

# Representation of Unrequited Love: Barthes' Semiotics Study in the Selected Songs of *The Secret of Us* Album by Gracie Abrams

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This research aims to analyze the representation of unrequited love in two selected songs from Gracie Abrams' *The Secret of Us* album using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Unrequited love is an emotional experience that is often experienced by individuals and is often expressed through music. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with Barthes' two-stage semiotic analysis, to reveal the explicit and implicit meanings in the song lyrics. Data was collected through documentation and analyzed based on linguistic signs that appear in the lyrics. The results show that the relationship depicted in the lyrics does not show an unequal relationship as studied in Bringle's theory. Thus, Barthes' semiotic analysis helps reveal the representation of unrequited love in Gracie Abrams' song in the album *The Secret of Us*.

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## I. Introduction

Unrequited love is a common phenomenon experienced by many people. Being social creatures, humans basically want to establish relationships with other people, including in terms of romance. However, not all love that is felt will be reciprocated with the same feelings. Sometimes, a relationship with another person is favorable, but the feeling is not received or reciprocated. This is called unrequited love when love only comes from one side. Although this happens often, the feelings that arise can be very disturbing, such as sadness, disappointment, or feeling undervalued.

As stated above that unrequited love is a fairly common phenomenon, some studies show that almost 95% of men and women have experienced it [1]. It indicates that unrequited love is an almost universal experience that can happen to anyone, regardless of their gender or background. Despite being common, it can still have a profound emotional impact on the individual experiencing it. Further information according to [2] unrequited love is characterized by a one-sided attraction. This phenomenon shows that in a relationship, feelings of love do not always lead to a mutual relationship. This phenomenon is interesting to study because according to [3] someone who is liked generally tends to respond to the feelings given to them. However, in the case of unrequited love, individuals who reject love do not show reciprocation of feelings towards the person who likes them. Logically, a romantic relationship will not form if both parties have no interest in each other, as there is no initiative to initiate the relationship. However, in situations of unrequited love, the would-be lover may take steps to approach the rejector even though their feelings are not reciprocated [3]. Based on the quote above, this shows that strong hope and attraction can encourage individuals to continue to seek attention or closeness despite the signs of rejection.

In the face this phenomenon of unrequited love, music has long been a medium of expression for people. According to [4], music has the unique ability to articulate feelings that are difficult to express through ordinary words, providing space for listeners to represent their personal experiences. This makes music an effective tool in processing and interpreting complex emotional experiences. In addition, there are also lyrics in music, music and lyrics are two complementary elements, where beautiful and memorable lyrics can effectively convey messages to listeners. According to Suryono in [5] Language in song lyrics has a crucial role in conveying social criticism, reflecting society's anxiety, and providing entertainment. With the power of language, song lyrics are able to build

awareness, influence perceptions, and arouse the feelings of listeners, making it an effective form of communication in conveying messages and deeper meanings. This is reinforced by the statement from [6] who said song lyrics are written based on the personal experience or anxiety of the creator, which is then arranged in such a way that it can be enjoyed by a wide audience.

In line with the paragraph above, currently, one of the musicians, Gracie Abrams, born on September 7, 1999, in Los Angeles, is known as a singer-songwriter with an introspective style and emotionally laden lyrics. Since releasing her debut *Mean It* in 2019, she has built a reputation as one of the contemporary pop musicians who are able to convey personal narratives in an authentic way [7]. Her popularity further increased after she opened for Taylor Swift's *The Eras Tour* in 2023 and 2024, as well as Olivia Rodrigo's *Sour Tour* in 2022. In 2024, Abrams earned a Grammy nomination in the Best New Artist category, confirming her position as one of the most influential young musicians today [8]. This shows that her work is not only widely appreciated, but also recognized in the music industry.

The album *The Secret of Us*, released in June 2024, received much critical acclaim and was included in Billboard's list of The 50 Best Albums of 2024 [9]. In addition, her song *Us*, a collaboration with Taylor Swift, was also nominated for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance at the 2025 Grammy Awards [10]. Through her songs, Abrams describes the experience of unrequited love, feelings of loss, regret, and ultimately the journey towards self-acceptance. These themes are relevant to how individuals process emotional experiences in real life, making this album a reflection of the inner struggles of many of its listeners.

Abrams' popularity and her impact in the music industry are the main reasons why her album *The Secret of Us* was chosen as the object of study in this research. With a wide listener base and achievements, and the recognition she has received from various music industry parties, her album's lyrics significantly influence the listeners' interpretations and emotions. In this context, representation becomes a relevant key concept to analyze, as stated by [11] that representation is the ability to describe or imagine something. The study of representation is important because human experience, including emotional phenomena such as unrequited love, is inseparable from meaning and language as the main tool to express it. Therefore, an appropriate analysis method is needed to uncover these meanings in song lyrics. This research uses a semiotic approach, in particular Roland Barthes' semiotics, which aims to explore meaning in depth. The essence of his theory lies in the concept of two stages in signification. The first stage in the signification process explains the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a sign, as well as its relation to references in the real world. Barthes calls this stage denotation. Denotation refers to the basic or common meaning of a sign, which is the direct and explicit understanding [12]. In other words, denotation is a meaning that is not influenced by context or subjective interpretation, so it can be universally understood.

The second stage of signification is called connotation. Connotation occurs when a sign acquires additional meanings that are influenced by the feelings, emotions, and cultural values of the individual or group using the sign. In this stage, meaning becomes more subjective or at least inter-subjective. However, connotation is inseparable from denotation, because the signifier and signified in connotation depart from the underlying denotative meaning [13]. This means that connotative meaning always has a basis in denotative meaning, but then develops according to culture, experience, and social context. For example, a picture of an apple can have connotations of health or even a symbol of knowledge, depending on how society interprets it.

In addition, Barthes also introduced the concept of myth. He argues that myths are a culture's way of thinking about something, as well as a system of concepts that shape collective understanding. He emphasized that myths work by naturalizing history, making something historical seem natural and as if it were indisputable [12]. For example, an apple in certain contexts is not just a fruit, but can be a symbol of knowledge or temptation, as in the story of Adam and Eve. From the explanation of the concept of semiotics, especially in Barthes' semiotics. So to uncover the meaning of the representation of unrequited love, this semiotic concept is very appropriate to use. Therefore, to support this research, the researcher reads several previous studies as references that guide the author with research findings and materials

First previous research titled "*Analisis Semiotika dalam Lirik Lagu Album Bersamamu Karya Jaz*" conducted by [14] discusses the meaning contained in the lyrics of the songs in *Jaz's Bersamamu* album with a semiotic approach. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's sign theory, this research analyzes icons, indexes, and symbols in the song lyrics to reveal the themes of love, togetherness, and motivation. The correlation technique in semiotic analysis is also applied to identify the relationship

between various signs in the lyrics. The results show that the songs in the album *Bersamamu* contain symbols that reinforce the message of optimism and support in relationships, such as in the phrases "*taklukan dunia*" and "*melangkah bersamaku*". In addition, musical elements such as melody and harmony, as well as visual elements in the music video, also reinforce the meaning to be conveyed, creating a deeper emotional experience for the listener. The conclusion of this study confirms that the meaning of songs does not only depend on the lyrical text, but is also influenced by the social, cultural context, as well as the accompanying musical and visual elements, thus providing new insights into how songs can be a complex and meaningful communication medium in representing human experience.

Next previous studies titled "*Analisis Semiotika Makna Motivasi pada Lirik Lagu 'Bangun Pemuda Pemudi'*" conducted by [15] examines the motivational meanings contained in the lyrics of the song "*Bangun Pemuda Pemudi*" by Alfred Simanjutak. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, this research analyzes the signifier and signified aspects to reveal motivational messages aimed at the young generation of Indonesia. Using descriptive qualitative research method and constructivist paradigm, this research divides the whole song lyrics into several sentences to be analyzed in depth. The results show that this song not only functions as a musical work, but also as a semiotic medium that provides inspiration and encouragement to the younger generation to play an active role in nation building. The analysis found that the song lyrics contain values such as determination, honesty, sincerity, and noble character as a moral foundation for the youth. The conclusion of the research confirms that through the use of metaphors and strong symbols, the song succeeds in building a narrative that evokes the spirit and responsibility of Indonesia's young generation in achieving the nation's progress and glory through struggle, integrity and good attitude.

This research important because there's an interesting phenomenon that hasn't been discussed much: how the feeling of unrequited love is portrayed in popular songs today. Imagine, almost 95% of people have experienced unrequited love in their lives. It's a very common experience but rarely studied in depth in contemporary music. I was interested in exploring how Gracie Abrams, a rising Grammy-nominated singer, expresses this feeling in her album "*The Secret of Us*". Unlike previous research that has focused more on general themes such as motivation or life values in songs, I wanted to delve specifically into the dynamics of unrequited love. Many people listen to songs to find solace in heartbreak, and Gracie Abrams' album seems to be a mirror for their experiences.

Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, I was able to uncover not only the literal meaning of the lyrics, but also the implied meanings and cultural myths contained within them. This gives us a deeper understanding of how the current generation perceives and deals with unrequited love stories. Ultimately, this research is not only useful for the academic world, but also to help us all better understand how music becomes a place where we process and heal hurt. By understanding representations of unrequited love in popular music, we can better understand how people deal with and overcome these difficult emotional experiences.

## II. Method

This research uses qualitative methods. According to [17] the qualitative approach aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, and motivations, thoroughly through descriptions in the form of words. This approach is applied in a natural context by utilizing various methods that are in accordance with the natural characteristics of the research. Qualitative research emphasizes social inquiry that focuses on how individuals interpret and understand their experiences and the world around them. This method produces findings that are not obtained through statistical procedures or quantification techniques.

In an attempt to collect relevant data for this study, the researcher followed the basic principles in qualitative research methods. According to [18], when conducting qualitative research, researchers should accurately, completely, and methodically capture any information that may be useful by using field notes, sketches, voice recordings, photographs, and other related techniques. Based on that guideline, the researcher took several steps to collect data. First, the researcher gathered the songs from the album *The Secret of Us* through the Spotify platform. Then, the researcher collected the lyrics of each song in the album. Finally, the researcher obtained secondary data related to previous research on the same object to support the analysis.

In analyzing qualitative data, researchers follow systematic steps so that the results obtained can be considered as academically credible. [19] describe qualitative data analysis as follows: condensing

data, which is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, summarizing, and transforming raw data; displaying data that has been condensed into a form to help conclude; and drawing and verifying conclusions. Based on this explanation, the researcher took several steps to analyze the data. First, the researcher categorized the song lyrics into a table containing denotative, connotative, and myth found in the songs. Second, the researcher analyzed the denotation, connotation, and myth in each stanza presented in the table. Third, the researcher used the results of the analysis to draw a conclusion about the representation of unrequited love in the song lyrics

### III. Results and Discussion

The following table contains the denotation, connotation, and myth analysis of Gracie Abrams' The Secret of Us album, which is organized to identify the explicit and implicit meanings contained in the lyrics of these selected songs

**Table 1 Denotation, Connotation and Myth from *Close To You* song**

Lyrics	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
“Smoky, dark, crowded room, I need nothing”	Describes a smoky, dark and crowded room, where the narrator doesn't feel like she needs anything	These lyrics create an atmosphere of loneliness despite being in a crowd, signifying the emotional state of someone who feels lost or alienated despite being surrounded by many people	These lyrics state state where someone is in a crowd but feels empty. This myth developed in a society that often imposes being happy in a crowd as a standard of happiness, while many people hide sadness underneath the crowded situation.
“I burn for you and you don't even know my name”	Directly state that the Narrator feels a strong attraction towards someone who doesn't even know her name	In these lyrics, the narrator describes her feelings as being burn, a metaphor to show the intensity of emotion, desire, and suffering that burns inside her. However, the suffering feels meaningless because the person she loves doesn't even realize her existence, doesn't know her name, or even her feelings.	This lyric shows how much feeling a person holds. But ironically, they are never considered or even realized by the person they love. This myth grew out of the experiences of many people who felt it was enough to love silently, even though they were actually torturing themselves. In our society, this kind of feeling is commonplace.
“Pull the trigger on the gun I gave you when we met”	Describes the act of pulling the trigger of a gun given when narrator first met, which can be interpreted as a form of giving up control or power to another	In this lyric, the narrator seems to realize early on that she has given up something fragile - perhaps her heart, her trust, or her ability to be hurt - to the person she loves.	In this lyrics is a myth that often occurs in relationships: that giving everything from the beginning is proof of love. This expression shows how someone from the

	person in a relationship	“The gun” is a metaphor for the power or potential to hurt that she has willingly given away in that first moment of hopeful meeting. When she says “pull the trigger,” the narrator implies that the person is now actually using that power to hurt her	beginning has given up the most delicate side of themselves to their partner, with the hope that those feelings will be taken care of.
“Break my heart and start a fire, you got me overnight”	show the experience of heartbreak and burning feelings in a short time after meeting the person that narrator’s love	The narrator seems to be saying that in just a short period of time, the person has completely controlled her feelings-and destroyed her at the same time.	This lyric creates a common myth that great feelings can arise in an instant. However, what hurts is when those feelings are not reciprocated with the same depth. The lyrics also suggest that in that short moment, not only love is created, but also pain

Representation of Unrequited Love

The song “*Close to You*” represents unrequited love through the form of “unequal love relationship” as stated in the theory of [2]. In the lyrics “*I burn for you and you don't even know my name*”, there is a clear emotional disparity between the narrator and the object of her love, in which the narrator feels deep desire and pain, while the person she loves is not even aware of her existence. This reflects the most painful form of unrequited love, when great feelings are never noticed, let alone reciprocated. Metaphorical elements in lyrics such as “*pull the trigger on the gun I gave you*” and “*break my heart and start a fire*” reinforce the idea that love given fully leads to hurt, showing the vulnerability of being given with no guarantee of reciprocation.

**Table 2 Denotation, Connotation and Myth from *Felt Good About You* song**

Lyrics	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
“I felt good about you 'til I didn't”	In denotative terms, this lyric means that a person feels good or comfortable towards another person at first, but then the feeling turns bad.	The lyrics describe a sharp emotional change in a relationship. The phrase “I felt good about you” suggests that initially the narrator had positive feelings towards the person. However, the addition of “'til I didn't” shows the turning point, when	This myth illustrates that feelings of affection are not always eternal love that can grow strong at first, giving hope and comfort, but can also fade away over time

		those good feelings turn into disappointment.	
“Got what you demanded, picture perfect like you planned it”	The narrator has fulfilled all the demands and desires of his partner according to the plan set	The lyrics illustrate in an unequal relationship that the success of a relationship is often measured by the extent to which a person can fulfill their partner's expectations, even if it means sacrificing themselves. The phrase “got what you demanded” describes a situation where one party is constantly adjusting to fulfill their partner's desires, until finally creating a relationship that looks “picture perfect” looks ideal from the outside, but is full of pressure on the inside.	In many cases, someone feels the need to constantly adjust and become the idealized version in order to maintain a relationship that appears fine from the outside. This myth reflects the social pressure to be the perfect partner without considering the balance of the relationship.
“We were fightin' more than laughin', black and blue”	The narrator conveys that fighting dominated the interactions in the relationship	This lyrics describes a relationship that is full of conflict. The narrator describes how fighting and tension dominate the relationship, more often than laughter or happiness, whereas it should be laughing that dominates the relationship. The phrase “black and blue” refers to the deep sadness experienced by the narrator.	The lyrics reflect the myth in many relationships that it is common for a relationship to be filled with more fighting than happiness. The lyrics “fightin‘ more than laughin’” illustrate how often couples hurt each other instead of getting stronger.
“Fell hard then I lost your interest”	The intensity of the love feelings initially felt was eventually followed by a loss of interest from the other party	The narrator reveals that she fell in love with great love “fell hard” which indicates a deep and sincere emotional involvement. However, once she opened herself up	When a woman gives her whole heart and opens herself up completely in a relationship, that is when her partner starts to lose interest. This is showing too much love

		<p>completely, that's when the partner lost interest. This creates the impression that the greater the love, the faster the attention disappears</p>	<p>is considered a weakness, not a strength. It reflects the emotional inequality that is often normalized in relationships, where one party is perceived as too intense while the other feels bored</p>
<p>“Bad nights, new girls, misgivings”</p>	<p>Directly refers to bad nights, the presence of new women, as well as the appearance of doubts in the relationship</p>	<p>“Bad nights” are nights of hurt, sadness, or insomnia that the narrator experiences due to the breakdown of the relationship. “New girls” refers to the presence of new women in the life of the man she used to be with-a symbol of her replacement coming too soon and painfully. While “misgivings” indicate the suspicion, doubt, or regret she feels all the time-whether towards the man, towards herself, or towards the whole dynamic of their relationship.</p>	<p>From its connotative meaning, a myth emerges that after a breakup, men will quickly move on with a new woman, while women are left with wounds, anxiety, and regret. This myth emphasizes the view that women are destined to feel deeper and longer, while men are the ones who easily forget and quickly find a replacement. It also reinforces the belief that heartbreak for women is a lonely phase, and that women will always be the ones who are more hurt and slower to recover after love ends.</p>
<p>“Got me where you want me, in your palm it's almost funny”</p>	<p>The narrator feels completely under the control by her partner</p>	<p>The lyric “got me where you want me” shows that the narrator is in a weak, inferior and insecure position. While “in your palm” is a metaphor that describes how small and helpless she is in the dynamics of the relationship, as if she is just a small part. while “it's almost funny” gives a touch of irony, a form of bitterness wrapped in sarcasm. She is aware of her</p>	<p>The lyrics reflect a myth that often occurs in relationship dynamics, that women should accept a weak and powerless position in relationships, as if it's part of their role. The line “got me where you want me” and the metaphor of “in your palm” form an image of power imbalance, where women are considered natural to be submissive, controlled, or even emotionally</p>

		helplessness, but can't do anything about it.	manipulated. The irony in “it's almost funny” reinforces the myth that pain or loss of control in relationships is something to be laughed at rather than confronted.
“You felt nice for a bad decision”	States that although the partner’s presence felt nice, the relationship was a bad decision.	This lyric is a sharp satire from the narrator towards her partner who seems calm or even pleased after making a bad decision. The lyrics imply hidden emotions, such as anger, disappointment, or bitterness, because the woman sees that after all that has happened, the man can still feel comfortable with his bad decision.	The lyrics reflect the myth that men can feel secure even after making decisions that hurt others, especially in the context of relationships. the myth is that in relationship dynamics, men are often portrayed as less burdened by the emotional or moral consequences of their bad decisions, as if they are emotionally free.
“Til I realized I felt fuller without you”	The narrator feels better in the absence of her partner	The lyric “Til I realized I felt fuller without you” conveys a moment of emotional enlightenment for the narrator, who realizes that the presence of the person she once loved made her feel empty, and that partner’s departure made room for her to grow and recover. the word “fuller” is not just about happiness, but about feeling whole, independent, and valuable without having to rely on others. The lyrics are powerful and serve as a turning point where the narrator realizes that the relationship she once considered important is consuming her, making her lose	This myth reinforces the narrative that losing a partner can be a turning point towards emotional recovery, as if happiness can only be achieved after suffering. The word “fuller” symbolizes a woman who no longer defines herself through her partner, but through self-love.

		part of who she is. When she manages to let go, there is a sense of fullness that she never felt before.	
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#### Representation of Unrequited Love

The song “Felt Good About You” represents a form of unrequited love that belongs to the category of unequal love relationships in the theory proposed by [2]. In this category, unrequited love occurs in the context of a real relationship where one party loves much more deeply than the other party. This is reflected in the lyrics of the song that show emotional inequality and affection, such as in the quotes “Got what you demanded, picture perfect like you planned it” and “Got me where you want me, in your palm it's almost funny”, which indicate that the narrator is in a position of being emotionally controlled and used. The phrase “Fell hard then I lost your interest” makes it clear that the loving party is slowly experiencing unequal love, as their partner's attention fades.

#### IV. Conclusion

At the denotation level, the lyrics in “Close to You” and “Felt Good About You” display literal meanings that express the experience of unrequited love directly. Denotatively, these lyrics describe concrete situations such as being in a dark and smoke-filled room, harboring deep feelings for someone who does not know the narrator's name, giving control to others, and experiencing heartbreak. Direct phrases like “I burn for you and you don't even know my name” and “Fell hard then I lost your interest” clearly show the imbalance of feelings in the relationship. This denotative meaning becomes the basis for understanding the deeper level of meaning.

At the connotation level, the lyrics contain more complex and emotional layers of meaning. Metaphors such as “pull the trigger on the gun I gave you” and “in your palm it's almost funny” present images of power and vulnerability in an unbalanced relationship. The connotation of “burn” suggests the intensity of painful emotions, while the phrase “felt fuller without you” connotes the process of self-discovery and recovery after letting go of an unhealthy relationship. These connotative meanings enrich our understanding of the dynamics of unrequited love that involve not only sadness, but also despair, vulnerability, and ultimately self-liberation.

Myth analysis reveals how the lyrics reflect culturally embedded beliefs and values about love and relationships. Myths such as “feelings of love can be instantaneous but painful when unrequited” and “showing too much love is a weakness, not a strength” illustrate society's view of power dynamics in romantic relationships. Other myths such as “women should accept the position of weakness in relationships” and “after a breakup, men will move on quickly while women are left with wounds” reflect gender expectations that still circulate in society. Interestingly, these songs also challenge these myths, as in the lyrics “Til I realized I felt fuller without you” which shows a narrative shift from emotional dependence to self-empowerment.

This research has successfully achieved the goal as stated in the Introduction, which is to identify the representation of unrequited love in Gracie Abrams' songs using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The results of the analysis in Results and Discussion show that all the songs analyzed represent a form of unrequited love that is categorized as an unequal love relationship, as described by Bringle et al. in the theory of unrequited love. In this unequal relationship, there is one party who has greater and more intense feelings, while the other party does not reciprocate these feelings equally - either in the form of emotions, attention, or commitment. The prospect of developing the results of this research is wide open, both for further literary-music studies with different objects and genres, as well as for exploration in the context of cultural psychology, gender representation in love relationships, and its application in educational media to train critical analysis skills of popular texts.

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