



## The Pacman Song Meaning Interpreted through Semiotics Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to interpret the meaning of the song lyrics “Pacman” by EAJ. It used the semiotic analysis by Michael Riffaterre. The research was qualitative descriptive research. Data for the research was the lyrics of the Pacman song by EAJ. The research found that the heuristic reading process in the “Pacman” lyrics still discussed each line’s meaning. It was interpreted when a person loved someone and would give anything and did anything even if it ended painfully as long as he/she was together with his/her mate. Then “Pacman and Lover” was analyzed as a model. “Cause my head says no, but my phone keeps calling you.” and “Over and Over, like it’s Red Rover” was analyzed as a variant. “People who love to die for someone” was analyzed as a matrix. Last, “one-sided love” was explored as a potential hypogram, and “Pacman” was analyzed as an actual hypogram. This research concludes that the hidden meaning of “Pacman” lyrics is when a person loves someone deeply. Even if a loved one hurts him, he will still love his lover.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, Meaning, Riffaterre’s Semiotics, Semiotic analysis, Song lyric, Song Interpretation



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### 1. Introduction

Communication among people can be done in different ways, one of them is by using music. Music is one medium used by singers or songwriters to convey messages or express feelings. Music in the song can be said to be the science or art of composing a tone or sound in a specific order. It has a combination and tempo that are interconnected to create a composition of sound. It also has unity and elements such as tone, dynamics, textures rhythms, songs, timbre, and harmony that can be enjoyed. In general, a song simply can be said as music with lyrics to be sung and has its meaning and message. In addition, the song has vocal sounds and lyrics while the music is only the player’s instrument. Songs are considered a system for communicating with other people by using music and lyrics to express feelings, ideas, emotions, messages, or thoughts. Nowadays, people are straightforward in expressing their feelings by creating a song. The songs created are varied and divided into several music genres: pop, hip-hop, folk, rock, jazz, and others. All these genres depend on the lyrics of the song and the theme created.

The music consists of two supporting elements: music or sound as the primary element and the lyrics as the secondary element. Song lyrics are an essential key in delivering the message of a song so that finally, the song can be enjoyed deeply by the listener. Lyrics give listeners a profound understanding of a message contained within a song. According to Dallin (1994), lyrics form an interaction between the lyricist and the listener. There is a message to motivate the listener through lyrics. The purpose of a lyric is embedded according to the cultural context and musical preferences of the listener. Song lyrics are verbal communication that has meaning. Through the lyrics of the song, the writer’s feelings can be clearly described so that others can unknowingly feel the feelings of the lyricist.

The lyrics of songs nowadays written chiefly talk about love. So, most of the song's theme, especially for the genre of pop music, is love. Love-themed songs sell better and are more enjoyed in the market than songs themed on social criticism, life, and others. Love-themed songs are often presented in implied form but have a deep meaning. It is also related to the instinct in the human being about love so that something related to love will be easier to understand and enjoy. Many feelings are related to love and love out of affection, losing loved ones, or even one-sided love. Almost everyone has ever felt a love story that was one-sided love or unrequited love. So, there are not a few songs about one-sided love such as a song by EAJ entitled Pacman that become the writer's focus in this research. The writer is interested in analysing the interpretation and meaning of the song "Pacman" by using the semiotic analysis of Michael Riffaterre. The purpose of this study is to know the interpretation of the meaning of the song "Pacman".

Understanding a song's interpretation means understanding the meaning of the song's lyrics. According to Pateda in Lumihi (2017), the "meaning" of words and terms are confusing. "Meaning" is always embedded in the speech word or phrase. The writer understands that the meaning of a word is fully reflected by its context. Here, the meaning of the word is constituted by its contextual relations. The contextual considerations are based on the language use in communication. Communication is more clearly when the information or assumptions of the speakers are well delivered to the listeners. The listeners can accept more information about the speakers' assumptions than they say (Nuryanti and Fazrin, 2023).

The lyrics in songs can be interpreted in different ways such meaning of words. The research about the meaning of songs is not new. Wahyuni (2012) studied the meaning of figures in song lyrics, while Ekaningrum and Suharto (2015) focused their research on the meaning of children's songs by A.T. Mahmud. In addition, Firdaus (2013) focused on textual meaning in analyzing song lyrics. Differing from the previous research, Nuryanti and Basuki (2020) analyzed the interpretation of signs and symbols in the Pocari Sweat advertisement. Then Prakasa, Kartika, and Poyo (2023) studied about interpretation of songs using Barthes' theory.

Song, as well as poetry, is always been an interesting source for analysing. It can be said that song is another form of poetry. According to Riffaterre (1978:3), four aspects must be considered in understanding and interpreting poetry: heuristic and hermeneutic readings; indirect expressions; matrices, variants and models; and hypograms. In addition, the important characteristic of poetry according to Riffaterre (in Faruk, 2012:14) is that poetry inevitably expresses concepts and objects indirectly. This means that poetry conveys one thing for another. He (Riffaterre) adds especially in the study of poetic texts, words are associated with something, and text is compared to the reality of reality because poetry is a collection of words that express a poet's emotions or ideas about something in a literary text (1978: 26).

## 2. Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics

Michael Riffaterre is a semiotics expert who understands the science of such signs as Charles Sanders Peirce (1931) and Ferdinand De Saussure (1959). However, the semiotic approach put forward by Michael Riffaterre understands the signs of literary works such as song lyrics or poems contained in his book *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978). In his book entitled *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), Riffaterre suggests four processes for knowing a meaning in literature: heuristic readings, hermeneutic readings, matrix, models, variants, and hypograms.

### 2.1. Heuristics and Hermeneutics Reading

Heuristic reading is reading according to language systems and conventions, according to normative grammar. Heuristic reading is the first interpretation because the deep meaning cannot be captured in this process. In this stage, the reader must have linguistic competence, and the reader must have the ability to sense a mismatch between words that do not make sense literally to capture meaning.

The reader's ability to capture discrepancies between words that include grammatical deviations (ungrammaticalities) and the ability to capture a word or phrase cannot be understood only literally. It can only be understood if a semantic transformation is accomplished by reading a word or phrase as a metonymy or metaphor. Thus, heuristic readings based on the language structure interpret the "incompatibility" of words and language structures to fit the colloquiality and structure of the word. At this stage, it will be found the meaning of the lyrics only textually.

On the other side, Hermeneutic reading, or called retroactive reading, is the process of decoding. It is the process by which the reader remembers what has been read and modifies his understanding. The maximum effect of retroactive reading is when the system generator is present at the end of the text section. That is, the text must be seen as the wholeness of its meaning, not by part by part.

The hermeneutic workings for the interpretation of literary works, according to Teeuw, can be done in two ways: with an understanding of the entirety through their elements, and the second, with the understanding of the elements through their entirety. Furthermore, as Pradopo (2010) explains retroactive readings are repeated readings from beginning to end by interpreting the text. This reading process is a process of giving meaning based on literary conventions.

In conclusion, it can be said that in semiotic literary studies, the search for meaning in poetry can be done by reading heuristics and hermeneutics. Heuristic reading is a way of reading in the first-level semiotic system, which is a language-based way of reading poetry, seen from the normative system of language, while hermeneutic reading is a way of reading in the second-level semiotic system, which is a way of reading literary works based on literary conventions (Riffaterre, 1978: 5–6). This is also can be applied in analyzing songs.

### 2.1. Indirect Expression

In studying poetry, it is understand that it expresses concepts and objects indirectly. It means that poetry says one thing with another meaning. Poetry has a special way of conveying its meaning to the poem learners. It is because the language of poetry is full of signs. It represents certain meanings. It can be said that the language used in poetry is semiotic, while literal language is mimetic, embracing reality or what it is. The expression of language that is semiotic in poetry is a poetic indirect expression that occurs because of a shift in meaning, destruction of meaning, and creation of meaning. Shifting meaning means the meaning that replaces or represents. This displacing meaning is caused by the use of comparative figurative language such as metaphor, metonymy, personification, simile, synecdoche, allegory, and others (Riffaterre, 1978: 2). The destruction of meaning occurs in the form of figurative language use of contradictions such as ambiguity, contradiction, nonsense and so on. The creation of meaning in poetry means that everything in language convention is considered meaningless, but in forms such as symmetries, rhymes, or semantic equivalents between homologs in a stanza. The meaning of creation is a classification of texts outside of linguistics. The meaning of creation occurs because of the arrangement of the text space, including enjambment, typography, and homologue (Pradopo, 2010: 220).

To understand the meaning of poetry through it rhymes are seen as repetitions of similar-sounding words occurring at the end of a line in a poem or song. That is why we can say that rhymes are tools that make use of repeating patterns that bring rhythm or musicality to poetry (<https://literarydevices.net/rhyme/>). In addition, Enjambment, means a move from one line to another without a punctuation ending. It can be defined as a thought or feeling, it can be a phrase or a clause, in a line of poetry that does not end at a line break, but moves to the next line. It is exercising the senses from one stanza or line to the next without major breaks or syntactic breaks (<https://literarydevices.net/enjambment/>). While typography means the arrangement of relationships and the arrangement of lines. Typography is used to get an attractive visual form and to reinforce the meaning or expression of the poet through the superiority of a word, phrase or sentence. It is an important part of various art styles, or it is a way of structuring and presenting text (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-typography-definition-term-examples.html>).

### 2.2. Matrix, models, and variant

Matrix is an abstract concept that is never actualized and does not appear in the text. The matrix is abstracted in the form of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. It can be said that matrix is the keyword of a literary work where the words used are the key to interpreting the concretized poem. A Matrix can be a simple word, phrase, clause, or sentence. Matrix gives the meaning of unity in a literary work. With the knowledge of finding the matrix in poetry, the reader knows the theme of the poetry.

The model is the first actualization of a matrix that can be a word or sentence contained in a verse of poetry and represent the matrix's core. To know the model in a poem, we must know from the poeticism of the word or sentence. When we want to get a word or sentence as a model, the word or sentence must have a high quality of poeticism that can represent the entire meaning of the text and create poetry or song lyrics. The Matrix and models were later actualized into variants. A variant is a form of the model description contained in each stanza or line in the poem.

### 2.3. Hypogram

Hypogram or intertextual relationship is the text that is the background of the creation of a literary work. Literary works such as poetry, prose, or song are not created in cultural voids, including literature. A poem or prose is a response to previous poems. Hypogram is the setting for creating literary works that can be

adhered to and trivialized by the author. According to Riffaterre, hypograms are divided into two, potential hypograms and actual hypograms. A potential hypogram is a matrix at the core of text or keywords that can be simple words, phrases, or sentences. The first change of a potential matrix or hypogram is a model, then converted into variants. At the same time, the actual hypogram is the background of creating a new literary work in simple text, words, proverbial sentences, or the entire text.

As Pradopo (2010: 155) states a literary work can be read in relation to other texts. He also states that the background of literary works can include society, historical events, nature and life. That is why, understanding poetry, it can be done without looking at the poet's explicit intention (Teeuw, 1983:65). In the end, to understand the meaning of literary works, especially poetry, the readers should remember that the harmony in literary works such as poetry may cause the exact meaning of the poet's intention.

The research about meaning and song is not new, especially the ones who use Riffaterre's semiotics (Pradani and Rizal, 2020), Sipatuhar and Arianto (2019), Hanifah (2016), Oktaviani and Maliki (2020), Allo K and Nuryanti (2022). Among those writers, only the latter analyzed song without using Riffaterre's semiotics but focussed on the tense and aspects while the others used poetry as the data of the analysis. Differing from those previous research, here the writer uses the song to be analysed using Riffaterre's semiotics.

### 3. Method

The methods and designs used in this research are qualitative. The qualitative method explores and understands individuals or groups by deciphering descriptive form words or systematically arranged sentences. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative research is an approach exploring the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, the data typically collected in the participant's background, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. It is also descriptive research. In addition, qualitative research is a study where the presentation of data is not in the form of numbers, and the writer only provides an explanation without showing the process of processing numbers (Allo K and Nuryanti, 2022). Qualitative research is a kind of research in which all data found is presented in the form of elaboration of words that are formed into a sentence without involving data in the form of numbers or numeric.

The types of data used in this research is grouped into primary and secondary data. Primary data is a data source that directly provides data to data collectors or researchers, secondary data is a data source that does not directly provide data to data collectors or researchers (Sugiyono, 2017). The primary data in this research is the lyrics of the song "Pacman" by EAJ. The data is the lyrics of the song "Pacman" by EAJ, taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0MrGb1hT2U>, focusing on the lyrics by heuristic reading, hermeneutic reading, model, matrix, variant, and hypogram. The data source used in this study is written data. The method of data collection used is text analysis, such as analysing the song "Pacman." In this research, text analysis will be conducted by analysing the entire verse in the song "Pacman" and analysing it using Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory approach.

The text analysis in this research will be divided into four stages analysing the text of the lyric verse of the song contained in the song "Pacman." The four stages include heuristic and hermeneutic readings, matrices searches, models and variants, and hypograms. Heuristic reading becomes the first stage of reading that focuses on language systems and conventions. The reading of hermeneutics is the second stage in the literary way that will present meaning based on the interpretation of the first stage. Matrix, model, and variant are the third stage in words, phrases, or sentences in the song's lyrics, which is then represented. The last stage is hypogram which is the appearance of actual words or linguistic meanings on the data.

### 4. Result and Discussion

After the writers analyse the song from every stanza, the meaning of unrequited love in the song "Pacman" from the first stanza until the fourth stanza by heuristic reading can be established. In the first verse, we know the meaning from the heuristic reading, when it is getting longer and getting harder to love someone. It becomes increasingly difficult to do (loving someone) when our minds or feelings and actions are not harmonized with loving someone because it is already contrary. Although it is not harmonized between thoughts and actions, the action is still done (calling someone a loved one), while the loved one does not respond to him.

In the second verse, with such feelings, everything always repeats continuously but never gets what he is looking for (love). He feels this relationship would be like a game that just played each other's feelings and conditions. Like a game, this constant state will end when one of them loses. The next verse (pre-chorus), from the heuristic reading, states that he does not want to be left behind, but he also does not want to feel hurt at the same time. Nevertheless, someone does not want to be like that either. Therefore, all he wants is to love her to death. At the end of the story, his feelings could kill him. His own feelings killed him. Fear surrounds

him, haunting him. However, he still wanted to hold his beloved hand even though he would be killed one day. After he is killed, he will burn to the ground. The term burn can be conveyed with the phrase “buried in.” He will be buried with a smile. He shows that he would be buried with a smile if he died with his loved ones.

Through the heuristic reading above of the full lyrics, the heuristic result is someone who loves his beloved so much that he makes him do anything, as long as he ends up with his lover. The lyrics show the viewpoint that the man is willing to do everything for someone he loves. The heuristic readings above only give the song lyrics meaning based on the conventions of its language as a first stage of the semiotic system. Thus, the lyrics above do not give the meaning contained in the song. To give meaning, the lyrics of this song must be read repeatedly (hermeneutic) and interpreted based on literary conventions which are the second stage of semiotic systems according to Riffaterre.

The phrase “over and over, like it's Red Rover” expresses something that goes on and on like a game. Thus, each word is interpreted according to the dictionary or other sources but with the actual meaning. To give real meaning, the reading process must be done based on literary conventions, and for example, the text is expressed indirectly and has allusions such as metaphors and metonymy interpreted.

“Pacman” is an allusion that stands for someone getting chased and loved by his loved ones. The term “Pacman” could be replaced with a universal pronoun, and it can be either “he” or “she.” In this, it is illustrated that she always avoids pursuing someone who tries hard and loves her to get his love. Someday, the feeling was increasingly empty so the feelings that used to exist were all different. This male figure is described as a man who pursues women as the Pacman. He feels numb because someone he loves makes that feeling disappear as if the person does not need to be loved. The man who knows this thinks that he has pursued something wrong like a fool incapable of thinking clearly. He realizes he has done nothing but still behaves like he is still chasing after his loved ones. The person being pursued (his lover) never responds, but she tries to give the man hope that she has the same feelings. Whereas she, the Pacman, never had similar feelings at all toward him. She only comes when she needs the presence of the man.

The man always wishes for his feelings even though his mind has rejected the feeling. So, the man only puts his feelings forward, not his thoughts. Here the man relies solely on his feelings, not his thoughts. Finally, the feeling happens continually as if there is no end to his whole feeling as in bait of “like it's Red Rover.” In hermeneutic readings, EAJ writes the term Red Rover as a metaphor to describe the man's feelings and situations. The Red Rover also refers to the woman who only contacts the man when she is bored but never starts a relationship. He only gives up on repeated cycles even though his feelings are treated like arcade games that will never stop until he runs out of patience in the lyrics “run out of quarters soon.” Besides the cycles he and his beloved always repeat, he seems to live and get trapped in a maze or labyrinth—a labyrinth occupied by only the two “Pacman and lover.” Pacman is a game that depicts Pacman characters and ghosts walking around in a maze where the ghost travels around to get Pacman. The ghost is portrayed as a man always looking for his dearest, even though his feelings also follow him and are ready to kill him.

However, despite his circumstances, the man was worried about his feelings. He wanted to end everything, but he did not want to leave or be left behind, and also, he could not do much of anything. He unknowingly has feelings and thoughts that are inversely proportional to each other. He was unsure about his feelings; he was worried about the ending. The feeling he had was too heavy until finally the feeling that destroyed the condition of the man. That feeling that lacks clarity seems to turn into a monster that is ready to pounce on it one day. His feelings of worry and love towards someone raise a fear that eventually makes the man unable to do anything. After he cannot do anything because he is threatened by his feelings, gripping himself, he still wants to hold the woman and wants her by the man's side who cannot do anything.

When he has excellent feelings for anything or anyone, those feelings will one day destroy him as well. It is like the feeling is too big in a relationship, then those feelings and relationships will destroy whatever he is got. The relationship will be destroyed because of the lover's presence. However, such destruction will not be a problem as long as he gets what he wants. He will be destroyed after getting what he has been chasing, and even he is willing to risk his life to get someone's love. This song also depicted a loved one as the partner Pacman, namely the ghost in the game Pacman. If she comes into contact with or meets the ghost, Pacman will be destroyed and die.

Overall, the song tells the story of a state of romance that repeatedly occurs, with endless cycles like a maze in a Pacman game. The cycle of a relationship is like Pacman and his soulmate, the never-separated ghost. The man wanted his partner. Even after getting it, he would die for his feelings and a relationship that would never unite because the man would lose his life if he managed to get his heart heard. However, in this song, the man does not matter because he will die with his soul mate, most notably when he dies. Pacman's game will end with the death of Pacman and Ghost (Pacman and lover).

The convention of literary works is universal. The hermeneutic reading above from the first stanza to the fourth stanza interprets that when we have too excessive a feeling of something we are looking for, that feeling will destroy us. Like in a one-sided relationship, the more we pursue, the more pain we receive. When we get what we are not supposed to get, all we get afterward is pain. When we go after someone who never even needs us, all we feel is a feeling of pain.

After we pass the hermeneutic reading, we go to the model in the lyrics of the song “Pacman.” It is “Pacman and Lover,” in the second verse, which is the whole feeling and circumstance felt by the Pacman, and someone he pursues as a lover. Lover in this lyric refers to the object that always follows Pacman, considered a ghost. The woman herself presents as Pacman, while her “lover” is a ghost in the game. Pacman is telling her lover not to hurt or even kill her, and she is telling the ghost to leave her alone so that Pacman can continue the game or life.

The lyrics of the song “Pacman” have four variants: “my head says no, but my phone keeps calling you” in the first verse. The second is “Play me over and over, Pacman and lover,” the third is “fear is holding me down,” and the last variant is “if I die, it's with you.”

In the first variant, he does not have a great feeling because his mind rejects everything about the feeling, but his action reverses what is in his mind. He feels dumb because he does everything that is not in accordance with his mind as if what he was doing was happening in his subconscious condition. The second variant of lyrics, “Play me over and over, Pacman and lover,” means that the man does a repetitive process that will never pursue the lover. We know that Pacman is a game that can be played continuously without any level limits. The game is always continuously repeated, and in the end still reaches a point where Pacman is eventually going to die and the end. Even at the 256th level where the game occurs, a bug makes Pacman cannot be continuously played.

In the third variant of the lyrics, “fear is holding me down,” due to the repetitive process of pursuing the lover, the feeling is excessive, but fear can destroy everything, even his feelings because the man knows that chasing his lover is just like risking his life and also his lover’s life. The last variant means that the man does not feel in trouble for chasing the lover. He actually knows the end of this relationship, but he is ready for everything as long as he is with his partner, so he still needs to get his lover even though his presence in her life will kill the lover.

In the lyrics of the song “Pacman,” matrix is found as “one-sided love.” This matrix is found in the lyrics of the chorus section of the song. The meaning in the matrix is the most important because it is the overall meaning of the song's lyrics. Overall, the song “Pacman” lyrics are a person's feelings in pursuit of his love, but the love pursued will not make both happy and united. That kind of feeling will ultimately kill them because they will never unite, and even their story is broken before they start.

The last part is the hypogram. Hypograms are divided into two potential hypograms and actual hypograms (Ratih, 2016). The potential hypogram in Pacman's lyrics is “Unrequited love.” In the song's lyrics, this phrase is a reality that everything loved is not destined to be ours. Thus, what we love and pursue can destroy us one time, and it will all end. The actual hypogram is “Pacman and Lover,” where the phrase is a model in the song “Pacman,” which means a relationship that will never be united as Pacman and his lover.

## 5. Conclusion

The research discovers that the song “Pacman” lyrics have a specific meaning after reviewing a semiotic approach by Michael Riffaterre. This approach includes heuristic readings, hermeneutic readings, matrix searches, models, variants, and hypograms. The mixture of semiotic features in the “Pacman” song lyrics constructed a story and delivered meaning to the listeners.

After exploring and analysing the song lyric, the writers have found that each stanza has a specific meaning. An unrequited love story will never be united in Eaj's “Pacman” about how we feel about something. It can be concluded that the meaning of “Unrequited love” from the hermeneutic reading of Eaj's song “Pacman” is more described as “Pacman and lover” that will never unite. In this song, the lyricist attempts to convey the message that having a bloated feeling towards someone we love gets the possibility of hurting ourselves. In the same way as Pacman, the more we pursue, the greater our feelings, and the more heartache and disappointment we will get. The more excessive our expectations in loving someone, the greater the pain we get. Even someone we love will feel that pain. There is something destined not to be together, as much as after, like Pacman and lover.

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