Symbols of Hope, Affirmation, and Perseverance - A Semiotics Analysis of Journalist, Harry Kingsley, from The Disney Classic Movie, Iron Will

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While this Disney film is based on a true story, this paper describes and examines the character, Harry Kingsley, the primary journalist in the movie credited for reporting and following Will Stoneman’s journey in a 522-mile dogsledding race from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to St. Paul, Minnesota. Played by actor Kevin Spacey, in various ways, Kingsley serves as a living symbol for the following values: hope, affirmation, and perseverance. In some moments, he even presents himself as a secondary father-figure to Stoneman (played by actor Mackenzie Astin). Will’s father, Jack Stoneman, dies from a tragic dogsledding accident. Because of his death, the Stoneman family will potentially lose their family farm if someone or something does not intervene on their behalf. Will also planned to go to college, which, like a dream, now appears jeopardized as well due to the financial hardship from these circumstances. Hence, winning the Red River-St. Paul Sports Carnival Derby dogsledding competition and it’s $10,000 award money provides an ample opportunity to save Will’s family’s farm and eventually go to college.

While this paper highlights certain scenes of the film and the meanings those scenes carry, the objective of this analysis is to utilize Semiotics Theory to examine the Kingsley character, his role, and specifically his relationship with Will. In its full conception, this essay will begin with an introduction to explain the purpose of the evaluation and a brief background on the application of Semiotics.
Theory. After historical background information of this real-life occurrence, a succinct literature review will then illustrate similar studies at work in the same Pop Culture phenomenon. The bulk of the paper will then dissect the values of hope, affirmation, and perseverance in the described context with Kingsley’s character. Some last thoughts and suggestions for further research complete the text.

Semiotics, as a theoretical construct, serve as an effective tool to analyze the meaning of different interactions, concepts, and systems of Communication. Signs become the basic units that Semiotics Theory utilizes to evaluate a variety of phenomena, including groups of symbols within sign systems. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, are the recognized scholars who created the field of semiotics as a research tool in the field. These two men, in addition to other semioticians today, attempt to understand a system of signs in its entirety, not just by a single dimension alone. The process of defining what we see in the form of interpretation becomes the goal (Leed-Hurwitz, 1993). That same process is also the goal of this paper. The relationship of how a sign operates incorporates three elements: the sign itself, the object, and the interpretant. The sign represents a symbolic meaning to an individual in the interpretive internal processes one utilizes while contemplating an understood logic. What the sign represents is the object. The interpretation or translation of the sign is the interpretant (Johansen and Larsen, 2002). Relating to semiotics analysis through film mediums, Buldac et al. (2021) state the following: “Cinema has a language that narrates both the real and the unreal as well as the truth behind what is displayed in terms of connotation, in addition to reflecting the truth through signs in terms of the literal” (p. 329). Therefore, the actions of movie characters potentially resemble deeper connotative meanings that exist beyond the obvious visuals or literal conversations of the individuals who play these roles. Through these symbols, understood truths materialize from the perspectives of audience members touched by these insinuated, unsaid messages.
Communication involves the delivery process of semiotics, and in the case of semiotics, the signs or sign systems develop into the message within the communication that occurs. A sign carries meaning in a process known as signification. A signifier is a vehicle or object that brings forth the meaning of the sign. The signified becomes the meaning that an individual accepts through the signifier (Kim, 1996). A commonly given example might be a rose. The sign of a rose resembles love. The signifier becomes the rose itself. When given to someone, the signified represents this in the individual’s mind who receives the rose, which symbolizes love. When given to someone, the rose represents an intended, understood message that “I love you” (Leed-Hurwitz, 1993; Kim, 1996).

Relating to these described observations, Van Leeuwen (1999) asserts that “semiotics can be a tool for design” (p. 10). This process involves the nature of creative interpretation in film critiques and analysis. In order to manifest a creative message in the words of a song, the characters in a story, or even in the images of a movie scene, artists express a narrative in a designed system of signs.

These signs become spoken in a specific language, which then creates meaning through objects, individual people, important life events, and other observed phenomena. Cultural standards, beliefs, and customs impact the process of interpretation through language with codes and structural meanings in place (Hall, 2013). Concerning semiotics and the distinct types of signs, it is paramount to understand the meaning of a symbol within the described following details. As another foundational scholar who influenced the theoretical constructs of semiotics, Carl Sanders Peirce (1994) labeled and defined three of the most known signs categorized as icons, indexes, and symbols. In each of the three forms, the signifier and signified play their given roles. Leed-Hurwitz (1996) best explains the three types of signs with this quote:

An icon has the relationship of similarity or resemblance; an index has the relationship of continuity or connection; an index has the relationship of contiguity or connection; a symbol has the relationship of arbitrariness. That is, any sign displaying a similarity between the present and the absent components
is termed as an icon; any sign using a part of something to stand for the whole is an index; and any sign using the arbitrary connection between the present and absent components is a symbol. A photograph of a bride is an icon; it resembles her. The top of the wedding cake kept for the first anniversary is an index; it formed a piece of the original event. The bride’s white dress is traditionally a symbol of virginity, standing for something it neither resembles nor was taken from (p. 23). Although an extremely long explanation, the distinguishing difference of these terms demonstrates important considerations in the context of this paper. Then, with these descriptions, the three types of signs will not be confused with each other. The signs observable in the quotes and movie scenes of *Iron Will* represent symbols like the definition that Leed-Hurwitz explained in the previous excerpt.

For this analysis, the terms, sign and symbol, will often be used interchangeably as nouns to illustrate the process of semiotics at play. Through the lens of interpretation, movie directors present meaningful narratives, inspirational characters, and even an arranged system of signs. Therefore, these presentations create purposeful messages for audience members in application to specific scenes and pivotal conversations within the plot and storyline. In this instance with the movie, *Iron Will*, Kingsley becomes the driving force and representation of hope, affirmation, and perseverance, especially with his relationship to Will Stoneman, sometimes in moments of serious desperation.

*Historical Background of the Movie Narrative*

*Iron Will* was in some ways based on a real person, however, there were some relevant differences between the movie and the true story. The history behind this inspirational story further reinforces this theoretical analysis of symbols and signs with common overlap between real-life events and the movie. The name of the event was, in fact, the Red River-Saint Paul Sports Carnival Derby that stretched 522 miles between Winnipeg and St. Paul, Minnesota, which occurred in 1917. Will Stoneman played a fictional character whose real name was Fred Hartman. Louis W. Hill, Jr., whose family legacy worked actively in the railway business, publicized the event on a large scale.
Newspaper journalists and even cameramen stood atop the railway cars to spectate and report on the dogsledding race (Willistein, 1994).

For the span of the ten-day challenge, Hartman experienced hardship with the death of his lead dog and unfortunately finished last in the derby, rather than first like Will Stoneman in the movie, *Iron Will* (Willistein, 1994). When Hartman’s lead dog died on the first day of the race, he then had to lead the rest of his dogs, sometimes trekking long miles through deep snow himself, rather than his lead dog performing this function. Without having to lead and physically trek through the snow, his competitors could still ride for most of the race with their own lead dogs. The weather was also extremely harsh, which caused Hartman to experience frostbite on his hands, feet, and face (Sherburne County Historical Society, 2004). A journalist named Kermit Kingsley reported on the race, making Hartman a national hero with readers who followed his progress. When Hartman completed the race, thousands of people waited to cheer him onto the finish line in St. Paul (Willistein, 1994). Without a lead dog and perhaps even the least trained dogs for a race of this caliber, Hartman quickly became a household name that newspaper readers and other media followers cheered for. Much like the movie, many small country towns of five hundred people or less took pride in cheering the racers on, often giving children a break from their school studies to watch the momentous occasion. Hartman weighed in at 160 pounds when the race began but finished at 128 pounds (Jarchow, 1971). The weariness of Hartman himself and his dogs mirrored the image of Will Stoneman at the end of his race.

As one will notice through this paper, several parts of the movie narrative correspond with this well-known, real-life event, including Hartman as the historical dogsledding competitor on record. In the movie *Iron Will*, large crowds of spectators also encouraged Will Stoneman at the end of his long journey through the wilderness race in small-town atmospheres. Both Hartman, as a real person, and Stoneman, as a movie character, inspired millions of people through publicized media viewership. From a semiotics perspective, these two personas served as a symbol of hope to those who followed
their narrative journeys in the dogsledding race. In history, Hartman’s lead dog died. In the movie, Stoneman’s lead dog, Gus, was purposefully attacked by another team’s dog, causing severe injuries. Even through this hardship, crowd observers along the route of the derby affirmed these two men to show their stories were paramount and personal to viewers. These followers tracked progress on the race through information provided by the media. Notable journalists for Hartman and Stoneman chronicled these events so these fan followers could affirm their accomplishments throughout the journey, including completion of the race. Through historical perseverance against exhaustion and weather unfit for humankind, Hartman’s dogsledding pursuit exhibits hope and affirmation in these mentioned ways, much like Stoneman’s character presence in Iron Will.

**Research with Similar Applications to Movie Character Analysis and Relationships**

Tseng (2012) demonstrates how the actions of characters and the conversations they hold afford the ability to evaluate artifacts within a specific film. In turn, these evaluations assist in understanding what fictional personalities contribute to interpreting the interactions among characters within a film. The deeper constructions of what authentically creates a character generate a basis to comprehend the roles played by those characters. The information then becomes processed to discern patterns that emerge among the characters and plotlines of a movie. Tseng specifically explores these stated ideas between The Thin Red Line (1998) and Black Hawk Down (2001), comparing scenes from each film to apply these processed observations. The audience members decipher their own cognitive experience with an interpretation of the storyline unfolding as the plot thickens. A semiotic theoretical framework provides a meaningful approach to explore the given phenomenon of character roles and expected narratives from the viewpoints of audience members (Tseng, 2012). Relating to character analysis, the cultural background of a specific character interplays with how messages are communicated and interpreted in these personality portrayals. Symbols and depicted images of a specific culture impact how and why understood messages merit the meaning they carry for those
viewing these scenes (Huang, 2012). In other words, cultures influence the role of how characters become investigated by researchers and the questions posed in these studies. What audience members recognize as deeper meanings of depicted symbolism helps one to imagine what it might be like to play a common role in a film. In other words, viewers often see similarities between themselves and the characters they relate to with movies that inspire them.

Through the fashions of wardrobe attire, Sofia Coppola’s film, *Marie Antionette*, served as a statement to receive recognition from others and create a sense of independence from the aristocratic customs of the day. The outfits depicted through the main character, Marie Antoinette, oppose an expected order that then also signifies organized defiance against presumed political structures. From an individualistic perspective, Marie’s body adornment and her conversations symbolize a personal motto and narrative that creates objections with the guided, accepted structures of court life and public image. A created level of chaos imbalances these court subjects to Antoinette’s impervious ways where expectations are violated through character conversations and fashionable clothing. (Flores, 2013). Much like the films, *Iron Will* and *Marie Antionette*, Luke Skywalker’s narrative in *The Last Jedi* carries semiotic meaning as a restraining force against an opposing adversary known as The First Order. Luke's actions become subject to analytical inquiry with his personal sacrifice as a character and his experiences with the emotion of fear. In this movie, Skywalker develops into an example of public morality that focuses against the tyrannical ways of The First Order. Many individuals in the rebel resistance refuse to be subject to the system of forced coercion within The First Order. Fear temporarily overcomes Luke with his inability to mentor Ben Solo in goals to one day help Ben become a Jedi Knight. The training attempts by Skywalker failed as Ben Solo leans towards the dark side when Luke decides to escape to an isolated island on a foreign planet. Fear overtakes Skywalker’s life when he thinks his presence actually harms others rather than helps them. This mentality would be one of the main reasons Skywalker refuses to train Rey, even at her request. This refusal of sorts
simply stands as an act of self-preservation, however, eventually, Luke again relates to the idea of family when he sacrifices himself in a duel with Ben Solo. Then what remains left of the resistance forces can successfully escape to safety because of his offering of himself. Therefore, Skywalker transforms into a symbol of sacrifice by his actions so that others may live, leading to his final disappearance (Gould, 2021). Concerning value narratives, such as fear, sacrifice, perseverance, affirmation, hope, or personality independence, movies portray compelling messages through the actions of characters relating to one another. In these relationships, connotative insinuations speak to an audience in terms of overall themes experienced throughout the film, even inspiring viewers in their own lives.

In Julian Rosefeldt’s film, Manifesto, twelve art movements of the 21st century manifest through thirteen storylines with the first of these serving as an introduction to the other twelve manifestos. These storylines represent meaning based on space, utilized objects, and the role of characters present in the film. Through Semiotics Theory, deeper connotative meanings then address the intended messages of Rosefeldt. For example, in one manifesto, a financial advisor works in a stock market environment, which resembles the demands of futurism through these images. Technology then affords quick access for business reasons, which also creates more induced stress. In another scene, an employee of a garbage incineration plant lives in a simple, dull building after working a routine job. An architecture manifesto emerges when the bore of large city structural buildings links to the monotonous routine in the lives of the working class. Shades of grey further portray this way of life in an ordinary existence throughout the cinematic experience. Cate Blanchet played all thirteen personas where these audience-connected interpretations illustrate these contemporary artistic movements and the cinematic styles of the director. These personas unfold in storylines to signify these various creative time periods in history (Buldac et al., 2020). A Rethina Velu and How (2019) explore how the closeness of a camera shot, film angles, and the eye contact of
characters with audience members impact social relationships and interactions that transpire within these relationships. Short films in the political realm often utilize symbolism to signify the agenda items of leaders depicted in these media scenes. Visual representations of these leaders, therefore, become absorbed or rejected by the audience, similar to whether viewers enjoy the cinematic experience of an inspirational movie or if the audience dislikes the film (A Rethina Velu & How, 2019).

Like the previously described symbolic devices, Terres et al. (2020) evaluate whether television posters of the Netflix series, *Grace and Frankie*, accurately depict the plots and relationships of the specific seasons referred to. Through the lens of these given sampled posters, these visual interpretations communicate thematic elements that resemble emotions, postures, and social closeness realistically represented in each season’s episodes. In other words, the analysis showed effective representations that lined up with the episodes of each individual season of the program. The posters parallel the symbolic portrayals of experiences in the program and how meaningful incidents bring these two female characters to form a close bond. For instance, as mature, older women, Grace and Frankie embrace technological advancements with online dating, active social media roles, and starting a vibrator business together (perhaps activities many older citizens do not partake in). Their success remains evident through the signs of current times and how both Grace and Frankie adapt through their mutual hardships with commonalities experienced. Within the poster images, facial expressions nonverbally communicate information about the friends’ relationship, including interactional meanings that relate to the intimacy level between the two in getting to know one another. As another example, during the first season of the program, Grace and Frankie struggle in a terse, antagonistic relationship, which remains visually obvious in the first season poster of this study. Imaged in the poster, Grace tries to avert the closeness of Frankie in proximity to her personal space (Terres et al., 2020).
Semiotics level, posters communicate what movies or television programs might entail in storylines and character relationships with shared challenges encountered.

Semiotics Theory affords many evaluative approaches and related concepts that apply to different media outlets and even artwork as a creative practice of expression. For example, Toh (2014) implements Semiotics Theory with application to the main character roles in anime films. The character’s personal narrative becomes centerfold in the observed ideology planned by the original artists of anime works. These perspectives are then expressed through the actions and interactions of each main character in a narrative form. The visual artwork perceptions of an anime main character and the actions of that character teach viewers how to absorb and grasp the greater meanings in the symbols these film characters represent. The framework of signs within an anime film equips the primary relationship of how main characters also impact the roles of other crucial characters in a story. Transformation occurs within one character that then defines the next one in the meaningful conversations that happen in different scenes. The defining moments of meaning and semiotic symbolism explore how these characters influence the next major character and any relationship that may exist between them. Visual scenes become the basis of analysis for what develops a character beyond surface-level observations. One scene potentially carries meaning in character development as transitions happen from one important moment to the next with defined evident relationships among characters (Toh, 2014). In other words, one critical scene affects the interpreted meaning of symbols into the next scene of a plot, especially among relationships with these main characters.

In relevance to a Disney Pixar short film, Barton et al. (2021) explore the titled work, *Bao*, through a semiotics framework. This study first links intentional interpersonal connections among the main characters with displayed gestures and image portrayals. In addition to interpersonal relationships among the characters, cultural stereotypes become addressed through a critical lens on what it means to be Asian. Eye contact between characters illustrates a closeness in the communicative nature between
the given individual roles of the mother and baby dumpling. If not making eye contact, the character then appears distracted with attention given elsewhere, not focused on the viewer concerned about them. Close framing of the characters signifies a close relationship. In comparison, medium-framed images represent social connection but not on a deeper intimate level. The long-distance image frame creates an impersonal feeling with a lack of a deeper fondness in the relationship. At the beginning of the film, the tiger mother takes care of the dumpling baby when all its needs rely on her as children depend upon their parents for nurture and care. Over time, growing up, Bao who once played the baby dumpling takes interest elsewhere to play soccer and hang out with friends, maybe like an imagined, modern day teenage adolescent. The short film utilizes recognized Chinese folk music, signifying a greater overall Chinese culture. The mother and Bao even practice Tai Chi together in the park, an activity some associate with Asian individuals. The mother seeks to raise Bao in a stereotypical vision of organized habits with a button-up shirt and semi-formal glasses, which symbolizes the importance of intelligence and education in Asian cultures. Bao becomes banned from playing soccer with strict adherence to traditional Chinese customs and activities. These descriptions and observations display a stereotypical fantasized version of Chinese cultural expectations. While the interpersonal relationship remains evident between the mother and the baby dumpling named Bao, these images give way to stereotypical assumptions about Asian cultural norms and observed activities in relationships (Barton et al., 2021). Semiotics Theory remains useful in measuring these dynamics in short Pixar cartoon films where cultural considerations serve as the major focal point for audience spectators.

Garratt and Piper (2016) explore the relationships between sports coaches and their players in the movie, Bend it like Beckham (2002). Symbolism through the act of touch gives full attention to meanings in these actions within scenes of the film. There are multiple parts of the movie that depict touch in various interpreted forms with analysis from a semiotics theoretical perspective. Typically, in the United Kingdom, if inappropriate acts occur with players of a younger age and their coach, the
gesture impacts a coach's reputation and could even lead to legal prosecution. The film was named after the famous player, David Beckham, who was known for bending the curve of a soccer ball with successfully kicked penalty goals. In one specific scene, after practice, Jules, a female soccer player, is the last teammate to leave, and she suddenly embraces her male coach, Joe, with her arms wrapped around him. Leaning into his body, Jules whispers an intimate unheard message that leads the audience to witness the inappropriate responses of touch between coach and athlete roles. The indecent act signifies the lack of professionalism on the part of players and coaching staff when this form of touch is usually denounced by society. In an additional scene, another player named Jess stumbles outside of a nightclub when Joe, the coach, happens to catch her with his arms around her shoulders and waist, asking if she is okay. The storyline of the film remains much more intricate than these simple descriptions. However, while the audience views improper forms of touch between an older male figure and younger female soccer players, the movie characterizes these actions as normal in the given depictions. Perhaps it is only human to yearn for younger professional athletes a coach leads in a team environment, or at least that is what the film suggests through its symbolic lens (Garratt and Piper, 2016). In Iron Will, as the semiotics analysis will demonstrate, Kingsley supports Stoneman with the nonverbal means of touch in a few pivotal adverse moments, suggesting a closeness in the relationship between these two main characters.

**A Semiotics Evaluation of the Sports Journalist, Harry Kingsley**

In celebration of the race the night before it begins, Will shows up to the party unannounced as a late registrant where race sponsor, J. W. Harper, initially refuses his entry application. Upon Kingsley’s opening dialogue, longing for a decent headline on the front page of his associated newspaper, he offers to pay the late fee on the behalf of Will, who did not have the extra funds to do so. In the spotlight at the party, Harper reluctantly allows Will to enter. And thus, upon Kingsley’s intervention, he first becomes a symbol of hope because Will now has a chance to win the dogsledding
race and thus save the Stoneman family farm. With his ambitions to sell news headliners for recognition’s sake, Kingsley’s intentions could be questioned. However, when examined on a deeper level through Semiotics Theory, his intentions and caring nature for Will remain honorable. As the national newspapers call him “Iron Will,” Kingsley supports and believes in Stoneman all the way to the finish line.

Simply writing about this inspirational story for all of America to read provides its own affirmation as a symbolized action with the message received by those who follow the race and cheer for Will to win. When reporting on the derby, Kingsley narrates the following: “So, as war looms over Europe, the nation roots for a new symbol of hope and determination. The heroic tale of a young man’s bravery spreads across the land, and America rallying behind ‘Iron Will’ Stoneman.” The movie takes place during a time of war where men eighteen years of age and older are routinely encouraged to enlist in the military when American forces fight for the freedoms of a European continent. Kingsley proposes that Will’s story about his participation in the race distracts from the tragedies of wartime and even gives others hope through the example Will sets to achieve his dreams and provide for his own family’s sake. Kingsley calls Stoneman “the last American hope in this race.”

On a semiotics level, Kingsley even says that Stoneman is a "symbol of hope and determination," thus confirming the representation Will’s character brings to the film. Determination is a component of perseverance because one must be determined to persevere through tribulations and challenging circumstances on many occasions to experience successful outcomes. With these newspaper narratives written by Kingsley, Stoneman, as his own symbol represents an icon of hope to endure and see the race through. In general, involvement in any war represents a bleak darkness in the mortality of battle. In relevance to the movie, readers of the national newspapers seek a spark of hope to affirm their existence in these dark times where family members and close friends serve to protect the freedoms of the world overseas. The danger of war leads to the loss of many loved ones. Through
his newspaper narrative, Kingsley reinforces and reminds us that Will Stoneman serves as that symbol of hope to shed light in this described world of darkness surrounded by war. For readers who long for a story that briefly relieves them of the constant media reminders for worldwide bloodshed and destruction, Stoneman becomes that signifier of deliverance and promise in the rise of a champion.

In addition to the value of hope, Kingsley also serves as a catalyst of affirmation and perseverance with inspiration so that Will can finish the long-distance dogsledding race. Far into the derby, three-fourths through the movie, Will’s sled becomes severely damaged where he needs the skills of a blacksmith to repair it. Stoneman approaches Kingsley, additional journalists who are covering the race, and fellow competitors in a warm café restaurant. In this moment of despair, another racer notes that Will “looks like death.” At the end of many long days, Will’s facial expressions communicate feelings of discouragement, exhaustion, and despondency, losing faith in a chance to win the derby competition. In his moment of lost faith, Will walks outside through the door of the café only to collapse to his knees on the snow-covered ground.

For one of the few times Kingsley cannot find words to boost the morale of his newspaper hero in the movie. In a nonverbal showing of support, he places one hand on the shoulder of Stoneman as the young man continues to rest on his knees. It is a powerful scene at night where shadows remain visible in a dim-lighted outside area, perhaps a solid visual for a promotional movie poster. Kingsley affirms his supporting presence by simply placing his hand on the shoulder of Stoneman. Without a father-figure or mentor character to further play the role of hope in a disheartening situation, the gesture of touch shows expressed concern as a symbolizing expression. Just by being present, Kingsley affirms Will’s worth and the message that this soon-to-be champion must press on with perseverance in the face of destitution and overwhelming odds.

While this analysis certainly praises Harry Kingsley’s character role, he is certainly not without fault. As a journalist covering the derby, Kingsley desires front-page publicity with his name on the
article. Thus, Stoneman’s story inspires America as the mentioned “symbol of hope,” and the newspaper continues to sell thousands of copies thanks to Kingsley’s articles about “Iron Will” Stoneman.” After Stoneman’s lead dog, Gus, is purposefully attacked by another competitor’s dog, Will confronts the man who planned the attack with a gun, screaming “You tried to kill my dog!” In the same scene, Will also encounters Kingsley with a hard punch to the face. Stoneman yells, “That’s for using me and my family to sell your damn newspapers and printing pictures to make my mother worry!” Will possesses a strong closeness with his family, including his mother, and Kingsley potentially took advantage of the narrative to save the Stoneman family farm without consideration for the sensitivity of the circumstances. Will perseveres through the danger posed to his lead dog, Gus; yet in this one instance, Kingsley was certainly not the source or sign of hope and affirmation Will needed. On the other hand, while this description is only one scene, through the rest of the movie, Kingsley supports these expressed values of hope, affirmation, and perseverance. These incidents, conversations, and notations transform into the symbols described throughout the rest of the inspirational plotline. While Kingsley’s outward actions sometimes suggest a motivation for self-recognition and a good story that sells to the public, his heart and perhaps even his protective nature eventually shines through as the plot progresses.

As Will tend to the wounds of Gus, he experiences another low point in the pursuit to win the multi-day derby. Will even apologizes to Gus for the dog’s involvement in the race, which inevitably led to this attack by simply being there in the competition versus safe at home on the farm. Angus McTeague serves as one of the main sponsors for the derby. McTeague’s character represents a rich man who cares little for others and wages thousands of dollars against Stoneman to lose. McTeague also happens to sponsor his dog-sledding teams with a strong desire that one of his hired men will win over Stoneman. Angus offers Will a bribe of $5,000 to withdraw from the race. In the back of his mind, McTeague knows Will could win and feels threatened by him. If audience members could pick a
villain within the movie plot, McTeague best plays such a role. In other words, he could potentially
destroy the symbol of hope Will’s story represents to millions of Americans with the temptation for
Stoneman to take the money. When Stoneman refuses the offer, in a threatening voice, McTeague
asserts. “Son, I don’t think you realize who I am.” McTeague sees himself as a man of power who
controls the outcomes of the derby. From the shadows of the background in the scene, Kingsley
emerges with his response to this cautionary statement. He boldly states, “Now I suggest you get out of
here before I make you tomorrow’s headline!” Before McTeague can respond formidably in his own
way, Kingsley forcefully shoves McTeague outside of the barn where Will is trying to rest. Kingsley
further says, “Maybe I am not making myself clear. If you bother the boy again, trust me, the world
will know it!” Kingsley becomes a character of authority in this scene to suggest that journalists have
power with the privilege to write the news, especially when threats from powerful individuals like
McTeague endanger Will’s well-being and ability to compete.

With this action of a protective nature, like that of a father-figure, Kingsley is not just a man of
words for a newspaper here. Kingsley affirms Will’s question to champion the race. These actions and
words portray another sign of hope while also contributing an affirmative presence that Will needs to
persevere. McTeague will offer no more threats, or Kingsley will make his bribing presence known to
his newspaper reading audience across America. Without further complications from McTeague,
Kingsley presents a moment of hope, which becomes signified by his daring response to publicize
McTeague’s tempting offer. Of course, such a news story would discredit McTeague in his efforts to
cheat the race as he becomes exposed for the villain he is. Thus, with the power of penmanship,
Kingsley gives Will the ability to endure until the finish line.

Shortly after the brief conversation between Kingsley and McTeague in the barn, as Will
continues to rest, he asks Kingsley to wake him up in two hours so that he can continue the next leg of
the race. Stoneman has been pushing himself to an unhealthy extreme with little sleep and inadequate
meals to set a winning pace. Kingsley sympathetically with concern says, “Listen, kid, this is crazy. You are going to kill yourself. You've got to sleep longer than that.” However, Kingsley agrees to act as Will’s human alarm. As Will goes to sleep, he expresses his gratitude to Kingsley with the following quote: “Mr. Kingsley, thanks. You’re not so bad after all.” This moment establishes a recognized kinship between Kingsley and Stoneman with a mutually understood goal to win the race, no matter the costs. In some ways, both men give each other a sense of hope here. Kingsley is not just a sellout reporter, and Will is not just a farmhand boy. Concern from Kingsley is expressed and received by Will with a grateful heart. As an initial gesture of goodwill, Kingsley's action to intervene with McTeague signifies a form of affirmation, thus initiating a conversation of meaning.

Following these scenes on the last leg of the derby, after Will sleeps for two hours, Kingsley wakes him up. Stoneman claims he cannot get up or move his arms and legs. Kingsley urges calling a doctor in his newfound care and concern for Stoneman, which would inevitably lead to his withdrawal from the race. Inspired by the crowds of spectators who believe in the cause, Will states, “It’s not about me anymore, Mr. Kingsley. It’s about all those people…those people pulling for me. It’s about those boys that came out and cut trails.” Reluctantly, Kingsley gives in and holsters Will’s arm around his shoulder so he can help Will get to his dogsled. As another sign of support, Stoneman understands that thousands are rooting for his underdog story, many thanks to Kingsley's many articles about Will. To inspire these "Iron Will" believers, as Stoneman recognizes their faith in him, he chooses to persevere. Due to sheer exhaustion, the simple act of assisting Will so he can compete symbolizes Kingsley’s affirmation and belief that Will can finish what he started. With a demonstration of iron will, meaning a relentless ambition to never quit, Stoneman and his dogs, led by Gus on the last leg, represent hope in its truest form.

**Future Research Directions and Suggestions**
As an analytical tool, Semiotics Theory presents applicable constructs to explore fictional characters and their relationships to one another in movies, television shows, radio, and other outlets of media viewership. This historical real story of characters portrayed in media offers an interesting outlet to explore and research how fictional characters compare to true-life narratives. In an inspirational movie, like Iron Will, the audience often sees themselves as participants in the underdog fight depicted with symbolic hope. For instance, Stoneman sought to save his farm and further pursue his college education, however by the end of the movie, he desired to win the race for everyone who believed in him and followed his journey through the newspapers written by Kingsley. When walking in the shoes of the main character as an audience member, individuals cheer on the competitor who faces overwhelming odds through affirmative efforts. These film spectators have faced mutual adversities in their own lives. A historical analysis of this proposed inquiry makes for an engaging project. How spectators relate to main characters through a film narrative on an intrapersonal level also provides intriguing observations about human nature and what inspires people to become greater in facing their own difficult circumstances.

In addition to traditional Disney movies, other genres of media warrant the attention of scholars through a semiotics framework. Within the field of Pop Culture, anime, music videos, documentaries, musicals, silent films, and many other visual compositions contribute to the growth of knowledge in the discipline. In silent films, images, colors, black and white contrasts, and nonverbal communication present the primary basis of interpretation. Without sound, the symbolism of a major moment might be missed. For example, in many Disney films, including Iron Will, music accompanies notable scenes to bring harmony into the mix of melodies that touch viewers and their accepted meanings of these scenes. Music often accompanies some of the most well-known films, such as the famous chords of Jaws or the opening of a Stars Wars movie with the yellow text that scrolls across the movie screen. Music potentially brings forth its signifiers of meaning in the sequence of events within a movie,
which then leads to another interesting topic to explore what meanings music brings to those scenes and the development of the film's main characters.

Final Thoughts

When the odds stack against an underdog competitor, support through affirmation carries a person to achieve greater than what was originally expected. Affirmation in some forms inspires one to fight, to never give up, and to push further than one perceived they could accomplish. It can make the difference between winning and losing a competition of any kind. In the described roles, Harry Kingsley serves as that motivating force for Will Stoneman with his newspaper narratives as a sports journalist and what appears to eventually be a bond between the two characters in friendship. With this observation, Kingsley signifies a vital source of affirmation. As this symbol of affirmation, he then instills hope in Stoneman to persevere. Will's narrative and character then serve as the depicted sign of perseverance in the pursuit to complete this rugged race, even though he faces several extremities. These signs and the application of Semiotics Theory are not so farfetched to only influence characters that roleplay a fictional narrative, even though sometimes inspired partially by a known true story. In reality, affirmation through the devoted support of individuals who believe in a person causes one to reach for higher heights, with challenges never encountered before by the original competitor. In a relationship, a person can certainly bring you up or bring you down. In the growing relationship between Harry Kingsley, a known journalist, and Will Stoneman, the young dogsledding champion, affirmation leads to perseverance, which, in turn, leads to hope for thousands of newspaper readers. The same process remains true in real life. When people support someone to achieve greater ambitions through affirmation, a person absorbs that encouragement to believe those greater goals become possible and within one’s reach. Hope forms, and then perseverance takes over.
References


