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Stars in the Sky and in Our Lives



Figure 1. Stars on barns are thought to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits.

Abrahamsen, Elizabeth. *Red Barn With A Barn Star*. 2017. Ever Seen Stars On A Barn? Here's What Those Mean. *Wide Open Country*. Digital image. 2/6/2020

I chose the star as my subject of semiotic analysis. As a semiotic concept, it has a wide variety of meanings, and the interpretations of this sign have changed throughout time. My interest in this sign began when I saw a large star on the barn at the property of friends. They explained the star to me as a sign of good luck, coming from their heritage as German farmers. The signs were placed on barns to ward off evil spirits in times when the barn represented the entire livelihood, and therefore life, of farmers. People today continue the tradition with beautiful and sometimes elaborate stars on the fronts of their barns. You can see in figure 1 a silver star on a red barn, and in Figure 2 a more stylized star, one meant to represent quilting squares.



Figure 2. This star is styled to look like a quilting square.

Abrahamsen, Elizabeth. *An Ohio Barn*. 2017. Ever Seen Stars On A Barn? Here's What Those Mean. *Wide Open Country*. Digital image. 2/6/2020

I dove into research of this sign, curious both about how we had come to associate it with the bright lights in the sky and how we then came to use this sign for such a wide variety of meanings. What I found was even more interesting than my hypothesis. The sign of the star has a long history and a broad range of uses, many of which tie back to it being the representation of the light we see in the night sky (Figure 3).



Figure 3. People throughout history have looked up at the sky and drawn what they see as a star.

Edwards, Madison. *Star*. 2012. Symbols. *Star Crossed Lovers- Romeo and Juliet*. Digital Image. 2/6/2020

Very early representation of the star often shows the stars with intersecting lines, or, what is known as a pentagram. The word pentagram brings to mind much different semiotic concepts than that of the word star, but there is no denying the fact that they are symbols one and the same, as seen in Figure 4. Here we see stars drawn in much the same way that we were all taught to draw them in grade school, and how many of us still draw them today.

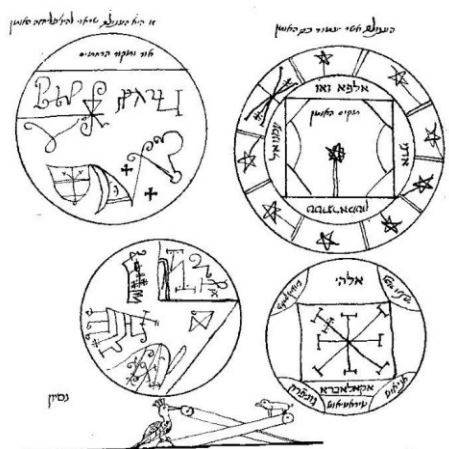


Figure 4. In the upper right, you see a very familiar star.

D'Abano, Pietro. *A group of pentacles from the Hebrew manuscript, Key of Solomon*. 16th century/ 2019. The Pentagram: Symbol of What Exactly? *Modern Mythology*. Digital Image. 2/7/2020



Figure 5. The pentagram has a long and varied history.

Lévi, Éliphas. *Tetragrammaton pentagram*. 2019. The Pentagram: Symbol of What Exactly? *Modern Mythology*. Digital Image. 2/7/2020

How did the star get from a pentagram symbol, as shown in Figure 5, to our beloved star, which we use to bestow honors from the highest to the most trivial? Both were meant to

represent the light we see in the sky. As Eliphas Levi wrote in “Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie:

The empire of the will over the astral light, which is the physical soul of the four elements, is represented in magic by the pentagram, which we have set at the head of this chapter. The elementary spirits are subservient to this sign when employed with understanding, and, by placing it in the circle or on the table of evocations, they can be rendered tractable, which is magically called to imprison them (Rex. 2019).

Clearly, he meant for this sign to be associated with the lights he saw in the night sky. Modern society would surely balk at using such signs to represent things held dearly to them, and yet we see the star appear in modern life with the creation of the American flag. The flag, which we can see in Figure 6, was given stars and stripes to represent the forming of a new constellation, the new United States. As told by The Daily Dose: “The Flag Act of 1777 which resolved “that the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation” was passed by the Second Continental Congress” (Applewood Books 2016).



Figure 6. The flag represented the forming of a new constellation, the United States.

No Artist Available. *Flag*. 2016. June 14, 1977: Congress Adopts Stars and Stripes. *The Daily Dose*. Digital Image. 2/7/2020

The sign made a huge leap in what it seems to mean to people in the newly formed United States. It is still representing the lights in the sky, intending to create a constellation of states, the change seems to be in its semiotic concept. It's no longer a sign of

magic or evocation, it is a sign of unity and honor. If asked today how a sign of ancient magic became one of the most commonly used stickers in Kindergarten classrooms in the United States, I have a feeling that most people would say that it is a different sign. As we saw in Figure 4, it's not a different sign at all. The only thing that has changed is how we interpret it.



Figure 7. A high honor for the young.

Guat, The. *Gold Star*. 2012. I'm Not In Kindergarten Anymore But Gold Stars Are Still Nice. *The Wish Factor*. Digital Image. 2/6/2020

The star sign continues this journey of honor into modern usage, where it has become synonymous with fame, and doing a good job. We have all received a gold star for a job well done, as seen in Figure 7. Only the luckiest of us receive the gold star honor of having our name on the Hollywood walk of fame (Figure 8). The signified concept of the modern star is recognition. We give gold stars for good work, paved stars for fame, different colored star badges for military honors. A person of fame is literally referred to as a “star”. Are we calling them an astral light? Are we saying that they remind us of luminous balls of gas? Not exactly. What we are saying when we refer to someone as a star is that they have excelled at something, or that most people would know who they are.



Figure 8. Fame and “Stardom” go hand in hand.

Anzuoni, Mario. *Mary J Blige Hollywood Star*. 2018. Mary J Blige Honored With Star On Hollywood Walk Of Fame. *NBC News*. Digital Image. 2/6/2020

Clearly, the star has gone beyond representing astral light to taking on a cultural meaning that is much more nuanced. What we have here is a symbol. As Daniel Chandler defines in his book, *Semiotics for Beginners*:

Symbol/symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified but which is fundamentally *arbitrary* or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt: e.g. language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, morse code, traffic lights, national flags (Chandler. Ch.2).

A child is not born knowing the meaning of a star symbol, and a visitor to this country may not understand how it is used in our culture as opposed to its historical use. Both would have to learn its meaning.

What is most interesting to me about this sign and the formation of it as a symbol in our culture is that its history would seem to make its use prohibitive. We do not have the most accepting society when it comes to cultural and religious differences, and we are very conscious of how we are perceived by others. Yet, we allow ourselves to be represented by the star, not only in popular culture, but on the very flag we fly in patriotism. The star, with its roots in paganism, witchcraft, and early astronomy. It is well documented that the stars on the US flag are Mullets, rather than Stars, a symbol of military use for flags, uniforms, and many other things. I find it even stranger that the United States military would have adopted this symbol in the days of witch burning and puritanism. The reason for the stars use in so many different contexts must be deeper than the sign itself.

Quite contrary to my expectations, I am finding the conclusion of this semiotic analysis to be the unifying force of our natural surroundings. We draw signs and symbols from nature, from what we can see in our world. The fact that someone else has given a certain meaning to a representation of a natural element does not inhibit our own ability to give it a different meaning.

The natural elements are so steadfast, so prevalent to our lives that one interpretation of their meaning cannot be held as the truth. We see this in other natural elements, like the tree. The tree could be a symbol of a wide variety of meanings, from family to life to nature. Because someone draws a family tree does not prevent us from drawing our own tree to represent what we want it to. These elements belong to everyone. Stars belong to everyone. From the beginning of time, people have looked up at the night sky and thought about the stars. At some point, they begin drawing representations of them, and assigning those representations meaning. As Chandler puts it, “We seem as a species to be driven by a desire to make meanings: above all, we are surely *Homo significans* - meaning-makers” (Chandler Ch.2). Because the stars belong to no one and everyone, because we can all see them, no matter where we are, we all get to give our own interpretation. They are personal to us, as they are personal to everyone else. From Chapter 2 of *Semiotics for Beginners*: “Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take 'reality' for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation” (Chandler Ch.2). The reality we see before us is created in our minds. How effectively we communicate what we see with others is determined by the signs that we use. The fact that the same symbol can signify witchcraft ritual and also military honor is a great example of this. One culture looks up at the sky and interprets what they see to mean that there are gods looking down upon us. Another culture looks up at the same sky and decides that the stars they see should be bestowed upon humans as symbols of greatness. Same stars, different interpretations. It’s the great human equalizer. We live in different places and believe very different things, but we all look up at the same stars.

Works Cited:

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