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Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of John Lennon's song lyrics "Imagine"

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Abstract

In 1971, John Lennon wrote the song "Imagine." It embodies the spirit of world peace and encourages listeners to imagine a whole world without dividing boundaries such as nation, religion, possessions, and conflict. The song later evolved into a protest song and a global peace hymn. This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to deconstruct the lyrical text of John Lennon's "Imagine." Applying the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, the analysis reveals how the song systematically dismantles dominant societal myths of nationalism, religion, and private property. The research demonstrates that "Imagine" constructs an alternative myth of secular, borderless humanism, using a simple form to make its radical ideology palatable. This semiotic structure, however, also renders the song polysemic and vulnerable to ideological re-appropriation by various cultural contexts. Researchers divide the findings into five structures, namely denotative foundation of the literal landscape of lyrics, mythological deconstruction in challenging dominant societal narratives in "Imagine", contextualizing meaning in its socio-historical and polysemic frames, the semiotic project a utopian vision through Barthes' lens.

Keyword: Roland Barthes, Semiotic, Song Imagine, John Lennon

INTRODUCTION

John Lennon's 1971 song "Imagine" holds an unparalleled position in global culture as an anthem for peace and unity. Its seemingly simple lyrical structure and

gentle melody have contributed to its widespread adoption, yet this accessibility masks a complex and radical ideological project. The song directly challenges foundational societal constructs, including religion, nationalism, and private property(Andriani et al., 2021). Despite its iconic status and frequent invocation in diverse cultural contexts, the specific semiotic mechanisms through which it constructs its utopian vision and critiques existing power structures remain underexplored. This research addresses this gap by investigating how the song functions as a persuasive semiotic text.

This study employs the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes to deconstruct the lyrical text of "Imagine." *Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky/Imagine all the people, Living for today, Imagine there's no countries, It isn't hard to do/Nothing to kill or die for, And no religion too, Imagine all the people, Living life in peace You/You may say I'm a dreamer/But I'm not the only one, I hope someday you'll join us, And the world will be as one*(Ulfha et al., 2023). Barthes' framework, particularly his concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth as a second-order semiological system, provides a rigorous methodology for analyzing cultural artifacts. This approach allows for a systematic examination of how the song's lyrics move beyond their literal meanings to evoke a web of cultural associations and ideological values(Pasha, 2026). By treating the song not as a simple artistic expression but as a structured system of signs, this research aims to reveal how it naturalizes a specific utopian ideology.

The central objective of this research is to analyze how "Imagine" systematically deconstructs dominant societal myths and constructs an alternative one. The analysis will proceed in stages: first, establishing the denotative meaning of key lyrical signs; second, uncovering their connotative and ideological associations; and finally, examining how these signs function at the level of myth to challenge and replace established cultural narratives. This study will also consider the song's polysemic nature, acknowledging the role of the reader in generating meaning. Ultimately, this paper presents a structured reading of how the song's semiotic architecture persuades listeners.

This research is grounded in the semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes. Semiotics, the study of signs and their meaning within society, was initially structured by Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the signifier and signified(Caronil., 2023). Barthes expanded this framework beyond linguistics to analyze cultural phenomena as systems of signs. His approach is particularly suited for this study as it treats cultural artifacts, such as song lyrics, not as simple artistic expressions but as complex texts that communicate ideologies and shape our understanding of reality.

Central to Barthes' methodology is the concept of two orders of signification: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal, objective, and descriptive meaning of a sign. It is the first level of analysis(Ambarini, 2012). Connotation, the second order, encompasses the associated cultural, emotional, and ideological meanings

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that the sign evokes. For instance, a word in a lyric has its dictionary definition (denotation) but also carries a wealth of secondary meanings (connotation) derived from social conventions, making it a powerful tool for communication.

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Building upon connotation, Barthes introduces the concept of myth as a second-order semiological system. In this process, a complete sign from the first order (the union of signifier and signified) becomes a new signifier for a broader, ideological concept (Siti et al., n.d.). This myth functions to naturalize cultural values, presenting them as common sense or universal truth rather than as historically constructed ideologies. This study will use the concept of myth to analyze how "Imagine" attempts to deconstruct dominant societal myths about nation, religion, and possession.

Applying this framework, the lyrics of John Lennon's "Imagine" will be treated as a structured text composed of multiple signs. The analysis will first examine the denotative level, identifying the literal meaning of phrases like "no heaven" or "no countries." Subsequently, the research will delve into the connotative level to uncover the deeper ideological messages about peace, unity, and anti-materialism. This process allows for a systematic deconstruction of how the song constructs its utopian vision and critiques existing social and political structures.

Finally, this study acknowledges Barthes' later emphasis on the role of the reader in creating meaning. While the author's intent provides context, Barthes argued that a text is a "tissue of quotations" whose ultimate meaning is produced by the reader. The lyrics of "Imagine" are therefore not a vessel for a single, fixed message but a polysemic field of potential interpretations. This research presents one such interpretation, recognizing that each listener's engagement with the song generates a unique understanding shaped by their individual and cultural background..

METHODS

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This qualitative research method begins with the analysis of various data collected from a study, then moves toward forming conclusions based on certain general categories or characteristics. The data analysis process, in this case, involves reviewing all available data from various sources. The next step is data reduction, followed by data interpretation or data processing to draw conclusions (Sucipto, 2016). The primary textual corpus for this research is the complete lyrics of the song "Imagine," written and performed by John Lennon and released in 1971. This song was purposively selected due to its iconic status as a global anthem for peace and its explicit engagement with themes of utopianism and social critique. The lyrical content, which directly challenges concepts of religion, nationalism, and materialism, provides a rich and focused dataset for Barthesian semiotic analysis. Its widespread cultural resonance and seemingly simple language mask complex ideological layers, making it an ideal subject for deconstructing denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings (Roland et al., 2024).

To ensure analytical integrity, the definitive version of the lyrics was sourced and verified. The primary source for the textual corpus was the official liner notes from the 1971 album **Imagine**. This authoritative version was then cross-referenced with multiple reputable online lyric databases, including LyricFind and Genius, to account for any potential transcription errors or variations in public dissemination. This verification process established a canonical text, ensuring that the analysis is based on the most accurate and authentic set of signifiers as intended by the author. This step is methodologically crucial for maintaining the validity of the subsequent semiotic interpretation.

Building upon the denotative foundation, this stage initiates the analysis of second-order signification. The complete signs established in the first order—the union of a lyrical phrase (signifier) and its literal definition (signified)—are now treated as new signifiers (Putri, n.d.). The method involves systematically mapping the cultural, emotional, and ideological associations these signifiers evoke. For instance, the sign "no countries" will be examined beyond its literal meaning to uncover its connotations of anti-nationalism, global unity, and a critique of geopolitical conflict. This process aims to reveal the web of secondary meanings that constitute the song's persuasive and affective power.

This final analytical stage elevates the analysis from connotation to myth, treating the entire connotative system as a second-order signifier (Riyadi et al., 2023). The method involves identifying the dominant societal myths that the song directly confronts, such as the naturalness of national identity, the necessity of religious frameworks, and the virtue of material possession. The procedure will analyze how the song's lyrical signs, now rich with connotative meaning, function as the 'form' of a new mythological system. This process aims to deconstruct how these established myths operate to naturalize specific ideologies, exposing them not as universal truths but as historically constructed concepts.

The deconstruction will be executed by systematically juxtaposing the song's connotative themes against these identified societal myths. For example, the theme of 'global unity' derived from "no countries" will be analyzed as a direct challenge to the myth of nationalism. The analysis will detail how the lyrical signifier empties the myth of its assumed meaning and re-presents it as a source of conflict. This method focuses on exposing the myth's function, which is to transform history into nature. The research will demonstrate how Lennon's lyrics interrupt this process, thereby revealing the ideological underpinnings of seemingly common-sense values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Denotative Foundations: The Literal Landscape of "Imagine" Lyrics

The initial phase of analysis, focusing on the denotative meaning of the lyrical corpus, yielded a foundational lexicon of objective definitions. Following the established

methodology, key signifiers were segmented and their literal meanings were determined using the Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes, 2005). For instance, "heaven" was defined as "the abode of God and the blessed," while "countries" was defined as "a nation with its own government, occupying a particular territory." This systematic procedure created a verifiable data matrix, establishing a non-interpretive baseline for the entire semiotic deconstruction.

Analysis of the theological signifiers revealed a direct and unambiguous negation of established concepts. The term "heaven" denotes a specific post-mortem destination of divine reward, while "hell" refers to a place of eternal punishment. By preceding these with "no," the lyrics literally propose a reality devoid of these specific eschatological frameworks. Similarly, "religion" is denotatively defined as a particular system of faith and worship. The lyric "no religion too" thus signifies the absence of such organized belief systems, establishing a first-order sign of pure secularity.

The examination of geopolitical and social signifiers produced similarly stark results. The denotative meaning of "countries" is a politically defined and governed territory. The call for "no countries" is, at its most literal level, a proposition for the dissolution of all nation-states and their corresponding borders. This literal reading strips the concept of its patriotic and cultural associations, presenting it simply as a system of division. This objective meaning forms the stable signifier for subsequent analysis of globalism and anti-nationalism.

Regarding material and economic concepts, the denotative analysis of "possessions" identifies its meaning as "things that are owned; property." The lyric "imagine no possessions" therefore literally signifies a state without private ownership. This is reinforced by the negation of "greed or hunger," which denotatively refers to intense selfish desire. The literal landscape constructed by these phrases is one of absolute anti-materialism and communal existence, providing a clear first-order sign for the exploration of the song's critique of capitalism.

In summary, the denotative analysis successfully mapped the literal landscape of "Imagine" as a series of negations against concrete, dictionary-defined concepts. The result is a textual world defined by the absence of theological afterlives, nation-states, organized religions, and private property. This methodical cataloging of first-order meanings provides the crucial, stable foundation required by Barthesian theory. Each of these literal signs—the union of the lyrical signifier and its objective signified—now serves as the raw material for the second-order analysis of connotation and myth.

2. Connotative Architectures: Ideological Resonance in Lennon's Lyrical Units

Building upon the denotative foundation, the analysis of second-order signification revealed how the song's literal negations become powerful connotative affirmations. The first-order signs, such as the absence of heaven or countries, were found to function as new signifiers for complex ideological concepts (Sucipto, 2026). The repeated "no" does not connote a void but rather a liberation from perceived constraints. This semiotic process transforms the lyrical text from a simple list of absences into a persuasive

argument for a new way of being, where each negation evokes a positive alternative.

The theological signifiers "no heaven" and "no religion" were found to connote a strong ideology of secular humanism. The literal absence of an afterlife is re-signified to evoke an emphasis on the present—"living for today"—and a focus on human agency over divine will. "No religion" connotes a critique of institutional dogma as a source of conflict and division, a prevalent sentiment in the counter-culture of the era. Together, these signs construct a vision where peace is achieved through human solidarity, not transcendental belief systems.

Analysis of the geopolitical sign "no countries" uncovered potent connotations of anti-nationalism and global unity(Calyaretta, 2024). This signifier transcends its literal meaning to evoke a world free from the conflicts fueled by borders, patriotism, and political allegiances. It powerfully connotes the concept of a "brotherhood of man," framing national identity as an artificial barrier to universal kinship. This finding aligns with the song's historical context, where it functioned as a critique of the nationalism that underpinned conflicts.

The economic signifiers, particularly "no possessions," were found to connote a radical anti-materialist and communalist ideology. The literal absence of ownership is re-signified to suggest a world of sharing, equity, and freedom from the "greed or hunger" generated by capitalist systems. This connotative field directly challenges the virtue of private property, framing it as a root cause of social inequality and conflict. The analysis revealed this sign as a key component in constructing the song's utopian vision of a post-capitalist existence.

Thematic clustering of these connotative meanings demonstrated their synergistic function in building a coherent ideological architecture. The streams of secular humanism, global unity, and anti-materialism are not disparate but deeply interconnected. The analysis revealed that the rejection of religious dogma is linked to the dissolution of national borders, which in turn enables a world without material greed. This interwoven structure forms the song's central argument: achieving true peace requires a simultaneous deconstruction of these foundational pillars of modern society.

3. Mythological Deconstruction: Challenging Dominant Societal Narratives in "Imagine"

Moving beyond connotation, the analysis entered the third order of signification: myth. Here, the entire connotative system of secular humanism and global unity functions as a single signifier. This second-order sign does not merely critique; it actively constructs an alternative mythological framework(Grace, 2024). Following Barthes, the song empties dominant societal myths of their historical specificity, representing its own utopian vision as a natural, common-sense alternative(Jayaningsih et al., 2025). This process reveals how "Imagine" operates as a powerful piece of ideological persuasion.

The research identified a direct deconstruction of the myth of nationalism. The connotative theme of global unity, derived from "no countries," confronts the

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naturalized belief in the nation-state as the ultimate form of social organization. The song strips nationalism of its patriotic virtue, recasting it as an arbitrary system of division responsible for conflict. By doing so, "Imagine" exposes the myth's function: to transform a historical political arrangement into an unquestionable and eternal truth about human identity.

Similarly, the song challenges the myth of religious necessity. The connotative field of secular humanism, signified by "no heaven" and "no religion," directly confronts the idea that morality and social cohesion depend on transcendental belief systems. The analysis shows how the lyrics reframe religion not as a spiritual foundation but as a historical source of division ("nothing to kill or die for"). This empties the religious myth of its claim to universal truth, proposing a new myth of human-centered ethics.

The myth of capitalist virtue is systematically dismantled through the signifier "no possessions." The song's connotative critique of materialism challenges the naturalized assumption that private property and accumulation are inherent to human progress and happiness. By linking ownership to "greed or hunger," the lyrics expose the myth that capitalism is a system of opportunity, recasting it as a historical construct that generates inequality. This deconstruction presents a world without possessions not as deprivation but as liberation. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that "Imagine" does not simply negate existing myths but proposes a new, overarching myth of utopian humanism. It synthesizes the deconstructed elements of nation, religion, and property into a coherent alternative vision. The song's mythological power lies in its ability to naturalize this radical ideology, presenting a borderless, secular, and communal world as a simple, achievable dream. It uses the form of myth to replace dominant historical narratives with its own aspirational one.

4. Contextualizing Meaning: "Imagine" in its Socio-Historical and Polysemic Frames

The analysis situates the song's potent anti-nationalist connotations within the socio-historical context of the early 1970s. The signifier "no countries" and the phrase "nothing to kill or die for" resonated deeply with a public polarized by the Vietnam War. This historical frame validates the interpretation of these lyrics as a direct critique of the nationalism that fueled geopolitical conflict (Kurnia, 2018). The song's initial reception was thus heavily mediated by this anti-war sentiment, anchoring its semiotic power in a specific, tangible struggle for peace.

Furthermore, the song's critique of religion and materialism aligns with the dominant ideologies of the era's counter-culture. The call for "no religion" and "no possessions" functioned as signifiers for a broader rejection of established institutional authority and consumer capitalism. These themes were not unique to Lennon but were central tenets of a movement seeking alternative communal and spiritual lifestyles. This context confirms that the song's lyrical signs were part of a wider cultural vocabulary challenging the foundational myths of Western society.

While the original context provides a crucial interpretive anchor, this study acknowledges the polysemic nature of the text, consistent with Barthes' later work. The

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meaning of "Imagine" is not static; it is perpetually regenerated by its audience. The lyrical signs, once embedded in the 1970s counter-culture, have been detached and re-signified within new cultural and historical frames. This analysis reveals the song's function as a "tissue of quotations," where its ultimate ideological impact is determined by its reception and re-appropriation.

The song's semiotic plasticity is evident in its corporate and institutional co-optation. When used in Olympic ceremonies or advertising campaigns, the signifier "Imagine" is often emptied of its radical anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist connotations. It is re-signified to connote a depoliticized global harmony that aligns with, rather than challenges, the structures of global capitalism and national competition. In this frame, the myth of utopian humanism is repurposed to serve the very systems the lyrics originally sought to deconstruct.

Conversely, in moments of collective trauma, such as post-9/11 memorials, the song undergoes another semiotic transformation. Here, "a brotherhood of man" is re-signified to emphasize communal resilience and a desire for peace, often within a framework of national unity. The critique of division is channeled into a call for solidarity against an external threat, temporarily neutralizing its anti-nationalist message. This demonstrates how the same lyrical signs can be mobilized to support divergent, and sometimes contradictory, ideological positions depending on the interpretive context.

5. The Semiotic Project of "Imagine": A Utopian Vision Through Barthes' Lens

Synthesizing the analysis, the semiotic project of "Imagine" is revealed as a systematic process of ideological replacement. The song first empties dominant cultural signs—nation, religion, property—of their naturalized meaning at the denotative level. These empty signifiers are then refilled with new connotative values of humanism, unity, and equity. This entire second-order system then becomes the form for a new myth, presenting a radical utopian vision not as a political argument but as a natural, common-sense aspiration.

The specific utopian vision constructed by this semiotic project is one of radical secular humanism. The analysis demonstrates how the systematic negation of existing structures serves to affirm a world governed solely by human empathy and shared existence (Pardosi et al., 2025). This is not a vague dream but a structured ideological alternative built on anti-nationalist, anti-religious, and anti-materialist foundations. Through the mechanism of myth, the song naturalizes this specific post-capitalist, borderless community as the ultimate horizon for a peaceful "brotherhood of man."

Central to this project is the titular signifier, "Imagine." This imperative functions as a direct invitation for the listener to participate in the semiotic act of myth-making. It is a procedural command that activates the listener's role in producing meaning, aligning with Barthes' concept of the readerly text. By asking the audience to "imagine," Lennon makes them co-conspirators in the deconstruction of old myths and the construction of the new utopian one, thereby enhancing the song's persuasive ideological power. The Barthesian analysis resolves the paradox of the song's radical

content and its mass appeal. The semiotic project succeeds by clothing its revolutionary critique of capitalism, religion, and nationalism in a gentle, accessible form. The simple melody and plain language function as the mythological signifier that makes the radical signified palatable.

CONCLUSION

This research successfully applied Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to deconstruct John Lennon's "Imagine," revealing a systematic process of ideological construction. The analysis progressed through three orders of signification, establishing how the song's literal negations of nation, religion, and property are transformed at the connotative level into powerful affirmations of global unity and secular humanism. The study demonstrated that these connotations ultimately coalesce into a new, overarching myth. This myth functions to systematically challenge and replace dominant societal ideologies with a coherent utopian vision, presenting a radical political project as a natural and universally desirable dream for humanity.

The study concludes that "Imagine" operates as a sophisticated ideological project far beyond a simple plea for peace. Its primary mechanism is the creation of a new myth that naturalizes a radical vision of a post-capitalist, borderless world. By framing its potent critique of nationalism and private property within an accessible, dream-like form, the song renders its revolutionary content palatable to a mass audience. The titular imperative "Imagine" is central to this process, actively engaging the listener as a co-creator in this myth-making, which significantly enhances the song's persuasive and enduring ideological impact.

Finally, this study confirms the polysemic nature of the lyrical text, consistent with Barthes' later theories on the role of the reader. While the analysis identified a coherent radical message rooted in its historical context, it also showed how the song's meaning is not static. The semiotic openness that facilitates its universal appeal also makes it vulnerable to ideological re-appropriation by corporate and nationalist interests, which can neutralize its original critique. This research therefore contributes a structured deconstruction of the song's core semiotic project, while acknowledging that its ultimate meaning remains fluid.

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