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Painting a Language of Emotions: A Semiotic Study of The Potato Eaters by Gogh

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Abstract
This study seeks to examine Van Gogh's The Potato Eaters both denotatively and connotatively. It uses qualitative exploratory Semantic method to investigate the concepts that have not been much considered previously. The selection of the painting is based on purposive sampling as the selected painting seemed more open to interpretation and the researcher could grasp its denotative meaning, a superficial meaning of a text or an image, and connotative meaning, an intended meaning of a text or an image, very easily. Both implied and intended meanings of the painting have been interpreted from the perspective of Barthes' Semiotics and its semantic code is specifically used for identifying its intended meaning. Data from various secondary sources, such as journal articles, news articles, books and google websites has been utilized to support this study. Also the primary data for data analysis is collected through self-observation of the painting under study. Compositional interpretation has been used as a tool to examine each and every element of the painting carefully and derive an in depth meaning that the painting delivers. For this purpose, the painting is divided into its components for analysis, such as the title, figures, and colours etc., then each component is analyzed both denotatively and connotatively by treating them as signs that constitute a signifier— a concrete object or a word or a sound— and a signified— the mental concept of a concrete object, such as a text or a sound.

Keywords: Visual discourse, Barthsian Semiotics, Denotation, Connotation, Sign System within a Visual Domain.

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1. Introduction

Language, in general, is considered as a set of words with grammatical rules used in a speech or writing for conveying ideas and feelings, however, for many words are not the only means of sharing their thoughts with others. Some express themselves through different ways, such as through painting, in which colours and shapes are used instead of words to create a unique, expressive and a visual form of language to tell the world about how you feel, as Elkins (2019) described painting to be an unsaid and largely unacknowledged dialogue, where paint speaks wordlessly in masses and hues, and artist responds in moods. All those meanings are preserved in the portraits displayed in the museums.

There are various studies that have worked on the language of paintings and drawings, many have used different aspects of the theory of Semiotics to support their study on identfying visual discourse and its meaning; however, no work has been found that has explored the denotatve and connotative meanings of any painting, thus leaving a gap for this study. To bridge this gap, this study takes Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* as a sample and applies Barthes' Semiotics, specifically his Semantic code on the painting to identify its denotative and connotative meanings. The Potato Eaters, Painted by Van Gogh in 1885, is a vivid descriptions of the lives of working class people, specfically farmers, during the 19th century. With the help of Semiotic theory, which studies signs, the meaning of the painting could be easily interpreted as the focus would be on each and every sign and their meaning within the painting.

Study of the Potato Eaters from the perspective of Semiotics might be helpful in getting an insight into the deep meaning of any art work and getting a complete grasp of its hidden messages, as well as, it could encourage those who can express themselves mainly through their drawings and paintings to show their talent by producing more creative and meaningful paintings and convey their thought to the

world which might lead other researchers to consider working on the meaning of visual objects.

For the purpose of carrying this study, the researcher deals with the objective of identifying the denotative and connotative meanings of Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* using Semantic code from Barthes' theory of Semiotics, and focuses on the question: how Barthes Semantic code can be helpful in identifying the denotative and connotative meanings of Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*?

In order to carry this research without any ambiguity, the area of the study is delimited to the identification of denotative and connotative meanings within Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* from the perspective of semantic code from Barthes' Semiotics,

2. Literature Review

Discourses shape our understanding of artists, critics, curators and present art; not just as mere objects of visuals or beauty, but also as sources of ideas, institutions, subjects and activities that define and construct what counts as art and what does not. Visuals are not self-evident or objective, instead its meaning is based on interaction and interpretation within a specific context (Rose, 2022). Farida (2020) considers not only words but also images, sounds and gestures etc as signs without which communication is impossible. Vivek (2019) gives example of a folk art which is inseperable from its local traditions, songs and language, thus making it just a form of aesthetics outside its commuity where people lack knowledge about its cultural background and any other language might misrepresent its meaning. Trifonas (2001) implies that the concept— that visuals are direct and universal, and has a fixed and transparent meaning that is clearly depicted— is not completely true, because a visual image as a whole is composed of fragments and each fragment carries a meaning that vary depending on cultural context and viewers' perception. And much like written and verbal language which combines

various clauses and phrases to produce meaning, visual imagery also communicates effectively by combinig different colours, shapes and figures (kress & Leeuwen, 2020).

Painting, a part of visual domain like other images, is presented on two dimentional surfaces that help painters to convey ideas and feelings by using a variety of colours and paints, hence making it appear both exquisit and meaningful. Through painting, an artist preserves local values, culture and traditions that keep adapting to the changing times (Sabila et al., 2025). Vazquez & Kattau (2011) clearify that painting is not just a depiction of objective reality but also a portrayal of an artist's perception of such reality. Carter (1976) draws an analogy between painting and language by demonstrating that both constitue elements or fragments— words, letters and phonemes in a language, whereas shapes, colours and figures in a painting— that build a complex and meaningful whole of each.Therefore, such similarity to language makes the linguistic study of a painting essential even if it does not entertain everyone.

Semiotics is concerned with a sign (Eco, 1979), and contribution of signs, sign system and signification process in forming meanings and representing reality (Chandler, 2022). Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, pioneered the scientific theory of signs and modern semiotics in his course in General Linguistics (Chandler, 2022). Saussure's Semiotics introduces a dyadic concept of a linguistic sign, constituting a signifier–a physical representation of a sign– and a signified, an interpretation or understanding of a signifier or its collection, and the link between them as culturally consturucted. An American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), further expanded the theory to a triadic comprehension of semiosis which delves deeper into the intended meaning of a sign. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), a French linguist whose work builds on

Saussurean Semiotics, also gives importance to connotation in his Semiotics much like Pierce (Raaphorst et al., 2016).

2.1. Barthsian Semiotics

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is an influential figure in the theories of culture and modern literature due to his significant contribution in the fields of structuralism, post structuralism, semiotics, cultural studies and psychoanalysis(Allen, 2004). Trifonas (2001) illustrates Barthes' Semiotics as a shift from the study of structural linguistics to a cultural oriented study of real world situations, such as interpretation of signs in images and texts that are intelligible. This concept of Barthes Semiotics has been mentioned in his texts; and Mythologies, the last of his books, gives an account of Barthes' theoretical interpretation of signs in culture and their textual representation in media through the selection of advertisements, photography, wrestling, traval guide and fashion etc as subjects of his theoretical study. Huppatz (2011) further explores that Barthes' work focuses on revealing hidden meanings in our daily routine by presenting new techniques and analysing meaningful sign systems within cultrual artifacts, as in barthes perspective daily used objects are not neutral instead filled with hidden meanings shaped by culture and idealogy. People usually acquire signs to communicate and share their thoughts and feelings as human life constitute various kinds of signs— natural and artificial signs— that give different meanings based on their comprehension (Jadou & Al-Ghabra, 2021). Thus Barthes' Semiotics demonstrates that all cultural artifacts in our surroundigs act as signs.

Barthes' denotative and connotative concept of signs is that denotation is the superficial meaning of something, whereas connotation refers to a deeper meaning based on the interpretation within a specific cultural context. Connotation helps in identifying a portion of hidden meanings within a plural text, however, it is not needed for texts with a clear and a single denotative meaning nor it would be

helpful in grasping the meaning of a multivalent text (Barthes, 1990). Connotation is significant in keeping ideas clearer during conversation within any situation unlike denotation which only focuses on literal meaning (Vivek, 2019). Barthes (1990) theorises that connotation helps in initiating a code, and a meaning embedded deep into the text; therefore, a text must rely on it for discovering such meaning. But the concept of denotation is not so literal either, it is just a naturalised connotative layer pretending to be the first meaning as both connotative and denotative meanings are interdependent and both enable us to grasp meaning of a text while the absence of any of these might make the meaning unclear. In order to drive both connotative and denotative meanings, a text should be diveded into several units called 'lexias'— which can either be a word or a sentence— that could be beneficial in extracting both literal and intended meanings from the text.

2.1.1. Barthsian Semantic Code

Vivek (2019) defines Semantic or connotative code, one of Barthes' five codes, as an helpful tool in making a connection between the reader and the text by delving deep into its core meaning. It, much like a cultural code, gives an insight into the meanings of signs within a cultural context and acquire background knowledge for the analysis of cultural signs; however, the focus of Semantic code is narrower than the cultural code as its analysis of signs is more specific to particular norms, traditions, art and architecture within subcultures, thus it requires more specialised understanding of that specific subculture.

2.1.2. Barthsian Semiotics on Visuals

In his essay Mythologies, Barthes introduces interpretative methods that recognize the use of physical objects as a source of expressing a message and meaning through magazines, ads and media. For Barthes, such material objects are metaphors which carry a deeper cultural meaning, feelings and desires of a society (Huppatz, 2011). Barthes supports his point by analysing signs within Japanese

culture using images like Sumo wrestler,the geisha and hand writing of a Kanji character that captures the essence of both space and time, in that way it connects viewers to the subject both visually and culturally (Trifonas, 2001). Barthes (1985) in his essay, Rhetoric of the Image, states that the word image comes from the root word 'to imitate', and rhetorically questions whether such images can also create signs or just a collection of symbols, as both linguists and general audience are uncertain about the linguistic capabilty of an image. They believe that an image is a clear expression of reality, making it free of interpretation. Many consider an image too basic for any signification while many find it so deep and extreme which can not be explored fully by any linguistic interpretation. But in Barthes point of view, linguistic units, such as titles, labels etc., might prove helpful in grasping a specific and contextual intented meaning of an image which is open to a wide range of interpretation. According to Barthes,the interpretation of an image leads to a linguistic, coded iconinc and non-coded iconic message. The linguistic message relays, coded iconic message is the connotative meaning of an image and the non-coded iconic message is the dennotative meaning of an image. Barthes called the signifier and signified of the third message as ' quasi-tautological', meaning that the literal meaning of an image is almost clear and does not need any code system for an interpretation, where as the connotative or cultural meaning rely on the dennotative message of an image for comprehension.

Barthes (1985), however, distinguishes images from drawing which needs coding and interpretation even at the literal level, because drawings need certain historical rules to translate reality into lines, shapes, figures, and shades, and create only what seems important and culturally meaningful. Unlike a picture—in which natural and cultural meanings are associated— in a drawing both denotative and connotative meanings preserve cultural values, thus it links culture to culture on both surface and hidden levels which needs a proper code sytem for analysis.

Vivek (2019) implies that Semantic code is as significant in the interpretation of visuals as it is, per Barthes' statement, in the textual domain. However, such analysis might not be possible without having any cultural understanding of a visual material. Because artists create visuals per their deep understanting and perception of the compositional elements of an art and its cultural background.

2.2. Vincent Van Gogh as an Artist

Vincent Van Gogh was born on 30th of March 1853 in Groot Zundert, located in North Brabant's province in the Southern Netherlands (Crispino, 2008). He was a profound artist whose work gained worldwide admiration posthumously (Arnold, 2004) Van Gogh was highly influenced by Jean-Francois Millet, who created paintings about peasant life, and it built his interest in painting. He committed suicide at the age of 37, but it was in the remaining ten years of his life that he created over 900 paintings, sketches and drawings, a lot of which are now worth millions of dollars (Crispino, 2008).

Li et al. (2011) describe Van Gogh's brushwork as a strong and creative sense of rhythem and repitition which distinguishes his art work from his contemporaries and those who distinguish his art from his fellow artists. Zemel (2023) explains that Van Gogh's art works mainly convey moral and cultural values to specific viewers, such as 'Pictures of Weavers,' painted in 1884, depicted the life of rural craftsmen for the audience that lived in cities. His perception of an ideal world within his paintings longs for the past moments as well as hopes for a better future, it also highlitghts his detestation of city life and capitalism, and his support for communitarianism. His art rooted into the concerns and traditions of the ninteenth century. Van Gogh utilises his art to represent the sight where culture feels at risk, and also its deep meaningful values. In 1884-1885, Van Gogh became even more determined to use his art to honour and represent rural people, considering their values worth celebrating.

2.2.1. The Potato Eaters

The Potato Eaters, painted in 1885, is an oil painting on canvas measuring 32 by 45 inches. This profound piece of Van Gogh's artistic creation is a part of the collection at Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. In December 1884, he started to create paintings of peasants with the aim of making a portrait of them in a domestic setting, and finished the final painting in April to May 1885. *The Potato Eaters* represents the simplicity of the lives of peasants in a small, modest wooden interior filled with emotions, where five family members are gathered around a table and they are having potatoes for dinner. The painting aligns with a realist movement as it honestly portrays worn, rough and weary faces of peasants, however, instead of focusing on the accuracy of the shapes, figures and lines, Van Gogh focused on the sufferings and struggles of the peasants, and mainly tried to express the emotions, feelings and the rural life through the painting. In this manner, Van Gogh diverged from Dutch Realism which emphasized accuracy of portraits (Crispino, 2008).

3. Analytical Framework

This study adopts Barthes' Semiotics to study the denotative and connotative concept of signs within *The Potato Eaters* by Gogh using Sematic code. As Semiotics is the study of signs within a language, Barthes' Semiotics identifies signs and their meanings within a sound, image or any cultural object. As per Barthes' Semiotics, every cultural object constitutes signs which could carry both superficial and intended meanings and the understanding of these meanings is dependent on the background knowledge of these objects. Barthes' Mythologies highlights everyday objects as meaningful signs aiding to commounication with certain rules, and emphasises that these seemingly natural objects often depend on their historical context, and each sign cotains both literal and intended meanings

(Huppatz, 2011). Furthermore, semantic code, one of Barthes five codes from his Semiotics, mainly interprets the connotative meaning of any sign within image or a text by breaking it down into its components.

Barthes (1990) uses a key unit within semantic code that acts as a signifier for identifying connotative meanings, such as culture, feelings, ideas and symbols carreid beyond literal meaning. It helps to identify meanings within lexia— a fragment of a text— not only by what is stated, but also by how it is expressed. Therefore, the application of Barthsian Semiotics on the study of *The Potato Eaters* might be helpful in the interpretation of its connotative and denotative meanings by exploring its context. With the help of semantic code, the painting has been divided into its compositions—considered as signs— and each composition has been analysed both connotatively and denotatively and semes, a unit of meaning within a semantic code, have been identified, helping the researcher to vividly explain the meaning of the painting and the message presented by the painter.

4. Methodology

I have applied qualitative exploratory semantic method for exploring the concept of Barthes' Semiotics and the context of Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters,* as the main purpose of this research study is to explore the deeper meaning of the painting and identify its themes and hidden message which may not have been possible through quantitatve method. Creswell (2014) distinguishes qualitative method from quantitative method in a sense that it is the collection of purposive sampling, open ended data, comprehension of an image or a text, presentation of data in figures and tables, and the self analysis of the collected data or sample.Also, Brink (1998) explains that exploratory method is an open ended and holistic approach thay that investigates new knowledge, insights and meanings that has not been studied before. Painting *The Potato Eaters* has been as a secondary source

that has been interpreted through personal observation while research articles, books, mewspapers and google websites are the secondary sources of data collection.

The selection of Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* is purposive sampling as it seemed more open to interpretation and its signs could be clearly understood, thus making it easier for the researcher to analyse the paintings from semiotcs' perspective. Tajik et al. (2024) define purposive sampling as a non-probability approach that is essential within a qualitative or mixed method for a deeper understanding of the context. It is a purposeful selection of specific elements or samples relevant to the study.

The semiotic analysis of signs within *The Potato Eaters* for identifying its connotative and denotative meanings is performed through compositional interpretation. Compositional interpretation tends to explore both content and type of visual images. This tool gets into a deeper and detailed description of the main visual elements such as colours, spatial organization, lightning and expressive features. It deals with the question of how these elements work together to convey meaning within a still image for deeper understanding (Rose, 2022).

5. Results and Discussion

Unlike previous research studies which have simply focused on the general understanding of any art work; many applying theory of semiotics as well, this study specfically focused on the analysis of signs in *The potato eaters* and interpreted them both denotatovely and connotatively from the perspective of Barthsian semiotics and his semantic code. The portrait is retrieved from Google arts and culture for analysis. As the figure 1 portrays, there are five figures sitting around a table in a dimly lit cottage, eating potatoes and drinking chicory, a substitue for coffee, at dinner. Each composition is interpreted through its visual

sign system. The compositions, being signifiers, would indicate both denotative and connotative signifieds.

Figure 1. The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885), oil painting on canvas, located at Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

5.1 Title "*The Potato Eaters*"

The title functions as an anchorage which contextualises the painting as a portrait of peasant life, depicting people who are consuming the very potatoes they have cultivated.

5.1.1 Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

Title → A group of people eating potatoes (Denotation)

Title → 1. Emphasizes connection between labor and sustenance,
2. peasants value the food they have worked hard to grow (Connotation)

Semantic Code → SEM: Survival, Worth

In the context of painting, title "The Potato Eaters" literally signifies a group of peasants eating potatoes, however, it also highlights a connection between labor

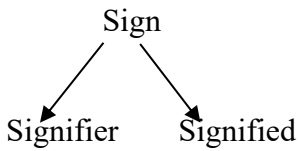
and sustenance. Peasants would work hard the whole day to grow potatoes and then they would consume the very food for survival because they knew the value of cheap food like potatoes, whereas the elite class in the Netherlands mostly preferred extravagant and high-priced food.

Figure 2. Colours of the painting The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

5.2. Colours of the Painting

Figure 2 represents almost similar but different tones of dark colours. For instance, the cottage appears quite dark with a very little light source, the figures are wearing dresses of dark green, blue and brown colours, and they have earthy brown skin tone.

5.2.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings



1. Dark cottage ⟶ Absence of light, Night time
2. Dark clothing ⟶ clothes have low level of light colours to match the whole scenario.
3. Earthy skin tone ⟶ colour complexion of farmers (Denotation)

1. Dark cottage ⟶ Daily challenges and difficulties faced by the working class people.
2. Dark Clothing ⟶ Association with the natural environment
3. Earthy skin tone ⟶ Attachment to soil and the earth (connotation)

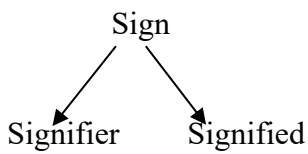
Semantic code ⟶ SEM: hardships, struggles, connection, link

Dark colour often indicates absence of light. The dark cottage in the painting might denote that as it is night time and the cottage is dimly lit, as a result the background appears dark. Dark clothing of farmers creates an even dark tone in the painting, while the earthy skin tone refers to the colour complexion peasants. But the Colours in the painting point to a deeper meaning. The dark cottage depicts the struggles peasant life and other working class people. It shows the harsh reality of the 19th century in which only rich were benefiting from the advancements and industrialization, while poor were surrounded by difficulties, lacking even the basic rights like electricity. The dark green, blue and brown colours of peasant clothes underscores a connection between rural life and the natural world. It emphasizes that farmers spend whole day in farms growing vegetables, which brings them closer to nature, contradicting city life, which has lost such connection with nature. Similarly, the earthy skin colour of peasants associates them with the earth and its soil as they plough the fields and touch the soil with their bare hands. It also specifies a sense of longing that the painter had for rural life.

5.3. Figures

As shown in figure 1, the painting embodies five figures; two men, two women and a little girl. They are all sitting around the table and sharing a meal.

5.3.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings



Figures ⟶ A group of people having dinner together. (Denotation)

Figures ⟶ Creates a sense of Harmony (Connotation)

Semantic code ⟶ SEM: Unity

Figures in the painting literally denote a group of five people sitting and having dinner together, but it also intends to specify a sense of harmony and unity among working class people. Despite all odds and difficulties, working class people would always work together, share their meal and spend their time together, developing a sense of community, which Van Gogh was quite supportive of. During the 19th century, capitalism was established and individuality was promoted. The painter, who was always against individuality, encourages the value of community and unity through the portrayal of a peasant family.

Figure 3. Dress code in the painting The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

5.4. Dress Code

Figure 3 highlights the dress code of the peasants. Figures in the painting are clad in a style that reflects a certain dress code. Men are clothed in shirts, trousers and woolen coats, and they are also wearing hats. While women are attired in long thick layered dresses and their heads are covered with scarves, except for the little girl whose hair is not covered.

5.4.1 Denotative and Connotative meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

Dress Code → To cover themselves, protection from cold (Denotation)

Dress code → 1. Equal and similar life style

2. Moral and religious values

3. Financial condition (Connotation)

Semantic code → SEM: Equality, Faith, Ethics, Poverty

Denotatively, the attire of the figures helps in covering their bodies and, as it is winter season, they are wearing durable and a thick layer of clothing for protection from cold, however the dress code also reflects life style, values and beliefs of working class people. Their similar dress style highlights equality and unison among working class people which creates a sense of community that the painter supported. Their modest clothes also portray their Christian faith and morals, as working class people in the 19th century held very strong religious beliefs. Apart from ethical values and similar life style, peasant dress code also sheds light on their financial crises and poverty. In the 19th century, in Netherlands, lower class people would mostly wear durable clothes that could be utilized for a long period of time as they could not afford buying much clothes.

5.5. Face and Hands Texture

Figure 4. Face and hands texture in The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

Figure 4 embodies a rough, bony face and hands texture that Van Gogh (1885) has given to the figures to create a realistic tone throughout the painting.

5.5.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

Face and Hands

Texture → Appearance (Denotation)

Face and Hands

Texture → Indicates peasants' hard work (Connotation)

Semantic Code → SEM: Efforts, Toil

Literally, Coarse faces and bony hands of peasants refer to peasants' looks and appearance. However, the rough skin texture is created to realistically represent the life style, hard work and efforts of farmers. Peasants spend whole day working hard under scorching heat of the sun, yet they earn very little, not enough to even feed themselves properly. The intense toil and scarcity of food make peasant faces and hands appear rough and bony.

5.6. Food

Figure 5. Supper in The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

In figure 5, Peasants are eating potatoes— a cheap food— at dinner and drinking chicory, a cheap substitute for coffee.

5.6.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

Potatoes and

Chicory ⟶ A kind of food (Denotation)

Potatoes and

Chicory ⟶ Status of Peasants in the Society (Connotation)

Semantic code ⟶ SEM: Rank, Poverty

Potatoes and chicory superficially refer to a type of food consumed by people. But Food in the painting also emphasizes lower rank of peasants in the society. Potatoes are cheap kind of food mainly consumed by working class society in Netherlands, as well as, chicory is a cheap drink, which is used as a substitute for coffee. So the food shows their poverty and lower social status.

5.7. Time on the Clock

Figure 6. Time on the clock in The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

Figure 6 draws attention to a clock hanging on the wall, showing that it is 7 p.m. in a winter evening.

5.7.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

7.p.m. → Dinner Time (Denotation)

7.p.m. → A moment for peasants to relax and sit in peace together. (Connotation)

Semantic Code → SEM: Relaxation

As it is 7.p.m. in the evening and peasants are having dinner, so the time on the clock literally points to dinner time. But 7 p.m. on the clock does not only refer to dinner time, it also indicates a moment of relaxation for peasants. They work hard all day long and cannot get time to relax during day time, so it is only in the evening that they can find a moment of comfort and rest.

5.8. Photo

Figure 7. Photo in the Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

Figure 7 indicates a photo hanging on the wall beside the clock. There are two people in the photo with a cross sign in between them.

5.8.1. Denotative and Connotative Meaning

Sign

Signifier Signified

Photo → A piece of decoration (Denotation)

Photo → Christianity and religious beliefs (Connotation)

Semantic Code → SEM: Religion, Faith

In literal sense, the photo is used in the painting as a piece of decoration. The photo also intends to represents deep Christian belief and faith of peasants and other working class people in the Netherlands. Just like their dress code, the photo also delves into the moral and ethical values of peasants and their love for Christianity.

5.9. Lamp

Figure 8. Lamp in the painting The Potato Eaters by Van Gogh (1885).

Figure 8 shows a lamp hanging above the table in the middle of cottage, which is the only source of light in the whole cottage.

5.9.1. Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Sign

Signifier Signified

Lamp ⟶ Source of Light (Denotation)

Lamp ⟶ A ray of hope (Connotation)

Semantic Code ⟶ SEM: Hope, Optimism

The lamp hanging in the middle of cottage is used to light up the cottage. Thus the lamp in the painting is represented to be the only source of light within the whole painting. Thus the lamp also indicates the artist's hope for a better future despite all the difficulties that the working class people have faced. The painter is being optimistic about a pleasant that the poor labourers would finally see a light of hope for a bright future despite the darkness they have seen in their life.

By analyzing the data denotatively and connotatively using Barthes Semiotics, this study acknowledges that *The Potato Eaters* is not simply an embodiment and representation of peasant life and their life style. It carries a deeper meaning than only portraying five figures inside a cozy cottage that is all dark except for a lamp that gives yellow light. Van Gogh (1885) underscores the struggles, religious beliefs, and lower social status of the whole working class society of the 19th century in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular. The Semantic code has explored the painting both denotatively and connotatively with the help of its cultural and historical understanding. All the compositional signifiers lead to both denotative and connotative signifieds. The connotative signifieds further resulted in its smaller meaningful units called semes (SEM). Also, the Semantic code has limited the findings to one specific context by exploring the cultural and historical background of the painting.

6. Conclusion and Further Research Directions

This study aimed to explore the meaning of Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* both denotatively and connotatively from the perspective of Barthes' Semiotics. The in-depth interpretation of the painting, by keeping in view its context, has helped the researcher to explain the hidden meaning of the painting which the painter tried

to convey. Both the denotative and connotative analysis of the painting *The Potato Eaters* explains that the portrait is not a mere representation of a group of peasants and their lifestyle, but it embodies the sufferings and struggles of working class people and the painter's nostalgia and longing for simple and rural life that has been left behind due to industrial revolution and urbanization in the 19th century. Each composition, such as food, figures, colours and clothes etc., in this single piece of painting represents the harsh reality of the advancements in the European countries during the 19th century. Yet the painter also shows a glimpse of hope for a better future through the use of lamp in the painting. Barthes' Semantic code from has made the study of the painting much convenient and easier by focusing on each and every fragment of the painting with the help of its historical and cultural contexts, as it makes background knowledge crucial for the study, hence saving the interpretation of the painting from going into various directions.

In a nutshell, this study explored Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* and analyzed it both denotatively and connotatively using Semantic code from Barthes' Semiotics by focusing on the context of the painting which made the analysis of the painting clear and specific to a single context, avoiding ambiguity. This study recommends the application of Peirce's triadic model of semiosis in future studies for interpreting the meaning of any other visual or the same painting used by the researcher for this study.

Other than its application on any visual or linguistic signs, Barthsian Semiotics could also aid future studies in examining both literal and intended meanings of everyday myths within a specific culture.

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