

THE SYMBOLISM OF SILENCE AND DEVOTION IN “BLINDING LIGHTS”: A SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study presents a semiotic interpretation of Blinding Lights by The Weeknd, focusing on how the song constructs symbolic representations of emotional states such as loss, loneliness, devotion, and hope. Using the theoretical frameworks of Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, and Yuwana, the analysis reveals the way linguistic and symbolic signs, such as light, darkness, silence, and urban imagery, encode emotional depth within the narrative of romantic longing. The study identifies how these signs interact to form a coherent structure of meaning that resonates with the universal experience of separation and devotion. The findings show that popular music, far beyond entertainment, serves as a space of cultural signification, conveying complex affective messages through semiotic constructs. This research contributes to the growing field of music semiotics and affirms the relevance of contemporary song lyrics as legitimate texts for scholarly analysis.

Keywords: *semiotics, popular music, symbolism, emotional devotion, blinding lights*

Introduction

Popular music serves not only as entertainment but also as a contemporary form of literary expression, encapsulating complex human emotions, cultural values, and symbolic meanings within its lyrical and musical structures. As a modern poetic text, it operates similarly to traditional literary works, offering nuanced insights into the human condition. One such exemplar is Blinding Lights (2019) by The Weeknd, a global hit that merges retro synth-pop rhythms with lyrical expressions of emotional vulnerability, longing, and personal devotion. The song tells the story of a man overwhelmed by solitude and regret after losing his beloved, who metaphorically navigates through literal and emotional darkness while yearning for reconnection.

What sets Blinding Lights apart is its use of symbolic language, particularly the recurring motifs of silence and devotion, which subtly construct a narrative of emotional turmoil and existential hope. The symbol of silence functions as a metaphor for emotional void, isolation, and communicative breakdown, while devotion symbolizes loyalty, memory, and spiritual endurance amidst loss. These symbols are crucial to analyze because they reveal how abstract emotions are made tangible through lyrical signifiers, shaping the listener's interpretation through cultural and personal lenses.

This study explicitly addresses the following research questions: (1) How are the symbols of silence and devotion constructed and represented in the lyrics of *Blinding Lights*? (2) What deeper meanings emerge from these symbols through semiotic interpretation? The primary objective of this research is to uncover how these symbols contribute to the song's overarching themes of emotional longing and human resilience. By doing so, this paper seeks to expand scholarly discussions on the emotional and cultural significance of popular music as a form of literary and symbolic discourse.

This research is distinctive in its combined use of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics to analyze lyrical texts, an approach that allows for a dual perspective: the structural relationship between signifier and signified, and the dynamic interplay among representamen, object, and interpretant. While previous studies (e.g., Ramdani & Sakinah, 2023; Pascua Jr., 2024; Mukminin, 2024) have applied these models to various musical texts, this study introduces a focused symbolic reading of *Blinding Lights*, emphasizing how specific motifs operate within broader cultural narratives of emotional struggle. Moreover, this paper foregrounds the interpretive agency of the listener, acknowledging how meaning is co-produced through both textual cues and socio-cultural context—a perspective supported by Yuwana & Pertiwi (2022) and 'Ashr & Yuwana (2023). By applying a layered semiotic framework to a globally recognized pop song, this study offers a fresh contribution to the interdisciplinary analysis of music, literature, and cultural semiotics.

Literature Review

A growing body of research has demonstrated how semiotic theories can effectively be applied to the analysis of popular song lyrics, treating them as cultural texts rich in symbolic meaning. Ramdani and Sakinah (2023) applied Saussurean semiotics to Taylor Swift's lyrics, focusing on the relationship between signifier and signified to uncover recurring themes of love, heartbreak, and emotional transformation. Their study emphasized how linguistic choices in lyrics construct affective narratives that resonate with listeners' lived experiences.

In a complementary approach, Pascua Jr. (2024) employed Peirce's triadic model to examine how symbolic language in popular love songs conveys deep emotional and relational meanings. For instance, phrases such as "fall into your arms" were interpreted not merely as poetic expressions, but as culturally coded signs that evoke safety, intimacy, and surrender. The study demonstrated how Peircean semiotics allows for a more dynamic and contextual interpretation of musical texts by considering the listener's interpretive role.

Meanwhile, Mukminin (2024) utilized Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze the Arabic love song *Kalam Eineh* by Sherine Abdel Wahab. By examining the denotative, connotative, and mythological layers of meaning, the research revealed how the lyrics function as a site of negotiation between individual emotion and cultural values—particularly in the Middle Eastern context where expressions of romantic love are often interwoven with societal expectations.

Despite the valuable insights these studies offer, none of them explicitly isolate and analyze recurring symbolic motifs such as silence and devotion in a single song, nor do they combine both Saussurean and Peircean models in one integrated framework. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on two specific symbols within a globally acclaimed

pop song, Blinding Lights, and demonstrating how these symbols function within and beyond the lyrical structure to convey universal emotional experiences.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies in; 1) Its focus on symbolic motifs ("silence" and "devotion") as central to meaning-making, 2) The integrated use of both Saussurean and Peircean semiotics, and 3) Its emphasis on the listener's role in interpreting symbolic meaning based on cultural and emotional context. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives and applying them to a specific lyrical analysis, the study contributes to a richer understanding of how popular music operates as both a literary and cultural artifact.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a semiotic analysis as its primary analytical framework. The objective is to interpret how Blinding Lights by The Weeknd communicates emotional states, particularly silence, loss, and devotion, through symbolic language. The method integrates both textual and contextual analysis of the song's lyrics, drawing upon the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this research is the official lyrics of Blinding Lights, obtained from verified online music databases (e.g., Genius.com). Supplementary materials include public interpretations, artist interviews, and relevant background on the song's cultural context.

Analytical Framework

This study applies a multi-theoretical semiotic approach:

Saussurean Semiotics: According to Saussure (1916/1983), the sign is composed of a signifier (the sound-image or word) and the signified (the mental concept). The study identifies key signifiers in the lyrics (e.g., "dark," "empty," "blinding lights") and interprets their corresponding signifieds in relation to emotional states and narrative trajectory.

Peircean Semiotics: Peirce (1931–1958) expands the concept of the sign into three components: representamen, object, and interpretant. This model allows for a layered analysis of symbols in the song. For example, "lights" may function as both indexical signs (pointing to the city/nightlife) and symbolic signs (hope or memory of a lost love), depending on interpretation.

Barthesian Semiotics: Roland Barthes (1977) introduces the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, which are used to uncover socio-cultural meanings in media texts. In this study, connotative meanings of keywords like "The lights blind me" are explored in terms of personal disorientation, emotional numbness, and modern urban alienation.

Procedure of Analysis

The data analysis follows these steps:

Identification of Key Signs, all emotionally loaded words and phrases in the lyrics are highlighted and categorized (Yuwana, 2023). **Classification by Type of Sign,** using Peirce's and Saussure's models, the signs are classified as iconic, indexical, or symbolic, or by

their signifier/signified relationships. Contextual Interpretation, signs are interpreted within the narrative of the song and the broader cultural context, considering genre conventions, artist identity, and audience reception. The findings are synthesized to articulate how the song symbolically represents silence, devotion, and longing as universal emotional experiences.

Validity and Reliability

Although qualitative studies do not rely on statistical reliability, triangulation is applied by consulting scholarly literature on semiotic theory and existing analyses of The Weeknd's work. Intertextual comparisons and scholarly validation support the interpretive approach through existing literature.

Result and Discussion

The semiotic analysis of Blinding Lights reveals a rich tapestry of symbolic expressions that articulate themes of silence, emotional disorientation, and enduring devotion. The results are discussed by identifying and interpreting the dominant signs in the lyrics, their structural roles, and their connotative meanings within the emotional narrative of the song.

1. Symbols of Emptiness and Disorientation

The opening lines of the song—"I've been tryna call / I've been on my own for long enough"—immediately establish the theme of emotional isolation. The repeated references to being "alone" and "on my own" function as indexical signs of abandonment, signaling the absence of the loved one as a catalyst for psychological unrest.

In Saussurean terms, the signifiers "dark," "empty streets," and "city cold and empty" point to signifieds of inner void and loneliness. These images work beyond the literal to evoke the metaphorical sense of being emotionally lost. According to Barthes (1977), such expressions create connotative meaning, where urban emptiness is a mythologized representation of existential solitude—a modern, metropolitan melancholy.

2. Devotion Through Light Symbolism

One of the most repeated motifs in the song is "lights," especially in the chorus: "I'm blinded by the lights / No, I can't sleep until I feel your touch." On a Peircean level, the word "light" functions both as an index (connected to city lights) and a symbol (representing the emotional presence of the beloved). The blinding nature of the lights symbolizes the overwhelming memory or emotional hold of the absent lover.

The paradox of being "blinded by the lights" yet still moving toward them suggests a tension between clarity and confusion, hope and helplessness. Barthes would interpret this as a myth of romantic suffering in modern society—where devotion manifests through self-sacrifice and psychological turmoil, encoded in aesthetic metaphors.

3. The Semiotics of Waiting and Redemption

Phrases like "I said, ooh, I'm drowning in the night" and "I'm running out of time" indicate a profound sense of urgency and despair. The persona is caught in temporal suspension—a hallmark of longing. From a semiotic standpoint, "drowning" is not just a physical act but a symbolic sign of emotional suffocation. The recurring theme of waiting,

particularly in “I’ll never let you go this time,” reinforces a commitment to redemptive love.

In semiotic theory, these phrases exemplify what Peirce refers to as interpretants—the meanings drawn by the audience, shaped by shared emotional and cultural understanding. The act of waiting becomes a symbol of devotion, echoing mythic narratives of tragic but noble love.

4. Silence as Emotional Narrative

Despite being a musical work, *Blinking Lights* conveys silence as a thematic presence. The absence of dialogue with the beloved, the failure of communication (“I’ve been tryna call”), and the sleepless nights without her represent semiotic silence—what is not said, but deeply felt. As theorized by Tagg (1987), musical and lyrical silence often operate as cultural codes for emotional depth, especially in love songs. The lyrical “noise” of synth and beats is juxtaposed with the thematic “silence” of abandonment, enhancing the emotional duality.

Table 1. Summary of Key Signs and Their Interpretations

Signifier	Type (Saussure/Peirce)	Signified/Interpretant
Dark, Empty	Symbol / Index	Loneliness, absence
Blinking Lights	Symbol / Icon	Memory, emotional overwhelm, hope
Drowning, Night	Symbol	Despair, helplessness
No sleep, Call ignored	Index	Separation, longing
Running out of time	Symbol	Fear of permanent loss, urgency

5. Interpretive Synthesis

Through semiotic decoding, *Blinking Lights* emerges not merely as a nostalgic pop song but as a sophisticated narrative of loss and hope. The song utilizes symbolic oppositions—light/darkness, presence/absence, sound/silence—to convey the internal conflict of a man emotionally suspended between regret and longing. These signs are not accidental; they are structured to evoke universal affective responses, rooted in shared cultural codes about love and devotion.

The semiotic richness of the song shows how modern music can carry myth-like narratives (Barthes, 1977) and construct meaningful emotional worlds that resonate across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

This study employed semiotic analysis to interpret the emotional depth embedded in *Blinking Lights* by The Weeknd, revealing how the song uses symbolic signs to represent themes of loneliness, emotional devotion, and the hope for redemption. The analysis demonstrated how the song communicates these emotional states through both linguistic and musical signs, including the recurring motifs of light, darkness, and silence.

By applying Saussurean, Peircean, and Barthesian frameworks, this research has shown that the song’s lyrics are rich with semiotic meanings that go beyond surface-level interpretation. The repeated references to “blinking lights,” “drowning,” and “empty streets” convey a sense of emotional disorientation and longing, while the contrast

between light and darkness symbolizes the tension between despair and hope. Furthermore, the concept of silence in the song operates not as an absence of sound but as a powerful symbol of emotional distance, conveying the protagonist's internal struggle.

Through this analysis, it is evident that Blinding Lights functions not just as a catchy pop song but as a complex narrative of love and loss, resonating with universal human experiences. The song's use of semiotic signs—through its lyrics, melody, and cultural context—establishes a connection between the artist and the audience, illustrating the decisive role of popular music in conveying complex emotional truths. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the semiotics of popular music and provides a framework for further exploration of emotional themes in contemporary songs.

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