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# Language Lessons: Gender-Based Material Signifiers of Social Intent in *Better Off Dead*

Elizabeth Brady

Claude Lévi-Strauss's theories on structural anthropology are designed to inform us of practices in our cultures at play in our daily life that we are unaware of. Often these theories dramatically reshape our understanding of our cultural practices, adding a new element that can sometimes be considered a bit startling. Take for example his briefly mentioned theory on the fact that men use women as communication. Lévi-Strauss asserts that our culture is structured to revolve around male needs, and women are exchanged among men in order to communicate particular messages to other males (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship* 116). For instance, women are “given” in marriage by their fathers in order to establish and solidify a relationship with the father-in-law. Alliances are formed between the men—and the woman is merely a physical embodiment of that male bond. In essence, males establish relationships between each other—alliances, hierarchies, rivalries, etc.—by the use of women as their form of communication (115). Women are the very words exchanged between men, tools to achieve a given social goal (*Structural Anthropology* 61). Lévi-Strauss's theory of women as material signifiers of male intent is abundantly present in the 80's film *Better Off Dead*.

The first indication of Lévi-Strauss's model at play is in Beth's opening scene. In a reversal of the dominant gender that communicates through the other, a female is plainly utilizing males to her benefit. Sitting on her bed, talking on the phone to a girlfriend, Beth's use of men as signifiers of social intent is clear: “If [Roy Stalin] asks me out, of course I'm going to go out with him. I mean he skis the K-12. He's so boss. Lane? I don't know. I'll tell him after tryouts because you know

how he gets when he gets upset.” Her removal of Lane’s picture from its frame in order to replace it with Stalin’s signifies her unaffected calculations. We know this is a completely self-promoting move, not only as indicated by her words, but because we have already seen Lane’s complete obsession with her demonstrated in his opening scene—his bedroom walls plastered with photographs of Beth, hangers in his closet equipped with her face, a framed picture of her carried into the bathroom. We know Beth’s dismissal of Lane is a self-promoting, calculated move because we see Lane’s utter devotion; this will cripple him, and Beth casually tosses his love away. Her intent is further solidified as she coolly severs her social tie with Lane: “We’ve been seeing a lot of each other lately and I think it’s in my best interest if I go out with someone more popular. Better looking. Drives a nicer car.” Beth fully understands that Lane cannot fulfill her need for social power and is therefore useless—detrimental, even—to her. Stalin, on the other hand, embodies all of the prosaic characteristics that will allow Beth to climb the social ladder—riding on Stalin’s coattails. Levi-Strauss’s concession that “the rules of the game would remain unchanged should it be decided to consider the men as being exchanged by women’s groups” is seemingly demonstrated (“The Family” 284).

However, one important element is missing: where are the other women Beth is communicating her power to? Sure, we assume she is chatting to a girlfriend. But what is the benefit for Beth to communicate to that particular female that she is dumping a “spastic nerve bag” for a jock? The girlfriend is never expressly featured in the film; she has very little importance. So even though Beth’s ploy to use males as material signifiers of her intent for social standing is clear, it is a moot point; her social status is determined by the status of the males she associates

with, resulting only in her being haphazardly dragged around the social ladder throughout the movie, calculating and obtaining, climbing and falling, clawing upward and flung downward. It is clear that *Better Off Dead* was never intended to indicate female communication of intent by way of males. If it were, Beth would

see lasting success from her efforts because the males she used for social gain would indicate to the women her social position—she would have gained the pinnacle of the female social hierarchy.

Conversely, when Lane is thrown out of the kitchen of Pig Burger and onto the restaurant floor in front of Beth and Stalin, while Stalin oinks at Lane, Beth sinks lower in her seat—embarrassed of and minimizing her previous social tie to Lane. Were Beth communicating her status to females, she would not be ashamed of her tie to Lane as his demise and current fallen social state would indicate her

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complete power over men and therefore offer herself as a dominant female worth allying with. So even though this is her aim, her efforts are anchorless: in order for this to have had total effect, the women would have had to be the dominant social structure in the first place. Like Adrienne Rich's extensive list of the ways males have historically dominated women, this cannot be replicated in the opposite manner (women's list of their oppression of men) in any way even close to being comparable, so too is it evident here that even though women can use similar mechanisms to dominate men, the female equivalent will never be fully effective (Rich 18–19). So even though Beth uses men doggedly, she still must play the men's game within the male-dominated social structure and will therefore never gain the significance and dominance she desires.

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The men of the movie, on the other hand, effectively communicate poignant messages to each other by way of women. The film is fraught with instances of males using Beth as means of communication to Lane. However, while Lévi-Strauss's (and Marcel Mauss's) model indicates that male communication to each other revolves around forming alliances by the bestowal of women as gifts, the males in *Better Off Dead* are instead communicating their power, establishing relationships of competition, hierarchy, and rivalry.

Mauss proposed that the significance of gift giving is that it expresses, affirms, or creates a social link between the partners of an exchange. Gift giving confers upon its participants a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid... Lévi-Strauss adds to the theory of primitive reciprocity the idea that marriages are the most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts (Rubin 172-173).

If allied relationships were the aim of the men in *Better Off Dead*, Beth would be regarded in much higher esteem, viewed as a "precious gift." Since males are instead establishing relationships of rivalry, Beth is instead used as a signal of social domination.

Over and over again, males ask Lane if they can go out with Beth. First, the geometry teacher: "Lane, this is a bit awkward. I've heard a few things and . . . I was wondering if you wouldn't mind if I took out Beth?" Next, the incompetent mailman, and finally Barney Flingstone through the television. With each subsequent male more absurd than the last, they are not necessarily asking with the intent to ask her out (only the geometry teacher's request ever comes to fruition), but with the intent to communicate to Lane that they can go out with her—absurd and so-

cially unacceptable suitors as they are—and Lane cannot. They have no interest in Beth, only in thwarting Lane’s social aspirations, communicating to him his lowly social status and incompetence.

Stalin’s use of Beth is equally intended as discouraging communication to Lane. Everything Stalin does to or for Beth is designed to one-up Lane: Stalin’s Christmas gift of “a giant teddy bear, bigger than [Beth]” in comparison to Lane’s pocket-size teddy bear; Stalin’s initial acquisition of Beth through his status as not only the captain of the ski team, but “a hero—the only one in this town who can ski the K-12” versus Lane’s inability to make the ski team and debilitating fear of the K-12 mountain and subsequent loss of Beth; Stalin’s display of his guitar and vocal skills for Beth in the lunchroom contrasted with Lane’s lunchroom outburst to a picture of Beth he drew; Stalin’s PDA with Beth at the New Year’s dance versus Lane’s only company being the embarrassing Charles de Mar; Stalin’s repeated humiliations of Lane while Beth clings to his arm compared to Lane’s frequent social faux pas; and ultimately Stalin’s status as the male for which Beth (very readily) left Lane. Every instance of Stalin’s interactions with Lane is an expression of Stalin’s vaulted social status, with having Beth at his disposal being the dominant method of communication, cementing Lane’s inferior social status.

Lane receives these messages in their intended way: he recognizes that Beth communicated to other males his social standing and he is therefore now completely socially inept. Acting upon these messages, his first impulse is suicide so he immediately goes to the garage and fits himself with a noose. However, after his attempt fails, he tries another tactic: to go against the messages and obtain a different female. First, he aims real high. He tells himself (and cartoon Beth), “Any girl in this school would be overwhelmed with sweat just to go out with me,” and his self-affirmations persuade him to approach Kris Kremens, a cheerleader notorious for dating “the entire basketball team.” Ultimately, Kris rejects Lane’s advances, then he accidentally pulls off her cheer uniform in front of the school and the basketball team beats him up, further reinforcing the male social messages of his unfitness for any female.

Lane cannot have the cheerleader, but he doesn’t stop there—he lowers his standards and tries again, this time bolstered with an alternate source of male messages about the use of females as communicants. Lane’s dad sits him down and tells him, “You are going to date other girls. Starting with tonight. Tonight at six o’clock you’re picking up Joanne Greenwald.” Lane recognizes the implicit message—“Your law partner’s daughter?”—that his father is attempting to establish kinship with an important male by way of their children’s romance (the best model of Lévi-Strauss’s theory in the film), but accepts the role, anticipating any date will reestablish his social status. And we do mean any date; he is settling

for Joanne Greenwald, “the one with the big antenna on her face.” Anticipating his upcoming social victory, he imagines to himself, “Alright, Joanne Greenwald, you horrible thing. Here’s your one chance to go out with a real stud. One night with me and she’ll probably go blind with ecstasy, poor creature. Gee, I hope she doesn’t grab onto my leg and start crying when the date’s over. Oh God, what will I do?” He admits his previously high social status (as attached to Beth) wouldn’t have provided headgear-ridden Joanne with the opportunity to go out with someone as far up as he was, and therefore anticipates her utter elation at her opportunity to use him to climb the social ladder herself. After all, that’s what dating is for, right?

But he is soon faced with a stark reality that either not everyone is a ladder-climber, or he really wasn’t that socially desirable: Joanne immediately rejects him. Worse than that, even when he attempts to overcome her initial rejection and continues to tell himself—and her—that she actually does want to go out with him, he can only keep up that act for so long. When she pulls out her printing calculator and demands half of the anticipated price of the date, he is forced to concede that perhaps the messages all along have been right. If not even Joanne Greenwald will go out with him, what social worth does he have? He takes the other males’ messages to him as representations of the accuracy of the notion that his failure to be with Beth (and now every other female) implies his uselessness and responds accordingly—with suicide attempts.

However, Lane’s game changes when he meets Monique, a female who goes against all standard material signifiers. First, by her reversal of typical gender roles: Monique is a competent mechanic (she initially starts fixing Lane’s Camaro); she encourages gender equality (persuades Lane that they work together to complete the Camaro); she is better at skiing than Lane and successfully tackles the K-12 (“Watch; it’s no sweat!”); then turns into his coach (“Go that way really fast. If something gets in your way, turn!”); she is fascinated with and more competent than Lane at baseball (Monique pitches apples and hits the road sign repeatedly; Lane’s throw breaks a window, dogs bark, and he slinks away); she stands up to Lane’s bully (sprays Stalin with soda in the cafeteria); and she faces Lane’s fears of the Asians for him (slams his foot into the gas pedal). Monique’s disregard for traditional gender roles cuts against the Lévi-Strauss model, leaning closer toward Rubin’s ideal: “The elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles . . . an androgynous and genderless . . . society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is [and] what one does” (204). Monique’s disregard for gender roles proves her

Monique's disregard for traditional gender roles proves her unfit to be used as a female signifier of male intent.

unfit to be used as a female signifier of male intent. She is then free to disrupt the system: Monique communicates for Lane that he can competently communicate with other males. She is not using Lane to further her own social power in a patriarchy, but her encouragement instead enables him to act strongly in the dominant social structure—without making herself his currency, only an ally.

Monique further proves herself as the antithesis of a female to be used as a social signifier by her refusal to speak English. According to Lévi-Strauss, the difference between males using women to communicate or words to communicate is that words have become purely signs, whereas women can speak for themselves. “The process by which phonemes and words have lost . . . their character of value, to become reduced to pure signs, will never lead to the same results in matters concerning women. For words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens” (*Structural Anthropology* 61). Women’s ability to speak for themselves is their defense against being completely exploited by males. However, Monique chooses to speak unintelligible French when she could speak English—preferring to not communicate her value when she could. Her refusal of the female mode of defense solidifies her position as one outside the effects of the system.

It is when Monique reveals her English ability to Lane that he recognizes her true value, and simultaneously reveals his budding inclinations to leave the system behind as well. Lane never encourages her to share her value to others and therefore goes against the social intent model. If he were to continue along the paths of social intent indoctrination, he would have encouraged Monique to speak English once he knew she had the ability; her ability to speak would increase her value in others’ sight. Instead, Lane is content to associate with an abnormal female who does not even attempt to display her attractiveness as a social commodity. Because Monique does not speak English to others, she cannot be a material signifier of social power for Lane—which he accepts.

Other characters in the movie are not as gracious and are more fully attached to the system, intending to exploit Monique due to her inability to utilize the women’s defense of speech. Both Mrs. Smith and Ricky intend to capitalize on Monique’s vulnerability. Mrs. Smith declares, “As we’re discovering around our household, you don’t need words to speak the international language. You know—love. The language of love. I think Monique and our little Ricky have a regular cross-continental romance.” Monique verifies Ricky’s intent herself: “Ricky. He thinks because I stay here I am his love goddess.” The Smiths try to fill in the gaps left by Monique’s defenseless French with her supposed love for Ricky—a very socially benefitting tool for the hefty nasal spray addict. Stalin also fills Monique’s silence with his own intentions. When Lane and Monique are sitting together in the

lunchroom, he puts his hand on Monique's shoulder, signaling to Lane that he has power even over Monique—that he can physically claim her and she has no words to dissuade him. Stalin verbally insults Lane, all the while massaging Monique's shoulders. Even though Monique could choose to effectively communicate with Stalin in his own language, she does not acquiesce and is not tempted to forfeit her unique power to the social intent model. Stalin therefore fills her silence with his messages to Lane through his use of Monique.

Just as Lane needs Monique to aid his escape of the social intent model, Monique is likewise assisted by Lane. Caught in the web of the Smiths' manufactured love shack, Monique is trapped by Ricky's total use of her as a signifier of his intent. Ricky repeatedly enacts the system upon Monique: physically scoots her closer to his chair at lunch, asserting his ownership; takes food from her hand and eats it himself, asserting his dominance; and uses Monique as a rag doll during the New Year's dance, then once a crowd gathers and cheers, pushes her away so he can domineer the complete spotlight, asserting his ability to use and discard her at will. Monique has no need for the system. Not only has it (Ricky) abused her, but she has no incentive to use the model for her own gains. By knowing and caring about no one in Greendale, she has no one to communicate her social intent to and therefore Lane cannot be useful to her as means of a message regarding her social intent. Monique and Lane are using each other as means of escaping the system. As the instigator of their escape, Monique's continuance of her anti-social-intent characteristics both before and after meeting and interacting with Lane indicate that she is not merely using Lane for her own purposes. Instead, their mutual gain is a reciprocal relationship that fully goes against the theory of social intent. Lévi-Strauss declares, "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives something, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place" (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship* 115). Contrarily, Monique does benefit from the relationship with Lane, receiving freedom from Ricky (after Lane duels him in the snow), while also offering Lane something he will benefit from: freedom from the system which likewise has not served him well.

Once Lane and Monique establish this reciprocal relationship, the true test arises. First, Monique and Lane conquer the K-12 mountain together, almost resulting in a determining bond and preference for Monique's way of life outside the system: a kiss. Charles interrupts, however, and it is time to face Stalin. Monique verbally invites Lane to remember the prospect of their reciprocal relationship, "Please hurry; we have unfinished business. Do not forget: the international language." With this send-off, Lane then miraculously defeats Stalin at his own game by



winning the race down the K-12—on one ski. Lane quickly establishes an enviable social status, and the crowds notice. He becomes “the hottest thing since sunburn” and he not only wins the affection of the masses, but of a significant female signifier as well: Beth. Upon his victory, and amidst the crowd’s acknowledgement of his status and celebration, Beth tells him, “Lane, you really are the best!” and seals her offering of herself with a kiss.

Lane is left with a choice: Beth or Monique? Use a female to communicate his social value or deconstruct his reliance on the system and leave it behind? “From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response” (Rubin 182). It is clear that Monique does not embody the preferred female. Not only does she not respond to the desire of others (i.e., Ricky), but also she actively seeks a response (from Lane). She first saw Lane through her bedroom window; she initiated their meeting at the New Year’s dance; she clearly solicited his assistance when Ricky attempted to retrieve her at the dance. Beth, on the other hand, is the perfect embodiment of what the system desires of females. She took Lane when he desired her; took Stalin when he desired her; even went out with the geometry teacher. Overall, her role is clear: Beth is a material signifier for any male that wishes to use her as communication to other males.

So it is no wonder that for a moment Lane falters, tempted by the cultural structure he has long been accustomed to. Ultimately Lane refuses to take a woman that would serve as a material signifier of his social intent, and breaks free of the system that bound him, attributing “language lessons” to his social advance—language lessons, we know to be taught under Monique’s instruction. Language lessons not only of love, but also of freedom. Language lessons that teach Lane that women aren’t the words with which he must construct his communication, lessons that teach Lane that he does not need the system and neither does Monique. He turns away from Beth, and discovers Monique’s imminent reabsorption into the system as well: the Smiths dragging her home. Lane fights for Monique, displaying the newly-acquired skills honed at Monique’s encouragement, and ultimately succeeds in not only breaking himself away from the system, but also rescuing Monique from it as well.

While there is significant evidence of Lévi-Strauss’s model of women as material signifiers of male intent present in *Better Off Dead*, two characters undercut the absoluteness of this theory. Monique freely dwelled outside of the realm of the system, indicating that there are alternate models. Lane’s willingness to and success in denying the system and departing from it indicates that even those within the system are not inevitably bound to the tenets of the theory. While some aspects of structural anthropology may seem startling to a feminist audience, there

is also hope for an alternative. The existence of successful outliers serves as the basis for further exploration: we are not bound.

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