

Semiotic Analysis of Gender Identity Transformation in the Film ‘The Danish Girl’

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Abstract

The transgender phenomenon is not exclusively a post-2000s issue; historical evidence traces its presence as far back as the mid-1920s. *The Danish Girl* (2015), directed by Tom Hooper, presents a compelling cinematic portrayal of identity transformation, following the journey of Einar Wegener as he transitions into Lili Elbe. This study aims to analyze the representation of gender transition through a semiotic lens and the pedagogical potential for English language teaching and learning. By employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, selected scenes from the film are examined to uncover the layers of meaning that construct and communicate transgender identity by using John Fiske’s three-tiered framework of reality, representation, and ideology. By linking the analysis to Butler’s view that gender is fluid, this study demonstrates that *The Danish Girl* presents an exemplary understanding of the complex dynamics of gender identity within individuals. The findings revealed: (1) *The Danish Girl* depicts Einar Wegener’s transition into Lili Elbe through emotionally charged scenes and visual elements, such as costume and gesture, which signify internal conflict and identity shifts. The film constructs gender transformation using cinematographic techniques like lighting, framing, and symbolism while promoting individual freedom, and gender identity. (2) This film is valuable used as resource for analyzing psychological changes and for linguistic teaching to foster critical thinking, media literacy, and cultural awareness. By using film as authentic material

Keywords: *Gender Identity; Transformation; English Teaching, Semiotic Analysis*

1. Introduction

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human identity that includes a person’s feelings, behavior, and sexual orientation. Sexuality is often seen as a personal expression influenced by various factors, including biological, psychological, social, and cultural. Sexual liberation is an effort to deconstruct norms by overcoming social restrictions that are considered oppressive in expressing sexuality freely, outside of what has been determined by the dominant society. Ultimately, this also involves recognizing diverse sexual identities and orientations, as well as the struggle for equality and acceptance of diverse gender identities in society (Inayah & Fauzi, 2024). Identity change or gender transformation has been legalized in several countries, just like LGBT same-sex relationships have been legalized in several countries such as Canada, Thailand, Taiwan. However, there is a phenomenon called transgender, which is a change in sexual identity from male to female or from female to male. This phenomenon is not something that is determined at birth, but rather a choice made by the individual. In essence, biologically they remain as the identity given at birth, but they claim to have experienced changes through the actions they take. Sexual identity that leads to gender transformation is one of the psychological phenomena that occurs in humans. Some cases start from feelings of internal incongruence, where a person feels trapped in a body that is not in line with the gender identity they feel. This phenomenon is not always related to biological factors such as the proportion of Y and X chromosomes, but can also be influenced by environmental factors, such as doctrine from other people or intense social patterns with the opposite sex from an early age.



For example, a girl who was initially very feminine and sweet-looking, when interacting too much with male friends, can gradually experience a change in interests and begin to adopt more masculine behavior. The condition when women show a more masculine style or behavior is often referred to as a tomboy. One example of a film that is in line with this study is the film "The Danish Girl" where the conflict in this film is the psychological aspect of the character Einar Wegener who decides to change his gender identity to Lili Elbe. The Danish Girl is a 2015 American biographical drama film which turns out to be based on the true story of a Danish painter husband and wife and this is the second Transgender case in the world. This film premiered at the Venice Film Festival on September 5, 2015 this film received an extraordinary response from critics and this is also one of the reasons why many researchers choose the film The Danish Girl as their research object.

Research has mostly used academic and theoretical perspectives, but has not yet directly involved the voices and perspectives of the transgender community itself regarding how they see their self-representation in film media.

John Fiske's semiotic theory put forward the theory of codes which he called the code of television. In the codes mentioned in John Fiske's theory, social codes have three levels. The first stage is called the level of reality (real) such as appearance, clothing, environment, gestures and expressions (Jaya & Prawiradiredja, 2017). Then the second stage is representation, such as character, narrative, action, dialogue and setting. The last stage is the ideological code of ideologies such as patriarchy, individualism, race, capitalism and so on. In this study, a qualitative approach was used which was entirely through John Fiske's semiotic theory so that this study could obtain accurate objectives and results. The researcher examined the signs related to Transgender in the film The Danish Girl.

2. Method

This research is a descriptive qualitative study, the data source of which is entirely from the film "The Danish Girl." The researcher chose a qualitative descriptive approach: first, to better understand the phenomena being studied in the film. Second, as John Fiske's semiotic theory has three levels: reality, representation, and ideology, the nature of film as a cultural text rich in symbols and representations requires interpretive analysis.

This 119-minute film by Tom Hopper, made in 2015, was shot in Nyhavn, a setting altered to resemble the 1930s. Set in 1920s Denmark, the film tells the story of a painter's husband, whose wife asks him to model for her paintings, posing and even dressing as a woman. Initially, he refuses due to embarrassment, but over time, a sense of comfort develops, ultimately leading to his coming out as transgender.

The film's story of gender transformation reflects the complexity of individual life choices. More broadly, it demonstrates how personal and social factors influence decisions. This parallels a phenomenon in the workplace, where, compared to men, women's career choices tend to be more influenced by the micro-family context (Ye & Cai, 2024). The data collection technique used in this study was documentation through film observation. The research method used was descriptive qualitative research. The researcher conducted in-depth observations of scenes in the film, focusing specifically on scenes that demonstrate Einar's character transformation. This data collection used a documentation method, identifying and recording key scenes that occurred before and after the character transformation. The video was played repeatedly to ensure a thorough understanding of the storyline. The researchers then marked scenes that demonstrated the gender transformation process and divided them into segments based on the main character's development. This was supported by visual documentation, including screen recordings and transcripts of relevant dialogue and scenes. After the data was collected, the researchers categorized and analyzed the data using comparative analysis, namely thematic analysis, by grouping the character's condition before and after the transformation. After identifying and compiling all identified themes, a systematic comparison was conducted between the pre-transformation and post-transformation conditions. This thematic data analysis was grouped according to findings based on John Fiske's theory.

This analysis was conducted because the researcher wanted to conduct an in-depth analysis of the unique characteristics of the film's characters. Thematic analysis also helped the researcher focus on the social and psychological themes of the characters.

John Fiske proposed a theory about the codes of television. According to him, the codes that appear or are used in television programs are interconnected to form meaning. Reality does not emerge through visible codes, but is processed first in the minds of viewers. Therefore, each sign or code typically has a different perception among viewers. According to John Fiske, the three levels of semiotic theory are reality, representation, and ideology. The reality level contains social codes such as appearance, behavior, and movement. The representation level relates to filming techniques such as camera placement and lighting. Finally, the ideology level, the highest level, displays the message and meaning of the film itself.

3. Findings

The Danish Girl depicts the main character's gender identity change not only in dialogue but also through individual signs that can be socially interpreted by the audience. An analysis of "The Danish Girl" reveals significant

linguistic changes that accompany Einar's transformation into Lili, demonstrating how language serves as a crucial tool for the construction of gender identity. The character's linguistic evolution changes through distinct patterns of speech modification, vocabulary choices, and communicative behaviors that reflect the internal psychological transformations that occur throughout the gender transition process. Initially, Einar's linguistic patterns exhibit masculine communication markers, including a direct communication style, assertive sentence structure, and vocabulary choices that align with conventional male speech patterns in 1920s Danish society. However, as the transformation progresses, subtle but significant changes emerge in speech patterns, with Lili adopting a more hesitant language structure, an increased use of restrictive adverbs, and a softer intonation pattern that reflects the expression of her emerging feminine identity.

a. Reality Level – Linguistics data analysis
Before the Change:

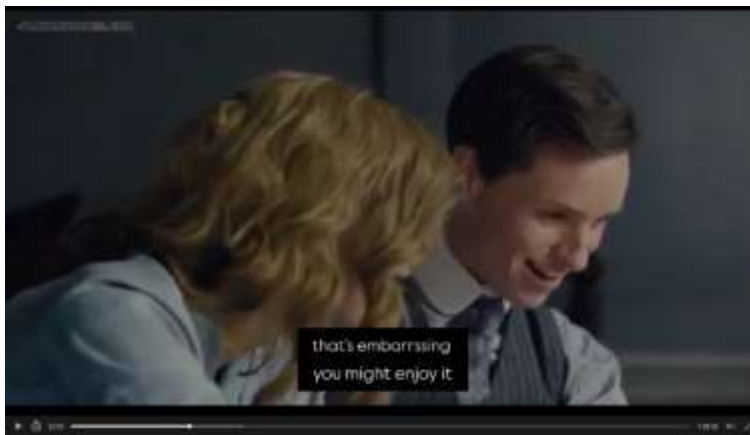
In this scene, Einar's character is depicted as a simple man with masculine traits. When his wife asks Einar to be a lily at a party, Einar quickly refuses because he feels it is very embarrassing.

Gerda : why not give them something different, be someone else??

Einar: Do you know who in particular?

Gerda: No, but you'd be very convincing.

Einar: No, that's very embarrassing.



Gerda: Maybe you'd enjoy it.

Einar: No.

(Figure1. 0.22.37)

Time to change:

When Einar agrees to disguise himself as a woman at a party, before entering the building he asks Gerda if she is pretty enough??.

Gerda: Why?

Einar: Am I pretty enough?

Gerda: Amazing.

Einar: But I can't be as beautiful as you.

(Figure .0.26.51)

Time After Change:

Mr. Hans: How are you, Lily?

Einar: I... feel completely myself.

(Figure .1.48.02)

After Lily's surgery, the doctor said she had lost a lot of blood and had a high fever, which might resolve on its own, but it also might not.

This raised concerns among Gerda and Mr. Hans.

Then, through John Fiske's semiotic research, we also discovered the psychological complexity of Einar's character as Lili Eble. Personality psychology is the study of human personality, focusing on the factors that influence human behavior. Personality psychology studies the relationship between memory or observation and development, and the relationship between observation and adjustment (Podungge et al., 2023). The main character's internal conflict manifests

through various complex psychological stages, from identity confusion and denial to a newfound self-acceptance from behavior to how to dress.

Gender identity is used to describe an individual's internal sense of self as male, female, or somewhere in between or outside of these two categories. Individuals. Einar Wegener, at the beginning of his gender identity transition, wore a suit, which was a common menswear item worn by men in the 1920s. Wearing a matching jacket and tie, Einar blended into the crowd of men in the process (Wahyuningsih & Prastiwi, 2023).

Based on a semiotic analysis of the film "The Danish Girl" using John Fiske's three-level framework, this study identifies several key themes that depict the transformation of Einar Wegener's gender identity into Lili Elbe. The thematic analysis is conducted through in-depth observation of key scenes that show character changes that correspond to the analysis of language and linguistic identity and psychological complexity.

Reality Level – Psychological Complexity before the change – appearance:



Gerda's friend: Look, those two... those two over there, they're together.

Everyone laughs.

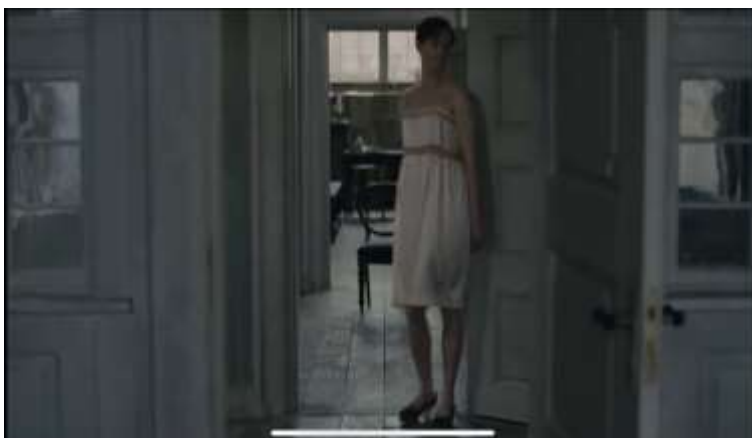
Gerda's friend: Oh, married people are so easily startled.

When Einar and Gerda attended a party, they and their friends saw two effeminate men, which they joked about.

Like men of his time, Einar's masculine appearance, wearing a black and white suit and a jacket, gave off a dignified impression.

(Figure 1. 00.16.23)

Time to Change - appearance:



Einar is learning to style himself in Gerda's pajamas and heels.

In this scene, Einar looks awkward and embarrassed when Gerda finds out, having just returned home.

(Figure 2. 0.26.07)

After of change – appearance:

As Lily changes over time, her way of dressing also gradually changes. Previously, Lily tended to wear neutral or monochrome clothes, but as time went by, Lily seemed comfortable wearing more striking and colorful clothes. This shows Lily's increasingly strong feminine nature.

(Figure . 1.29.11)

before the change – Make up:

Einar wore no makeup, her hair short and neat, like a man's. Her appearance was kept as natural as possible, with no visible makeup whatsoever, to make the difference between her before and after transformation more noticeable.

(Figure 0.21.43)

Time to change – Make up

In this scene, it is shown that Einar has difficulty using her own make-up, she already feels comfortable with the appearance of her face, Einar in this scene uses a red wig to perfect her appearance as Lilli.
(Figure .0.23.27)

After to change – Make up



Einar's (Lili) make-up shows extraordinary beauty, even her make-up seems to blend in with her own skin, she doesn't even need to use a wig for her hair because she can use her own hair
(Figure .1.34.22)

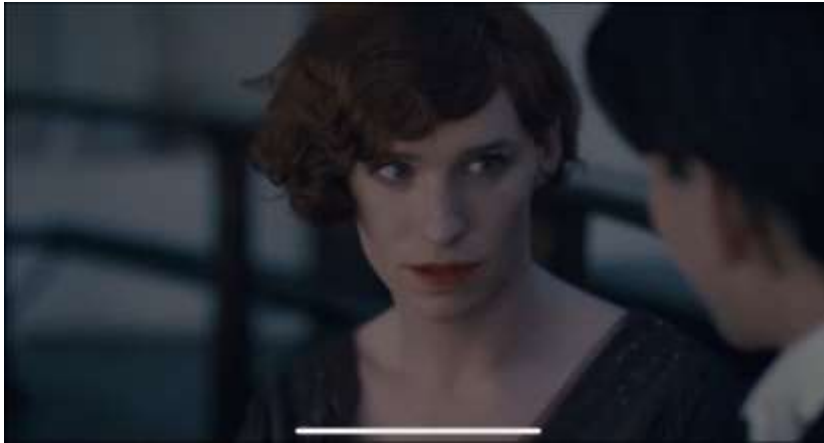
B. Representation Level

Before of change:



The close-up shooting technique from the front, which includes the head to the neck, aims to show the facial expression of a character when attaching her clothes to her body, the expression reflected is that the character feels attracted to her dress which looks beautiful when she wears it.

(Figure 7. 0.12.51)

Time the change:

The close-up shooting technique with neat framing and dramatic use of depth of field where Einar is in sharp focus while the background and the second subject are blurred, then coupled with Einar's intense and interesting gaze, makes it easy for the audience to capture this condition.

(Figure .0.32.47)

After to change:

Point of view camera technique, in taking this scene the camera seems to be Einar's point of view, the scene when Einar gets on the train for his first operation he reveals his identity which he will soon replace with a new identity, namely Lily Elbe.

(Figure .1.27.22)

C. Ideology Level



The scene where Lily wants to expedite her surgery and change into a new identity.

Lily/Einar: Should I wait?

Warnekros: Just a week.

Lily/Einar: (sighs)

Warnekros: I want you to rest and gain weight.

We can't risk infection with what we're about to do. I need you to be strong.

Lily/Einar: This isn't my body, Professor.

(Figure . 1.28.58)

The images and dialogue demonstrate that the ideological level contained in this film is the Liberalism ideology adopted by Denmark, which states that freedom and equal rights are the primary political values (Jaya & Prawiradiredja (2017), also known as the civil rights movement. This means that the recognition and acceptance of transgender behavior began to be accepted and recognized as part of the human spectrum. LGBT rights were legalized in 1933 by the Danish government, including same-sex activity. In the scene above, Lily's insistence on changing her identity immediately, fighting for it by all means, Although Einar's transition surgery as Lily was successful, Lily's condition deteriorated shortly thereafter and she ultimately died. The tragedy that befell Lily in the film reflects the real-life health challenges faced by the transgender community. This aligns with findings in the Limited literature suggests that individuals who are transgender and racial/ethnic minorities suffer poorer health outcomes (Howard et al., 2019).

demonstrates the film's complex and controversial ideology, reflecting various societal and political perspectives at the time regarding transgender rights. Essentially, this film presents the ideology of the civil rights movement, where the recognition and acceptance of transgender behavior began to be accepted and recognized as part of the human spectrum.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that *The Danish Girl* is not simply a narrative about gender identity change, but also a complex representation of how identity is formed, negotiated, and expressed within social and cultural contexts. The complexity of gender identity depicted in the film aligns with the realities reflected in recent demographic data.

From BRFSS data, we found that of adults who identify as transgender, 38.5% (515,200) are transgender women, 35.9% (480,000) are transgender men, and 25.6% (341,800) report that they do not fit into binary gender categories (gender nonconforming). Transgender adults who identify as nonbinary may have reported their gender on the BRFSS as different from the sex assigned at birth (Herman et al., 2022). These data reinforce the importance of diverse representation in media like *The Danish Girl*, which can help the public understand the complex and multifaceted spectrum of gender identities. Using John Fiske's semiotic theory, this study successfully uncovers how the film conveys meaning in three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. Similar to previous research, this study adds psychological complexity and linguistic analysis.

It can be said that this research supports previous research with additional elements of linguistic research and psychological complexity.

Linguistic analysis also strengthens the semiotic findings. The changes in Einar/Lili's communication style demonstrate that gender transformation also alters how individuals interact and represent themselves through language. This enriches our understanding of the relationship between language, identity, and culture.

At the level of Reality, Einar's transformation into Lili is depicted through visual changes such as clothing, makeup, and body gestures.

At the level of Representation, cinematographic techniques such as lighting, framing, and close-ups effectively convey the character's inner state. Einar's reflective gaze is both framing and isolating, and the shifting image technique suggests a difficult and demanding process.

Meanwhile, at the ideological level, the film emphasizes the importance of recognizing and accepting diverse gender identities. Liberal ideology, particularly its support for individual freedom to determine one's own identity, serves as the film's core value framework.

This study concludes that the film *The Danish Girl* effectively represents the transformation of gender identity through complex semiotic elements, both in visual, narrative, and ideological forms. Einar's transformation into Lili is not only depicted as a physical process, but also as a psychological and social journey full of struggle. This film conveys an important message about individual freedom and acceptance of gender diversity. Through John Fiske's semiotic approach, it is seen that gender identity is not static, but is shaped by the interaction between the self, society, and visual culture. In addition, Furthermore, the results of this study also emphasize the importance of film as a learning medium capable of fostering social awareness, empathy, and critical literacy in English language learning. Thus, *The Danish Girl* is not only a form of entertainment but also a valuable educational resource, particularly in understanding the complexities of gender identity and the challenges faced by transgender individuals. Communities that are inclusive and support gender equality can provide positive role models and the resources necessary for families to adapt. Conversely, communities that hold strong traditional values may act as obstacles to this transformation process (Damiri, 2024).

This is reflected in how the main character experiences a social dilemma. If others do not interpret his behavior as masculine, they will judge him negatively, and the transgender man will likely adjust his behavior in an effort to become more masculine (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). The film thus successfully depicts the social pressures and internal conflicts faced by transgender individuals in seeking and maintaining their authentic identity.

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