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## Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Human Factor: Emma Stone and *Birdman*.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay offers an analysis of the meanings and conflicts conveyed through the characters of Sam Thompson in the film *Birdman* (2014) and the effect of casting Emma Stone for the part. To this aim, the prime theoretical source are Richard Dyer's elaborations on film characters as constructions and stars as structured polysemy from *Stars*. A brief section is devoted to the persona of Emma Stone as a constructed personage that articulates a series of meanings. The analysis explores the various means through which the character of Sam is constructed devoting special attention to the influence of Stone's persona on its characterisation. As this essay will argue, Stone's persona is a decisive element of Sam's characterisation because it reinforces and determines the meanings the film conveys through her.

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo de fin de grado ofrece un análisis de los significados y conflictos que se expresan a través del personaje de Sam Thompson en la película *Birdman* (2014) y el efecto de la elección de Emma Stone para el papel. Para ello, las elaboraciones de Richard Dyer en *Stars* sobre los personajes de películas como construcciones y la polisemia estructurada de las estrellas, son la principal fuente teórica. Se dedica una sección a la 'persona' de Emma Stone como personaje y los significados que articula. El análisis explora los diferentes mecanismos a través de los que se construye el personaje de Sam, prestando especial atención a la influencia de la 'persona' de Stone en su caracterización. Como se expondrá, la 'persona' de Stone es un elemento decisivo para la caracterización de Sam porque refuerza y determina los significados que la película transmite a través de ella.

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## 1. Introduction

*Birdman (or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* is a black comedy-drama released in 2014. Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, the film was a critical success. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards and won four of them, including Best Picture and Best Director. Following the change initiated with *Beautiful* (2010), *Birdman, (or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, hereafter referred as *Birdman*, also portrays a male single protagonist facing a life crisis. It is a departure from the scrambled and multiple plots of the ‘death trilogy’ that made the director famous, although it retains some of the Iñárritu's visual hallmarks. *Birdman* is an unusual film in many aspects. Maybe the most eye-catching features are the technical means, such as the long take, the extreme close-ups, the seemingly absence of editing and the visual effects. On this account, the film won the Academy Award for Best Cinematography. Nevertheless, the work of the team of co-writers N. Giacobone, A. Dinelaris, A. Bó and the director himself is equally outstanding. The beauty, thoroughness and complexity of the script is extraordinary to the point of being awarded the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

The film follows Riggan Thompson (Michael Keaton), a washed up Hollywood star who became a star in the 1990s for his role as the superhero Birdman in a blockbuster franchise. He strives to redeem himself from what he feels was a life empty of meaning by creating a piece of art that would make people recognise him as a true artist. The story begins with the final rehearsals prior to the opening night of a Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* that Riggan has written and is also directing and starring. Throughout this ambitious undertaking, he is hounded by Birdman, his superhero alter ego and antagonist, who constantly voices Riggan’s downright self-doubt. Birdman manifests

himself as an internal voice and some dubious telekinesis from the beginning and gains physical presence as Riggan spirals down from midlife crisis into a severe depression that will eventually lead him to attempt suicide on stage.

The film essentially narrates the story of a man struggling to attain love in absolute terms. This includes reconnecting with and making amends to his estranged daughter Sam (Emma Stone), the main secondary character of the story. She is a young woman who has been released from rehab and now works as her father's assistant. She resents Riggan's absence during her childhood and accuses him of being a bad father overall, but at the same time she seems to linger around longing for their reconciliation. Stone's outstanding performance earned her her first nomination for the Best Supporting Actress Academy Award.

This essay will analyse the character of Sam Thompson, her role in the narrative of *Birdman* and the meanings it carries, as well as the formal strategies through which these meanings are conveyed. To this end, special attention will also be paid to how the casting choice for the part contributes to her characterisation and adds relevance to the character in the story. Therefore, Emma Stone will be analysed in terms of the meanings her star persona may contribute to the characterisation of Sam. Thus, this essay is mainly grounded in the field of close reading and star studies and will draw from Richard Dyer's seminal work *Stars* (1998). His valuable elaborations on the notions of film characters and stars' images will be the basis for the analysis.

## **2. Characters in Film**

First, what is meant by ‘character’ should be clarified before proceeding any further. There is a generalised awareness of what a character in a narrative is. The general public easily identifies the characters that they encounter every day in mainstream forms of entertainment (novels, TV shows, films, videogames, etc.). However, it is a rather complex concept that has been the subject of constant discussion since Aristotle’s times. Characters can be defined in general terms as “fictional beings, whether human, animal or fantastic, who carry the story, who do things and/or have things done to them” (Dyer 90). It should be noted that together with plot, characters are an “essential element of narrative films without which the narrative cannot exist” (Barsam and Monahan 134). The concept of character has evolved hand in hand with narrative forms. Therefore, the modern notion of character arises from the development of the novel (Dyer 90).

According to Dyer, what makes characters different nowadays is their level of particularisation and their development in the course of the narrative time. That is, modern fiction presents “particular people in particular circumstances” rather than ‘human types’ embodying moral concepts or ideals, and they change over time (roundness) (90). This provides them with a level of psychological realism that they lacked before and makes readers/viewers perceive characters as having full existences, just like them. According to Dyer’s discussion of the notion of character, film characters, like characters in novels, have “interesting traits and problems” and give the illusion of having lives of their own (100). The most problematic consequence of this evolution is that it often masks the fact that characters are constructed elements with narrative designs. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that characters continue to carry meaning, usually a number of them –they are polysemic, and contribute to

conveying the overall ideological message of films. Although they appear to be particular individuals they still offer social role models and can be read as embodiments of types. What those meanings are, how they are expressed, and their relation with the plot will be analysed in section four.

For Dyer, film characters share the basic qualities of characters in novels, but are slightly different from them in some aspects as a direct consequence of the conventions and limitations of the cinematographic medium. As mentioned before, development/roundness is an essential quality of characters. Round characters undergo more profound changes and therefore are “complex, lifelike, believable and even unpredictable and contradictory” (Barsam and Monahan 134). According to Dyer, this evolution of characters as the plot unfolds enables the “happy [sic] ending” (100). Whether those changes are genuine or apparent and whether they make up for a round characterization cannot be a matter of generalisation. However, Dyer points towards what Scholes and Kellogg define as ‘developmental characterization’ (169) in their work *The Nature of Narrative* (1968). That means that he observes a tendency in film characters to tone down or modulate their personality traits in order to fit into the ideology of the plot (Dyer 100).

Characters’ consistency is related to the changes that characters undergo. This derives from the notion that there is more to us than our social roles. The idea of the dual identity of the individual is much extended in our culture. It implies that our identities consist of the role(s) that we play in our society and the way in which we present ourselves to others –our persona, as well as of a knowledgeable, unique and constant self (Dyer 21). Logically, audiences extend that complexity to fictional characters and assume that, although they may change in the course of the plot, those changes take place within a broader frame of ‘personality’, thus preserving their

consistency. Dyer claims that character consistency is often sacrificed in films produced up to the 1950s because they favoured plot over character (100). However, he does not elaborate on contemporary films that may be more focused on the psychology of characters. On the other hand, Barsam and Monahan argue that characters' motivation is multifactorial but psychological motivation is usually the strongest (138).

The qualities of interiority and discrete identity are harder to suggest in film characters, according to Dyer (100). The former refers to the direct access to a character's inner thoughts and feelings that novels often grant readers through techniques such as the internal monologue or omniscient narrators. In films, there are multiple signs of different nature that viewers can read as revealing a character's state of mind or true feelings. Some are more effective –and subtle –than others. Although voice-over is the most obvious technique to convey interiority, it is seldom used in contemporary cinema because it can conflict with the audience's suspension of disbelief. In some cases, filmmakers seek to make viewers aware of the fact that they are being told a story from a subjective perspective, usually breaking the fourth wall, which leads them to mistrust the 'narrator', who is usually the protagonist. There are many instances in which this technique was effectively used, such as *Election* (Payne, 1999), *High Fidelity* (Frears, 2000) and *Easy A* (Gluck, 2010), to mention only a few. The most effective techniques to convey the interiority of a character seem to be those more deeply encoded into cinematic language. Dyer pays special attention to reaction shots, point-of-view shots, subjective shots and close-ups (118-121). All of them, and especially the latter, put the emphasis on the notion of "the face as being a window to the soul" and are extensively used in contemporary productions.

The most unique element of characterization in film (and drama) is the physical presence of the actors who perform the roles. Film characters cannot be analysed



without studying the performance because it contributes to the construction and presentation of character (Dyer 132). Following Dyer's definition, performance is what actors do in addition to what is written in the script, the particular way in which they enact and deliver their lines (134). According to Barsam and Monahan, skilled actors use a wide range of abilities (intellectual, psychological and physical) as well as their knowledge about filmmaking to render the character (270). Although some actors develop personal styles of performance, they mainly fall into the Diderot and Coquelin approach or the Method (Dyer 132). Whatever the approach to performance is, for Barsam and Monahan great screen acting must show "appropriateness, expressive coherence, inherent thoughtfulness or emotionality, wholeness and unity" (310). When all these qualities are achieved the performance is perceived as naturalistic because the performer renders the character in a believable/realistic way. The audience can read performance by means of performance signs that Dyer lists as: facial expression, voice, gestures and body posture and movement (134). However, these signs are ambiguous and complex (Dyer 133) when taken in isolation, so viewers must consider their culture/history-bound meaning. Moreover, those signs may be part of the actor's repertoire of mannerisms whose meaning is created by the actor's persona.

Film stars are actors that enjoy a higher recognition thanks to their successful career and/or due to their private lives. They are also "supremely figures of identification" (Dyer 99). The identification of the audience with the star playing the part is essential for the correct placing of the audience towards the character. What the audience feels and thinks about a star influences what they think about the character and the feelings it evokes (Dyer 125). The way in which the audience acquires those ideas about a star works in a similar way to how they read characters in films. This is because a star's image or persona is a "constructed personage" and is in many aspects analogous

to novelistic characters (Dyer 97). Nonetheless, unlike characters, film stars are real people who exist outside the films they appear in. That is, stars are composed of the real person, the actor, and their public (constructed) image. Hence the widespread practice of adopting a star name, different from their given/real one (e.g. Marilyn Monroe, born Norma Jean Mortenson; or Michael Keaton, born Michael John Douglas).

An actor's persona is defined as "a consistent and unique creation" that consists of his/her physical appearance and mannerisms and that is more often than not "rooted in his/her natural behaviour, personality and physicality" (Barsam and Monahan 272). By sustaining this construction an actor creates expectations in the audience of what his/her performance will be like. This applies to what Barsam and Monahan call 'persona-identified actors' (272) who they define as those who maintain their personae role after role, creating a consistent and distinguishable image as a result. What Barsam and Monahan call 'star persona' broadly corresponds with Dyer's notion of 'star's image'. He set the basis for star studies by focusing on how stars are part of the ways in which films signify, their social relevance, and stressing their "structured polysemy" (3). For Dyer, stars encapsulate a "finite multiplicity of meanings" (3) and these are geared to foreground some of them and hide others conveniently.

Lastly, Dyer emphasizes the intertextual nature of stars' images arguing that they are built of "all kinds of media texts" (88) which he groups in "promotion, publicity, criticism and commentaries" (60), in addition to films, of course. Although Dyer elaborates abundantly on how this extra-filmic texts contribute to the construction of the image of a star, this essay focuses on the star's image that emanates mainly from their filmography for the sake of the analysis. The star mentioned here is, therefore, assessed as a signifier and not as a real person.

All the qualities and elements of characterization discussed above are interrelated and influence one another, resulting in the complex construction of film characters. In the following section I will introduce the star persona of Emma Stone and the meanings that she carries and that she may contribute to the characterization of Sam Thompson.

### **3. Emma Stone: the persona**

Emma Stone's birth name is Emily Jean Stone but as previously pointed out, it is very common for Hollywood actors to change their names and adopt artistic names that singularise them. This is the reason why Stone decided to change her name when she was only sixteen years old (*W Magazine* 2017). Stone was born in Arizona in 1988. She has been very open about her mental health journey and has recounted in many interviews that she suffered from anxiety and panic attacks as a child and started acting in school productions as a therapeutic activity.

She describes herself as a "loud and bossy" child (*W Magazine* 2011) by which we can understand that she had a strong personality from a young age. It is also public knowledge that she made a PowerPoint presentation in order to convince her parents of moving to Los Angeles so she could start her acting career at fourteen years old, before even graduating from high school. It worked, although she was not cast for any major part until she was 18. During that time she darkened her natural blonde hair in yet another move to particularise her image and because she felt that she did not fit the 'blonde type' she was auditioning for.

Stone has a rather long list of performances in a variety of media ranging from television to film to Broadway. Her first major role was in the teen comedy *Superbad* (2007), when she played Jules, the love interest of one of the protagonists. Three years later she was cast for her first protagonist role in *Easy A*, a modern interpretation of *The Scarlet Letter* in which teenager Olive Penderghast (Emma Stone) deals with the consequences of a false rumour spread about having lost her virginity. Stone's portrayal of a witty high school girl with a strong personality who tries to stay in control of the situation earned her her first nomination for the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress –

Motion Picture Comedy or Musical. In *Crazy Stupid Love* (2011) she continued to be cast in comedies as ‘the girlfriend’ and/or ‘the daughter’ of the protagonist(s). That same year she appeared in *The Help* (2011), her first drama although her role was the lightest one in tone. Once more she portrayed a young daughter, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phela, a recent university graduate who, despite her noble intentions, still has much to learn about life.

In 2014, Stone starred in *Magic in the Moonlight* under the direction of Woody Allen. She portrayed Sophie, again a young woman, a daughter because she is accompanied by her mother. Sophie has a markedly American character and initially passes herself off as a clairvoyant for money. Again, Stone’s character ends up being the love interest of the protagonist thanks to her intelligence and natural appeal. That same year *Birdman* was released and, as this essay will analyse in the next section, Stone was cast as ‘the young daughter of the protagonist’ once more. This was Stone’s most profound character and her most emotional performance to that moment. Her ‘honest’ performance in the role of Sam Thompson was highly prized by critics and public alike and Stone received her first Academy nomination for it. Although she does not consider herself a good singer (Poland), she achieved great success with her starring role in *La La Land* (2016). She was awarded the Oscar for Best Actress for her dazzling performance, which consolidated her reputation as a prestigious and versatile actor. After that she seems to have taken a turn away from romantic comedy although she still displays a tendency towards humour (especially black comedy-dramas).

From the consideration of this brief summary of Stone’s roles, especially of those up to *Birdman*, a certain pattern can be observed. Knowing the types that she had played is fundamental to the analysis of her persona. Her previous roles inform the audience’s expectations of the kind of character that she will play in any new feature

regardless of whether or not said expectations are actually fulfilled (Dyer 109). Stone admitted in an interview for *W Magazine* in 2011 that she was always typecast as “the girlfriend” or “the young girl with [an] attitude”. She was playing Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) at the moment and she was right. All of her roles were and still are the love interest of some other character. Yet, in spite of being typecast as the love interest/object of desire, she rejects being cast as “the pretty girl” because she thinks that being “funny or honest” is more important (*W Magazine* 2011). It is undeniable that Emma Stone has a photogenic face and a slim body. She started dyeing her hair a copper-tone on producer Judd Apatow’s (*Superbad*) suggestion and has become one of her hallmarks. However, the most memorable trait of her physiognomy are her big green eyes. If we hold the hackneyed phrase “the eyes are the windows to the soul” to be true, then Stone offers widely open gateways to her interiority. She strongly relies on the expressive power of her look to convey all kinds of emotions from naïve wide-eyed amazement to a seductive feline gaze. Her magnificent eyes, paired with her often tight mouth gestures seem to give away her anxious character, both on and off-screen.

Apart from ‘the love interest’, most of Stone’s parts are characterised as daughters. She has often played the girlfriend and the daughter at the same time as in *Crazy Stupid Love*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Birdman* for example. This is probably just a natural consequence of her young age and is related to the other type that her star persona embodies — “the young girl with [an] attitude”. This is probably her most recognisable trait. Most of her roles are angry (Sam is probably the angriest one) or at least dissatisfied with the cards they have been dealt and proactively try to improve their situation using their amusing intelligence. Even Stone’s smaller parts show a

strong personality by withstanding peer pressure as in *Easy A* or giving the same sort of quick witty comebacks and making casual jokes, just like Stone does in her interviews.

Another aspect of this type of girl is that they are often labelled as “outcast” “unruly” or “difficult” because they do not fit in the traditional female stereotype. To different degrees, all of these characters seem to have a shell of emotional distance protecting their vulnerable, loving and warm true self. In a similar way, Stone is extremely private about her love life, although she always seems much more approachable than Sam (*Birdamn*) or even Wichita (*Zombieland* 2009) in her public appearances. She does not have any known official profile on any social media which makes her a rather atypical millennial. However, she is outspoken about her opinion on any topic when asked in any of the events she attends as part of her profession. For example, in 2017 she attended the Oscar ceremony wearing a little pin in favour of planned parenthood in the United States. That same year, during a promotion event for *Battle of the Sexes* (2017), she spoke openly in favour of gender equality and equal pay and took part in a video for gun control. Even though she is not an activist, this social awareness reveals her as a twenty-first century woman.

It is impossible to know whether Emma Stone as a real person shares all these traits with her characters but they are part of her persona regardless. This analysis will determine to what extent Emma Stone’s star image reinforces the characterisation of Sam.

#### 4. Sam Thompson

As stated in the introduction, *Birdman* is, first and foremost, a film about love. This is clearly pointed at from the very beginning. In the opening credits there is a quote of Raymond Carver's last poem, *Late Fragment* (1989). In it, the poetic persona claims to have attained what he wanted from this life, which was to call himself beloved and to feel himself beloved. Furthermore, when the syncopated letter-by-letter formation of the credits renders the title of the film, the word "amor" in red capital letters fleetingly appears diagonally, formed by the remains of the quote. The Spanish word for "love" is thus equated to "Birdman", the main title of the film. In this way the Spanish speaking creators involved in this production indicate to attentive viewers what the main subject of the film is. There are several other references to it throughout the film, such as the Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981) that the protagonist is putting on, or direct references to all sorts of love in dialogues about romantic relationships, parenthood, self-love and validation. In this respect, each of the characters can be said to be searching love in one sense of the word or another. Being the protagonist, Riggan is in search of love in absolute terms, and the other characters enable us to see all those different aspects of love that he seeks. One of the most prominent facets of love that Riggan longs for is professional fulfilment in the form of recognition. This want is shown in his relationship with other actors and staff members of the theatre, such as his rivalry with Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), and his conflict with the critic Tabitha Dickinson (Lindsay Duncan) and the public.

Although Riggan is clearly obsessed with being recognised as a true actor or artist, it is his relationship with his daughter Sam that is presented as the most relevant one. As the co-writer Alexander Dinclaris said in an interview for *Bulletproof Screenwriting*, Sam is the worst nightmare of a father (2020). Father-daughter conflicts



are part of family life and a recurrent theme in our culture that Iñárritu explored in his first long feature *Amores Perros* (2000). However, in Hollywood's patriarchal dominant culture there seems to exist the widely spread particular idea that fathers are their daughters' first love, and that such love turns into hate as they enter their teenage years. This, added to the fear that their daughters will fail to choose a worthy object of their love –not as worthy as themselves, that is –creates an anxiety in fathers that is reflected in many films like *Meet Joe Black* (1998), *Meet the Parents* (2000) or *Crazy Stupid Love*, among many others. As these examples illustrate, the paternalistic attitude towards full-grown adult women/daughters has evolved from the dramatic spectrum into a comedic display. Nevertheless, it is still validated almost as a fatherly duty in the mainstream. And this is Riggan's biggest source of anxiety. He is deeply afraid that he is not worthy of his daughter's love and admiration.

Before proceeding any further, a few technical aspects need to be addressed. The limited space of the indoors sequences prompt a series of technical decisions that affect the way in which the audience reads the scenes and the characters. The first one is that indoor sections are shot with a shallow focus. This is often used to emphasize the relevant subject of the shot. In this case, the sum of shallow depth of field, lighting and closed framing results in a great sense of intimacy: it brings us so close to the characters that the audience can almost feel their breath. Another determining factor was Iñárritu's decision to shoot the film with as little editing as possible. This means that instead of having the classic cut in shot/reverse shots the filmmakers chose to use composition and constant rack focus in order to direct the viewers' attention to the different subjects during the unusually long takes and seamless transitions between scenes. It should also be noted that the camera shows reality through Riggan's eyes, at least for the most part of the time. Therefore, when we see Sam, we see her through her father's focalisation,

except for the couple of scenes in which Riggan is not present. Moreover, for the most part of the film Iñárritu uses one of his visual trademarks, non-stabilized and/or constant camera movement, which gives a naturalistic, documentary-like general feel and at the same time reflects the focalizer's restlessness. The continuous movement of the handheld cameras and steadicams used in the shooting (Haarhoff 2014) makes it difficult to establish the framing of a scene because they offer an ever dynamic image. Even in scenes where characters are static the camera moves seemingly, effortlessly floating around in a way that makes the viewer feel like an invisible witness –an intruder, at times when the camera trespasses the characters' personal space and accesses their interiority.

It is difficult to fully render a character's personality in one take (Dyer 106). It is more often revealed and shown to develop or change as the plot unfolds. However, Sam's first appearances give a rich overview of her personality and the conflicts that the film articulates through her. She interrupts Riggan's meditation in the story's opening scene with a video call, so she is the first character to appear onscreen after the protagonist, signalling that she may be the second most important character in the story. This first scene introduces her most prominent personality traits. She is presented chiefly as the daughter of the protagonist since her first onscreen word is "dad". Immediately after, we get the proper first impression of Sam. The close-up that the video call offers does not allow us to see much of her physical appearance. It only shows Stone's face, with those characteristic huge eyes rather shadowed by a long blonde fringe and uncombed hair. The audience gets the immediate impression that she is a nasty young woman because she shouts at the flower seller, uses racist slurs and complains without listening.

Significantly enough, the first time that we see Sam's/ Stone's face is on a laptop screen. This introduces Sam as a millennial, just like Stone. Hence the use of the Skype call, that the film uses to convey two important messages. First, Sam is a young woman and as such she feels comfortable using technology, namely her smartphone, the internet and social networks. It emphasizes the generation gap between her and her father. Second, it acts as a communication barrier rather than a means. It also symbolizes Riggan's feeling of inability to reach his daughter by presenting her boxed up in a window (not maximized) on the laptop screen (fig. 1). The communication problem between them is thus obvious from the beginning. This meaning is conveyed, not only by the fact that it is a technology-mediated conversation, but by its content as well. It is a short conversation in which Sam calls her father to ask him what flowers he wants but she does not (seem to) listen to his answer because she is too busy complaining about working for Riggan. This contradictory attitude (calling but not listening) hints at her general attitude towards Riggan. As mentioned in the introduction, she is resentful at her father but at the same time she sticks around because she wants to create an opportunity window for their reconciliation.

Not all the characterisation is built from the characters onscreen appearances. Their offscreen actions, especially those that motivate a reaction in other characters, are relevant signs of their personality, too. The second time that Sam appears onscreen she is not physically present in the frame either. She is presented through a vase full of roses and a note (fig. 2) making use of what Dyer calls 'object correlatives' (112). From her first two appearances Sam is associated with smartphones and flowers, two relevant objects that will recur at different points of the plot. In this case, Sam's weight on Riggan's psyche is evidenced by his reaction to the bunch of flowers that she has decided to buy for him. Although he has told her that he hates roses, that is precisely

what she has bought. Given Riggan's already upset state, his daughter's gesture is the last straw. He bursts in a fit of rage and throws the vase across the dressing room using his/Birdman's telekinetic superpowers. Birdman acts as sort of voice over, a part of Riggan's mind talking for the audience to hear, but he is also another character in the film, and as such, what he says about or in reaction to Sam also constructs her character. Viewers know from Birdman's words that Riggan feels undervalued and extremely frustrated by his daughter and with his circumstances.



Figures 1 and 2: Sam being presented through object correlatives.

The audience has to wait a few minutes to really lay eyes on Sam. She walks on the stage interrupting Riggan and Mike's impromptu rehearsal and stops to get framed as the vertical axis between the two men, anticipating that there will be tensions between them and Sam will be the centre of some. She stands in a medium long shot in the middle ground, allowing viewers to see her physique and clothing. Stone's slim figure and fair skin and hair are emphasised by the intense light coming from the stage light fixture. Sam wears a distressed tank top and shorts over torn black tights following the street fashion of the 2010s (fig. 3). She has quite a grungy style, which reinforces her characterisation as a temperamental young woman. Moreover, she walks into the frame with her smartphone in her hand. She uses it as an extension of her weary hand gestures, just like any millennial would do. In the short conversation that follows,

Riggan talks over Sam which obviously annoys her. She scowls at her father to make him stop and makes a sarcastic comment about Riggan treating her as a pet as she leaves the stage, followed by Mike. With this demonstration of attitude, the action moves on, leaving Riggan behind and out of frame.



**Figure 3: Sam as central axis.**

On their way to the costume room, Sam is seen scratching her arm a few times in a very natural manner. It may appear that it is an irrelevant gesture but scratching is one of those things that are not usually seen on the silver screen unless it is significant somehow. The casual gesture actually conveys two apparently contradictory meanings. First, it can be a sign of Sam's carelessness. She seems so comfortable that she does not mind her body language. However, we know from her first lines and her constant annoyed look that she is not. Therefore, her scratching can be also seen as an unconscious sign of anxiety and stress. This meaning is supported by the revelation about Sam being recently released from rehabilitation made by Sylvia Thompson, Sam's mother (Amy Ryan), during a private conversation with her ex-husband in a later scene and the subsequent references to Sam's past history of drug use. Stone's well known experience with anxiety also reinforces this reading of Sam's repeated scratching.

On the other hand, while climbing down the stairs to Mike's costume fitting, he makes a flirtatious comment to Sam. Her reaction is slightly delayed in order to allow for the camera to pan 180° and show her reaction shot, not because it is not immediate or she hesitates, but as a consequence of the unusual cinematographic style. She plainly rejects Mike's unsolicited remark with an exclamation of disgust and a glare in yet another display of her tough girl pose. In addition to that, she decides to stay while Mike undresses proving to him that she is not a prude and showing in an indirect way that the attraction is mutual.

Their relationship is further developed in the two scenes at the theatre rooftop. In both encounters she displays a juvenile disposition. Her youth is strongly emphasised through various means. The perspective of the shot in the first moments added to the fact that Norton is considerably taller than Stone and to her cross-legged sitting make Sam look smaller than Stone really is. Also, the first rooftop scene unveils a playful side of Sam as she insists on playing 'truth or dare'. It is worth mentioning that up to that moment Sam stays out of focus, which indicates that Mike is the focaliser here. That can be the reason why Sam seems rather childish; because her youth is allegedly what Mike would like to regain.

Sam's strong attitude and cheeky personality is underlined by her shouting back at the man on the street and the fact that she enjoys spitting on a man's head for a dare. However, her tough girl image starts to crack and she appears more humorous and less angry than in the previous scenes. In both encounters Sam is sitting on the edge because she seeks an adrenaline rush as a substitute for drugs. In fact, that longing seems to be what motivates her attraction towards Mike. Sam calls the shots in these scenes, leading the conversation and the action. Eventually, after an honest conversation about her issues with Riggan, she is the one who kisses Mike.

The most relevant scenes in terms of Sam's characterisation are the only two private conversations that father and daughter share before the attempted suicide. The first conversation happens when Riggan tries to connect with Sam, approaching her to thank her for her job. The conversation quickly turns into a heated argument when Riggan finds a joint butt and reacts by turning Sam's possible relapse into an issue about him. The gap between them is so big that they seem to belong to different worlds. Riggan despises the internet and by extension digital natives (i.e. millennials). On the contrary, Sam finds that her father's opinion is based on ignorance and self-centredness as she expresses a certain race/class awareness so characteristic of online discourses. She pours out all the rage and resentment towards him that she has been accumulating for the longest time and blows the lid off the root of her bitter feelings. This climactic moment is perfectly rendered by Stone's tense body language and her sublime expression of anger (fig. 4). As per usual, her enormous eyes are the centre of attention. Fixed and wide open, they reflect the cold fluorescent light, complemented by an angry frown and aggressive mouth gestures, and the appropriate inflection. Then, in the blink of an eye, her facial expression changes completely and her stabbing gaze turns into puppy eyes (fig. 5) as she becomes aware of what she has just said and immediately regrets it.



Figures 4 and 5: Stones extraordinary expressiveness.

This highly emotional scene is especially relevant because, on the one hand, it serves to characterise Riggan as a father in Sam's terms. On the other hand, according to Dinlaris, Sam's monologue defines her character. He sums Sam up as "that sort of bitchy and sassy and precocious –and on the other side, this sort of really innocent, hopeful thing [sic]" (Ferrari). This emotional slap to Riggan's ego is directly followed by the sequence in which the final scene of Riggan's play is enacted for the first time. In it, his character, Ed, wonders why he cannot be loved and echoes Sam's sentence "You don't exist" from their previous fight, before committing suicide. This scene is repeated three times with variations but always following a moment of maximum distress, two of which are triggered by Sam's actions.

Before the second father-daughter conversation Riggan sees Sam fooling around with Mike, which can be read as the first trigger that sets the action in motion towards the climax of the plot. The vision leads to him getting locked out of the theatre and walking across Times Square in his underwear before he renders the final scene of the play for the second time. In this occasion it is Sam who approaches her father because she seems concerned about him. Although we can hear her calling, she remains out of frame as Riggan appears to be too lost in his own thoughts to notice her. Once she is in the frame she is blurry while Riggan ruminates about his problems but her image is sharp enough for the audience to see her reactions, sunk in a big arm chair that makes her look small and vulnerable again. She tries to comfort her father with words of encouragement and a soothing voice. Riggan does not seem to be really listening but in a sudden instant of clarity he admits that he has been "a shitty father". This rare moment of true communication between them is also the beginning of their reconciliation, as evidenced by the fact that they are finally framed together, both in focus on the foreground, in an intimate close-up. The backlighting coming from the dressing room



mirror lights creates a noticeable chiaroscuro in which Stone's face receives more light than Keaton's, thus directing the audience's attention towards Sam. She tells Riggan that his half-naked stroll has become a trending topic on Twitter and tries to explain to him that it can be a powerful promotion tool although it remains unclear whether Riggan understands it. Nonetheless, they look each other in the eye and almost hold hands thanks to the smartphone.

Moving on to the final scene after Riggan has attempted to kill himself on stage at the end of the opening night, Sam visits him in his hospital room. Here Stone makes use of the whole range of meanings that her persona embodies, beginning with a very realistic portrayal of repressed stress/anxiety in the face of such a situation, and moving into a warm, loving daughter who is aware of her father's vulnerability and tries to cheer him up. This moment is the affirmation of their total reconciliation, symbolized by the bunch of fragrant lilacs that Sam gives Riggan. This detail closes the circle that opened in the first scene when Riggan asked his daughter to buy any flowers that smelled nice. The screen feels specially balmy and healing thanks to its very bright "natural" lighting. The sunlight that enters through the big windows of the hospital room bathes everything as father and daughter finally embrace and creates a flare effect and a general brightness that transmits a soft romantic feeling (fig. 6). Once more, Stone's expressive power is the centre of attention, mainly because Keaton's face is completely bandaged up. We see again Sam's casual/anxious gesture of scratching her nose as well as her wry smile when both joke and her affected yet calm expression when she lays her head on Riggan's chest and he affectionately strokes her hair.



**Figure 6: final reconciliation.**

When Sam leaves the room for a moment Riggan realizes that he has failed to get rid of the voice in his head (i.e. Birdman) and jumps out of a window in a final attempt. When Sam re-enters the room and frantically searches for Riggan, the camera offers the audience an impossible framing as it dollies outside said window floating in the air (fig. 7 and 8). From that position of unreality, the audience can only rely on Sam's focalisation to draw their own interpretation of the open ending of the scene, and



**Figures 7 and 8: Sam seen from outside the window.**

of the film. It is impossible to know whether Riggan is smashed on the pavement or soaring above New York because the camera only shows Sam's reaction shot. Sam's expression changes from terrified to amazed, emphasized and synchronised through a change from a low to a high angle. The initial low camera angle makes Sam utterly vulnerable conveying her fear, while the high angle magnifies her (Stone's) gleaming green eyes and their enthusiastic expression. It is clear that the filmmakers want the

audience to reach their own conclusions about the ending, but it is also evident that they want them to do so from what they have told us about the character of Sam, which makes her the second most important character of the film. In my opinion, Sam clearly evolves from an angry teenage-like adult into a woman with a more mature attitude and a better understanding of the challenges and limitations of her father. As a consequence, in the last shot her expression and cinematic language convey that she finally sees Riggan as he is.

This final scene is the consolidation of Sam as a character in her own right because she is arguably the only character that undergoes a true evolution. All the characters in the film are quite flat in terms of their main motivation. Focusing on the three major ones: Mike's only obsession is with truth, Riggan wants to quiet the chronic dissatisfaction that haunts him, and Sam wants to feel loved by her father. We know that Riggan attempted suicide before the beginning of the plot, at a previous point of the story. Before shooting himself onstage, he confesses to trying to drown himself in the ocean years ago. The audience can see that he has not changed when he finally jumps out of the window. On the other hand, Sam is the only one who comes to terms with her source of conflict, leaves her anger behind and reconciles with her father. Observing her evolution we can observe that she is a complex character: she has a three-dimensional personality that shows some contradictions. As a character, she not only crystalizes Emma Stone's persona, but also takes her distinctive traits to new and more profound levels of signification.

## 5. Conclusion

*Birdman* is a complex audio-visual narrative that presents many layers of signification. One of the most relevant of them is articulated through the character of Sam Thompson. Sam is the daughter of the protagonist with whom he has a dysfunctional relationship. As part of her recovery after drug rehabilitation she works as her father's assistant at the Broadway production that he is putting on. Her role in the narrative is essential because she triggers the key actions and because her focalization is the only external opinion that the film offers about the protagonist.

As a character, Sam embodies a specific type of 'tough girl', one that is very much defined by Emma Stone's persona, that is, the accumulation of meanings and images from her previous roles. What characterizes this type is that they use their sense of humour, wit and/or sarcasm in order to create a somewhat cynical appearance that shields their vulnerable interior. Stone brings all these characteristics to Sam's initial presentation, before the character actually starts to develop. Likewise, Stone's usual typecasting as 'the girlfriend' makes Sam and Mike's relationship no surprise and Stone's typecast as 'daughter' acquires a deeper dimension in this film.

Sam also represents the typical millennial woman because the internet, smartphones and social networks are part of her reality. Although Emma Stone does not have an online presence, it does not seem farfetched to assume that, being a millennial herself, she is a digital native. As a consequence, Sam's characterisation is perceived as more credible or even naturalistic. Similarly, Stone's openness about her mental health makes viewers more inclined to read an underlying anxiety in Sam otherwise ambiguous gestures. Therefore, casting Emma Stone for this role is a determining factor in the construction of the character. Her star image influences the audience's interpretation of Sam.

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