

# Emotional Representation in Divorce Conflict in the Film “Marriage Story”

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## ABSTRACT

This film explores the intricacies of a marriage that faces challenges due to ineffective communication and the accumulation of suppressed emotions between the characters, Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber. This study seeks to analyze the portrayal of emotions in divorce conflicts depicted in Noah Baumbach’s film, Marriage Story. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method utilizing Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach, which focuses on the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings within visual and narrative signs. Data collection was conducted through the observation of several pivotal scenes that illustrate the emotional evolution of the characters, encompassing the initial phase of relationship warmth, the emergence of conflict, the culmination of arguments, and the stage of acceptance. Data analysis in this study was conducted through a multi-step process, including sign identification, denotative analysis, connotative analysis, and myth analysis. The research findings reveal that the representation of emotions in film is conveyed not solely through dialogue but also through visual signs such as facial expressions, body movements, spatial composition, and character interactions. These signs generate connotative meanings that encapsulate the complexity of emotions in divorce, including a sense of loss, anger, regret, and lingering affection. Furthermore, films depict divorce as an emotional process that is not linear but dynamic and ambivalent, wherein both characters experience internal conflict. This study is anticipated to contribute to the field of visual communication studies, particularly in comprehending the representation of emotions within film.

## KEYWORDS

Emotional,  
Representation of  
Divorce, Semiotics,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Film is a visual communication medium that has a strong ability to present social reality, including the dynamics of human relationships (Khaira et al., 2022). Through elements of narrative, visuals, dialogue, and actor expressions, film not only functions as a means of entertainment but also as a medium that conveys meaning, values, and complex emotional experiences. Film as a product of popular culture plays an important role in representing various social realities, including issues of relationships (Indana Zulfia et al., 2025). In cinema, narrative is not only constructed through verbal dialogue but also through visual language that can touch the conscious aspects of the audience. One of the most crucial elements in the formation of this visual language is cinematography. Through visual narrative, audio, dialogue, and the symbols presented, film not only functions as a medium of entertainment but also becomes an ideological space that reproduces, disseminates, or even challenges certain discourses related to social structures and cultural norms (Aliah et al., 2023).

Cinematography is not merely capturing images using film or digital sensors, but rather a creative process of storytelling through visuals. Every technical decision, such as the placement of

angles, choice of lenses, or camera movement, is an effort to represent emotions through visuals. (Putra et al., 2022). Film as a medium of representation not only reflects reality, but also constructs meaning about a social phenomenon. Through visual and audio language, film is capable of influencing the audience's perspective on a concept, including interpersonal relationships and conflicts in daily life (Difitrian & Saleh, 2024). This shows that films play an important role in shaping society's understanding of human emotional experiences (Apriannur et al., 2025).

A theme often raised in films is conflict in marital relationships, including divorce. Divorce is not only a legal or social event, but also a complex and layered emotional process. Individuals going through a divorce often face a variety of conflicting emotions, such as remaining love, a sense of loss, anger, regret, and even acceptance. This emotional complexity makes divorce a phenomenon that is relevant to study in the context of media representation. Conflicts in marriage do not appear suddenly, but develop from patterns of ineffective communication. According to journals (Alya, 2025), Failures in interpersonal communication, such as excessive criticism, defensiveness, and lack of empathy, are major factors that cause marital relationships to break down. This indicates that communication plays a central role in both maintaining and damaging a couple's relationship.

In line with this, research by (Nurhasan et al., 2025) states that divorce is often the result of an accumulation of unresolved conflicts over the long term, not merely caused by a specific event. Poorly managed conflicts can create emotional distance between partners, thereby reducing the quality of the relationship and increasing the potential for separation (Siarkanasa et al., 2026). In films, marital conflict is often depicted as a complex and multidimensional dynamic. Noah Baumbach's film, *Marriage Story*, illustrates how ineffective communication contributes to the breakdown of the relationship between Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber. A deeper analysis of the two main characters is necessary to understand how the conflict is formed and evolves throughout the storyline. The analysis of the main characters is carried out by reviewing character development and the dynamics of the conflicts experienced by the characters within the narrative plot. This aligns with the opinion that character analysis in films should focus on character development and the conflicts experienced by the cast as part of the story structure (Rondonuwu, 2020).

Although the film *Marriage Story* has been extensively studied in previous research, most studies tend to focus on aspects of moral messages, legal conflicts, or family representation. Meanwhile, other research highlights moral values and the importance of communication in marital relationships (Syam et al., 2025). However, there are still limitations in studies that specifically discuss how emotions are represented as sign systems in film. In fact, the main strength of a film lies in conveying emotions subtly through expressions, gestures, space, and other visual elements. Roland Barthes' semiotics becomes relevant because it is able to reveal meaning behind visual signs in film. Meaning is not only at the denotative level, but also at the connotative and mythological levels, which relate to cultural constructions. The semiotic approach is effectively used to uncover hidden meanings, including ideology and emotions, that are not conveyed explicitly in visual works (Swandhani et al., 2023). In line with this, studies in communication semiotics affirm that signs in the media not only have denotative meanings but also contain connotative meanings related to social and cultural contexts (Afif et al., 2025).

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a semiotic analysis method aimed at interpreting the meanings contained in visual and narrative signs in films. The object of this study is the film *Marriage Story* by Noah Baumbach, released in 2019. This film was chosen because it presents emotional dynamics conveyed not only through dialogue but also through visual and performative elements. The focus of this study is directed at the interaction between the main characters, Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber, who are undergoing a divorce process with various underlying emotional conflicts. The unit of analysis in this study includes visual elements (facial expressions, body movements, distance between characters, and spatial composition), verbal elements (dialogues), audio elements, as well as cinematic elements such as framing, types of shots, and camera movements. Several key scenes were selected as the focus of analysis, namely the opening scene, the consultation scene with the lawyer, the quarrel scene in the apartment as the conflict climax, the

'Being Alive' song scene, and the closing scene representing emotional acceptance. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, documentation, and literature study. Observation was carried out by watching the film repeatedly to identify signs relevant to the research focus. Documentation was conducted by noting important dialogues, taking screenshots, and compiling transcripts of scenes being analyzed. Literature review was conducted by examining various sources, such as scientific journals, theoretical books, and previous research relevant to the research topic.

The data analysis technique in this study was carried out through several stages, namely the identification of signs, denotative analysis, connotative analysis, and myth analysis. In semiotic studies, signs are the main concept presented as material for analysis. Semiotics is the science that studies signs in human life (Arni, 2023). In the first stage, the researcher identifies various signs that appear in the scene, whether in visual, verbal, or audio form. The second stage is denotative analysis, which describes the literal meaning of those signs. The third stage is connotative analysis, which interprets the implied meaning or emotional meaning contained in those signs. The final stage is myth analysis, which connects the meaning with a broader cultural or ideological context, such as the concepts of marriage, divorce, and gender relations in society.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzes the representation of emotions in the divorce conflict in the film *Marriage Story* by Noah Baumbach using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The analysis is carried out on five main scenes that represent the development of the characters' emotions, from the phase of relationship warmth to the stage of post-divorce acceptance. The research subjects are scenes containing emotional representations, with units of analysis including visual, verbal, audio, and cinematic aspects. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory focuses on how signs function in communication through these signs (Ubaidillah & Patriansah, 2024). The stages of analysis used in this study are as follows:

### 1) Identification of Key Signs

The initial stage is carried out by identifying the key signs in the film, which include visual elements (facial expressions, body gestures, space composition, lighting), verbal elements (dialogue and narration), audio elements (voice intonation and background music), as well as cinematic elements (framing, types of shots, and camera movements). This identification aims to determine the relevant units of analysis in representing emotions in divorce conflicts.

### 2) Denotative Analysis

At this stage, the identified signs are analyzed based on their literal meaning or the meaning that appears directly. Denotation is the first level of meaning, where the researcher describes what is seen or heard without providing additional interpretation.

### 3) Connotation Analysis

The next stage is to examine connotative meanings, which are additional meanings that arise due to cultural associations, experiences, and social context. At this stage, signs are no longer interpreted literally, but rather as representations of emotions, power relations, inner conflicts, or the psychological dynamics of characters. Connotation analysis allows researchers to understand how films build complex emotional experiences.

### 4) Myth Analysis

The final stage is myth analysis, which is to identify how signs in the film represent, reinforce, or even challenge the values, norms, and ideologies developed within society. In the context of Barthes' semiotics, myth is not merely a story, but a system of meaning that is considered "natural" by society. Through this stage, research can reveal how films not only depict conflicts of divorce, relationships, and human emotions.

In the film *Marriage Story*, there is the concept of Roland Barthes' semiotics, namely Denotation, Connotation, and Myth. Here is an analysis regarding semiotic theory based on Roland Barthes.

**Table 1.** Semiotic Theory Analysis

Element	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Opening montage	The couple lives a harmonious daily life	A simple and caring love	An ideal marriage is built from small things and togetherness
Consultation Scene with a Lawyer	Conversation with a lawyer	Awareness of inequality in relationships	Women often lose their identity in marriage
A Quarrel Scene in the Apartment	Couple's quarrel	A burst of pent-up emotions	Divorce as an accumulation of communication conflicts
Scene of the song 'Being Alive'	Charlie sings a song	Reflections on loneliness and emotional needs	Humans need emotional connection
In the final scene, Nicole ties Charlie's shoelaces	Nicole helps Charlie	Remaining love	Love does not always disappear after a relationship ends

The table above presents a semiotic analysis of several scenes in a story/film, which is divided into four aspects: scene elements, denotation (literal meaning), connotation (implied meaning), and myth (cultural/ideological meaning). Each scene, from a couple's harmonious life to separation, is described to show how meaning develops from the simple (real events) to a deeper understanding of love, conflict, identity, and emotional needs in relationships (Auger et al., 2025).

1) Opening moutnage

An opening montage is a series of video clips, images, or short scenes arranged sequentially at the beginning of a film, television show, or video to convey a lot of information in a short time (Sumpena, 2022). Here is one example of an image from the opening montage.



**Figure 1.** Semictic Analysis of Opening Montage Scene

In the image above, the denotation, connotation, and myth can be explained in the form of a table. The main purpose of explaining in the form of a table is to present data or information systematically, concisely, and in a structured manner. The following is a table explaining the image above.

**Table 1.** Semictic Analysis of Opening Montage Scene

Opening Montage	
Denotation	Connotation
The opening scene in the film Marriage Story features a series of daily activities between Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber, such as tying their child's shoelaces, cutting hair, cooking, and laughing together. Visually, this scene is dominated by warm facial expressions, natural physical contact, and interactions that appear harmonious. The voice-over accompanying the scene contains a list of things each likes about their partner.	Behind these simple activities, there is an emotional meaning in the form of closeness, care, and interest built through routines. Small gestures like touching, helping, and paying attention to a partner's details demonstrate a form of love that is not expressed directly in words but is manifested through actions. However, the use of a voice-over that actually comes from a divorce therapy session creates an ironic connotation, suggesting that these memories are not currently happening but are being recalled as something that has been lost.

**Myth**

This scene represents the myth of the ideal marriage, which is a relationship built from small things and everyday togetherness. However, this film simultaneously deconstructs that myth by showing that warmth does not always guarantee the continuity of a relationship. In this context, the myth of marriage as a space of stable happiness is questioned.

Emotionally, this scene represents nostalgia and an unconscious sense of loss. The emotion does not appear as a conflict, but as a warm space of memory. Precisely because the visuals feel intimate, the audience experiences a strong emotional contrast when they realize that the relationship has broken. In other words, the visual signs in this scene function as a representation of hidden emotions, whose meaning only becomes apparent after the conflict arises. This finding is in line with the research of (Feng & O'Halloran, 2013), which explains that emotions in film are not only represented through dialogue, but also through a combination of visuals, facial expressions, body movements, and narrative context that shape the audience's emotional experience. Thus, the opening montage scene represents the emotion of loss, constructed through memories of past happiness.

2) Consultation Scene with a Lawyer

This scene of consultation with a lawyer shows an important moment when the couple's relationship begins to enter a formal and legal realm. The conversation that takes place is no longer just personal communication, but has already been directed toward legal conflict resolution. Here is an image that can be viewed for the scene of consultation with a lawyer.



**Figure 1.** Semiotic Analysis of a Scene Consulting with a Lawyer

In the image above, the denotation, connotation, and myth can be explained in the form of a table. Here is a table that explains the image above.

**Table 2.** Semiotic Analysis of a Scene Consulting with a Lawyer

<b>Consultation Scene with a Lawyer</b>	
<b>Denotation</b>	<b>Connotation</b>
Nicole spoke with her lawyer in a closed room. The camera often used close-ups to highlight Nicole's face, with an expression that was initially calm but gradually turned emotional.	Changes in Nicole's facial expressions and voice intonation indicate the process of internalizing emotions that have long been suppressed. The words spoken are not merely a story, but a form of self-acknowledgment. The enclosed space becomes a symbol of a safe place to express emotions that previously could not be conveyed in the marital relationship.

**Myth**

This scene represents the myth about the position of Women in marriage, where Women are often positioned as the party who adjusts themselves, thus losing the space to express personal needs.

This scene represents the emotions of awareness and liberation. Nicole is no longer in the phase of suppressing her emotions, but begins to articulate her feelings. Visual signs such as close-ups and pauses in speaking show that the emotions that arise are not spontaneous, but the result of a long accumulation. This indicates that emotions in divorce often start from self-awareness, not direct conflict. These findings are consistent with the research by (Beeney, et al., 2019), which states that a person's attachment pattern affects how individuals express emotional needs and build interpersonal

relationships. Individuals who experience obstacles in fulfilling emotional needs tend to have difficulty communicating their feelings openly to their partners. In the context of the film, the consultation room becomes a symbol of freedom for Nicole to voice the needs and feelings that have long been suppressed.

### 3) Argument Scene in the Apartment

The quarrel scene in this apartment depicts the peak of emotional conflict between a couple who previously seemed harmonious. The interaction, full of tension, marked by raised voices, angry expressions, and aggressive gestures, reflects the accumulation of problems that have been suppressed all this time. Here is an image that reflects the quarrel scene in the apartment.



**Figure 2.** Semiotic Analysis of a Quarrel Scene in an Apartment

In the image above, the denotation, connotation, and myth can be explained in the form of a table. The following table explains the image above.

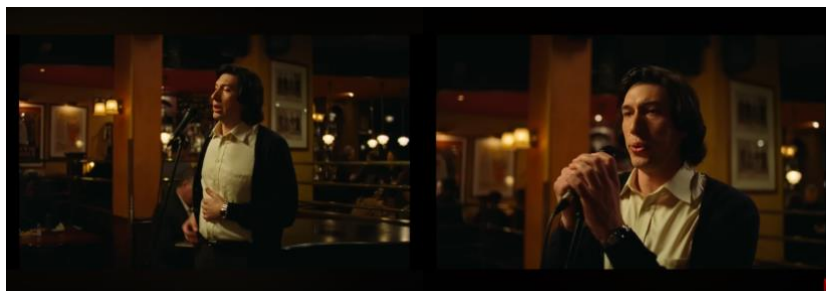
**Table 3.** Semiotic Analysis of a Quarrel Scene in an Apartment

Argument Scene in the Apartment	
Denotation	Connotation
Charlie and Nicole got into an intense argument inside the apartment. They yelled at each other, moved around the room, until Charlie hit the wall and finally cried.	A cramped space reinforces the impression of emotional pressure. The unstable physical confrontation reflects emotional instability. Dialogue that shifts from rational to personally attacking shows the collapse of self-control. The act of hitting the wall becomes a symbol of emotional release that cannot be expressed verbally.
Myth	
This scene is a representation of the myth that divorce is the result of a major conflict. However, the film actually shows that a major conflict is merely the peak of accumulated emotions that have long been suppressed. In addition, there is a myth about masculinity, where men tend to express emotions through anger rather than vulnerability.	

This scene is a representation of explosive and ambivalent emotions. Anger, love, and regret are present simultaneously. Charlie's crying after the argument shows that anger is actually another form of emotional wound. Thus, the signs in this scene represent that emotions in divorce are not singular, but rather layered on top of each other. This finding is in line with the research of (Ginalska & Cichopek, 2025), who explained that the end of a romantic relationship is often influenced by the partners' inability to manage emotional needs and resolve conflicts effectively. Conflicts that appear as major issues are generally the result of accumulated tension over a long period of time. Therefore, this scene shows that divorce is not caused by a single specific conflict, but rather by a long process of failed emotional communication.

### 4) Scene of the song 'Being Alive'

The scene of the song 'Being Alive' showcases a reflective moment of the main character as he expresses his deepest feelings through singing. This moment becomes an emotional point that reveals an awareness of loneliness, a need for connection, and a longing for the presence of others in his life. Here is an image depicting the song scene.



**Figure 3.** Semiotic Analysis of the Scene in the Spong ‘Being Alive’

In the image above, the denotation, connotation, and myth can be explained in the form of a table. Here is a table that explains the image above.

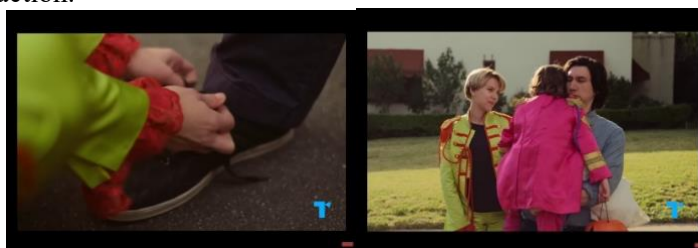
**Table 4.** Semiotic Analysis of the Scene in the Spong ‘Being Alive’

Scene of the song ‘Being Alive’	
Denotation	Connotation
Charlie sang a song in a bar in front of his performance crew.	Song lyrics become a medium to express feelings that cannot be conveyed directly. Calm yet emotional facial expressions show the process of self-reflection.
Myth	
This scene represents the myth that humans basically need emotional connections to feel ‘alive.’ Loneliness is not depicted as freedom, but as a condition that generates the need for relationships.	

The emotions in this scene are reflective and contemplative. There are no more emotional outbursts, but rather acceptance of the feeling of loss. Music becomes a sign that transforms emotion into an aesthetic experience. This shows the transformation of emotion from external to internal. These findings support the opinion of (Feng & O’Halloran, 2013) that sound and music are part of semiotic resources that can construct emotional meaning in films. Music not only functions as a supporting element, but also becomes a medium for representing the psychological condition of characters. In this scene, the song Being Alive becomes a symbol of Charlie’s emotional transformation from anger to acceptance.

5) In the final scene, Nicole ties Charlie’s shoelaces

This section presents the final scene that represents the meaning of emotional closeness and care among the characters, which is then analyzed using a semiotic approach to reveal the messages implied in the interaction.



**Figure 4.** Semiotic Analysis of the final scene where Nicole ties Charlie’s shoelaces

In the image above, the denotation, connotation, and myth can be explained in the form of a table. Here is a table that explains the image above.

**Table 5.** Semiotic Analysis of the final scene where Nicole ties Charlie’s shoelaces

In the final scene, Nicole ties Charlie’s shoelaces	
Denotation	Connotation
Nicole helped tie Charlie’s shoes before he left.	This simple act invites a lingering sense of care. There is no conflict, only calm and natural interaction.

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### Myth

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This scene represents the myth that love does not always disappear after divorce. Relationships can change form without having to completely end emotionally.

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This scene represents the emotion of acceptance and maturity. The emotion is no longer a conflict, but transforms into a calmer form of care. Simple signs like tying shoes become a symbol that their relationship has transformed, not disappeared. These findings are consistent with the research of (Balwin & Fehr, 1995) which explains that romantic partners have an emotional connection that can persist even when the relationship undergoes changes. This attachment allows individuals to continue showing empathy and care for their former partners. Therefore, this scene represents a phase of acceptance and emotional maturity after the divorce process.

### Interpretation of Signs and Meanings in Film

Overall, Noah Baumbach's film *Marriage Story* presents a complex system of signs in representing the emotional dynamics of divorce conflicts. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the film not only displays the denotative meaning of a series of divorce events between two individuals, but also builds layers of connotative and mythological meanings that show how emotions are constructed, suppressed, and ultimately reconstructed in a more reflective form (Jayaningsih et al., 2025). At the denotative level, this film depicts the reality of divorce in a naturalistic way through everyday scenes, dialogues, and interactions between Charlie Barber and Nicole Barber. Visual signs such as facial expressions, body gestures, and the distance between characters become the main elements conveying the shift in the relationship from intimacy to estrangement (Faiz, 2025).

However, on the level of connotation, these signs not only convey events but also produce deeper emotional meanings. The physical closeness shown in the opening montage, for instance, not only demonstrates harmony but also builds a sense of loss when the relationship begins to crack. Conversely, the physical distance that appears in conflict scenes becomes a symbol of the widening emotional gap. Dialogues that were initially communicative turn defensive and attacking, reflecting the failure of interpersonal communication (Bondarets, 2025). In this context, visual and verbal signs in films function as a medium to express emotions that cannot always be directly articulated by the characters. Emotions such as love, anger, regret, and longing are present simultaneously and overlap with each other, thus forming the complexity of emotional experiences in divorce (Ramadhani et al., 2025).

Furthermore, on a mythic level, this film represents and simultaneously deconstructs various ideologies that develop in society regarding marriage and divorce. One of the myths presented is the notion that marriage is a stable space that guarantees emotional happiness. Through the narrative constructed, this film shows that harmony does not always mean the absence of conflict, but can rather be a space where emotions are actually suppressed (Natassa & Psikologi, 2026). Furthermore, the film also touches on myths about gender roles in relationships, where women are often positioned as the ones who adjust, while men tend to have difficulty expressing emotional vulnerability. Another myth presented is that divorce is identical to the destruction of a relationship, whereas the film actually shows that relationships can change form without entirely eliminating care and emotional attachment. Through a system of signs analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotics, the film reveals that emotions in divorce are not merely a conflict between two individuals, but the result of accumulated experiences, uncommunicated messages, and social constructions that shape the way individuals interpret relationships (Rosmilawati, 2024).

### CONCLUSION

Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the film *Marriage Story* represents emotions in divorce conflicts as a complex, dynamic, and layered process. The meaning of emotions is constructed through visual, verbal, audio, and cinematic signs, which not only depict reality denotatively but also present connotative meanings such as love, anger, regret, and longing. The film simultaneously reveals and deconstructs myths about marriage, divorce, and gender relations,

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showing that relationships do not always end emotionally even though they have legally separated. Emotions in the film develop through stages ranging from suppressed feelings to acceptance, which are visualized through changes in space, framing, and character interactions. Overall, Marriage Story demonstrates that film can be a powerful medium in representing and shaping understanding of human emotional experiences.

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