The Semiotics of Smallville
By Melissa Powell

Smallville was an American TV show that aired on the CW network from 2001-2011. Its premise revolved around Clark Kent/Kal-El before he became Superman. Throughout the series, the semiotics become increasingly apparent. Lois Tyson would explain that “semiotics examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behaviors operate symbolically to ‘tell’ us something” (Tyson 216). Roland Barthes semiotic analysis of professional wrestling is very much like Smallville in that Smallville “can be interpreted as a language with a very specific purpose: to provide the audience with the cathartic satisfaction of watching justice triumph in a situation that (unlike real life) makes it very clear who is good and who is evil” (Barthes, Tyson 217). Smallville uses everything from subtle techniques to obvious tactics in order to convey a clear message to the audience: the hero always saves the day.

One subtle technique used to signify the villains and heroes in Smallville is the use of color. The main villain, Lex Luthor, is always wearing black, which is known to symbolize authority and evil (Cherry). Lex is the ultimate financial power in the story, coming from a background of money. Lex is also responsible for many deaths, both by his own hand and through indirect involvement. Not only is color used for the main villain, but for minor villains as well. Each time Clark Kent faces opposition, dark colors symbolize their evil. On the other hand, Clark Kent is always wearing blue and red. Aside from being the main colors of Superman’s outfit, red and blue are the colors of the American flag, exemplifying Superman as an all-American hero. The color blue symbolizes calmness and serenity (Cherry). It is Clark’s main purpose to keep the people of Earth calm and keep life as tranquil as possible. The color blue also signifies the sky, and the sky is where Kal-El’s spaceship came from. The color red symbolizes intensity and excitement (Cherry). Superman is a very intense person in many aspects. He is intense with his love interests and his passion for saving humanity. The color red also signifies the fire he can shoot from his eyes, which is ignited by sexual excitement when he first discovers this ability.

Interestingly, the use of colors does not stop with the heroes or villains. Lana Lang is the object of Clark’s desire, and, at the beginning of the series, she is dressed humbly and modestly and usually in soft, pastel colors. Once she starts dating Lex (eventually marrying him), her wardrobe turns from innocent farm girl to dark business attire. This symbolizes that Lex’s power easily takes hold on those around him. Likewise, after Lois Lane is introduced and slowly begins to take Lana’s place as Clark’s desire, she is transitioned from wearing many colors to wearing primarily red and blue. Like with Lex and Lana, this creates a bond between Clark and Lois.

Another signifier is a subtlety regarding the major villain and Clark’s love interest. In at least one episode of every season, the main villain’s face, first Lex Luthor then later in the series Tess Mercer, is spattered with blood. This signifies not only the blood spilled by these two characters, but the evil and opposition these characters represent. In the same respect, both of Clark Kent’s two main love interests are shown in a hospital
bed at least once each season. This shows them as the damsels in distress whom Clark will always rescue. An exception occurs in the last season when Lois Lane is shown in a hospital room, but not actually in the bed. These details signify the special bond that Lois and Clark have and how big of a threat Lex Luthor poses to humanity.

Yet another signifier in the series is the barn on the Kent Farm. The structure of the barn itself symbolizes Kal-El’s life as Clark Kent. The Kents made Kal-El the man he is and strivestobe. Many times each season, the barn is destroyed in one way or another. Using his superhuman strength and speed, Clark is able to rebuild the barn in no time. The constant destruction of the barn symbolizes the hardship Clark faces in his everyday life. His constant reconstruction of the barn, regardless of how many times it needs done, symbolizes his integrity and strength as a person. The rebuilding of the barn also symbolizes that it isn’t always the genes that make the man, but his surroundings as well.

In addition to these clever techniques are the major tactics used to differentiate the hero from the villain. Kal-El gets his superhuman powers from the sun. Many times he can be seen basking in sunlight, and it is through direct sunlight that major wounds can heal quickly. The sun as a signifier gives Clark Kent the appearance of a savior from the heavens whom the heavens shine down upon. There are even instances when Clark is shown in poses imitating Christ being crucified on the cross. These images symbolize Clark as the savior of humanity.

On the contrary, in Smallville Lex Luthor is the epitome of the Byronic hero. The definition of a Byronic hero is “an alien, mysterious, and gloomy spirit, superior in his passions and powers to the common run of humanity, whom he regards with disdain. He harbors the torturing memory of an enormous, nameless guilt that derives him toward an inevitable doom. And he exerts an attraction on other characters that is more compelling because it involves their terror at his obliviousness to ordinary concerns and values” (“George Gordon” 608). In all of Lex’s endeavors, the only person he takes into consideration is himself. Lex sees all others as being beneath him and uses them as he pleases. Lex also has no qualms using his name to gain power and control. The “torturing memory of an enormous, nameless guilt” involves the death of his younger brother, Juilan, when Lex was a child and Julian was an infant and the resulting suicide of his mother. Lex is haunted by the memory of his brother and mother throughout the series. He attracts the innocent Lana Lang through lies and guilt, forcing her into marriage. Detail by detail, there is little doubt that Lex is the embodiment of the Byronic hero.

The preceding is only a preview of the semiotics at play in the series Smallville. As Tyson explains, “For semioticians, anything can be a sign. The whole world of human culture is a ‘text’ waiting to be ‘read’” (219). With that in mind, one doesn’t need to be a semiotician in order to read the world, and its culture, as a text. Semiotics are a part of every TV show we watch, every music video that airs, and even in the pictures on our favorite DVDs or CDs. There are signifiers in our everyday lives that symbolize many things, many of which we aren’t even aware of, but could easily identify if we stopped to pay attention.
Works Cited


