

A Semiotic Analysis of Sophie's Identity in *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) Film

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine how Sophie's identity is conveyed through signs (icon, index, and symbol) in the film *The School for Good and Evil*. The type of this study is qualitative research and uses descriptive research design. The data consists of visual and verbal signs. The data were collected by repeatedly watching the film, selecting key scenes, documenting relevant visuals, coding them according to Peirce's semiotic consisting of triadic model and types of signs, and validating interpretations through secondary references. The data analysis employed Peirce's semiotic framework and Erikson's psychological development concept, which integrated with stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis shows that icons depict Sophie's unstable self-perception, while indexes reveal the connection between her inner conflicts and external effects that indicate her identity confusion, and symbols depict the social and cultural expectations around her. These signs collectively illustrate Sophie's struggle between her authentic self and the identity imposed by external pressures. By uncovering how the film's semiotic elements guide the interpretation of identity conflict, this study highlights the role of cinema in constructing and influencing perceptions of self-worth, beauty, and morality in media narratives.

Keywords: Identity, Semiotic, Film Analysis

Introduction Section

In today's social media culture, people often construct personas that differ from their real selves. On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, users are able to build their idealized identities through filtered images, edited photos, and captions that are created nicely. These cultures in the social media emphasis on perfection and often contradict between who they really are and how they want to be perceived, which often leads to uncertainty about personal identity. According to Crocetti et al. (2023), identity is a collection of meanings that define an individual's essence, role, affiliation with a group, and position within a social category.

This issue of identity is not only visible in real-life digital environments but also often dramatized in cinematic forms. A film entitled *The School for Good and Evil* portrays the tension between how the characters define their personal identity and how society labels them. This film represents this tension through one of the main characters, Sophie. She bases her self-worth on beauty, admiration, and her belief that external appearance determines moral value. However, when Sophie is unexpectedly placed in the "Evil" school, she is confronted with a contradiction between her own assumptions about morality and identity. Sophie's identity is expressed through symbolic visual elements, dialogue, and cinematic techniques that serve as signs in this film. These signs make this film an appropriate object for semiotic analysis using the semiotics framework.

The term "semiotics" was created by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 1800s to describe his theory of signs and interpretation of meaning (Behera, 2024). Charles Sanders Peirce defined semiotics as the study of how signs represent objects and generate meaning through interpretation (Peirce, 1991). His theory is based on a triadic model consisting of representamen (sign), object (reference), and interpretant (interpretation). Peirce classified signs into icon, index, and symbol. Icons represent their object through resemblance, indexes indicate a direct relationship with their object, and symbols have meaning based on social convention.

Previous studies of a semiotics approach have been broadly used in film studies to uncover deeper meaning through signs, symbols, and visual elements. Previous studies have shown that visual symbols often operate as representations of emotional struggle. For instance, trauma recovery and mental health issues are conveyed through symbolic visual signs such as color, mirrors, fog, and ocean imagery in *All the Bright Places* and *9-1-1* series (Habibah & Prastiwi, 2021; Charryana & Candraningrum, 2022).

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Similar approaches in *Gadis Kretek* and *Mother's Power* highlight how setting, gesture, and environmental signs symbolize gender inequality, maternal sacrifice, and emotional resilience, reflecting wider social ideologies rather than only individual narratives (Sakinah & Muary, 2024; Yunus & Aswar, 2024). Feminist media representations are also explored in *Raya and The Last Dragon* and *Barbie*, where semiotic signs such as leadership dynamics and role reversals are shown to challenge patriarchal constructions and reframe women as powerful subjects (Wardah & Kusuma 2022; Dewayani & Azwar, 2024).

Beyond semiotics, identity-focused film studies have examined how cinematic representation highlights that identity is visually and narratively constructed through interpersonal relationships, emotional conditions, and social roles. Studies on *Bila Esok Ibu Tiada* and *Mulan* adaptations revealed how loneliness, cultural expectation, and body language generate different interpretations of identity depending on context and character positioning (Purwanti, 2025); Zhong et al., 2023). Similar findings from studies on *Stand By Me* and *Moana* showed that visual storytelling can represent children's insecurity and psychological journey toward self-confidence, agency, and motivation (Ulfa et al., 2020; Tlonaen, 2023). These studies collectively highlight that identity in film is formed through emotional expression and social validation, not solely through spoken narrative.

Several studies have combined semiotics and identity, but the focus remains limited. Apriliani & Afifah (2025), employed John Fiske's semiotic framework in *The Danish Girl*. This study shows how costumes, colors, and cinematographic signs represent gender identity transition. In the same film, Wahyuningsih & Prastiwi (2023) used Barthes' semiotics to reveal how clothing acts as a signifier of gender identity transformation. Riza & Amalia (2022) examined Matt Buckner's journey in seeking identity in the film *Greet Street Hooligans*, which shows changes in gestures, costume, and dialogue that serve as semiotic indicators of identity development.

Hassan (2023) applied Peirce's model studies to *Pinjar* and showed how signs represent cultural identity and social meaning. Zhu (2024) showed key cultural symbols through a semiotic lens in *Farewell My Concubine*, such as the sword and Peking Opera motifs which shape and destabilize the characters' identity. These symbols also reveal themes of betrayal, loyalty, and complexity of identity construction. These studies reveal that identity transformations in film are often associated with internal conflict and social expectations. The signs not only reflect identity but also negotiate and destabilize it through visual discourse. Although these studies contribute to understanding identity construction through semiotic elements, identity is mostly examined in terms of gender or cultural belonging, not personal moral identity.

Among the existing studies of *The School for Good and Evil* mostly focused on the moral dichotomy, fantasy symbols, or psychological concerns. One of the studies conducted by Wahyuni & Marwinda (2025), examined Sophie's narcissistic personality disorder that showing her unstable self-image influences her dependency on Agatha and her moral decisions. Although it provides valuable psychological insight into Sophie's behavior, it does not explore how her identity is constructed and expressed through the film's visual narrative elements and signs. Since this film has strong symbolic elements and a distinctive identity conflict, it has not yet been examined from a Peircean semiotic perspective that focuses mainly on identity. The difference with existing study is that the aim is to find out the types of signs (icon, index, and symbol) used to convey Sophie's identity in the film. The film *The School for Good and Evil*, which is analyzed using Peircean semiotics theory integrated with Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly focusing on the stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, is interesting to study in more depth.

Research Method

The type of this study is qualitative research that uses descriptive research design which is not achieved by statistical procedures. According to Sugiyono (2013) and Creswell (2009), this approach focuses on interpreting meaning rather than measuring variables. The object of this study is divided into material object and formal object. The material object is the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) directed by Paul Feig, while the formal object is the semiotic analysis of Sophie's identity using Charles Sanders Peirce's concepts of icon, index, and symbol. The data consists of visual and verbal signs supported by secondary sources including books, academic articles and journals related to this study's topic. The data collection method was adapted steps from Sugiyono (2013) and Creswell (2009), namely: (1) repeatedly watching the film, (2) selecting key scenes, (3) documenting relevant visuals, (4) coding them according to Peirce's triadic model and types of signs integrated with Erikson's identity framework, (5) validating interpretations through secondary references. Trustworthiness was ensured by peer debriefing and expert judgement based on credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability, following Lincoln & Guba (1985). The data analysis employed Peirce's semiotic framework and Erikson's identity theory integrated with stages following Miles & Huberman (1994), namely: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) conclusion drawing.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This study collected visual and verbal signs in the film *The School for Good and Evil* along with the types of signs used to convey Sophie's identity. The signs used within the film expressing Sophie's identity consist of three types of signs, namely: (1) icon, (2) index, and (3) symbol. These signs represent aspects of identity covering six of the seven dimensions according to Erikson (Santrock, 2003 as cited in Nuha, 2021), namely: (1) Adaptive, (2) structural, (3) dynamic, (4) subjective, (5) psychosocial reciprocity, and (6) Existential status.

Table 1. Icon

No	Representamen	Object	Interpretant	Aspect of Identity
1	 Scene 1 00:47:28	Sophie looks at her reflection in the mirror wearing a dark crown in the gloomy room.	The mirror reflection resembles Sophie's physical self. The contrast between her reflection and her desire to be "Good" illustrates her internal conflict.	Subjective
2	 Scene 2 01:24:45	Sophie is walking confidently with other "Evil" students behind her.	This scene represents Sophie's transformation into the image of an "Evil" student. She visually imitates the expected look of an "Evil" student.	Adaptive
3	 Scene 3 01:53:04	Sophie changes her appearance to a "Good" student.	Sophie's appearance visually resembles the image of a "Good" princess in fairy tale nobility.	Psychosocial Reciprocity

Table 2. Index

No.	Representamen	Object	Interpretant	Aspect of Identity
1	 Scene 4 00:18:27 "No! You don't understand! I'm Good--"	Sophie is being carried away by a giant bird creature, and she shouts with desperate expression.	Sophie's desperate shout indicates a sign of fear of being seen incorrectly. The visualization of she is being taken away serves as an index of losing control over her wants.	Existential Status
2	 Scene 5 00:45:20 "And that's exactly what I wanna learn, but you put me in the wrong school."	Sophie protests with a frustrated expression.	Sophie's facial tension, tone and verbal protest are indexes of emotional resistance.	Adaptive

3	 Scene 6 01:17:15 “-from accepting who you really are.”	Sophie is being restrained by the dean of “Evil” school to accept that she is “Evil.”	The physical restraint indicates a direct index of coercion. The external forces pushing an identity onto Sophie indicate a crisis where her autonomy of self-defined identity is threatened.	Psychosocial Reciprocity
4	 Scene 7 01:18:39 “Why is this happening to me?”	Sophie is complaining about the situation that is happening to her while crying.	Her body gesture, tears, and desperate question indicate emotional pain. These signs are indexes of inner conflict about meaning of events that contradict her self-perception.	Existential Status
5	 Scene 8 01:25:29 “Because I’m tired of being pathetic little Sophie.”	Sophie shows her emotional and distressed expression.	Sophie’s watery eyes and emotional confession are indexes of inner-self suffering and rejecting her old self. This scene shows a shift in meaning of who she believes she should be.	Dynamic
6	 Scene 9 01:44:24 “I am a thing of beauty, am I not?”	Sophie is showing a confident gesture and her nose turning more pointed.	The change in Sophie’s physical appearance indicates the consequence of her internal decision to become “Evil.” This shows a shift in how beauty and identity are defined through external standards.	Structural
7	 Scene 10 02:03:53 “What have I done?”	Sophie is gasping in shock in a room lit with green light.	Sophie’s gasp, widened eyes, and fearful tone indicate sudden realization and guilt. The green lighting is an index of corruption and magic influence happening to her.	Subjective

Table 3. Symbol

No.	Representamen	Object	Interpretant	Aspect of Identity
1	 Scene 11 00:37:06 “Do I look like a witch?”	Sophie asked her looks wearing a dress in dark color to other students of “Evil” school.	The word “witch” is a symbol of evil, ugliness, and immorality. Sophie refuses this label and shows she wants to be labeled as “Good.”	Psychosocial Reciprocity

2	 Scene 12 01:23:26 “I was long overdue for a makeover.”	Sophie is wearing a black crown and her appearance changed.	Her appearance symbolizes an acceptance of being “Evil.” The crown represents authority, darkness, and power.	Dynamic
3	 Scene 13 01:52:04 “-that Good has become Evil.”	Sophie’s face changed to look old.	Sophie’s face turning old symbolizes a moral inversion which illustrates the collapse of the boundary between Good and Evil.	Adaptive
4	 Scene 14 02:15:28	Sophie went back to her normal look, wearing soft clothing while holding hands with Agatha.	The act of holding hands symbolizes acceptance, trust, and emotional connection. The soft clothing symbolizes innocence, stability, and a return to her true self.	Existential Status

Discussion

Types of signs used to convey Sophie’s identity in The School for Good and Evil film Icon

According to the data from table 1, the first type of sign is an icon. Peirce defines icons as signs that represent their objects through resemblance (Peirce, 1991). In Scene 1, Sophie’s mirror reflection becomes an icon of the subjective aspect of identity. The mirror reflection visually resembles Sophie’s physical self and illustrates her inner struggle with how she sees herself. This scene highlights her ongoing self-exploration to recognize between her desire identity and her true identity. Sophie’s struggle reflects how her internal experiences shape her exploration of self-identity. This supports Erikson’s view that subjective aspects form through personal experiences. Individuals with prior experiences tend to develop stronger internal certainty (Santrock, 2003 as cited in Nuha, 2021).

In scene 2, Sophie confidently walks among “Evil” students serves as an icon of the adaptive aspect of identity. Sophie’s transformation demonstrates a temporary adjustment to her surrounding environment. This fits Erikson’s adaptive identity aspect, which refers to how adolescents adjust themselves to meet the demands of their environment.

Scene 3, Sophie alters her appearance to resemble a “Good” princess that serves as an icon of psychosocial reciprocity. Sophie’s new-look mirrors societal ideals of “Goodness,” illustrating how her identity is dependent on how others value and respond to her. This scene aligns Erikson’s notion that identity is formed through reciprocal interactions with others, where an individual’s identity is shaped not only by the self but also through relationships with other.

Erikson defines identity as a psychological process that operates both within the individual and within the community (Erikson, 1968). Sophie’s struggle illustrates the stage of human development, particularly the fifth stage, *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, which typically occurs during adolescence. During this stage, individuals explore different roles, values, and beliefs to establish a coherent and stable sense of self (Erikson, 1950).

Index

The second type of sign is an index according to table 2. Indexes signify through actual physical linkage or cause-and-effect relations (Peirce, 1991). In this film, indexes have a direct causal connection between Sophie’s inner conflict and the external effects around her. In scene 4, Sophie’s desperate shout, “I’m Good!”, signals internal fear or misrecognition and reflects an existential status aspect. She attempts to define, communicate, and have her meaningful role acknowledged during a moment of distress. The existential aspect aligns with Erikson’s notion, which highlights adolescents’ exploration of meaning, purpose, and their position within society (Santrock, 2003 as cited in Nuha, 2021). Scene 5 indexes the adaptive aspect through Sophie’s protest. Her facial tension, tone, and language are showing resistance toward an imposed role. This scene highlights a conflict between Sophie’s desired skill development and the social environment (the “wrong

school”) meant to facilitate that adjustment. Sophie tries to adjust her wants to meet the demands of the environment around her.

In scene 6 when the dean physically restrains Sophie to accept who she really is, it illustrates a form of social pressure. This scene indicates an index of the psychosocial reciprocity aspect of identity imposed by external pressure. In scene 7, Sophie’s tears, cry, and her desperate questioning about what is happening to her serve as indexes of existential status. This scene indicates Sophie’s inner conflict when her adopted image clashes with her true self. Scene 8, the emotional confession of being “pathetic little Sophie”, reveals a dynamic aspect of identity that indicates shame and self-rejection. It aligns with Erikson’s dynamic aspect of identity, where external pressures shape new or conflicting identity outcomes.

Scene 9, when Sophie’s nose becomes more pointed, serves as an index of the structural aspect of identity. This scene reflects the consequence of her chosen path. The structural index marks a turning point which shifts toward consequences and reconsiders her future direction. This structural index aligns with Erikson’s notion of structural aspect, which involves future planning and addressing challenges from anticipated results. In scene 10, Sophie gasps in the green-lit room, serves as an index of the subjective aspect of identity. This scene is marked by Sophie’s self-awareness about what she has done. This supports Erikson’s view that subjective aspect forms through personal experiences to develop a stronger identity and internal certainty.

Symbol

According to the data in table 3, the third type of sign is symbol. Symbols appear throughout the film and rely on cultural conventions (Peirce, 1991). In scene 11, Sophie asks “Do I look like a witch?” She rejects the symbolic meaning of the word “witch”, which symbolizes evil, ugliness, and immorality (Schimmelpfennig, 2013). This scene symbolizes a psychosocial reciprocity, where Sophie’s identity depends on how others perceive her (Santrock, 2003 as cited in Nuha, 2021). In scene 12, Sophie is wearing a black crown and her new “Evil” appearance serves as a symbol of the dynamic aspect of identity. The black crown represents authority, darkness, and power. This scene represents her temporary acceptance of an imposed external identity to resolve her inner conflict. It reflects Erikson’s view that external factors influence the formation of new or conflicting identity outcomes.

In scene 13, Sophie’s face becomes old, it reflects a symbol of the adaptive aspect of identity. This symbol shows the moral pressure from others that forces her to redefine herself in reaction to shifting values and adjust to the environment around her. In scene 14, Sophie’s clothing and her acts of holding hands with Agatha represent symbols of existential status. Sophie’s dress is in white and pink colors symbolize innocent, tenderness, and softness (Kovsh & Dziuba, 2022). Her act of holding hands with Agatha symbolizes acceptance, trust, and emotional connection. Those symbols mark her return to her true self and find the meaning of her authentic identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Sophie’s identity in *The School for Good and Evil* (2022) is not merely expressed through cinematic elements, but is constructed and negotiated through signs. The integration of Peirce’s types of signs, namely: icon, index, and symbol, show that visual and verbal signs actively shape Sophie’s shifting identity, rather than simply illustrating it. By connecting these signs to aspects of identity such as subjective, psychosocial reciprocity, dynamics, adaptation, structural, and existential status, this analysis highlights how identity in film emerges from the continuous interaction between internal desires and external expectation. Theoretically, this study contributes to film semiotics by showing how visual and verbal signs function not only as symbolic representations but also as active elements that shape identity construction. This study also expands the use of Erikson’s framework in film analysis by identifying how dimensions of identity are communicated through cinematic signs. Practically, this study highlights the relevance of the film *The School for Good and Evil* for media literacy and identity education to encourage viewers to critically understand how media narratives influence perceptions of beauty, morality, and self-worth.

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