

A Semiotic Analysis of the Main Character's Grief in the Film "The Goldfinch" on Netflix

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology and the presence of streaming platforms such as Netflix have made films function not only as entertainment media but also as forms of mass communication that represent human emotional and social experiences. As an audiovisual medium, film contains various signs and symbols that construct certain meanings, including representations of loss and grief. John Crowley's film *The Goldfinch* depicts the life of Theodore Decker after the loss of his mother in an explosion at an art museum. This study aims to analyze the representation of grief in the main character of *The Goldfinch* using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected through film observation, in-depth interviews with three informants, and literature study. Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman and was validated through source and theoretical triangulation. The results show that the representation of grief in the film is constructed through visual and symbolic signs, such as facial expressions, body language, dim lighting, room atmosphere, and the symbol of the painting *The Goldfinch*. At the denotative level, grief is shown through traumatic scenes, nightmares, and changes in the main character's behavior. At the connotative level, these signs are interpreted as symbols of trauma, loneliness, and emotional isolation. Meanwhile, at the mythical level, the film constructs the view that loss is an emotional experience that can shape identity and have a long-term impact on one's life. Thus, *The Goldfinch* represents grief as a complex emotional experience through visual and symbolic signs in the digital film medium.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology and the emergence of streaming platforms such as Netflix have transformed patterns of mass communication consumption, making film not only a form of entertainment but also a reflective medium that contains moral messages, social representations, and articulations of human emotional experiences. In the contemporary media landscape, film serves as a symbolic space where individuals and societies negotiate meaning, identity, and collective trauma.

The rapid growth of streaming platforms such as Netflix has strengthened film's position as a dominant digital communication product in the global era (Evens et al., 2024; Lobato & Lotz, 2021). According to a Kompas Tekno report, Netflix's global subscriber count reached 260 million in the fourth quarter of 2023, an increase of 13.1 million in the last three months alone (Kompas Tekno, 2024). Meanwhile, a Nielsen report showed that streaming service viewing time increased to 40.3% of total television viewing time, with Netflix contributing 8.4% of total digital viewing (Nielsen, 2023). These data confirm that films on digital platforms are no longer merely entertainment products (Kim & Shim, 2023; Evens et al., 2024) but have become mass communication media that mediate human social and emotional experiences in the digital realm (van Es, 2024; Kim & Shim, 2023; *Frontiers in Communication*, 2025).

The study of the meaning of loss and the process of grief in film has become a significant focus in communication and cultural studies. From a symbolic communication perspective, film can be understood as a medium containing a system of signs and symbols that convey emotional and social messages. According to Blumer, as cited in West and Turner (2021), symbolic communication emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in an object or action itself but is formed through human interaction with and interpretation of symbols.

Furthermore, in the context of film, every visual element, such as lighting, color, facial expressions, and props, acts as a symbol that mediates communication between the filmmaker and the audience (Nugraha et al., 2024; Shen & Liu, 2025). Through these symbols, the characters' emotions and experiences can be translated into a form of communication that can be felt universally (Shen & Liu, 2025; Amaljith et al., 2024). Research shows that a family environment with supportive communication and emotional closeness plays a vital role in maintaining an individual's mental health (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Demetriou, 2025), while a lack of family support can increase the risk of stress and psychological disorders (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2024; Demetriou, 2025).

Film can also be constructed as a visual medium through a system of signs that interact to create aesthetic and semantic effects (Rizal et al., 2025; Mahalingam & Daniel, 2024). Visual elements, such as image composition, facial expressions, and lighting, combine with auditory aspects, such as dialogue, music, and sound effects, to form a network of signs that convey meaning implicitly or explicitly (Noad, 2019; Rizal et al., 2025; Aydın et al., 2024). In semiotics, iconic signs, namely signs that resemble real objects, play an important role in symbolizing emotions, conflicts, and social representations (Mahalingam & Daniel, 2024; van Kooten Niekerk et al., 2024). Therefore, semiotic analysis is an essential instrument for uncovering the meaning behind visual and symbolic constructions in films (van Kooten Niekerk et al., 2024; Aydın et al., 2024).

The *Goldfinch* offers a complex narrative of grief and loss through its lead character, Theodore Decker, played by Ansel Elgort. The film, adapted from Donna Tartt's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, was directed by John Crowley and released in 2019. The story centers on Theo's life, which changes drastically after he loses his mother in a bombing at an art museum in New

York. In the chaos, Theo accidentally takes a small painting entitled *The Goldfinch*, created by Carel Fabritius in 1654.

The film combines psychological drama and strong visual aesthetics to depict the main character's emotional journey. The use of a dark color palette and dim lighting depicts an atmosphere of grief, while close-ups of facial expressions and details of art objects reinforce the introspective impression. Through a narrative structure that shifts between the past and the present, *The Goldfinch* highlights how trauma, guilt, and memory shape Theo's identity. This study aims to analyze the grief experienced by the main character in *The Goldfinch* using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach to understand how emotional experience is communicated visually and symbolically in the digital cinematic medium.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to interpret the meaning of visual signs and symbols in the film *The Goldfinch*, which was available on Netflix. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focused on meaning, interpretation, and an in-depth understanding of emotional communication represented through film. According to Moleong (2014), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects holistically and contextually through word-based descriptions in natural contexts. Therefore, this study did not aim to generalize the results but to explore the meanings behind visual and symbolic representations in the film.

The main object of this research was the film *The Goldfinch*. The informants were three viewers aged 18–25 years who lived in Cirebon City and had watched the film on Netflix. They consisted of two main informants and one supporting informant. The main informants were Anabela, aged 22, and Zeyra Zhanubah, aged 18, who were selected because they had watched *The Goldfinch* more than once and had a deeper understanding of the film. The supporting informant was Desti Viandari Rossa, aged 22, who provided additional data to support the main informants' interpretations. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which informants were deliberately selected based on criteria relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data collection techniques in this study included document analysis, in-depth interviews, and a literature review. Document analysis was conducted by examining visual and narrative elements in the film, such as gestures, facial expressions, dialogue, and lighting, that depicted the grieving process. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain viewers' subjective interpretations of the representation of grief in the film. Meanwhile, the literature review was used to strengthen the theoretical foundation by examining literature, journals, and books relevant to the research topic, including semiotic theory.

Data validity was tested using source and theoretical triangulation. According to Moleong (2018), triangulation is a technique for verifying data validity by using various sources and theoretical approaches to confirm research results. In this study, the researcher checked the consistency between the film analysis results and the interview participants' views, then reviewed

the findings through the theories used. In addition, peer discussions were conducted to ensure the objectivity and consistency of data interpretation.

Data analysis was carried out descriptively and qualitatively using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles et al. (2020). The analysis process began when the researcher collected the data, reduced them to select relevant information, and presented them in narrative form to illustrate the relationship between symbols, emotions, and social representations. The final stage was drawing conclusions and verification, in which the researcher interpreted the patterns of meaning found to explain how *The Goldfinch* represented the experience of grief emotionally and symbolically. With this approach, the study was expected to reveal how the film functioned as an emotional communication medium that depicted the experience of loss visually and performatively, as well as how this meaning was interpreted by audiences in the context of contemporary digital culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of observations on the film *The Goldfinch* and interviews with research informants, it was found that the representation of grief of the main character, Theodore Decker, was constructed through various visual signs, visual expressions, emotional expressions, object symbols, lighting, music, and storylines that show the impact of loss on the main character's life. Grief in the film is not only shown as a form of momentary sadness, but also as a psychological trauma that affects Theodore's identity and life in the long term.

The selection of the number of informants in this study was based on the principle of data adequacy *in* qualitative research, where depth of information is prioritized over number of informants. Furthermore, this study also implemented source triangulation by comparing data from primary and supporting informants to increase the credibility and validity of the research findings.

This research involved four informants: two primary informants and two supporting informants. The primary informants were viewers who watched the entire film, *The Goldfinch*, and were able to provide in-depth interpretations of the meaning of the main character's grief. Meanwhile, the supporting informants served to enrich the analytical perspective and strengthen the findings of the primary informants. The supporting informants served as complements to enrich the perspective and strengthen the research findings.

The main focus of this research is to identify how the main character's grief is visually and symbolically represented in the film *The Goldfinch* and how this representation is interpreted by the audience. This identification forms the basis for presenting the research results, which draw on Roland Barthes's semiotic theory.

Scene 1



Picture 1 Duration 1:19:19

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

In this scene, Theodore Decker is seen walking out of the ruins of the museum after the bomb blast that killed his mother. Theodore's body is covered in dust, and his face appears confused. The museum appears chaotic, with debris scattered around and the lighting dim from the explosion. Theodore appears to be searching for his mother, walking with weak steps and a blank stare.

Connotation Analysis

Theodore's blank expression and passive responses represent the psychological trauma of sudden loss. Theodore isn't shown crying hysterically, but rather experiencing a state of emotional shock that makes him seem to lose the ability to respond normally. His unfocused gaze, weak body movements, and minimal dialogue suggest that Theodore is experiencing deep emotional distress.

Referring to Barthes (1988), connotative meaning emerges through the emotional and social experiences inherent in a sign. In this scene, Theodore's facial expression, the dark lighting, and the ruined atmosphere of the museum serve as connotative signs that represent the emotional devastation caused by the loss of a loved one.

Anabela's informant's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she states that Theodore appears to be experiencing a state of "freeze" and "shutdown" after the tragedy. The informant notes that Theo appears silent and frozen amidst the panic-filled situation. This suggests that the film depicts grief not only through tears but also through the main character's body language and nonverbal expressions.

The use of dim lighting and a dusty atmosphere further reinforce the traumatic impression on a literal level. From a semiotic perspective, visual signs such as expressions, gestures, and lighting function as icons that directly represent reality (Sobur, 2009).

Myth Analysis

At a mythical level, the film constructs the view that sudden loss is an experience that can drastically change a person's life. Grief is depicted as an emotional experience that doesn't always manifest as crying or emotional outbursts, but can also manifest as silence, confusion, and a lack of response.

Moreover, this scene demonstrates that society often perceives a silent person as "strong" or "fine," even though this condition can be a form of trauma that is not directly visible. Thus, *The*

Goldfinch builds the myth that emotional wounds from loss are not always verbally visible, but can be hidden behind a person's silent expression and emotional shock.

Scene 2



Picture 2 Duration 03.35

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

This scene shows Theodore temporarily living in the Barbour family home after the loss of his mother. The Barbour family apartment is large, luxurious, bright, and well-appointed. Theodore is seen sitting quietly, speaking only as needed, and showing no emotional expression when around the family.

Connotation Analysis

Through connotative interpretation, the contrast between the Barbour family's warm and comfortable home and Theodore's gloomy expression represents the main character's emotional isolation. Although Theodore is physically in a safe and well-equipped environment, he still feels empty and doesn't truly feel part of it.

Connotative meaning Barthes (1988) arises from the relationship of signs to an individual's emotional and social experiences. In this scene, the lighting and neatness of the house contrast visually with Theodore's psychological state, which is devastated by the loss of his mother.

Anabela's informant's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she states that the Barbour family appears "bright," "clean," and "put together," while Theodore appears dim and disoriented. The informant also notes that Theodore appears unable to integrate into his surroundings, even though everyone treats him well.

These findings align with (Nofia et al., 2025) those stating that visual elements such as loneliness, empty spaces, and dark tones are connotative signs representing loss and emotional disconnection. Thus, at the connotative level, the film constructs grief as a deep and layered emotional experience.

Myth Analysis

The film constructs the view that material comforts and a good social environment are not always able to heal a person's emotional wounds. This representation naturalizes the understanding that trauma and grief are inner experiences that cannot be resolved simply through facilities or a seemingly better life.

Furthermore, the film also shows that individuals experiencing loss often feel isolated even in a supportive environment. Theodore still feels alone despite being surrounded by the welcoming Barbour family.

From this phenomenon, the film *The Goldfinch* builds the myth that emotional wounds resulting from loss are personal and deep and cannot always be healed through external comfort.

Scene 3



Picture 3 Duration 1:41:14

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

Secretly keeping *The Goldfinch* for years after the museum tragedy. Theodore wrapped and hid the painting, even though he knew it was wrong. Literally, this scene shows Theodore continuing to hold on to the painting as something he has always protected since his mother's death.

Connotation Analysis

As seen in this scene, *The Goldfinch* is no longer seen as a mere work of art, but rather as a symbol of Theodore's emotional attachment to his mother. The painting is the last thing that connects Theodore to the moments he had with her before the tragedy.

Signs can form deeper emotional meanings through an individual's social and psychological experiences (Barthes, 1988). In this scene, the painting *The Goldfinch* becomes a symbolic sign representing Theodore's loss, trauma, and need to preserve the memory of his mother.

Informant Desti's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she states that the painting is Theodore's "last memory" of his mother. The informant also explains that Theodore seems to be living in his past through his attachment to the painting.

Not only that, but Theodore's way of guarding and hiding the painting shows that he has not been able to let go of the loss he has experienced. According to Sobur (2009), objects in films can have symbolic meanings that represent the emotional state of the characters. In this film, the painting becomes a symbol of the emotional wound Theodore continues to carry throughout his life. Through this attachment, *The Goldfinch* represents Theodore's emotional connection to his mother, which remains alive through certain memories and symbols.

Myth Analysis

The film builds on the notion that humans tend to maintain emotional connections with those who have passed away through certain sentimental objects. The painting *The Goldfinch* naturalizes

the understanding that material objects can serve as a medium for preserving memories and a sense of closeness to a lost loved one.

Moreover, the film also shows that individuals often find it difficult to let go of pain because loss becomes part of their emotional identity. Theodore maintains the painting even though it constantly reminds him of past trauma. Through this dynamic, *The Goldfinch* builds the myth that memory and loss will always live on through the emotional symbols humans retain.

Scene 4



Picture 4 *Duration 44.26*

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

Observing this scene, Theodore has grown up and appears to be living a normal life. He works, talks to others, and goes about his daily activities as usual. Visually, Theodore appears well-groomed and able to function socially in his environment.

Connotation Analysis

Although Theodore appears physically fine, his forced facial expressions, including smiles, blank stares, and reserved emotional demeanor, indicate that he still harbors the trauma of losing his mother. The film demonstrates a discrepancy between Theodore's external appearance and his inner state.

Referring to Barthes (1988), connotative meaning is formed through the emotional experience attached to a sign. In this scene, Theodore's expression becomes a connotative sign that represents the emotional wound hidden behind his normal appearance.

Anabela's informant's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she stated that Theodore seemed to "already have sadness within him" despite seemingly living a normal life. The informant also noted that Theodore's sadness felt bottled up and not expressed directly.

The film shows that grief isn't always expressed through tears or emotional outbursts. Instead, Theodore is depicted as struggling to maintain a stable self-image in the eyes of his social circle. Therefore, the film depicts grief as a hidden emotional wound that lingers even when someone appears to be able to live a normal life.

This finding aligns with Nofia et al. (2025) the notion that in visual semiotics, myths about grief are often constructed as part of human identity formed through traumatic experiences and

memories. Thus, grief is understood not merely as a temporary emotional response, but as an existential condition that shapes how individuals interpret life.

Furthermore, the film naturalizes the idea that loss is an inseparable part of human life. In Barthes's perspective, myths serve to make cultural constructs appear natural and unquestioned (Barthes, 1988). Therefore, *The Goldfinch* not only represents grief but also constructs a particular perspective on how humans should understand and navigate the experience of loss.

Myth Analysis

Based on this, the film constructs the view that a person can still appear normal even if they haven't fully recovered emotionally. This representation naturalizes society's view that individuals who continue to work, engage in activities, and interact socially are considered "fine."

The film also demonstrates the indirect social pressure to maintain a strong appearance after experiencing loss. Theodore appears to be trying to maintain a stable self in front of others, even though his past trauma continues to affect his life. In this way, *The Goldfinch* builds the myth that emotional wounds from loss are not always immediately visible and can be hidden behind the routines of everyday life.

Scene 5



Picture 5 Duration 07:05

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

In this scene, young Theodore is seen waking up from a nightmare about the museum explosion that killed his mother. Theodore appears shocked, breathing irregularly, and displays a frightened expression after waking from the dream. The room is dark and quiet, further enhancing the main character's emotional state.

Literally, this scene shows little Theodore still remembering the tragedy of losing his mother through nightmares that continue to appear after the incident.

Connotation Analysis

On a connotative level, Theodore's nightmare represents the psychological trauma that continues to linger within him after the loss of his mother. The dream suggests that the museum explosion tragedy not only affected Theodore's emotional state at the time of the incident but also continues to haunt his mind and subconscious.

Informant Zeyra's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she states that Theodore appears to have not had enough time to process his loss. The informant also notes that the sense of loss in the film continues to emerge through Theodore's emotional state and memories of the tragedy.

In this regard, the use of dark lighting and the quiet atmosphere of the room reinforces Theodore's depiction of fear and loneliness after waking from his nightmare. According to Sobur (2009), visual elements such as lighting and the atmosphere of a room in a film can construct certain emotional meanings for the audience. Therefore, this scene represents how the trauma of loss can linger in a person's mind and subconscious, even after the event has passed.

Myth Analysis

The film develops the view that childhood loss can leave deep psychological scars on a mythical level. The trauma of loss is not only felt at the time of tragedy but can also persist through fear, anxiety, and nightmares.

The film also naturalizes the notion that children who experience sudden loss are often unable to fully understand or process their emotions. Theodore is depicted as still haunted by the tragedy of losing his mother through recurring nightmares. *The Goldfinch* builds on the myth that childhood trauma caused by loss can linger and affect a person's emotional state long-term.

Scene 6



Picture 6 Duration 1:00:29

Source: Netflix

Denotative Analysis

In this scene, Theodore begins spending time with Boris and engaging in destructive behaviors such as alcohol consumption and other forms of emotional escape. In this scene, Theodore's destructive behavior becomes a connotative sign of trauma and emotional instability resulting from past loss.

Connotation Analysis

Theodore's relationship with Boris represents a form of emotional escape after he failed to process the loss healthily. Theodore appears to be trying to divert emotional pain through destructive environments and behaviors.

Anabela's informant's perspective reinforces this interpretation when she states that the trauma of loss can transform a person into a different version of themselves. The informant also observed that Theodore appeared to be seeking an escape to alleviate the emotional pain he was harboring.

In this regard, Theodore and Boris's relationship demonstrates how unresolved trauma can influence the course of one's life. Theodore begins to live a more chaotic and unstable life after losing his mother. The film illustrates how unprocessed grief can lead individuals to destructive behavior as a *coping mechanism*.

Myth Analysis

The film develops the view that the trauma of loss can affect human identity and behavior in the long term. This representation naturalizes the understanding that individuals unable to process their grief healthily may seek escape through destructive environments and behaviors. Past emotional wounds have a significant impact on the direction of one's life. Theodore not only loses his mother but also loses emotional stability in his life.

Therefore, the film *The Goldfinch* builds the myth that grief is not just temporary sadness, but an emotional experience that can shape human identity and life journey.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the film *The Goldfinch* represents the grief of the main character, Theodore Decker, through a layered construction of visual and symbolic signs. This representation is constructed not only through the storyline but also through cinematic elements, such as facial expressions, body gestures, lighting, color, visual composition, and symbolic objects.

Referring to the problem formulation, the meaning of grief in this film is formed through three levels of Roland Barthes's semiotic interpretation. At the denotative level, grief is shown through the loss of Theodore's mother in the museum explosion, expressions of shock, nightmares, and changes in the main character's behavior. At the connotative level, the film represents Theodore's trauma, loneliness, emotional isolation, and inner wounds through the use of a dark atmosphere, body language, facial expressions, and the symbol of the painting *The Goldfinch* as a form of attachment to the memory of his mother. Meanwhile, at the mythical level, the film constructs the view that loss can shape a person's identity and life in the long term and shows that emotional wounds are not always directly visible in the social environment. The interview results also confirm that the representation of grief in the film is conveyed realistically and emotionally through its visual and symbolic elements. Thus, *The Goldfinch* represents loss not merely as temporary sadness but also as emotional trauma that continues to affect human life.

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