorus]
Oh, I thought I was invincible
But Mr. Incredible could only take so much and
I made my heart invisible
'Cause I thought that WALL-E could still find love with an empty soul

[Chorus]
So keep me awake Just look in my eyes I'm trying to let go

I try to forget
The fairytale lies
But it's all that I've known

[Verse 2]
I was so scared to open up that door
Worried that the world outside wasn't my home anymore
This isn't Andy's room, these aren't the toys I used to know
What happened to the stories I was told? Then my mother asked me
Could you find confidence
Beyond Lightning McQueen?
'Cause stories won't last once you wake from your dreams
I looked her in the eyes and asked her what it all means
If my heroes only go so far

[Pre-chorus]
Oh, I thought I was invincible
But Mr. Incredible could only take so much and
I made my heart invisible
'Cause I thought that WALL-E could still find love with an empty soul

[Chorus]
So keep me awake Just look in my eyes I'm trying to let go
I try to forget
The fairytale lies
But it's all that I've known

[Outro]
Then my mother asked me Could you find confidence Beyond Lightning McQueen?
'Cause stories won't last once you wake from your dreams
I looked her in the eyes and asked her what it all means
If my heroes only go so far

From the lyrics presented above, several cartoon characters can be identified as symbolic elements. Each character is analyzed through Peirce's triadic model, focusing on its representamen, object, and interpretant. The discussion follows the lyrical sequence and analyzes the characters in the order of their appearance.

Verse 1: Flik

In the opening verse, the lyric *"'Cause Flik still saved the anthill even though I couldn't see beyond"* introduces Flik as the first cartoon character referenced in the song. Following Peirce's triadic model, the representamen [R] is "Flik." The object [O] is Flik himself. Flik is the protagonist of Pixar Animated Studios' film *A Bug's Life* (1998). In the film, Flik is portrayed as both a troublemaker and a problem solver. At the beginning of the story, he accidentally creates problem for his colony by destroying the food offering that the ants have collected for the grasshoppers. However, by the end of the film, Flik succeeds in

saving his colony from the grasshoppers with the help of a group of circus bugs whom he initially mistakes for warrior heroes.

From this reference, as the interpretant [I], Flik's narrative conveys the concept of responsibility. Examining this concept through the contrast between childhood and adulthood reveals that, in childhood, responsibility is often taught through simple situations, such as cleaning up a spilled cup of water. In adulthood, however, responsibility becomes far more complex. With heavier tasks to manage, the level of responsibility increases, and it is no longer as simple as it appeared in childhood.

Pre-chorus: Mr. Incredible

In the pre-chorus, the lyric *"But Mr. Incredible could only take so much and–"* introduces Mr. Incredible as the next cartoon figure referenced in the song. Following Peirce's triadic model, the representamen [R] is "Mr. Incredible." The object [O] is Mr. Incredible himself. Mr. Incredible is the protagonist of Pixar Animated Studios' film *Mr. Incredible (*2004). In the film, Mr. Incredible is portrayed as a hero known for his superhuman physical abilities. However, later in the film, after the government bans all superhero activities and forces them into hiding, Mr. Incredible, or Bob Parr, is shown working as a claims adjuster at an insurance company and struggling to adjust to ordinary life.

From this reference, as the interpretant [I], Mr. Incredible's narrative conveys the concepts of strength and vulnerability. Examining these concepts through the contrast between childhood and adulthood reveals that, in childhood, individuals often feel protected and supported by others, such as parents, and do not face the problem directly. However, as they grow older, they begin to face their own problems independently. These challenges are often far from simple and can become so overwhelming that they may even break those who appear strong.

Pre-chorus: WALL-E

Another cartoon character that appears in the pre-chorus is WALL-E, introduced through the lyric "'Cause I thought that WALL-E could still find love with an empty soul." Following Peirce's triadic model, the representamen [R] is "WALL-E." The object [O] is WALL-E himself, the protagonist of Pixar Animated Studios' film *WALL-E* (2008). In the film, WALL-E is portrayed as a robot assigned to collect trash on Earth. During his routine tasks, he encounters EVE, a robot sent to Earth on a different mission. Through this encounter, despite being a robot, WALL-E develops a special affection for EVE, and later in the film, he eventually wins her heart.

From this reference, as the interpretant [I], WALL-E's narrative conveys the concept of love. Examining this concept through the contrast between childhood and adulthood reveals that, in childhood, individuals are surrounded by love, particularly from their parents and family. As they grow older, however, they are expected to find their own partner, someone with whom they can build a family and share their life. Yet, oftentimes, in the process of finding a loved one, individuals encounter challenges, such as rejection or even heartbreak.

Chorus: -

In the chorus, no cartoon characters can be found; therefore, this section does not apply to Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs and will not be analyzed.

Verse 2: Andy/Andy's room

In the second verse, the lyric "This isn't Andy's room, these aren't the toys I used to know" introduces Andy's room as the referenced focus. Following Peirce's triadic model, the representamen [R] is "Andy's room." The object [O] is the room itself. Andy is one of the human characters in Pixar Animation Studios' *Toy Story* (1995). In the film, he is portrayed as a child who loves his toys and spends most of his time after school playing with them in his room, creating imaginative stories that bring the toys to life. His room becomes the central point where all these precious memories with his toys exist.

From this reference, as the interpretant [I], Andy's room conveys the concept of nostalgia. Examining this concept through the contrast between childhood and adulthood reveals that, in childhood, individuals assume that nothing will ever change and go according to their wishes. In reality, however, everything is constantly changing; nothing stays the same, and things do not always happen as expected.

Verse 2: Lightning McQueen

Another cartoon character that appears in the second verse is Lightning McQueen, introduced through the lyric *"Could you find confidence and "Beyond Lightning McQueen?"*. Following Peirce's triadic model, the representamen [R] is "Lightning McQueen." The object [O] is Lightning McQueen himself. Lightning McQueen is the protagonist of Pixar Animated Studios' film *Cars* (2006). In the film, Lightning McQueen is portrayed as a race car competing in the Piston Cup Racing series. In every race, he shows no fear of losing and consistently believes in his ability to win, even against more experienced competitors. When he accidentally gets lost in the forgotten town of Radiator Springs on his way to the next race, he must spend several days repairing the damage he caused. Despite this setback,

he maintains his confidence in winning the Piston Cup and achieving his dream of signing a contract with Dinoco, the top racing team in the *Cars* universe.

From this reference, as the interpretant [I], Lightning McQueen's narrative conveys the concept of confidence. Examining this concept through the contrast between childhood and adulthood reveals that, in childhood, individuals have strong confidence, trusting in their abilities and believing they can accomplish anything. As they grow older, however, this confidence can gradually fade due to various internal and external factors, such as self-doubt, societal pressures, or past failures.

CONCLUSION(S)

In conclusion, each cartoon character in the song lyrics of Livingston's *Fairytale* serves not only a lyrical purpose but also functions as a sign that captures the contrast between childhood expectations and the difficult realities of adulthood. These characters operate beyond their surface appearance as simple cartoons; through Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs, they represent idealized childhood ideas such as responsibility, strength, love, and confidence. Through this semiotic process, the song illustrates how these once-comforting symbols of childhood take on deeper, more complex meanings when viewed from an adult perspective.

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