
Research Article

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A Semiotic Analysis of *The Shadow* (1909) by Edmund Blair Leighton: Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes' Theories

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Abstract

This article is about the construction of meaning in Edmund Blair Leighton's painting, *The Shadow* (1909) through the application of Saussure and Roland Barthes' theories of semiotics. There are three objectives, namely: to describe the key visual of the Shadow, the reference of visual elements of painting, and the way of cultural and historical context shape the meaning of the painting. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method to describe and analyze visual elements of the painting with respect to Saussure's signifier and signified concepts, followed by the level of denotation, connotation, and myth introduced by Barthes. Results indicate that the visual elements like the woman, the knight, the shadow, the ship, and the Medieval location act as connected signs which depict concepts of love, dedication, memory, responsibility and disconnection. While at the denotative level the painting describes the painting portraying a woman touching a knight's shadow before he leaves, on connotative and mythological levels it portrays love and also emphasizes the myth of art as storage for memory and perpetual human relations. In addition, by re-using medieval images, a sense of knightly duty and love's faithful adherence. In conclusion, semiotic analysis assists to provide a full comprehension of the symbolic and ideological aspects embedded within visual artistic creation.

Keywords: painting; key visual; visual elements of painting; cultural and historical context; myth

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1. Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is produced based on each perception. One of the foundational ideas in semiotics is Ferdinand De Saussure in his book, *Course in General*. Saussure (1959) argues that a sign is not merely a name attached to an object, but it is a combination of two intimately united elements: signified (*signifié*) and signifier (*signifiant*). The signifier refers to the sound and word of the form of sign, while the signified associated with that form. Saussure further emphasizes that the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary; meaning that a sign is produced through an agreement within social culture. In other words, signs do not simply reflect reality, it conveys meaning through structural social systems.

Building upon Saussure's model, Roland Barthes further developed semiotic theory by introducing three different levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal or obvious meaning of a sign. It shows relation between the sign and the concept it represents without additional meaning (Jadou et al., 2021). Whereas, connotation refers to the cultural, emotional,

and ideological associations connected to that sign, as for the myth, it represents a deeper level of meaning associated with cultural values and ideologies that have been normalized and seen as common sense (Chandler, 2007). Thus, Barthes argues that meaning is influenced through interpretation of social and cultural contexts rather than naturally within a sign.

Semiotic analysis, therefore, offers a valuable framework in interpreting visual art, where meaning is created through combination of composition, colour, gesture and form. Paintings specifically hold a vital position of objects of semiotic analysis as they convey concepts, emotions and cultural ideas by the usage of signs rather than writing. Beside their aesthetic attributes, paintings have turned into a means of visual communication, the place each half makes meaning. By evaluating the artwork piece from the semiotic point of view, every person can analyse symbolic ideas, ideological and cultural implications hidden beneath their obvious visual content. The research on artwork through semiotic approach subsequently provides a comprehensive visual meaning by constructing artworks in context.

Research has proven the semiotic theory as an effective method of studying visual artworks (Putra, 2026). Putra (2026) used Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs to examine Djoko Pekik's painting of Go to Hell Crocodile, concluded that visual attributes can serve as signifiers that are interpreted according to their signified meanings in order to convey socially embedded interpretations of reality that can be represented symbolically; proving the suitability of Saussure's semiotic model for explaining not only artistic aspects but also visual meanings as well. Likewise, a study by Kim et al (2016) titled "A Semiotics Analysis on the Artistry of Paul Gauguin in Popular Culture Focusing on Saussure's Semiology and Barthes' Myth, the Gaze and the other, and Binary Oppositions" combined Saussure's and Barthes' semiotic frameworks to analyse Paul Gauguin's paintings; exploring myth, ideology, the gaze, the other, and binary oppositions to reveal the themes of anxiety, anticipation of death, mysticism, original sin, civilization and barbarism, and the frailty of human life. Additionally, Nata et al. (2025) in "Analysing the Interconnectedness of Cultural Values in Fine Art Works with Roland Barthes' Semiotic Approach" employed Barthes' semiotic framework to examine four visual artworks and found that denotation, connotation, and myth effectively uncover the cultural values embedded within artworks, demonstrating that paintings function as media for communicating cultural beliefs and collective identities.

Painted in 1909, *The Shadow* depicts a young woman standing in front of a knight, gently tracing the shadow of his side profile upon a stone wall. Leighton often incorporated themes of chivalry, courtly love, and moments of poignant drama into his works, constructing emotional engagement that captures the elegance and heroism as his well-known romanticized visions of the medieval era. Examining this painting is important because it offers insight on how symbolism extends beyond its visual arrangement, preserving interpretation of Edwardian into medieval chivalry that shaped social values and ideologies within the historical period. Hence, this study assumes that the visual signs in *The Shadow* (1909) construct layered meanings of love, devotion, duty, memory and separation in a fully thorough comprehensible through Saussure's and Barthes' semiotic frameworks.

Previous research has implemented the use of semiotic theory in the analysis of a multitude of paintings. However, these studies tend to concentrate either on the detection of signifiers and signified or the interpretation of artworks through cultural values and ideology. The researches have not simultaneously addressed historical and cultural productions of painting using both concepts of Saussure and Barthes. Furthermore, Edmund Blair Leighton's *The Shadow* (1909) has been largely ignored despite its plentiful symbolic potential and the ideal love, chivalry and devotion presented within the Edwardian painting. There is a clear need to further address the symbolism presented in the painting and explain how it comes to bear social significance when taken along with the historical and cultural context of the Edwardian period.

This study is addressed to answer the following research questions, they are: (1) What are the key visual signs in *The Shadow* (1909) and what is the relationship between their signifiers and signified? (2) What does the visual elements of painting refer to its denotative, connotative and myth? (3) How does the cultural and historical context of Edwardian England shape the meaning of the signs within the painting? These research questions will be analysed through Saussure and Barthes' framework.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of visual art as a system of signs that convey layers of meaning beyond its visual appearance. With the application of semiotic theory to Leighton's work, especially *The Shadow* (1909), this study explores how paintings can function as complex visual compositions that reflect cultural values, emotional expressions, and social beliefs.

2. Methods

This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to examine how meaning is constructed in Edmund Blair Leighton's painting *The Shadow* (1909). A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because this study looks at a single painting, and its meaning comes from the relationship between its visual elements and historical context. This approach allows researchers to explain how visual elements produce denotative, connotative, and ideological meaning within the context of Edwardian England.

The primary data of this study is *The Shadow* (1909) by Edmund Blair Leighton. This painting was chosen as the primary data because it contains several visual elements; the figure, gesture, clothing, setting, light and shadow, as well as composition that can be read as signs and interpreted through semiotic analysis. Its historical setting and use of chivalric imagery also make it suitable for examining how cultural values were represented in Edwardian art.

Data collection was done through observation and documentation. First, several candidate paintings were reviewed to see which contained rich visual and symbolic elements. *The Shadow* was then selected because it clearly shows both literal (denotative) content and symbolic (connotative) content. Next, the painting was observed several times in detail, part by part. The woman's figure, the architectural setting, the shadow of the knight, the use of light and color, and the overall composition; to identify the elements that stood out as meaningful. Each of these elements was, then, recorded into a list of visual signs, for example: the woman's posture, her gaze, her clothing, the wall, and the shadow which became the data used in the analysis.

The analysis used two related theories. The first is Saussure's theory of the sign, which explains that meaning is built from two parts: the signifier, meaning the physical form of a sign such as a color, gesture, or object; and the signified, meaning the concept or idea that form represents. The second is Roland Barthes' concept of three levels of meaning in: denotation, the literal meaning of a sign, such as a woman standing near a wall; connotation, the cultural or emotional meaning attached to that sign, such as a knight's shadow suggesting protection or romantic tension; and myth, the level where a connotation becomes so familiar that it feels natural or common sense, even though it actually reflects a specific cultural belief; for example, the idea of chivalric masculinity or feminine passivity (Chandler, 2007).

The analysis itself was carried out in four steps. First, the researcher reviewed the full list of documented visual elements to get an overall understanding of the painting before analyzing individual parts, so that each sign could later be understood in relation to the whole image, not on its own. Second, each visual element was classified using Saussure's theory by identifying its signifier and matching it with a signified. Third, each of these sign-meaning pairs was analyzed again using Barthes' three levels. At the denotative level, the researcher described what the sign literally showed. At the connotative level, the researcher explained what cultural or emotional meaning the sign carried in Edwardian art. At the myth level, the researcher examined whether this connotation carried a wider ideological message, such as the Greek story representative. Fourth, the results are presented descriptively, moving from the analysis of individual visual signs toward a broader explanation of the painting's meaning, so that each interpretation can be traced back to a specific visual element documented earlier in the study.

3. Results and Discussions

This result's section will present the findings of the semiotic analysis of *The Shadow* (1909) by Edmund Blair Leighton. This study will analyze the visual signs found in the painting and interpret their meanings using Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of the signifier and the signified, which explain how meaning is constructed through the relationship between a sign's physical form and the concept it represents (Saussure, 1959). The results are then further analyzed through Roland Barthes' second-order

signification, consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. This is to explore how the painting communicates broader cultural and ideological meanings (Barthes, 1972). Based on what has been analyzed, the results are presented in two stages, beginning with Saussure's semiotic analysis and followed by Barthes' semiotic analysis to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the painting's visual narrative.

The Shadow is based upon the Greek myth of Debutades, a Corinthian girl who drew the portrait of her beloved on the wall of her bed-chamber by tracing the outline of his shadow cast by the lamp-light on the night before he departed for war. Leighton changed the setting for the drama to the battlements of a medieval castle, below which the young crusader's ships are waiting.



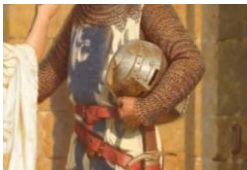
Figure 1. The Shadow by Edmund Blair Leighton (1909)

3.1 Saussure's Semiotic Analysis

Table 1 shows that the visual elements in *The Shadow* functioned as an interconnected system of signs. According to Saussure (1959), meaning emerges from the relationship between the signifier, which refers to the observable visual form, and for the signified, the mental concept associated with that form. Therefore, each object depicted in the painting contributes to constructing the overall narrative of love, separation, and remembrance instead of carrying meaning independently.

Table 1. Saussure's Semiotic Analysis of The Shadow

Picture	Visual Sign	Signifier	Signified
	Woman	A young woman with long curly orange hair wearing a flowing white dress, gently tracing the knight's shadow with a paintbrush on the stone wall.	Represents innocence, purity, devotion, emotional attachment, longing, and feminine virtue. Her attention to the shadow rather than the knight suggests anticipation of separation and an attempt to preserve his memory.

	Knight	A knight dressed in chain mail armor, carrying a sword and helmet, standing upright while looking at the woman.	Symbolizes courage, duty, sacrifice, military service, and readiness to depart for war.
	Knight's Shadow	The silhouette being traced by the woman on the wall.	Represents memory, absence, enduring love, and the desire to preserve someone despite physical separation. It also foreshadows the knight's departure.
	Lion Emblem	A faded black lion emblem displayed on the knight's surcoat.	Symbolizes nobility, strength, bravery, authority, and the ideals associated with medieval knighthood.
	Sword	A sword hanging from the knight's waist	Signifiers warface, protection, responsibility, and readiness for battle.
	Helmet	A helmet held in the knight's hand	Represents preparation for combat and acceptance of military duty.

	Ship	Ships visible in the distant background beyond the castle.	It indicates the knight's imminent departure for war and symbolizes distance, uncertainty, and separation.
	Medieval Castle Setting	A stone castle with an open sky and sea in the background.	Reflects medieval culture, and the romanticized historical setting associated with loyalty and honor.

Among the various visual signs, the woman, the knight, and the traced shadow collectively establish the central relationship within the composition. Rather than emphasizing direct interaction between the two figures, Leighton shifts the viewer's attention to the act of tracing the shadow. This compositional choice makes the shadow the central sign of the painting, expressing the emotional connection between the woman and the knight and foreshadowing their separation. The woman's concentration on preserving the knight's silhouette, instead of making eye contact with him, transforms the shadow into a visual substitute for the knight himself, suggesting an attempt to retain his presence before his departure. As Chandler (2007) argues, the meaning of a sign is produced through its relation to other signs within the same semiotic system, allowing the shadow to gain significance only because it exists in relation to both the woman and the knight.

In addition, other visual details further reinforce this interpretation. The knight's armor, sword, helmet, and lion emblem do not merely identify him as a medieval soldier but collectively construct the concept of military duty, courage, authority, and sacrifice. Similarly, the medieval castle, the distant ships, and the open seascape serve as contextual signs that establish the historical setting of the painting. These visual elements imply that the knight's departure is approaching, creating a sense of anticipation and separation without directly depicting the event (McGloin, n.d.; Woodard, 2007).

The painting also demonstrates that meaning is culturally constructed instead of naturally inherent in objects. The white gown, the woman's gentle gesture, and the preserved silhouette acquire emotional significance because they are interpreted through cultural associations of innocence, devotion, memory, and longing. The knight's military attributes then also signify more than physical equipment; they communicate social ideals of honor and responsibility embedded in medieval chivalric culture. Thus, the relationship between signifier and signified throughout the painting produces a coherent visual narrative in which physical objects become representations of emotional attachment and the inevitability of separation, supporting Saussure's view that meaning is generated through systems of signs rather than through individual images alone (Saussure, 1959; Chandler, 2007).

3.2 Roland Barthes's Semiotic Analysis

The meaning of *The Shadow* is developed through three interconnected levels of signification proposed by Barthes (1972): denotation, connotation, and myth. The interconnected signs reveal the meaning of sign not only as the narrative figures but also cultural meaning represented by each part of portrait.

Table 2. Barthes's Semiotic Analysis of The Shadow

Picture	Visual Sign	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
	Woman Tracing the Knight's Shadow	A woman tracing the shadow of a knight onto a stone wall	She creates a permanent image of her lover to preserve his memory, expressing love, devotion, and fear of separation.	It reflects the Greek myth of the potter's daughter who traced her lover's shadow, symbolizing art as a way to preserve love and memory.
	Knight	A knight stands in front of the woman.	He is about to leave for war, symbolizing duty and sacrifice.	Represents the cultural ideal of loyalty, honor, and commitment.
	Shadow	The knight's shadow is projected onto the wall.	It symbolizes remembrance and the lover's presence despite his absence.	Represents the human desire to preserve fleeting moments through art.
	Traced Outline	The woman draws the outline of the shadow on the wall	The tracing preserves the knight's image as a lasting memory of their relationship.	It represents the belief that art can preserve love, loyalty, and commitment beyond physical absence.
	Ship	Ships are visible in the background	They suggest the knight's departure and the uncertainty of his return.	Reinforces the narrative of sacrifice, separation, and devotion.

At the denotation level, the painting depicts a woman tracing the shadow of a knight onto a stone wall while the knight stands calmly beside her. The medieval castle, the distant ships, and the surrounding landscape establish the setting in which the scene takes place. The image simply portrays visible objects and actions without needing symbolic or emotional significance to them. At the connotation level, a woman is caught using charcoal to sketch out the form of her lover's shadow, onto the wall of the palace as the knight prepares to leave her side. Historically, silhouette portraits were done to capture and keep someone in memory of that person's characteristics. This is a good way of saying that the woman is feeling the love for her man, and she is creating a permanent image to hold him in place forever. The ship in the background can imply that he is leaving the woman for war and to defend his territory, and there is no telling when or if he will be back from battle to ever hold his lady in his arms again, leaving the woman and her lovers shadow alone in place of his true presence (McGloin, n.d.; Museum of the American Revolution, n.d.).

At the level of mythology, the painting has taken the idea from a Greek story of "the Corinthian maid," called Dibutades, who saw the shadow of her young man's profile cast on the wall by a lamp; she then traced it because he was going away on a journey and she wanted it for a memento during his absence (Warner, 2006). This painting then conveys more about the cultural concept of art, which symbolizes human desire to preserve memory, love as well as the fleeting moments through art. Therefore, the traced line in the painting stands for remembrance, loyalty, and the attempt to grant permanence to something ephemeral. As Woodard (2007) noted, Greek artists frequently used mythological narratives not merely to illustrate stories, but also to communicate value and explain human nature more meaningfully to contemporary audiences. Following Barthes (1972), this myth transforms a personal act of tracing a shadow into a cultural belief that art possesses the power to preserve memory, loyalty, and love beyond physical absence.

The findings of this study portray that *The Shadow* (1909) painting by Edmund Blair Leighton contains multiple layers of meaning that can be understood through the semiotic frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Through Saussure's concept of signifier and signified, the painting seems to be composed of visual signs that work together to construct meaning as the hypothesis is confirmed that the woman, the knight, the shadow, the ship, and also the medieval setting are not merely decorative elements but signs that communicate all of the ideas associated with love, devotion, duty, memory, and separation; as the woman traces the knight's shadow creating a sense of love to which she wants to remember the knight's presence before they are separate for war—the knight's duty and devotion to the territory—as the ship is about to set sail, the Medieval setting, then, reinforce this meaning since warfare was one of the defining features of society in Medieval Era, making separation and uncertainty common in everyday life.

Further analysis reveals that the shadow functions as the central sign within the painting. Although it appears as a simple silhouette cast upon the wall, its significance extends beyond its literal form. The woman's decision to trace the shadow of the knight suggests a desire to preserve his presence before his departure on which she will keep in memory this silhouette of exactly where and how her lover stands as their separating, forever. Therefore, this act transforms the shadow into a symbol of remembrance and emotional attachment. The knight's armor, sword, and helmet similarly signify his military duty, courage, and readiness for battle, while the woman's white dress and focused expression reinforce themes of purity—as white is often symbolized, loyalty and affection in terms of love. In combination, these signs create a visual narrative centered on the emotional tension between love and duty.

Furthermore, Barthes' theory provides a deeper understanding of how these meanings operate on different levels of signification. At the first level which is denotative, the painting simply portrays a woman drawing the shadow of a knight. However, at the connotative level, the image evokes feelings of longing, devotion, and uncertainty. In the background, the ship visibly suggests the knight's soon departure, while the woman's careful tracing of his shadow implies a desire to preserve his memory for his absence. These connotations encourage viewers to interpret the scene not only as a moment of artistic activity, but also as an emotional farewell between two individuals whose future remains uncertain. This finding of signification levels resonates with Nata et al (2025) noting that denotation is

perceived by the human senses as the literal or actual meaning, while connotation represents the second level, which generates implicit meanings that are often related with psychological aspects, feelings, and beliefs.

The final level is the mythological, the painting draws upon the ancient Greek story of Dibutades, whose daughter traced the shadow of her departing lover on a wall (Smith, 2022; Warner, 2006). By incorporating this narrative, Leighton connects the painting to a broader cultural belief that art originates from the human desire to preserve memory and overcome loss. The myth naturalizes the idea that artistic creation is an expression of love and emotional attachment. As a result, the shadow becomes more than a physical outline, it also represents the enduring human effort to maintain connections with loved ones despite separation and distance.

All of these Barthes' arrangements, as Chandler (2007) explains, is adopted from different orders of signification in which meaning develops orderly from one level to another. The first order of signification is that of denotation; when people first look at a sign, they usually perceive it simply as what it literally depicts. However, connotation is a second order; as viewers become more interested in that sign, they begin to seek a deeper understanding of how its visual signs convey particular meanings and emotions. Through a deeper exploration of these connotations, viewers eventually acknowledge the broader cultural beliefs and values embedded within the signs, reaching the mythological level, a higher order of signification as Barthes argued. Therefore, a deeper understanding of a sign requires progressing through each order of signification, as myth cannot be understood without first identifying its denotative and connotative meanings (Chandler, 2007).

Although *The Shadow* portrays a medieval scene, it was painted in 1909 during the Edwardian period. Therefore, the painting should be understood not only through its medieval imagery but also through the cultural-production context. As Alexander (2007) explains, the revival of medievalism in Britain was driven by a renewed admiration for chivalry that emphasized humanity, gallantry, and honour as moral values in the Middle Ages. Thus, Leighton carved out a unique space for himself, specializing in scenes that evoked chivalry, courtly love, and moments of poignant drama (Leighton, n.d.). Instead of reconstructing medieval history within the Edwardian period, medievalism rather served as an idealized world to the period that creates noble character, faithful love, and moral values.

This cultural perspective then incorporates the meaning of *The Shadow*; it is not only an ordinary farewell, Leighton extended it by transforming the scene into an idealized expression of chivalric romance. The knight represents more than a departing man; he symbolizes honour, courage, and duty, reflecting the chivalric code associated with medieval romance (Alexander, 2007). Likewise, the woman's act of tracing the knight's shadow is portrayed not merely as a grieving lover but as a symbolic affirmation of faithful love and remembrance. Seen from this perspective, *The Shadow* does not merely recreate a medieval narrative but also reflects the reinterpretation of the medieval past in Edwardian as a moral ideal. And so the painting presents love not simply as an emotional attachment but as a faithful virtue demonstrated through loyalty, sacrifice, and commitment despite separation.

Beyond its analysis of *The Shadow*, this study contributes to the broader field of visual and cultural analysis. The findings support the view that paintings function like language, with meaning constructed through shared cultural codes rather than inherent in the image itself. This suggests that the combined Saussure-Barthes framework can be applied to other Edwardian paintings exploring gender roles, romantic ideals, or national identity. More broadly, the study reinforces the argument that artworks cannot be separated from the historical and ideological contexts in which they were produced, a principle that also extends to media and advertising (Chandler, 2007).

This study also offers several directions for future research. As the analysis is limited to a single painting, future studies could compare *The Shadow* with other Edwardian works shaped by the same medieval revival and chivalric ideals (Alexander, 2007) to examine whether similar gendered patterns appear across the period. Audience or reception studies could also explore how contemporary viewers interpret the painting's signs and whether these meanings remain relevant today or are specific to the Edwardian context.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion can be drawn from this study is that *The Shadow* (1909) illustrates how artworks function as complex systems of signs that communicate meanings beyond their visual appearance. This approach highlights how meaning is constructed through the interaction between symbolic representation, mythology, as well as the socio-historical conditions on artwork production. By combining semiotic analysis with historical and cultural context, this study demonstrates that the painting not only represents a personal moment of farewell but also reflects enduring human values concerning love, remembrance, and the power of art to preserve human experience. Such research may further expand the understanding of how visual signs preserve collective memory, cultural identity, and ideological values across time.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author(s) Contribution

Lilis Fadilah conceived the study, designed the linguistic experiments, and wrote the original draft. Hasna Aliifa Aulia and Angelina Tri Ayuni Sinaga collected the language data and performed the qualitative analysis. Radya Alunna Pratama transcribed the recordings and provided critical revisions to the text. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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