

## **Authoritarian Parenting and Child Expression Suppression in Dead Poets Society**

**Andika Aulia Putri Kardiarita<sup>1)</sup>, Aghnia Dian Lestari<sup>2)</sup>**  
<sup>1,2)</sup> University of Swadaya Gunung Jati, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author  
Email: [aghnia.dianl@ugj.ac.id](mailto:aghnia.dianl@ugj.ac.id)

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### **Abstract**

*Authoritarian parenting, characterized by parental dominance and limited two-way communication, has the potential to restrict children's freedom of expression within family relationships. This study aims to analyze the representation of the suppression of children's expression within an authoritarian parenting style in the film Dead Poets Society. This research employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis to examine denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings through visual signs and dialogue. Data were collected through film observation, in depth interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that the father child relationship is represented hierarchically through one way communication, parental dominance in decision-making, and nonverbal expressions indicating emotional pressure. These representations construct a myth that parental authority is absolute and must be obeyed. Therefore, the film portrays authoritarian parenting as a symbolic mechanism that contributes to the suppression of children's expression within family relationships.*

**Keywords:** *Authoritarian Parenting; Family Communication; Semiotics; Hierarchy; Dead Poets Society*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of authoritarianism within the family remains a complex issue in social life. Parenting styles that emphasize absolute obedience, strict control, and achievement often limit opportunities for open dialogue between parents and children. This condition can hinder children's emotional expression and identity development.

In many cultural contexts, academic pressure and social expectations reinforce hierarchical family relationships, resulting in one-way communication patterns. This phenomenon is not only found in real life but is also frequently represented in films as a reflection of broader social dynamics. Films serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium that reproduces social values, including family communication patterns and power relations (Nurjanah et al., 2024).

Previous studies have shown that films often depict authoritarian parenting as a normalized practice. For instance, (Anggraeny & Aprilia, 2022) found that Indonesian family drama films frequently portray parental control through discipline, direction, and punishment. Similarly, Rosa (2024) highlighted how emotional control within parent-child relationships is represented in film narratives. These findings indicate that media plays a significant role in constructing and reinforcing social perceptions of parenting styles.

Authoritarian parenting itself is characterized by high parental demands without balanced responsiveness, placing parents as dominant authority figures within the family (Sutisna, 2015). In such conditions, family communication tends to be hierarchical, limiting children's ability to express their opinions and emotions freely (Damayanti & Tsurroya, 2023); (Sutisna, 2015). This imbalance is often normalized in media, especially where authoritarian parenting is depicted as a tool for character building (Damayanti & Tsurroya, 2023) According to Roland Barthes, meaning is constructed through layers of signification, including denotation, connotation, and myth. Myths function to naturalize cultural values, making them appear normal and unquestionable (Wahjuwibowo, 2018). Through this framework, films can represent and reinforce patterns of authoritarian parenting as taken-for-granted realities.

Based on this context, there is still a gap in understanding how the suppression of children’s expression is constructed through visual and narrative elements in film. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the suppression of children’s expression is represented through father–child relationships in the film *Dead Poets Society* using Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach.

## RESEARCH METHODS


This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis. This method is used to interpret meaning through three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. The unit of analysis consists of selected scenes from the film *Dead Poets Society* that represent father–child relationships and indicate authoritarian parenting and the suppression of children’s expression. The scenes were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus. Data were collected through film observation, in-depth interviews with three informants, and documentation of visual and dialogue elements. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2020). The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Findings of a study on the portrayal of authoritarian parenting and the suppression of children’s expression in the film “*Dead Poets Society*”. The data analyzed were derived from a film text analysis using Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach and in-depth interviews with three key informants. The results of the analysis are presented systematically to address the research questions. The presentation of the results is divided into two main sections. First, the findings from the semiotic analysis are presented in tabular form and analyze seven key scenes from the film based on Roland Barthes’s three layers of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Second, the findings from the interviews are integrated into the discussion to enrich the interpretation and triangulate the data.

**Table 1. Semiotic Analysis**

SCENE	DENOTATIVE	CONNOTATIVE	MYTH
 <p>Duration (00:07:57–00:08:03)</p>	<p>Mr. Perry entered Neil’s classroom and told him to stop participating in school activities; the reprimand was delivered unilaterally in front of Neil’s classmates.</p>	<p>The reprimand, delivered in front of Neil’s friends, implied the father’s authoritative dominance, positioning the child as the one who must submit to parental authority</p>	<p>A child’s obedience is presented as a way of upholding the family’s authority</p>



**Duration (08:21–08:27)**

Mr. Perry spoke to Neil in a firm tone and asked Neil to stop participating in school activities. Neil remained silent and did not verbally object.

A reprimand in a public setting implies the dominance of a father’s authority, which places the child in an unequal position. Neil’s shift in expression from irritation to compliance reveals the emotional pressure that led him to suppress his personal desires in order to meet his parents’ expectations.

A parent’s will is absolute and non-negotiable. A father’s authority is regarded as infallible and must be obeyed without question, while a child’s obedience is treated as defiance.



**Duration (01:22:10–01:22:17)**

Mr. Perry interrupted the conversation between him and Neil.

The use of verbal intimidation through shouting, which conveys anger and a threat of authority, because the communication is directive and intimidating rather than responsive.

Parental rights are absolute and inviolable. A conversation is not a space for dialogue, but a space for giving orders and passing judgement.



**Duration (01:36:20–01:37:38)**

Neil appeared in the theater performance wearing the character’s costume and crown. At the same time, Mr. Perry was sitting in the audience with a blank expression, showing no sign of a smile or pride

The theater performance serves as a space of freedom for Neil to express his identity and feelings. However, his father’s cold demeanor implies surveillance and rejection of Neil’s life choices. The contrast between Neil’s vibrant expression on stage and his father’s rigid attitude underscores the conflict between a child’s self-expression and parental control.

Parents are seen as the authority figures who have the right to judge their children’s success and happiness. A child’s self-expression is considered valuable only if it aligns with the family’s expectations; if not, emotional rejection from parents is viewed as something natural.



**Duration (01:40:55–  
01:41:25)**

Mr. Perry scolded Neil in a firm tone and cut him off when Neil tried to express his feelings. Neil's mother stood behind him without interfering. Neil's father asked Neil how he felt. Neil looked hesitant, lowered his head, and then replied, "Nothing," with a restrained expression.

Neil's response revealed emotional restraint and an inability to express his true feelings in front of his father.

A good child is one who sets aside their personal feelings and obeys their parents' authority in order to maintain family harmony.



**Duration (01:45:47)**

Neil opened the drawer of his father's desk late at night, took out a gun, and took his own life in that room without a word.

The silence in this scene serves as a form of nonverbal communication that signifies the loss of Neil's ability to express himself. This action implies an extreme decision in response to pressure from authority and the inability to openly express his feelings.

In an authoritarian family structure, where communication and individual choices are constantly restricted, a child's suffering may be viewed as a natural consequence. The tragedy is then normalized not as a failure of the family relationship, but as a result of the child's disobedience toward parental authority.

(Kardiarita, 2026)

In the first scene, a semiotic analysis reveals a representation of authority through the violation of a child's private space. Denotatively, the scene shows Mr. Perry suddenly entering Neil's dorm room while Neil is with his friends. The father's presence in this personal space is followed by a firm stance that immediately directs Neil to stop his involvement in school activities. Neil remains silent, offering neither resistance nor a verbal response. Connotatively, the act of entering a private space in the presence of others signifies parental dominance over a child's personal space. Neil's passive stance and the presence of his friends reinforce the implication that the child's obedience is being socially displayed. The communicative relationship that emerges is not dialogic, but rather instructive and one-sided. On a symbolic level, this scene reflects the cultural belief that parents have the full right to control their children's decisions, even in private spaces. Parental authority is understood as a form of responsibility that is non-negotiable, rendering the child's voice invisible in the decision-making process.

The second scene depicts a conversation between Mr. Perry and Neil Perry at school. Mr. Perry says, "Don't argue with me in public. Understand?" to which Neil replies, "Dad, I'm not arguing." The conversation continues as Mr. Perry insists that Neil must follow his wishes until

he finishes medical school. Throughout the conversation, Neil appears uncomfortable before finally nodding in agreement. Denotatively, this scene depicts a verbal interaction between father and son consisting of commands and the assertion of a unilateral decision by the parent. Neil is not given the space to fully present his arguments because the conversation is constantly directed by Mr. Perry.

On a connotative level, the cutting off of Neil's defense symbolically represents the silencing of a child's voice. Parental authority is demonstrated in the public space of the school, so that obedience becomes not only a personal relationship but also a social performance witnessed by others. Neil's fleeting expression of irritation reveals the dilemma between the urge to resist and the social pressure to remain obedient. On a mythical level, this scene reinforces the cultural belief that parents' decisions are absolute and beyond question. The father's authority is presented as legitimate truth, while the child's obedience is normalized as the ideal form of family morality.

In the third scene, the interaction between Mr. Perry and Neil illustrates a form of parental authority expressed through harsh and domineering verbal communication. Denotatively, the scene shows Mr. Perry scolding Neil in a raised voice and cutting off his son's speech when Neil tries to explain himself. The dialogue indicates that Neil is forbidden from speaking or defending himself.

Visually, Neil's facial expression shifted from tension to fear and resignation after receiving the reprimand. Neil's body language, keeping his head down and offering no verbal response, revealed the position of a child who had no room to voice his opinion. This situation illustrates one-way communication, in which decisions are entirely controlled by the father figure. Results of interviews with informants (Ananta, 2025) also reinforces the findings of the semiotic analysis. He notes that Neil's expressions often seem to be holding something back and the atmosphere becomes "tense" whenever his father appears, demonstrating how visual cues work to convey hierarchy and pressure.

On a connotative level, this scene represents the unequal power dynamic between parent and child. The anger displayed is not merely a form of discipline, but also serves as a control mechanism that restricts the child's self-expression. Neil is not only reprimanded, but symbolically silenced through the emotional pressure that arises during the interaction.

The meaning of the myth conveyed in this scene suggests that parental authority is presented as an unquestionable truth. A child's obedience is regarded as a natural and expected response, while the child's attempts to speak up or explain themselves are perceived as a form of defiance.

In the fourth scene, the film shows Neil Perry performing in a theater production, wearing the character's costume and crown. Visually, Neil appears confident and expressive on stage, demonstrating a strong emotional connection to his role. At the same time, the camera shows Mr. Perry in the audience with a blank expression, showing neither a smile nor any sign of pride in his son's performance.

Denotatively, this scene shows a child successfully performing in a theater production in front of his father. Connotatively, however, the visual contrast between Neil's lively expression on stage and his father's cold face reveals a tension in the relationship between the child's freedom of expression and parental control. The theater stage serves as a symbolic space for Neil to express his identity, while his father's presence imposes emotional pressure that restricts that freedom.

Mr. Perry's expression, which showed no appreciation, signaled his disapproval of Neil's choice, turning what should have been a joyful personal moment into a judgmental situation. This means that the parents' presence did not serve as emotional support, but rather as a form of oversight over their child's decision.

On a symbolic level, this scene represents the idea that parents have the authority to evaluate and determine the value of their children's achievements. Support is considered warranted only when a child's choices align with their parents' expectations, while expressions of self that diverge from these expectations are viewed as deviations that do not deserve recognition.

These visual findings were also corroborated by the results of interviews with informants. (Putri, 2025) noted that Neil's expression appeared "stressed" and shifted to one of fear and resignation when facing his father, even though he had previously seemed at ease on stage. This observation suggests that the visual cues in the scene not only construct narrative meaning but are also emotionally felt by the audience as a form of relational tension between parent and child.

In this scene, Neil's father asks Neil how he feels after learning of his involvement in the theater production. Visually, Neil appears hesitant and looks down before finally answering, "Nothing." His tense facial expression and the pause before answering suggest that Neil is experiencing an inner conflict. Although he had previously seemed eager to express his feelings, this response indicates that Neil has chosen to hold back his emotions and not reveal what he is truly feeling.

The denotative meaning of this scene depicts a conversation between a father and son about Neil's feelings. However, on a connotative level, Neil's brief response reveals emotional strain and limited opportunities for communication, which prevent him from expressing himself openly. The shift in Neil's expression from hesitation to tension also highlights the strong power dynamic between father and son.

This finding is supported by interviews with informants, who stated that "Neil often looked distressed, as if he wanted to speak but was holding back. When his father started getting angry, Neil's expression immediately turned fearful and resigned." (Putri, 2025). This statement indicates that the audience perceives the psychological pressure Neil is experiencing through the nonverbal cues displayed in the scene. Overall, this scene illustrates a family communication dynamic that does not provide a safe space for the child to express their feelings honestly, leading them to choose compliance as a way to avoid conflict with authority figures.

In the final scene, the film shows Neil opening his father's desk drawer late at night and taking out a gun, without any spoken dialogue. Denotatively, this scene simply depicts Neil's physical actions in his father's study, which take place in a silent atmosphere. There is no conversation or interaction with other characters, so the audience's attention is focused entirely on the character's gestures and visual actions.

On a connotative level, the silence in the scene serves as a form of nonverbal communication that signifies the loss of space for Neil to express himself. The absence of dialogue reveals that the conflict, which had previously emerged through conversation, has now shifted to action. Silence becomes a symbol of the inability to openly express feelings after previous attempts at communication were consistently stifled. Taking the gun from his father's room also suggests that the pressure of family authority remains present even in the final decision Neil makes.

The meaning of the myth formed in this scene illustrates how an authoritarian family structure can normalize a child's suffering as a personal consequence, rather than as the result of oppressive communication dynamics.

The tragedy that unfolds is no longer understood as a failure of family communication, but rather appears to be a natural consequence of the child's inability to meet parental expectations. Thus, the film illustrates how the repeated suppression of expression can lead to the complete loss of communicative space.

## **Discussion**

Based on the results of a semiotic analysis of several scenes in the film "Dead Poets Society", It was found that the suppression of children's expression is represented through

hierarchical and obedience-oriented family communication patterns. This representation is constructed through verbal and nonverbal cues that create layered meanings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, as explained in Roland Barthes's concept of semiotics.

On a denotative level, the scene depicts an interaction between Neil Perry and his father that is dominated by the father's instructions and unilateral decisions. The conversation takes the form of commands regarding Neil's future, with no room for equal negotiation. Literally, the scene merely depicts ordinary family communication, but Neil's facial expressions, stiff body language, and brief verbal responses serve as significant visual cues.

Connotative meaning emerges through changes in Neil's expressions, which appear subdued, hesitant, and restrained when he is with his father. When his father displays anger, Neil's expressions shift to fear and resignation, indicating emotional pressure that limits his freedom of expression. This finding is reinforced by interview results stating that Neil appeared to want to speak but held back and showed fear when his father was angry (Putri, 2025). This indicates that silencing occurs not solely through explicit prohibitions, but through relational pressure that causes the child to self-censor.

This meaning can then be understood more deeply through Fitzpatrick's Family Communication Patterns theory, which describes two orientations of family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Based on the research findings, the communication relationship between Neil and his father demonstrates a predominance of conformity orientation, a communication pattern that emphasizes uniformity of values, compliance with family authority, and parent-centered decision-making.

In this context, children are expected to accept family decisions without much discussion or dissent. This is evident in how Neil's father makes decisions regarding his children's education and activities without allowing for an equal exchange of views. Communication tends to be one-sided, so that conversations do not function as a process of exchanging ideas, but rather as a mechanism of social control within the family.

In contrast, the level of conversation-oriented interaction in Neil's family appears to be very low. Although the father asks Neil interpersonal questions, these interactions do not develop into open communication because power dynamics remain dominant. This imbalance leaves Neil without a safe space to express his feelings or personal aspirations. As a result, silence becomes the child's chosen communication strategy to maintain the stability of family relationships.

At the mythical level, this series of symbols reinforces the cultural understanding that parents have full legitimacy in determining their children's future for the sake of success and social status. The film portrays the social myth of children's obedience as the ideal form of family relationships, while also illustrating the psychological consequences when individual expression is suppressed by a strong authoritarian structure.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the portrayal of the suppression of children's expression in the film is not merely a personal conflict between characters, but reflects a family communication pattern characterized by a high degree of conformity, as described by Fitzpatrick. Through Barthes's semiotic analysis, the film illustrates how visual and narrative signs work to normalize parental dominance, while Fitzpatrick's theory helps explain the communication mechanisms underlying the formation of such suppression.

However, the findings of this study differ from those of a previous study conducted by (Anggraeny & Aprilia, 2022), which identifies authoritarian parenting through direct behavioral indicators such as direction and punishment. In this study, mechanisms of silencing are not only present through explicit actions but also operate symbolically through systems of visual and narrative signs. Body language, physical distance between father and child, vocal intonation, and the choice of interaction space serve as semiotic elements that reinforce the parent's power dynamic over the child. Thus, silencing is not always manifested as clear verbal prohibitions, but

rather as a construction of meaning that gradually instills fear, resignation, and limitations on the child's expression.

The effects of such authoritarian communication and parenting styles are also linked to children's psychological well-being. This is consistent with recent research on the relationship between authoritarian parenting and adolescents' psychological well-being, which shows that high levels of parental control and low emotional responsiveness can increase emotional distress and reduce children's psychological well-being (Fajri & Kusumaningrum, 2024). This finding reinforces the interpretation that the suppression of Neil Perry's expression in the film is not merely a dramatic conflict within the narrative, but rather a symbolic representation of the emotional impact that can arise from family communication patterns that stifle children's opportunities for dialogue and self-expression.

Thus, the film "Dead Poets Society" can be understood as a social critique of family communication patterns that prioritize conformity over open dialogue, and it highlights the importance of a balance between conversation orientation and conformity orientation in supporting children's expressive development.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze how the suppression of children's expression is represented through the father-child relationship in the film "Dead Poets Society" using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. The results of the study indicate that the film not only presents a story of education and the search for identity, but also depicts family dynamics characterized by an authoritarian parenting style that restricts children's opportunities for communication.

Through Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of six key scenes, it becomes evident how the father-son relationship is constructed hierarchically through fragmented dialogue, the dominance of body language, and the elimination of space for dialogue. On the denotative and connotative levels, Neil Perry is portrayed as a child who is constantly forced to obey, while on the mythical level, the film naturalizes the father's authority as the decision-maker who is always considered right. The child's obedience is positioned as a form of responsibility and maturity, while self-expression is interpreted as a form of defiance.

Silencing a child's expression not only results in the loss of their voice but also in the destruction of their identity and psychological well-being. The tragedy experienced by Neil serves as a symbol of the failure of family communication, which closes off space for empathy and dialogue, and demonstrates how power that is not balanced by responsiveness can lead to deep emotional wounds. Thus, this study demonstrates that "Dead Poets Society" serves as a critical reflection on authoritarian parenting practices that are still often normalized in society, while also emphasizing the importance of two way communication as the foundation of healthy and humane family relationships.

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