



## Semiotics in John Edmond’s “The Last Word in Rhodesian” Song

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### Abstract

The exploration of literature transcends the boundaries of written texts, encompassing a diverse array of expressions, including spoken or sung compositions like song lyrics. While on the surface, songs may seem to convey straightforward messages, beneath it lies a labyrinth of symbols and nuances that beckon listeners to interpret. This interpretive process demands a nuanced understanding and a willingness to explore the depths of lyrical expression. This research aims to unravel the significance of each letter in the word "RHODESIA" and to unravel the intricate composition of the portmanteau "Rhodesian" within the lyrics of John Edmond's 'The Last Word in Rhodesian' song using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiosis and employing qualitative research methodology with historical approach. Through meticulous analysis, the findings reveal the profound symbolism interwoven within the lyrics, which serves to encapsulate the historical essence of Rhodesia. The songwriter adeptly utilizes the arrangement of each letter in the word "RHODESIA" to encapsulate phrases emblematic of the Rhodesian Bush War and alluding to the names of significant Rhodesian figures; Rhodes and Ian, symbolically forming the word "Rhodesian". In doing so, the song becomes a poignant tribute to the complex tapestry of Rhodesian history.

### 1. Introduction

The concept of literature, according to Meyer (1997), could be described as: "written texts that are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter, are in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama)". The term has also been applied to spoken or sung texts despite the etymological origin from Latin *literatura/litteratura*, which means "learning, a writing, grammar". Originally, it referred to "writing formed with letters", derived from the word *littera/littera* meaning "letter". Typically, the subject matter of literature is expressive, whether of personal emotions, such as love or grief or of public emotions, patriotism, reverence, or celebration.

While examining sung texts (more commonly known as song lyrics), individuals go beyond merely perusing or glancing at the arranged words in the lyrics; they also make an effort

to comprehend the song's meaning. The expression of ideas in a song can be subtly embedded within the lyrics and often take the form of signs, symbols, icons, or even cryptic codes.

"It is possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeïon*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them." Ferdinand de Saussure (in Chandler n.d.). Saussure presented a two-part model of the sign and described it as a 'dyadic' structure. He characterized a sign as comprising a 'signifier' (*signifiant*), representing its form, and the 'signified' (*signifié*), representing the associated concept. The sign emerges as a unified entity through the connection of the signifier with the signified. The connection between the signifier and the signified is called 'signification.' (Chandler n.d.).

While there are numerous existing studies have examined semiotics in song lyrics, John Edmond's *The Last Word in Rhodesian* had not been previously investigated in any research. Therefore, this research brings a value of novelty by examining a song which not previously studied in any research.

*The Last Word in Rhodesian* is a Rhodesian patriotic folk song composed and performed by John Edmond, a Rhodesian songwriter and former soldier who became famous during the Rhodesian Bush War in the 1970s. He earned the nickname "Bush Cat" for his unwavering dedication to celebrating Rhodesian identity and heritage through music. The song is part of the *Troopiesongs – Complete* album, released in 1999 and reissued on January 1, 2011 for its 50th Anniversary edition.

Although John Edmond may not enjoy widespread recognition in contemporary society, the researcher finds his compositions rather interesting, especially his *The Last Word in Rhodesian* song. The main reason is that within such a short and simple song, the songwriter cleverly summarizes a piece of history of an often-overlooked African country - the Republic of Rhodesia, which is now known as Zimbabwe since 1980. Therefore, the researcher is interested to conduct research on this particular Rhodesian patriotic folk song. The song itself serves as the sole research object as well as the primary data of this study.

The researcher identified numerous interesting aspects in John Edmond's *The Last Word in Rhodesian*, but this study has some specific limitations according to its intended goals. Its general goal is to offer a more profound exploration of the symbols and the identification of their significance using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiosis as described in Daniel Chandler's *Semiotics for Beginners*. The specific goal of this study is to figure out what each letter in "Rhodesia" stands for, and to find out what the portmanteau of "Rhodesian" consisted of in the lyrics of the song.

## 2. Research Method

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative research, primarily concentrating on the analysis of textual data. In the simplest terms, qualitative research can be characterized as a research approach that centers on the interpretation of non-numeric information. In this study, the textual data under scrutiny are derived from a song's lyrics. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research procedures involve purposeful sampling, collection of open-ended data, analysis of text or pictures, representation of information in figures and tables, and personal interpretation of the findings.

The research approach for this study is historical approach. Historical approach entails comprehending the context encompassing the creation of the work and employing these discoveries to interpret the literary piece. As described by Guerin et al. in *A Handbook of Critical*

*Approaches to Literature Fifth Edition* (2005), historical approach sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work.

## **2a. Data Collection Technique**

In gathering the research data, the researcher followed a procedure which involves a series of steps. Initially, the researcher gathered the primary data by listening to John Edmond's 'The Last Word in Rhodesian' song several times and examined its lyrics, focusing on the signs and symbols within them and take notes of them. Next, the researcher pinpointed the symbols present and uncovered their meanings in the lyrics using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiosis and wrote them down. Subsequently, the researcher gathered the secondary data by exploring and collecting various sources regarding the history of Rhodesia and Rhodesian Bush War to provide a nuanced context for this song lyrics analysis. Finally, a meticulous analysis of the lyrics was conducted, enabling the researcher to comprehend symbolism within the song's lyrics, ultimately interpreting and deriving their significance.

## **2b. Data Analysis Technique**

Following the Saussurean dyadic model of semiosis, the data analysis is done by providing each verse of the song's lyrics as the 'signified', followed by the 'signifier' in the form of an explanation based on the researcher's interpretation of each verse. Next, both the 'signifier' and the 'signified' are merged through the 'signification' process, forming a 'sign.' Finally, the formed 'sign' then elaborated on the relevant context - the history of Rhodesia and Rhodesian Bush War.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

In this chapter, the researcher employs a two-part structure determined by the thematic content of the song lyrics. The initial segment encompasses the exploration of the first and second stanzas, wherein the songwriter spells out each letter in the word "RHODESIA" and expounds upon the meanings attributed to each letter. This analysis seeks to uncover the layered significance and symbolism embedded in the spelling of the word.

Moving to the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts to the third stanza, a crucial juncture in the lyrics where the songwriter ingeniously crafts the portmanteau "Rhodesian." This inventive fusion involves combining the names of two pivotal Rhodesian figures. The researcher delves into the symbolic dimensions of this portmanteau, unravelling the nuanced historical meanings encapsulated in the amalgamation of these significant names.

### **3a. Spelling Out "RHODESIA"**

This part focuses on the songwriter's explicit spelling of the letters in the word "RHODESIA" and his description of the significance behind each letter. The researcher delved into this content to reveal the importance of these meanings.

#### ***"R is for the regiments who fight the winning fight"***

The starting letter in the word "Rhodesia" is letter R, it serves as the signifier in the first verse for the regiments as the signified, which refers to the military branches involved in numerous skirmishes throughout the Rhodesian Bush War, specifically those who fought valiantly and emerged victorious in many battles.

The lyrics acknowledge and pay tribute to the various elements of Rhodesian security forces throughout the Rhodesian Bush War. The Rhodesian Bush War, also called the Second Chimurenga as well as the Zimbabwean War of Liberation, was a civil conflict from 1965 to December 1979. The conflict involved three main factions: the Rhodesian government led by the white minority rule under Prime Minister Ian Smith, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) - the military wing of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) - the military wing associated with Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). Both ZANU and ZAPU were competing nationalist organizations with communist backing, but despite their rivalry, they shared a common goal of fighting for black majority rule in the country. China predominantly supported Mugabe's ZANU, while Nkomo's ZAPU received support from the Soviet Union.

In the next verse, the letter H is used as the signifier for “home fires.” The phrase “home fires” serves as the signified.

***“H is for the home fires that the folks are keeping bright”***

The mention of "home fires" can be seen as a metaphor for the hearths or households across the nation. The act of keeping home fires bright becomes symbolic of a collective effort to maintain the spirit, resilience, and unity of the entire community or nation. Just as a family tends to its home fires for sustenance and well-being, a nation collectively nurtures its core values, traditions, and identity. The lyrics convey a sense of responsibility among the citizens to contribute to the overall welfare, vitality, and survival of the nation. In the context of Rhodesia during the Bush War (1965 - 1979), this can symbolize the collective endurance of the Rhodesian people, military and civilians, blacks and whites, men and women, young and old, through challenges and hardships not only from the terror attacks by the nationalist guerrilla forces but also from the embargo and sanctions imposed by the United Nations since 1966, showcasing a shared commitment to preserving the nation's values and identity.

In the following verse, the letter O is used as the signifier for the signified “other ranks and officers” which refers to the hierarchical elements within the Rhodesian military structure.

***“O is for the other ranks and officers as well”***

This verse meticulously acknowledges and extends appreciation for the collaborative endeavors of both the lower-ranking soldiers, often referred to as "other ranks," and their higher-ranking counterparts within the Rhodesian military structure. The emphasis is placed on the unity and cooperative spirit that permeated the armed forces, contributing significantly to their outstanding effectiveness in countering guerrilla activities. This notable achievement earned them recognition as an extraordinary and exceptionally efficient counter-guerrilla force. A poignant example of this prowess is illustrated through the exemplary performance of the 8th company of the 2nd Rhodesian African Rifles. Remarkably, within three months, they successfully neutralized over a hundred guerrillas while incurring the loss of only one man. Noteworthy is the composition of this company, comprising a hundred men, with regular soldiers strategically deployed in rotation. The officers, however, were sent on every call (Downie & Cecil, 1979), exemplifying a commitment to hands-on leadership and active participation in the field.

The signified in the following verse is represented by the signifier - letter D - for “die-hards” referring to those who are unwaveringly dedicated to their cause - civilians, politicians,

and military personnel alike, even in the face of extreme challenges, as suggested by the reference to fighting in hell.

***“And D is for the die-hards who will even fight in hell”***

Although the Rhodesian Security Forces possessed better equipment in comparison to the irregular nationalist guerrilla forces, a significant portion of their gear and combat vehicles were outdated, especially by the standards of the 1970s. This was a consequence of the embargo and sanctions imposed by the United Nations, which not only hindered their access to modern equipment but also led to shortages in supplies. In contrast, the nationalist guerillas consistently received support from communist powers such as the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China, ensuring a steady flow of arms along with ammunition. Additionally, they benefited from humanitarian aid from European nations, receiving essential food and medical supplies provisions. Due to the lack of combat vehicles, the Rhodesian soldiers had to patrol around 20,000 miles of the hostile border on foot, enduring the rugged African terrain and hot climate (Downie & Cecil, 1979). These circumstances posed considerable challenges for the Rhodesian soldiers, described by the songwriter as akin to fighting in hell, signifying extreme difficulties.

Letter E in the next verse serves as the signifier for the signified - the word “enemy” which refers to the armed guerilla forces who threatened Rhodesia’s existence as a state.

***“E is for the enemy that just won't ever win”***

The song lyrics astutely acknowledge the prolonged presence of adversaries in Rhodesia, specifically the paramilitary wings aligned with communist-backed nationalist organizations. These guerilla forces are portrayed as a formidable entity destined to never secure victory over the Rhodesian Security Forces. Despite their persistent pursuit of independence and substantial manpower, with up to 8,000 guerrillas operating within the country and an additional 20,000 dispersed along the borders of Zambia and Mozambique, the ill-equipped and relatively ineffective guerrilla forces suffered considerable setbacks in clashes with the Rhodesian army. Remarkably, the Rhodesian army, although relatively small, consisting of no more than 20,000 men (Downie & Cecil, 1979), demonstrated superiority owing to its better equipment, comprehensive training, disciplined approach, and extensive experience in combat situations. The disparity in capabilities and strategic effectiveness ultimately favoured the Rhodesian Security Forces over the battlefield, leading to the persistent failure of the guerrilla forces to achieve their objectives. As highlighted by the songwriter's assertion that “the enemy just won't ever win.”

The songwriter uses the letter S in the word “Rhodesia” as the signifier to refer to the signified phrase “spirit of our men.”

***“S is for the spirit of our men that won't grow dim”***

The lyrics emphasize the enduring and unyielding spirit of both the Rhodesian military personnel and civilians alike, emphasizing their resilience and determination even in the face of adversity and challenging circumstances throughout the war. Archie Dalglish, a farmer, whose farm was hit by a guerilla rocket attack, when he was interviewed by Associated Press and asked if he was ready to take up guns and defend himself, answered:

*“Exactly, my gun is ready, I'm waiting for an import permit to get some more in.”*

The statement by Archie Dalglish implies that he is prepared to defend himself with a gun in response to a guerilla rocket attack on his farm. It is a serious response to a concerning situation, with the choice of words reflecting the tension and anxiety experienced by individuals living in an area affected by the conflict. At the same time, Dalglish’s choice of words also reflects the unyielding spirit of the Rhodesians.

Following the letter S in “Rhodesia”, is the letter I. In this verse, the word “independence” serves as the signified which is represented by the signifier - letter I.

***“I is for the independence that we have to share”***

This line can be understood in two ways, the first interpretation suggests a concept of shared responsibility among the Rhodesians - military personnel and civilians alike - to uphold their national values and to preserve the existence of their country. The second interpretation proposes that the Rhodesians had to relinquish their independence to the Zimbabweans. This is exemplified by the country's reconstitution as a transitional government called Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in 1979 under Prime Minister Abel Muzorewa, followed by its transformation into solely Zimbabwe in 1980 under Robert Mugabe, a status that persists to the present day.

The signifier in the last verse is the letter A for the “arms” as the signified, which, at first glance, refers to the firearms that the Rhodesians had to carry all the time in case of a terrorist attack.

***“And A is for the arms that we will always have to bear”***

This verse touches upon the perpetual need to bear arms. The mention of "arms" could have a dual meaning, referring both to weaponry and the burdens or responsibilities associated with defending the nation. Either way, it symbolizes the ongoing commitment to defence and protection. Not only the military personnel who had to always carry guns to fight the relentless guerilla forces but civilians were also compelled by the hazardous circumstances to carry firearms as a precaution against potential guerrilla terror attacks. A woman in the documentary film *Rhodesia: Settle or Fight* (1975) provided testimony in this regard:

*“If you happen to be ambushed in a car, and if you’ve got a gun and a terrorist is firing at you, you got at least some chance of hitting one back. But if you haven’t got a gun, well, you’re just a sitting duck, aren’t you? The same thing applies if your house is attacked, if you fire back at them, they’re quite level to run away. We hope so, anyway.”*

Her testimony suggests how dangerous the situation was at that time. Even, a farmer’s wife like her had to undergo firearms training to learn how to operate small arms to defend themselves, their properties, and beloved families.

All in all, each letter of the word "RHODESIA" is used as an acronym to convey different aspects related to the Rhodesian Bush War and the fighting nation. These lyrics reflect a sense of patriotism, resilience, and pride associated with the armed forces and the nation of Rhodesia. The use of an acronym adds a mnemonic quality, making it a memorable and possibly motivational anthem for those associated with or supportive of Rhodesia.

### **3b. Portmanteau of “Rhodesian”**

This part of the analysis delves into the creative and symbolic aspects of the third stanza of the song. It explores how the songwriter cleverly combines the names of two prominent Rhodesian figures to create a portmanteau of the word "Rhodesian", discussing the implications and meanings associated with this wordplay. Portmanteau is a word formed, usually intentionally, by combining the sounds and meanings of two or more words. For example, the portmanteau of the words “spoon” and “fork” results in the term “spork”.

***“And the first word in Rhodesian is Rhodes”***

That line draws attention to the origin of the term "Rhodesian" and its immediate association with Cecil John Rhodes, a prominent historical figure closely linked to the colonial

history of Southern Africa and the founding of Rhodesia. Therefore, "Rhodes" mentioned in that verse is the signifier which represents the signified - Cecil Rhodes.

***"That's a name that everybody knows"***

In the line above, the mention of "everybody knows" suggests a widespread recognition of this historical reference. Rhodes was a notable British entrepreneur and statesman. He is known for founding the British South Africa Company (BSAC) in 1889. In the following year, 1890, "A "pioneer column" of 200 settlers and several hundred mercenaries selected by Cecil Rhodes raised the British flag at what was named Fort Salisbury in Mashonaland" (Houser 1977), initiating a British settlement to profit from the anticipated mineral wealth in the Mashonaland region (Northern Zimbabwe). In 1895, the regions covered by BSAC agreements and treaties were officially designated as "Rhodesia," signifying Rhodes's popularity among the settlers of that time.

Described in the next verse is the association of Cecil Rhodes' name with the green and white flag of Rhodesia as a national symbol.

***"It may be as Rhodesian as the flag of white and green"***

This line suggests that the name Rhodes is deeply embedded in the identity of Rhodesia, comparing its significance to the national flag with its white and green colours, further linking the term "Rhodesian" to symbols associated with the country, such as the flag. This implies a sense of national identity and pride tied to monumental historical figures and symbols.

Having introduced the idea that the word "Rhodesian" begins with "Rhodes," symbolizing Cecil Rhodes as the first pivotal figure in Rhodesian history, the songwriter then draws attention to the last word - "Ian" - as the signifier mentioned in the following last verse:

***"But the last word in Rhodesian is Ian"***

The lyrics take a turn in the last line, shifting from the historical association with Cecil Rhodes to a more contemporary figure as the signified, Ian Douglas Smith. This line suggests that, in a modern context, the term "Rhodesian" is associated with Ian Smith. Smith was the sole leader of Rhodesia after the unilateral declaration of its independence from Great Britain on the 11th of November 1965 and subsequently held the position of prime minister until June 1st, 1979 when the country was officially reconstituted as Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, and Bishop Abel Muzorewa replaced Smith as the prime minister, marking the end of the history of Rhodesia, with Ian Smith as its last prominent figure.

Overall, these lyrics seem to comment on the evolution of the term "Rhodesian" from its historical roots tied to Cecil Rhodes - the founder of the country - to a more recent association with Ian Smith, the sole prime minister of Rhodesia, also the final Rhodesian notable figure. The lyrics reflect on the complex historical and political changes in the region, encapsulated in the transition from the BSAC under British colonial rule in 1890, to the sovereign Republic of Rhodesia in 1965, and up to the end of Rhodesia - the reconstitution of the country to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in 1979, followed by the internationally recognized independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. The use of names and symbols serves as a poignant way to capture the historical and political identity of the region and nation.

#### **4. Novelty**

In the realms of semiotic analysis, the researcher found several existing studies. The first is a 2024 journal article by Alicia et al. titled *Semiotic Analysis of Representation of Life on the 2022 Indonesian Popular Songs in Spotify*. Next, a 2024 study by Putri et al. titled *Signs in the*

*Mark of Athena Novel Cover: A Semiotic Analysis*. And finally, an article titled *Semiotic Analysis of Charles Sanders Peirce in Nuriarta's Cartoon Discourse* by Sani et al. (2021). Each of the previously mentioned studies possesses titles that effectively encapsulate the core themes and research objects of their individual studies.

Unlike the previous ones, this study focuses on the semiotics within the lyrics of only one single song. Therefore, it has the novelty value. Moreover, this study primarily presents its novelty value with the analysis of John Edmond's *The Last Word in Rhodesian* song - a research object that has not yet been researched in any existing studies.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the etymological origin from Latin *literatura/litteratura* "learning, writing, grammar", literature has also been applied to spoken or sung texts (song lyrics). Literature typically expresses personal or public emotions. In the context of song lyrics, the interpretation goes beyond reading words, involving a deliberate effort to understand the song's meaning. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure's model of signs, which defines a sign as a dyadic structure composed of a signifier and a signified, literature is seen as a form of semiotic expression involving signs, symbols, icons, or codes.

The researcher conducted this study on the semiotics in the lyrics of John Edmond's *The Last Word in Rhodesian* song with the aim of delving deeper into the exploration of symbols and identifying their significance more comprehensively. Specifically, to figure out what each letter in "Rhodesia" stands for, and to find out what the portmanteau of "Rhodesian" consisted of in the lyrics of the song.

The researcher concludes that the signs and the symbols in the lyrics of John Edmond's *The Last Word in Rhodesian* song generally represent the historical essence of Rhodesia, primarily about the Rhodesian Bush War towards the independence of Zimbabwe which marks the end of Rhodesia. The songwriter also cleverly describes what it means to be a Rhodesian by spelling out each letter in "RHODESIA" as the signifier for Rhodesian Bush War-related phrases. In the last four verses of the lyrics, the songwriter adeptly captures the essence of Rhodesia's history by alluding to two names of significant Rhodesian figures: Rhodes and Ian. Cecil John Rhodes was the founder and the first figure at the beginning of Rhodesia's history, juxtaposed with Ian Douglas Smith who served as its sole prime minister, and also the last prominent figure at the end of Rhodesian history. These two notable names, Rhodes and Ian, are combined, resulting in the portmanteau "Rhodesian."

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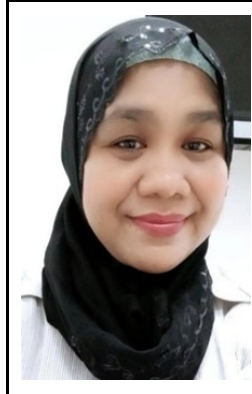
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	<p>Firmansyah Gani, born on July 31, 2000, in Jakarta, is currently in his fourth year as an undergraduate student majoring in English Literature at Pertiwi University, Jakarta, Indonesia. He is interested in patriotic and folk songs from various nations, with a particular passion for Russian, Bosnian, Irish, and Rhodesian melodies. Additionally, he exhibits a keen interest in linguistics, particularly in the realm of semiotics. Firmansyah completed his elementary education at SDS Nurul Falah, followed by junior high school at SMPN 244 Jakarta, and finally, senior high school at SMAN 73 Jakarta. He is eager to apply his knowledge of linguistics to contribute to the advancement of language studies. Through this journal article, he commits to sharing the beauty and significance of musical expressions of a Rhodesian patriotic folk song with a broader audience. Email: <a href="mailto:200350040@pertiwi.ac.id">200350040@pertiwi.ac.id</a></p>
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