

Spaces of Struggle, Signs of Hope: A Semiotic Journey through Chris Gardner's *The Pursuit of Happyness*

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Abstract

The Pursuit of Happyness is examined semiotically, with an emphasis on how signs and symbols are employed to create meaning in Chris Gardner's experience. Saussure and Barthes laid the basis for the study, which views language, pictures, and locations as systems of signs with cultural and psychological meanings. The study's methodology is semiotic textual analysis, which focuses on language, images, and spatial contexts as culturally and ideologically laden sign systems. The streets of San Francisco, government offices, homeless shelters, and subway bathrooms are examples of narrative spaces that are examined as spatial symbols which signify resilience change and encode social exclusion. Results indicate that these areas function as a dual semiotic structure. Both of these expose class exclusion and weakness while reproducing a broader cultural rhetoric of prosperity and resiliency. According to the study, the story serves as a culturally encoded text that transforms personal suffering into a symbolic conversation about poverty, resistance, and the ideological reconstruction of the American Dream.

Keywords: Semiotics, Symbols, Space, Resilience, *The Pursuit of Happyness*

المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث سيرة الذاتية/السعي وراء السعادة لكريس غاردنر من منظور سيميائي، مركزاً على كيفية توظيف الفضاء السردى بوصفه نظاماً من العلامات التي تنتج دلالات ثقافية واجتماعية وأيديولوجية. يستند البحث إلى الإطار النظري للسيميائيات كما طوره فرديناند دو سوسير، وتشارلز ساندرز بيرس، ورولان بارت، ويعتمد المنهج التحليلي السيميائي النصي في تفكيك الفضاءات السردية مثل الشارع، والمأوى، ودورات المياه العامة، والمؤسسات الحكومية، بوصفها علامات مشحونة بالمعنى.

يسعى البحث إلى الكشف عن كيفية تحول هذه الأمكنة من مواقع محايدة للأحداث إلى رموز دلالية تعبّر عن الإقصاء الطبقي، والهشاشة الاجتماعية، وفي الوقت ذاته عن الصمود والمقاومة الفردية. وتُظهر النتائج أن الفضاء السردى يؤدي وظيفة مزدوجة؛ إذ يفضح البنية غير العادلة للفقر والتهميش، وفي الوقت نفسه يعيد إنتاج خطاب الحلم الأمريكي القائم على تمجيد الجهد الفردي بوصفه وسيلة وحيدة للنجاة.

ويخلص البحث إلى أن رواية السعي وراء السعادة لا يُقدّم كسردية شخصية فحسب، بل كنص ثقافي يعيد صياغة المعاناة الفردية ضمن خطاب أيديولوجي أوسع، تتحوّل فيه الأمكنة إلى لغة ثانية تعبّر عن الصراع الاجتماعي، وتُسهم في ترسيخ أساطير النجاح والصعود الطبقي داخل الوعي الجمعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السيميائيات، الفضاء السردى، العلامة، الإقصاء الاجتماعي، الصمود، الحلم الأمريكي

Research Questions and Hypothesis

This study is guided by a collection of interconnected research questions that evaluate the semiotic role of narrative space in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. It looks into how physical spaces like sidewalks, shelters, subway restrooms, and institutional offices serve as semiotic systems that encode experiences of poverty, resilience, and social exclusion. The study also looks into how these geographical clues establish ideological meanings connected with class mobility and how they either promote or contradict the American Dream myth. The study explores into the extent to which Chris Gardner's own experience of pain is geographically represented in a broader sociocultural discourse. According to the study's hypothesis, narrative spaces in *The Pursuit of Happyness* serve as ideologically charged semiotic indicators that both highlight structural inequalities and uphold the American Dream's fundamental theme of individual tenacity.

Introduction

Literature involves the reader in a social and cultural context outside of the text through its intricate structure of signs and symbols that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In addition to providing a setting for events, the surrounding atmosphere influences the characters' and the reader's emotional and psychological experiences.

Saussure and Barthes found that meaning-making depended on the sign. Barthes concentrated on how signals produced secondary meanings that extended beyond their literal meaning within society and ideology. To emphasize the arbitrary character of their relationship, Saussure distinguished between the signifier and the signified. As a result, semiotics provided analytical frameworks that made it possible to comprehend literary and artistic works by studying the systems of signs and symbols they included without regard to their visual characteristics.

Reading *The Pursuit of Happyness* makes it easier to understand how everyday places, like a shelter or a subway restroom, may become potent symbols that represent mental constraints and societal pressure. Furthermore, San Francisco's streets and public buildings embodied the interaction between advancement and exclusion. The narrative is more than just a novel about personal struggles. It is a more thorough discussion about examining the American ideal and resiliency.

The study focuses on how space is portrayed as a narrative sign that generates meanings associated with human struggle, social exclusion, and the possibility of transformation through perseverance in an attempt to use semiotics to reveal the symbolic connotations of *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

By choosing significant scenes from the text and examining the narrative spaces and spatial symbols that are present in them, the paper methodology is based on textual-semiotic analysis. To understand the role of semiotics in rephrasing Gardner's experience and suffering within a comprehensive human discourse, the signs will be analyzed in accordance with Barthes' perspective on reading cultural and ideological connotations and Saussure's perspective on the relationship between signifier and signified.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework represents one of the basics of any literary study, providing the intellectual reference which the researcher relies on in interpreting and analyzing texts. According to this paper, semiotic theory is a method for identifying the symbolic meanings found in *The Pursuit of Happiness's* narrative, spatial, or symbolic fields. It enables the deconstruction of signs and an understanding of their relationship to the cultural and social context framing the text.

In Course in General Linguistics, Saussure provided an initial framework for understanding the sign, defining it as a unit consisting of a Signifier and a Signified that are informally connected. According

to him, language is not merely a means of communication, but a system of signs whose meaning is determined by the relationships and differences between its constituent elements (Saussure, 1983). According to Peirce, signs can be divided into three elements, icons, index, and symbols. The symbol is based on a social or cultural agreement, the index is connected to the thing by a causal or existential relationship, and the icon represents the thing by virtue of similarity (Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 1958). The classification made it possible for semiotics to include all forms of cultural discourse in addition to language.

Barthes's expanded in *Elements of Semiology* included culture and everyday symbolic systems, demonstrating that signs are not limited to direct meaning "Denotation" but produce second or mythical meanings "Connotation" that express the ideology underlying texts (Cobley, 2020). Hence, semiotics became an essential tool for understanding how language, image, and space contribute to the production of cultural meanings. Eco developed the field through *A Theory of Semiotics*, emphasizing that every text is an open system of signs subject to continuous interpretation. He explained that the recipient plays a pivotal role in reproducing meaning through interaction with symbols (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976). Thus, Semiotics became established as an interdisciplinary field employed in the analysis of literature, cinema, and the visual arts.

Semiotics was used to analyze literary and cinematic texts, focusing on how signs produce meaning and how texts encode cultural and social messages. Chandler demonstrated in *Semiotics: The Basics* how literature and visual media can be analyzed as sign systems that reproduce culture and ideology (Chandler, 2007). These studies confirm that semiotics is a flexible and rich tool suitable for deconstructing various texts. In its application to *The Pursuit of Happiness*, there is no published academic study that directly applies semiotics to texts. Most studies have focused on other frameworks, such as motivational, Maslow's hierarchy, and the American Dream, while semiotic analysis has remained absent. It makes the paper a new attempt in this direction.

Previous studies had approached *The Pursuit of Happiness* from the perspective of motivation. Some researchers had connected Chris Gardner's journey to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, highlighting how the struggle begins with the satisfaction of basic needs such as shelter and food, and progresses to self-actualization at the end of the narrative.

These studies emphasized how the work offered an important example of a person's capacity to overcome social and financial constraints. Other studies focused on the social and economic aspects of the text, emphasizing how it reflected class inequality and racial prejudice in American society. Some academics interpreted the poem as a humanitarian discourse about tenacity in the face of poverty and persecution, while others regarded it as an advocacy of the individualistic American Dream and free-market ideology. Despite the significance of these methods, they have not attempted to use semiotic tools to dissect the narrative's symbolic structures.

The paper examines the use of semiotics to reveal the symbolic signs and spatial locations in the novel by analyzing the major scenes as semantic systems that reflect psychological, cultural, and social elements.

The discussion will help demonstrate how the American Dream is reproduced and how moments of failure are transformed into symbols of resilience. Thus, contributing to previous studies that have not approached the text from this perspective.

Discussion

Semiotics provided a connected analysis for reading *The Pursuit of Happiness* not merely as an autobiography, but as a text filled with signs and symbols that produce intertwined meanings. The places Chris Gardner travels between, from home to street, from shelter to bathroom, and finally to

office, become signs of breaking and resilience, revealing the cultural and social structure that governs his experience. Thus, the discussion is not limited to reviewing the novel's events, it examines how to uncover the levels of meaning encoded by spatial signs and how individual experience transforms into general human discourse.

Saussure is considered the first founder of the concept of the sign, presenting it as a dual unit composed of a signifier, the audio or visual image, and a signified, the idea or concept in an arbitrary relationship (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1983). This approach revealed that a sign does not acquire its meaning in and of itself, but rather through its position within the overall system of language, where its value is determined by contrast with others. Returning to literary texts, every narrative element, whether a place or a thing, is a sign that carries connotations that can only be understood through comparison with others. In this sense, place in the novel becomes a semantic linguistic unit that transcends its descriptive function, becoming a reflection of a complex social and psychological experience. The stroller scene clearly embodies Saussure's principle. Gardner wrote, "The stroller had become my wheels, my only transportation" (Gardner, 2006, p. 6). The stroller, on its immediate level, signifies a simple means of transportation, while in its connotation, it represents the burden of poverty and parental responsibility. However, the deeper meaning is only revealed when compared to the cars that pass by on the streets, as the stroller becomes a sign of class inequality and social marginalization. It is compared within a network of signs that reflect wealth and luxury, poverty and weakness. Thus, the text demonstrates that a sign only expresses its meaning in relation to its context.

Peirce classified signs into icons, which were based on similarity to what they represent, indicators, which are connected by a causal or existential relationship to the thing, and symbols, which were based on social or cultural convention (Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders*, 1958). This classification made texts clearer to analysis because it allowed for an understanding of how a single sign can operate at more than one level. Thus, for Peirce, semiotics becomes a dynamic tool, revealing the multiplicity and richness of meaning.

In the bathroom scene at MacArthur Station, this semantic multiplicity is clearly evident. Gardner writes, "As soon as we're in there, I realize that we don't have to leave immediately. We can rest, wash up, take our time, even sleep" (Gardner, 2006, p. 245). The bathroom functions as a vulnerability, appearing to be a haven of protection as well as a symbol of dependence connected to a lack of long-term housing. Gardner reflects the division in society by closing the aperture as though to keep himself and his children away from the outside world. It illustrated the nature of symbolic representation and its propensity to heighten human sorrow by describing how a basic place can be perceived on numerous layers.

By differentiating between denotation, which relates to the surface meaning, and connotation, which reveals underlying social and ideological meanings. Barthes offered a viewpoint that the critic can see literary and cinematic works as narratives that both replicate social norms and accurately portray reality (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1972). As a result, the symbol becomes a dual link that conceals a mythical discourse that supports reality.

The shelter scene where Gardner and his son refused entry due to overcrowding "This one night I roll in to the front desk at the shelter [...] and I hear, Well, Chris, we're all full, sorry" (Gardner, 2006, p. 244). The direct denotation is the absence of space, while the connotation is the social exclusion faced by the poor. Shelter, supposed to be a symbol of safety, turns into a sign of rejection. Here, there is a signal of a cultural discourse that reinforces classism, as the image of poverty is reproduced

not as a temporary circumstance, but as a systematic exclusion. This reading reveals how the text encodes ideology through spaces.

Saussure insisted that the sign itself does not produce meaning, but by its relationship to others. This principle applies to narrative spaces, where each place acquires its symbolic value through contrast with other places (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1983). The house, the shelter, the street, and the office are not isolated spaces, but signs whose value is determined by opposition and difference. It made the text a productive structure for producing meaning through contradictions.

When Gardner described having to walk in the rain with his child after missing check-in at Concord Plaza, he wrote “We missed check-in at Concord Plaza by ten minutes. Pissed, tired, wet, I head toward Union Square, walking Christopher under the awnings” (Gardner, 2006, p. 242). The street is a place of movement, but its meaning is determined by contrast with the house and the shelter. It is a space of wandering and isolation, as opposed to spaces of stability. Thus, the text redefines space as a sign of fragility, not merely a neutral stage for events.

For Peirce, an index is a sign based on a causal or existential relationship to a thing. Thus, any physical trace or action associated with a direct human condition becomes a sign of a social or psychological situation (Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 1958). This concept enables texts to be analyzed in light of their material signs, as indicators of larger conditions.

Gardner wrote of his struggle to carry all his belongings with him “Having to compartmentalize and organize all our stuff to keep it contained[...] was beating me down” (Gardner, 2006, p. 244). Here objects were a direct indicator of homelessness, as they were causally connected to the lack of housing. They were not just things, but rather indicators of instability and an expression of psychological and social stress. Thus, objects become indicators of poverty and precarity, transcending their physical function to become social signs.

Barthes argued that signs are not limited to direct or implicit meaning; they can produce a mythical discourse that presents itself as a natural truth (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 1983). For him, myth is the way signs were used to justify societal ideologies, making cultural values appear natural. This idea allowed for reading texts as a means of reproducing dominant values.

In his repeated emphasis on hard work and perseverance, Gardner becomes a realistic embodiment of the myth of the American Dream. His suffering was presented not only as a personal experience, but as a discourse that points to the idea that individual resilience is sufficient to overcome poverty. The places where the street, the bathroom, and the shelter breakdown become signs that highlight the moment of breaking point, while simultaneously reinforcing the discourse of ultimate success (Gardner, 2006). Here, the American Dream is reproduced as a natural value, even though it is an ideology that hide the complexities of poverty (Hochschild, 2016).

Signs extended by semiotics consist of space as a second language that is just as expressive as words. In addition to providing the novel's setting, the narrative space plays as a semantic system that simultaneously promotes cultural and human experiences (Ryan et al., 2016). Instead of being a chronological series of events, the narrative field could be understood as a space of symbols that highlights deep societal conflicts.

“At the office... the brightness of my potential buoyed my spirits,” Gardner said of the training office as a place that offered him hope (Gardner, 2006, p. 244). Although it eventually transforms into a sign of opportunity, the office represents struggle, and its main standard is direction. Moving away from the standard way and haven, the workplace provides an example for group progress. It is a space that reflects the transition from marginal status to prominence, from weakness to strength. According

to Peirce, symbols serve as a means of understanding the morality and norms expressed in written language by relying on shared and collective consensus.

Symbolic allusions were interpreted as an embodiment of cultural values rather than through appearance or causality. Peirce's Collected Papers, 1958. Gardner explains that he went to church in an effort to find equilibrium. "I'd go to church on Sunday just to sit and feel a sense of order" (Gardner, 2006, p. 244). In contrast to the societal instability he encountered, the church served as a cultural symbol of faith and security. In the context of losing one's home, it was a sign that represented the human need for purpose and showed an effort to get in.

Barthes's semiotics highlighted that every symbol carries an ulterior interpretation, concealing an account of power and desire. Writings do not suggest unbiased readings, rather, they always represent rooted society attitudes (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 1983).

Gardner wrote "There were occasions when I sold blood, each time swearing I'd never do it again" (Gardner, 2006, p. 242). The verb in its direct meaning was medical, but its implicit connotation revealed the extremes of marginalization, as the body becomes a means of survival. The novel reveals its spatial and symbolic signs through social and class conflict, where objects and places become symbols of both defeat and resilience. The text is a cultural discourse that replicates the meanings of poverty, resistance, and the American Dream rather than just a personal narrative. The study demonstrates how semiotics is a useful technique for revealing texts' hidden meanings through fresh interpretations.

Conclusion

This study suggests that rather than being merely a personal narrative, *The Pursuit of Happiness* should be interpreted as having a rich setting and symbolic elements that reveal deep cultural and sociological layers. The places Gardner visits are not passive, but rather represent aspects of both power and weakness, according to a semiotic interpretation.

Barthes's view of myth and connotation emphasizes the ideological aspect of spatial signs. In addition to being explicit depictions of actual reality, locations such as the street, the restroom, and the shelter serve as implicit symbols that support a language of vulnerability and exclusion. Gardner's portrayal of success serves as a fabrication of the American Dream, concealing systemic socioeconomic injustice under the guise of tenacity.

The results showed that the work indicates a regular discussion regarding difficulties and resistance. Gardner is portrayed as a strong character who overcomes hardship, reinforcing the idea that social boundaries can be surmounted by individual determination. This viewpoint also reveals a strict social structure that prevents many people from developing. It reframes the topic as a socio-culturally situated discourse rather than merely a personal narrative by emphasizing geographical representation. This illustrates the importance of semiotic analysis in illuminating the ideological meanings of strength, optimism, and difficulty that environments and objects convey.

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