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Town, Company, and Family: The Hadley Power Struggle within *Written on the Wind*

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Nothing is ever quite what it seems. Likewise, no classic film means only what is imprinted upon the literal surface. Something, be it taboo sexual desire or power struggle, remains covered by the literal meaning constructed through the bonding of filmic and denotative elements. *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), which employs features of psychoanalytic “dreamwork” and semiotics, is no exception to the rule. Rhyming, repetitions with necessary variation, and the reappearance of motifs with significant alterations at each reoccurrence uncover a world of incest and power struggle. Familial sexual tension increases along with the desire to wield and control the gun, a symbol for patriarchal power.

At first glance, *Written on the Wind* tells a story of a family, its friends, and the struggles both sides endure, but a symbolic meaning underlies the plot. The film’s perceivable materials, visual and sonic, are linked to a literal plotline. According to semiotics, the science of signs, this inseparable link between the perceived and an underlying meaning within film mimics what occurs within language (Greene class lecture 17 October 2005). Instead of a film’s acts, scenes, shots, and frames, language is formed by paragraphs, sentences, words, and phonemes. The perceivable materials of the language, those visual or sonic qualities, link with the mental concepts which arise in response to the stimuli (17 October 2005). These elements, known as the signifier and signified, unite to form a sign. A word, written or spoken, is a sign. Within a film, a relationship between signifiers and signifieds is constructed through perceivable qualities of the image and the constructed meaning. Unlike language, film does not readily provide a part that equates with the word. The nature of the shot with its stacked images “resembles a complete statement (of one or more sentences), in that it is already the result of an essentially free combination” (Metz 70). Therefore, the entire perceived film becomes the signifier and the diegesis (story) encompasses the signified (Greene class lecture 19 October 2005).

The nature of the filmic signified permits an underlying meaning, significant in discovering the abstract within *Written on the Wind*. Two meanings exist within the diegesis, the denotative and the connotative. The denotative or literal meaning represents the plot. The connotative or abstract meaning arises through denotation (Metz 73). A clear and unquestionable narrative permits an abstract interpretation. Without a clear understanding of where Kyle Hadley stands within the family, who is his sister, wife, and so on, further analysis becomes impossible.

The relationship between signifier and signified is established in order to provide a literal and unquestionable meaning. The degree to which each shot is connected in relation to one another reveals the connotative or abstract meaning disguised through variant repetition and displacement. Displacement is a psychoanalytic term that refers to the substitution of one figure for another. In psychoanalysis, the dichotomy of the literal versus symbolic meaning is represented as two significant parts of a dream. The manifest content, which is the dream or film before analysis, represents the displaced object (the literal). Through analysis, the latent content or underlying meaning (understood as the signified within semiotics), decodes the displacement (Greene class lecture 31 October 2005). In a classic film revolving around family and power like *Written on the Wind*, what the audience absorbs through the senses implies a meaning saturated with symbolism and suppressed desire.

Both Thierry Kuntzel and Raymond Bellour stress the importance of the opening and closing scenes in delineating connotative meaning. At the opening, the audience experiences an
Although the plot establishes him with a different last name and his own father, Hoak, Mitch Jasper Hadley, the father, confesses how much he wants to meet and kiss his Hadleys after Miami Beach, he denies any belief in incestuous ties with Marilee. Although they are not literally brother and sister, they grew up together like brother and sister. The desire for power builds upon the already established incestuous links between characters of the Hadley family. As the film progresses and incestuous desire heightens, each family member fights for control of the gun, the phallic symbol. He says, "forget it" twice, and Kyle obeys like a son to a powerful, "equipped" father. Through his use for family, company, and town, every person embedded within the Hadley world transforms into a Hadley. The viewer is invited to create incestuous relationships between any two characters existing within that world because of the nature of incest. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, familial relationships are culturally, not biologically, constructed (Greene class lecture 31 October 2005). This indicates that there is no innate reason for humans to avoid incestuous relationships. Cultures create the incest taboo in order to avoid inbred children. Interestingly, if the opening depicts a world containing one family, then such an incest taboo cannot readily exist. After the credit sequence, the plot's repetition and move outside of the Hadley bubble conceals incestuous relationships. This concealment is necessary in order to establish audience acceptance. The innumerable possibilities for incestuous relations siphon off possibilities. Literally, the narrative provides five characters acting within typical positions. The viewer is permitted to formulate multiple array of possible meanings. As the film progresses, the symbolic meanings funnel down until the "repetition-resolution" within the final scene (Bellour 72). Within the concluding scene, the variation denies the suppressed desire, presenting the spectator with a limited but culturally practical option. The audience follows Mitch Wayne and Lucy Moore, representing an unrelated couple with clearly established sexual identities, beyond the Hadley world.

At the opening of Written on the Wind, the audience witnesses a selective montage of the present before flashing back to the past for most of the film. The film begins with a whirlwind of images free from diegetic control. According to Bellour, most classic film presents an array of multiple meanings called plurality (Greene class lecture 26 Oct. 2005). Their placement, within the credit sequence, permits the viewer an array of signified denotative (literal) or connotative (abstract) meanings. The viewer is permitted to formulate multiple meanings from the stacked images. Some of the most significant are, oil derricks, a racing car, the Hadley name, a drunken character, a couple in a bedroom, a woman looking out a window, the open door, the act of ascending or descending stairs, wielding a gun, and a fainting woman. These perceptions repeat throughout the film. As they repeat and vary, certain images become more significant as linkage with the connotative occurs.

The first of the images to demonstrate a symbolic meaning occurs with the name "Hadley." This image reappears throughout the opening sequence and bridges into the first flashback scene. First, the name appears as Hadley Inc., representing the company. A shot of the city sign follows. Inviting additional meaning, the name of the city is Hadley. Through these representations, the name "Hadley" comes to stand for every character within the film; through its use for family, company, and town, every person embedded within the Hadley world transforms into a Hadley. The viewer is invited to create incestuous relationships between any two characters existing within that world because of the nature of incest. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, familial relationships are culturally, not biologically, constructed (Greene class lecture 31 October 2005). This indicates that there is no innate reason for humans to avoid incestuous relationships. Cultures create the incest taboo in order to avoid inbred children. Interestingly, if the opening depicts a world containing one family, then such an incest taboo cannot readily exist. After the credit sequence, the plot's repetition and move outside of the Hadley bubble conceals incestuous relationships. This concealment is necessary in order to establish audience acceptance. The innumerable possibilities for incestuous relations siphon off possibilities. Literally, the narrative provides five characters acting within typical positions. The audience views father, brother, sister, male best friend, and wife.

Initially, Lucy Moore, who becomes Lucy Moore Hadley through her marriage to Kyle, works as a secretary within the company owned by Hadley. Her introduction to Mitch establishes her place. Two scenes later, Kyle refers to her as "a member of the happy, happy, happy Hadley industrial family." This inches her closer to a familial tie. Then, literally Jasper Hadley, the father, confesses how much he wants to meet and kiss his little sister. Again, in Jasper's office and with Kyle present, the two kiss each other. This time, the kiss falls on the mouth. Also, Lucy calls him "dad," after he fastens a necklace around her neck similar to a lover.

Like Lucy, Mitch Wayne entwines with the Hadley family as an adopted brother. Although the plot establishes him with a different last name and his own father, Hoak, Mitch and Marilee Hadley repeatedly act the brother and sister. When Mitch first arrives at the Hadleys after Miami Beach, he denies any belief in incestuous ties with Marilee. Although they are not literally brother and sister, they grew "up together like brother and sister." The viewer is invited to create incestuous relationships between any two characters existing within that world because of the nature of incest. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, familial relationships are culturally, not biologically, constructed (Greene class lecture 31 October 2005). This indicates that there is no innate reason for humans to avoid incestuous relationships. Cultures create the incest taboo in order to avoid inbred children. Interestingly, if the opening depicts a world containing one family, then such an incest taboo cannot readily exist. After the credit sequence, the plot's repetition and move outside of the Hadley bubble conceals incestuous relationships. This concealment is necessary in order to establish audience acceptance. The innumerable possibilities for incestuous relations siphon off possibilities. Literally, the narrative provides five characters acting within typical positions. The audience views father, brother, sister, male best friend, and wife.

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of his stress derives from his implied low sperm count, an indication of castration. The doctor indicates that his phallus or "gun" shoots blanks. While Kyle attempts to wield the gun and fails as the film progresses, he compensates through his alcoholism. Displacement occurs as he repeatedly drinks from long-necked bottles, pointing to his seeming lack of a phallus or, at least, patriarchal power. Throughout most of the film, the audience sees Kyle drinking the liquor down. It is only at the scene where Marilee plants the idea of an adulterous affair between his best friend and wife that he spits it out. Kyle gulps the liquid, only to spit the liquor at his own image in the mirror, similar to an ejaculation. Through this action, his desire to have children through his wielding of the phallus becomes strongest. This action represents a turning point in Kyle's desire, which leads to his castration.

His own sister, Marilee, castrates him through their fight in the dining room. The gun "goes off" and shoots him in the stomach. Prior to this moment, he challenged the father, Mitch, and says that he'll "put a bullet in [his] belly." A real bullet would "castrate" Mitch by killing him. Beyond this, Kyle desires to be the wielder, to penetrate Mitch, making Mitch the female and himself the male/penetrator.

Instead of Mitch, the position of power falls onto Marilee. Her power becomes evident in the courtroom, when Mitch's freedom depends on her decision. At the conclusion of the film, the audience sees her looking out of a window again; this time her gaze, usually held by the male, varies. Instead of looking onto a possible lover, she watches a couple leave. Also, her appearance has changed; she has transformed into a vision of her father, Jasper, as he appears within the portrait in his den. Her hair is pulled back, and she wears a masculine suit. Now, like her father and Mitch, Marilee commands the patriarchal desk. In the position of her father, she holds the oil derrick, another displacement for phallic power. But, unlike men, she sits unhappily. This moment of sadness limits the viewer's ability to identify with her any longer.

Although the viewer has been presented with alternatives and encouraged to identify with multiple characters displaying culturally accepted or denied behaviors, by the conclusion, all options for disobeying societal approval are erased (Kuntzel 25). As Marilee sadly occupies the male seat of power, complete with phallic symbol, the audience follows Mitch Wayne and Lucy Moore. Her power as looker is denied. The audience, like Mitch and Lucy, is no longer linked to the Hadley family. Because of their incestuous and/or phallic desires that deviate from culturally accepted behavior, each of them dies. While Jasper and Kyle both die after the phallic symbol of the gun is denied them, Marilee's feminine self figuratively dies. She must live as a male, without the possibility of an incestuous relationship with Mitch. So, as the audience continues with Mitch's new car, no longer stamped with the "H" monogram, and beyond the house and gate, the camera looks back. The viewer is denied entrance back into the Hadley world with the closure of the gate monogrammed with an "H." Each audience member must wait to experience those culturally irrational and unacceptable behaviors until the next classic film. Through repetition and variation, the same suppressed desires as defined by Freud's psychoanalytic theory will resurface with each classic film. The form becomes the patriarchal parent, permitting a small satisfaction of suppressed desire but never a complete embracing.

Works Cited


