

Symbolic Elements in Film Characters: An Analysis of Performance and Cultural Representation

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Abstract: This research delves into the realm of film studies, mainly focusing on the intricate interplay of symbolic elements within characters. Drawing upon Ferdinand de Saussure's theoretical framework, the study conducts a qualitative analysis to unravel the nuanced layers of performance and cultural representation in the movie "Carol." Saussure's theory provides a robust lens through which the subtle gestures, expressions, and interactions of characters are explored, illuminating the underlying symbolic significance embedded within their portrayal through signifier and signified. Through close examination of critical scenes and character dynamics in Carol, this research seeks to elucidate how symbolic elements contribute to the richness and depth of the film's narrative, shedding light on broader themes of identity, desire, and societal norms. By employing a qualitative review approach, this study aims to offer insights into the complexities of cinematic storytelling and the profound impact of symbolic representation within the realm of film characters.

Keywords: Symbolic Representation, Cultural Representation, Societal Norms, Carol, Semiotics, Film.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

We have been surrounded by films for more than a century. They serve as a means of storytelling and message delivery in addition to being a kind of entertainment (Thompson, 2003). Cinematography, sound, editing, and acting are just a few of the many components that go into the intricate process of creating a film (Adilov, 2022). However, symbolism is among the most crucial elements that are frequently overlooked. Symbolism is a literary device that uses images and deep pragmatics to convey a hidden message (Rakhmatova, 2023). Symbolism in cinema refers to the utilization of objects, colors, and other components to imply a deeper meaning (Fredericksen, 2021). Anybody hoping to work in the film industry—as a

writer, director, or producer—must be aware of the symbolism employed in movies. Symbolism is a tool filmmakers use to give their work complexity and significance (Yacavone, 2014). It's a means of communicating concepts and feelings without directly expressing them. Filmmakers can use symbolic elements to create a visual language that viewers can relate to and comprehend subconsciously. Every element of filmmaking, from the lighting and camera angles to the sets and costumes, has symbolism (Raleigh, 1973). For instance, depending on the situation, the color red in a movie might stand for danger, passion, or love (Yellowbrick, 2023). The characters in a film provide a plethora of concerns about their creation, structures, meanings, influences, and other aspects (Greenwood & Long, 2015). Characters are fundamental to the cinema experience (Cutting, 2015). They provide insight into the depth of a story and connect the character's experiences to the storyline, supporting the leading cause of the film (Eder, 2010). This is one area where common language and subjective intuitions frequently fall short. It is advisable to employ extra methodical categories and processes for those who truly want to comprehend characteristics and persuade discussion. Through the use of symbolic elements in characters, the filmmakers promote subjectivity and induce critical thinking in the viewers, forcing them to become an integral part of the movie analysis (Branigan, 2012).

1.2 Plot of the Film

The focus of this paper is on the Oscar-nominated film *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, starring Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara. This film is about breaking societal norms and falling into forbidden love during the 1950s. The film starts in the Frankenberg's department store, where an aspiring photographer works to make a living. There, she comes across a glamorous and elegant woman, Carol, who is looking for a doll as a Christmas present for her daughter. Carol decides to buy a model train set instead after Therese's suggestion. Carol puts her gloves on the counter before leaving. Carol's name and address are on Frankenberg's sales slip, which Therese uses to ship them to her. Conflict is seen from Therese's perspective in her present relationship with Richard, who wants to marry her and move to France. Therese receives an invitation from Dannie, a mutual friend, to visit *The New York Times*, where he works as a photo editor, and promises to introduce her to a buddy. She visits Danny, who tries to kiss her and makes her feel uneasy, making her walk away. Carol and her husband, Harge, are divorcing amicably in the meantime. Carol gives Therese a lunch invitation over the phone at Frankenberg's and

thanks the cashier for returning the gloves. Sparks fly at lunch, and Therese learns that Carol will soon become a single woman. She even travels to the city to pick Therese up, extending an invitation to visit her in New Jersey. On the way, Carol purchases a Christmas tree at the tree lot, where Therese captures a few candid photos of Carol, showing the attraction between Carol and Therese. Harge begins to doubt Therese when he unexpectedly turns up to take Rindy to Florida for Christmas, as Carol had an affair with her friend Abby years earlier. Therese watches as they fight. After Rindy leaves, Carol drives Therese, even though she is sad and angry, to the train station. After calling Therese to apologize, Carol surprises her at her apartment by bringing a suitcase full of gifts, including a camera and film. It has come to Carol's attention that Harge is requesting that the judge apply a "morality clause" against her, so exposing her homosexuality and gaining complete guardianship of Rindy. Therese is invited to accompany her on a road trip she has planned to decompress from the strain of the divorce procedures. Richard claims Therese is in love with Carol and that he knows Carol will grow tired of her quickly. Their relationship ends when the two fight. Carol and Therese start their journey, meeting a guy named Tommy Tucker on the second night. Therese and Carol kiss on New Year's Eve and share an intimate moment together. The following day, they find out that, in reality, Harge recruited Tommy Tucker as a private investigator to gather proof against Carol. Tucker is approached by Carol, who threatens him with a pistol, but he says he has already given cassette copies to Harge. Therese and Carol turn around to go back home. The next day, in Chicago, Therese finds out that Carol, who had requested Abby to take her home, has traveled home to contest custody of her daughter. She receives a letter from Carol from Abby. Therese calls Carol at home, but Carol hangs up, realizing that if she stays in her connection with Therese, she might lose custody of Rindy. Therese builds a picture portfolio and lands a position at The New York Times. Carol's divorce settlement stipulates that she must visit a psychotherapist in the interim. Carol unexpectedly acknowledges the validity of the recordings' contents during a contentious conference with divorce attorneys in the middle of April, refusing to back down from her sexuality. She informs Harge that if he lets her have frequent visits with Rindy, he may have custody of the child and avoid going to court and the possibility of a big scandal. Therese and Carol meet at the Ritz Tower Hotel lounge after Carol writes to her. Carol discloses that she has accepted an apartment on Madison Avenue and will be working at a furniture company. Therese turns down Carol's offer to move in with her. Carol informs Therese that she is meeting with

colleagues in the Oak Room and that they may have dinner if Therese decides to change her mind. Carol confesses, "I love you." Jack, a coworker who hasn't seen Therese in months, interrupts them, and Carol leaves. After agreeing to go with Jack to a party, Therese discovers she doesn't get along with anyone. The Oak Room is where she heads off. Carol is seated at a table when she looks around the diners. After pausing, Therese moves in Carol's direction. Their eyes lock. A smile slowly forms on Carol's face as she looks at Therese, and the film ends.

1.3 Research Questions

With a primary focus on the film's setting and background, limited research has been conducted on symbolic representation through film characters. The important factor to note in this regard is the cruciality of characters and what they symbolize in the film. This research conducts an in-depth analysis of the film *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, starring Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara. The primary goal of this research is:

1. To analyze the two main characters of the film *Carol*,
2. To examine the signifier and signified of the two characters through the lens of the Theory of Semiotics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The visuals play a significant role in portraying the critical themes of the film, which sets a high standard in the film industry. Excellent television and cinema animation's visual design examines the cultural values of the medium by decoding its visuals, resulting in a better level of style and scene design effect. The idea and meaning may be mapped by deciphering the visual components. Using symbolic settings in the film creates a perpetual level of abstract ideas and portrayal of complex thoughts through images or characters' behaviors. The term "symbol" describes the process of representing or alluding to an object by means of physical objects and visuals that obliquely reflect abstract notions. It can also be seen as a significant reference and channel for referring to another item or items with different meanings. The use of visual symbols and their application in the animated industry is discussed in detail in research (Jia, 2014). These days, we view animation as a medium of transmission closely related to the communication studies' symbol system, given the international trend of animation development in cinema and television and the goal of visual consumption. Different audiences will require different kinds of animation.

Nonetheless, a fundamental approach that all animation projects must take is employing symbols to spark the creative process and then turning those signs into visual symbols mirrored in animatronics to help the public comprehend the language in movies and TV. Science and technological advancements can only slightly alter the eye effect of animated films and television shows, providing brief moments of visual enjoyment. The manifestation of animation scenes reflects the visual symbolization feature as well. Specific animations just employ color patches or planes and the figurative significance of colors to convey the director's imaginative ideas. The scene form is expressed by the size and shape of the plane; the symbolic importance of the colors is described by the use of cold and warm hues, color shadows, and saturation. Another study explored the symbolism in the 2015 live-action movie *Cinderella* (RIZKI, 2022). The live-action *Cinderella* film is a 2015 Disney production that is a version of the animated *Cinderella* film. This research uses a number of symbols to enhance both the aesthetic value and the deeper significance. The first goal of this research is to locate the symbolism in the film; the second is to elucidate the symbolism's literary significance as it appears in the film. Using a qualitative approach, the significance of symbolism found in the *Cinderella* film was investigated. To get data with this approach, several procedures must be taken. The initial stage was seeing the movie many times, followed by reading the screenplay to have a deeper understanding of the story, and finally, taking screenshots of specific parts that relate to the symbolism that would be covered in the film. Sort the data after that. The information was taken from the online Oxford dictionary to understand the meaning. The information from many pertinent journal papers was utilized to determine the literary significance. The analysis found that the movie has a wide variety of symbols. The purpose of *Cinderella*'s symbolism is to provide a deeper meaning. The movie has two different kinds of symbolism: animals and colors. When symbolism in the film industry is included, the story has a deeper or more suggestive meaning than it should. Every animal and color symbolism in the film has a different meaning that the spectator is meant to understand because of their presence. Moreover, symbolism is employed to imagine different characters and situations based on the pictures supplied throughout the film's narrative. Moreover, many films explore the use of symbolism to represent the culture of a specific community (Sohlström, 2018). The movie from Disney and Pixar includes distinct narratives and imagery. *Turning Red* centers on a mother-daughter dynamic as they navigate the significant transitions of adolescence. A film is a creative work of art that

gives viewers a comprehensive grasp of life in the cosmos. One of Disney Hotstar's most well-liked animated movies is *Turning Red*. This movie portrays the many essential components of Buddhism in terms of religion, culture, and day-to-day life. Recent research looked at how Chinese symbols are portrayed in the movie *Turning Red* (Sihombing & Al'ula, 2023). The writers applied Manon de Reeper's *Mise en Scene* technique, Charles Sanders Pierce's Symbolism notion, and Stuart Hall's Representation theory using a qualitative methodology to support the analysis. The findings show that *Turning Red* tries to depict Chinese cultural identity via symbols, including cuisine, buildings, and animals. The Red Temple in Toronto, Canada, is one of the most prominent signs in this film. Mei's ancestors lived in this temple. Using colors plays an essential role in the symbolic representation of any idea (Kovsh & Dziuba, 2022). The color scheme of red is used to embellish the walls, doors, and lanterns. The altar, or house of prayer, is another symbol of Chinese culture. Aside from that, the film depicts table manners and cuisine. Sun Yee is the final ancestor to defend the Lee family. According to the results, these are the cultural icons of China. As a result, the writers contend that this movie depicts Chinese culture.


3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Analysis Technique

The technique utilized in this research is the theory of Semiotics. The theory of semiotics, as presented by Ferdinand de Saussure, is known as structural linguistics or Structuralism. Saussure was a Swiss linguist who proposed his theories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His seminal work, "Course in General Linguistics", was posthumously published in 1916, based on his lectures between 1906 and 1911. The semiotics theory offers a framework for understanding how people rely on signs to comprehend the world around them. "Saussure's theory of sign gives more emphasis to internal structure devoted to cognitive thought process or activity of human minds in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environments or surroundings, and among them is the structure of linguistic signs in the language system that allows them to function as human beings and communicate with each other." (Yakin & Totu, 2014). In Saussure's structuralist framework, language is seen as a system of signs, where signs are composed of a signifier and a signified (De Saussure, 2011). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is

considered arbitrary, meaning there is no natural or inherent connection between the two (Hutton, 1989). The connection is established through social and cultural conventions agreed upon by a community of speakers. Furthermore, Saussure highlighted the importance of structure in understanding meaning (Al Umman, 2015). This framework is applied in data analysis because Saussure posited that meaning is not simply a collection of individual words or signs but is derived from the overall structure of the system. A table is given below so you can understand the terms easily.

Table 1: Saussure's Concept of Signifier and Signified

SIGNIFIER	The Physical form of a Word or Symbol, i.e., Raven
	
SIGNIFIED	the concept or meaning associated with that sign, i.e., bad omen or grief

3.2 Research Design

This qualitative research delves into the intricate realm of film characters, focusing on the symbolic elements embedded within their portrayal and the cultural representations they embody. The film *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes, is considered for this research. The characters of this film will be analyzed through the lens of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. The characters will be broken down into signifiers and signified further to explore the symbolic elements in the movie *Carol*.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This research has been conducted by keeping the ethical considerations under check and balance. It has been performed for academic purposes and has no intention of political or other misconduct.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film *Carol* has the most symbolic representation through the characters, which displays the hidden meanings and reveals the depth that

has been folded between each character's portrayal. In the 1950s, the expectations attached to a woman were a lot. The characters of this film portray several elements of symbolism when viewed through the lens of Saussure's theory of semiotics.

4.1 Carol Aird

4.1.1 Signifier

Carol Aird is shown to have the perfect life in the beginning. She has a wealthy husband, the perfect daughter, a big house, and a loving home, and she is part of the extravagant elite society of New York. Her demeanor, glamour, stylish outfits, and poised mannerisms are all signifiers with a specific meaning behind them. Her way of speaking with Therese shows how even though she is married, she flirts with women as she is fond of them and remains in an unhappy marriage, hence seeking a divorce. Carol finds herself pursuing a woman who is a lot younger than her, but her subtle hint of flirting when Carol whispers to Therese at the department store, "I like the hat," shows that she seems to be attracted to someone who is completely opposite of herself. Carol is unaware of the girl's sexuality and is fully aware of her divorce proceedings and the complications it could create. Yet, she pursues a relationship with Therese, jeopardizing her daughter's custody. She is hiding behind a façade where she seems all confident and perfectly okay, yet her mental state is portrayed through her dialogues perfectly. Cate Blanchett's delivery of those dialogues with the correct portrayal of facial expressions justified the character's liking towards Therese and the inclination towards falling for a young girl, which could cause serious repercussions.

4.1.2 Signified

Carol's character embodies the societal expectations of the 1950s. The perfect life of a woman during that time was to have a wealthy husband who would fulfill all her material needs and not prioritize emotional needs, a loving family without whom life would be incomplete, a few kids with all the woman's hours dedicated to the children and none for themselves. Carol's character signifies the ideal life of a happy woman who is supposed to be a housewife and not a working woman. Carol is expected to hide her sexuality and her liking towards women and be the perfect housewife. Her husband demands sole custody of their daughter, Rindy. He files an injunction on the basis of a morality clause as he accuses Carol of having a pattern of "immoral" behavior. This prompts Carol to flee from the city

for a few days until the custody hearing with Therese, running away from the consequences of her actions. Eventually, she ends up falling in love with Therese and gets caught by a private investigator hired by her soon-to-be ex-husband. This consequence makes her flee from Therese in order to fight for Rindy's custody. All of these actions propose the symbolic representation of a scared and nervous woman who puts on a show for others around her. Additionally, Carol's longing for intimacy and autonomy signifies the dynamic correlation between her personal desires and the norms created by society.

4.2 Therese Belivet

4.2.1 Signifier

Therese Belivet, played by Rooney Mara, is a meek young girl who aspires to be a professional photographer but is stuck in a relationship with a man she does not even love. She is shown to be still getting a grip on her sexuality and explores herself more as she befriends a woman who is older than Therese herself. The character of Therese portrays youth, innocence, and artistic aspirations, which pose as crucial signifiers. If we analyze her behavior around Carol, we see that she is nervous around her but also loves her presence and as a muse for her photography. When Therese visits Carol in her house in New Jersey, she is shown to be playing the piano perfectly, but as Carol puts her hand on Therese's shoulders, she hesitates and mixes up a few keys. Carol's eyes are constantly glued to Therese, making her nervous and anxious, but in a good way. Her innocence is a prime symbol here as she hesitates at Carol's touch on her shoulder. This is the point where she is seen to be coming to terms with her sexuality and admires Carol even more. The age gap between the two is seen to be serving as a crucial signification of breaking norms as these two characters have totally opposite personalities and find each other in different walks of life. Her troublesome relationship with Richard is also a crucial signifier from which she releases herself when she goes out of town with Carol on a journey of self-discovery.

4.2.2 Signified

The most critical signified aspects of Therese's character are the departure from the traditional gender roles and expectations of society. Her road to self-discovery leads to her acceptance of her sexuality and transforms into an empowered young woman. She no longer remains the meek young girl as she challenges society's norms, symbolizing the quest

for personal fulfillment and authenticity. When Carol leaves Therese to fight for Rindy, she grows up in more ways than one. She gets hurt, brushes herself off, develops a sense of survival, and starts to protect herself from any other harm or vulnerability. When Carol offers Therese to meet her at the Ritz Carlton, she throws the letter in the dustbin as a sign of protection towards herself. Even as she was sitting with Carol, she did not show how much she wanted Carol back but kept her composure and remained calm and unbothered by her. When Carol says, "I love you," to Therese, it catches Therese off-guard and is soon interrupted by her old coworker. As Carol stands up, she puts her hand on Therese's shoulder and says goodbye. This was a crucial signification of Therese's feelings for Carol, which she could not say so quickly. Soon, she returns to Therese in a matter of hours. Her journey of breaking the walls of societal expectations and deliberately wanting to pursue a relationship with Carol signifies the need to not fall under the pressure of society and do what she herself feels is right.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

Using Todd Haynes' 2015 film "Carol" as a case study, this analysis explores how performance intertwines with symbolism to construct nuanced character identities. Through close examination of the protagonists, Carol and Therese, and their interactions within the socio-cultural context of 1950s America, this study elucidates the layers of symbolism in their demeanor, dialogue, and relationships. Drawing upon theories of semiotics and cultural studies, the research unpacks the significance of gestures, expressions, and narrative motifs in conveying broader themes of desire, repression, and societal norms. By scrutinizing the performances of Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, this study highlights how actors imbue characters with symbolic depth, contributing to the rich tapestry of cinematic representation. The findings of this research offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between performance, symbolism, and cultural representation in film, enriching our understanding of the artistic and socio-political dimensions of cinematic storytelling. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between performance, symbolism, and cultural representation in film. This research can be used to dive deeper into the field of symbolism through films and cinematography.

5.2 LIMITATIONS

This research was faced with a few limitations which included the restriction of time. Moreover, very limited research has been conducted in this area which makes it difficult to compare the previous literature with the current study.

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