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An Analysis of Supernatural Signs in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* Movie Script

(Analisis Tanda-Tanda Supranatural dalam Naskah Film Hereditary Karya Ari Aster)

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Abstract

This study examines the supernatural signs portrayed throughout Ari Aster's Hereditary movie script and selected scenes from its film adaptation. Specifically, the research aims to identify and classify the supernatural signs present in the movie script using Nathan Robert Brown's theory of supernatural signs and symbols, analyze the embedded meanings and semiotic processes of these signs through Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant, explain how these signs contribute to the narrative development, horror atmosphere, and thematic complexity of the story. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, primary data were collected from the Hereditary movie script and selected scenes from the film adaptation through repeated reading and viewing, followed by the identification of signs categorized as supernatural. The findings reveal that the movie script portrays numerous supernatural signs which including the treehouse, sigils, grimoires, ritual objects, occult symbols, and other cult-related elements associated with the worship of King Paimon. Through the process of semiosis, these signs function not merely as visual or narrative components, but as meaningful symbols that construct the movie's supernatural horror, foreshadow significant events, and reinforce the presence of the Paimon cult throughout the story. Overall, this study demonstrates that semiotic analysis provides a deeper understanding of how supernatural signs generate meaning and contribute to the thematic and symbolic complexity of supernatural horror narratives.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas tanda-tanda supranatural yang ditampilkan dalam film Hereditary karya Ari Aster. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menginterpretasikan tanda-tanda supranatural yang berkontribusi terhadap perkembangan alur cerita serta pembentukan atmosfer horor dalam film tersebut. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan teori semiotika Charles Sanders Peirce, khususnya model triadik yang meliputi representamen, objek, dan interpretan, serta teori tanda dan simbol supranatural yang dikemukakan oleh Nathan Robert Brown. Data utama diperoleh dari naskah film Hereditary dan sejumlah adegan yang dipilih dari adaptasi filmnya. Data dikumpulkan melalui proses pembacaan dan penayangan berulang, kemudian dilanjutkan dengan identifikasi tanda-tanda yang dikategorikan sebagai supranatural. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa naskah film Hereditary menampilkan berbagai tanda supranatural, seperti rumah pohon (treehouse), sigil, grimoire, objek-objek ritual, simbol-simbol okultisme, serta berbagai elemen lain yang berkaitan dengan sekte pemuja Raja Paimon. Melalui proses semiosis, tanda-tanda tersebut tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai unsur visual maupun naratif, tetapi

juga sebagai simbol bermakna yang membangun nuansa horor supranatural dalam film, memberikan petunjuk awal terhadap peristiwa-peristiwa penting yang akan terjadi, serta memperkuat keberadaan sekte Paimon sepanjang cerita. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa analisis semiotika mampu memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai cara tanda-tanda supranatural menghasilkan makna dan berkontribusi terhadap kompleksitas tematik serta simbolik dalam narasi horor supranatural.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a medium through which human experiences, emotions, and ideas are represented and communicated (Longo, 2019). As a body of written works, literature not only demonstrates excellence in expression but also reflects social realities and universal concerns that remain relevant across different periods and cultures (Widyaiswara et al., 2026). Through various forms such as novels, poetry, short stories, and movie scripts, literature functions as a mirror of society, allowing readers and audiences to observe, interpret, and evaluate human experiences (Semiyeva, 2025). Keerthika (2018) argues that literature records real-life events and transforms them into fictional representations that enable society to reflect upon itself and pursue self-improvement.

Among contemporary literary forms, movie scripts can be categorized as literary works because they contain essential literary elements, including theme, setting, plot, characterization, and point of view (Ferrell, 2000). According to Nurzaman and Permanaludin (2020), a movie script is a narrative literary work that embodies these intrinsic elements and constructs meaningful stories through them. One genre that frequently utilizes such literary elements to engage audiences is horror. Horror movies are designed to evoke fear, shock, and suspense through the portrayal of disturbing situations, supernatural phenomena, or psychological threats (Clasen, 2017). Worland (2007) defines horror movies as cinematic productions intended to frighten or shock audiences, while Redfern (2020) classifies horror into several subgenres, including supernatural horror, psychological horror, Gothic horror, and slasher movies.

Among these subgenres, supernatural horror is particularly notable for its extensive use of supernatural signs and symbols (Anggraheni et al., 2026). Such signs often include occult rituals, demons, magical objects, sigils, and other representations associated with forces beyond ordinary human understanding. These signs function not only as narrative devices but also as symbolic elements that contribute to the construction of fear and suspense. Their presence in popular media has become increasingly visible in contemporary society. For example, public discussions emerged in Indonesia following a 2023 concert by the indie musician Hindia, where audiences and social media users interpreted several visual elements as references to satanic symbolism and occult imagery (Al Ansori, 2023). The controversy illustrates how supernatural signs continue to attract public attention and generate diverse interpretations regarding their meanings and implications.

The utilization of supernatural signs is also evident in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018), a supernatural horror movie that follows the Graham family as they become entangled in a series of traumatic and occult events connected to a cult devoted to King Paimon. Throughout the movie, various supernatural signs are repeatedly presented, including sigils, ritual spaces, occult texts, and symbolic objects that gradually reveal the hidden influence of the cult. These signs play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and conveying meanings beyond their literal appearances. One example is the recurring Sigil of Paimon, which appears on personal belongings and ritual objects, symbolically linking characters to the cult's activities and foreshadowing later events in the story.

Given the prominence of supernatural signs within *Hereditary*, this study investigates how such signs are portrayed and interpreted throughout the movie script. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory and Brown's (2011) concept of supernatural signs, the research aims to analyze the meanings embedded within these signs and their contribution to the movie's supernatural horror narrative. By examining the relationship between signs, objects, and interpretations, this study seeks to enrich the understanding of symbolic representation in horror literature and movie, particularly within the context of supernatural horror.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to investigate the supernatural signs portrayed in Ari Aster's Hereditary movie script. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the study focused on interpreting and describing the meanings embedded within supernatural signs rather than measuring numerical data. According to Bogdan and Biklen, as cited in Kadekoh (2022), qualitative research encompasses studies that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable phenomena. Therefore, this method enabled the researcher to examine the symbolic meanings of supernatural signs appearing throughout the movie and its script.

The study utilized two theoretical approaches. First, Brown's (2011) theory of supernatural signs and symbols was employed to identify signs categorized as supernatural, such as sigils, grimoires, ritual objects, demonic symbols, and other occult elements. Second, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory was applied to interpret the meanings of the identified signs through the process of semiosis. Peirce's triadic model, consisting of representamen, object, and interpretant, served as the analytical framework for examining how supernatural signs generate meaning within the narrative (Wulandari & Siregar, 2020).

The primary data sources of this study were Ari Aster's Hereditary movie script and its movie adaptation released in 2018 by A24. The movie and script were selected because they belong to the supernatural horror genre and contain numerous supernatural signs relevant to the objectives of the study. To support the analysis, secondary sources were also consulted, including books, journal articles, previous studies, reviews, and other scholarly publications related to horror movies, supernatural symbolism, semiotics, and Hereditary.

Data collection was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher repeatedly watched the movie and read the original movie script to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative. Second, supernatural signs were identified and classified according to Brown's (2011) theory of supernatural signs and symbols. Third, supporting information was gathered from relevant literature, including academic journals, books, and scholarly reviews, to strengthen the interpretation of the findings.

The collected data were analyzed using Peirce's semiosis process. Each identified supernatural sign was classified according to the trichotomic categories of representamen (qualisign, sinsign, and legisign), object (icon, index, and symbol), and interpretant (rheme, dicisign, and argument). After the semiosis process was completed, the meanings of the signs were interpreted by relating the findings to relevant theories and previous studies. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the results of the analysis to answer the research objectives and explain how supernatural signs contribute to the construction of meaning in Hereditary.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis reveals that *Hereditary* employs several supernatural signs that contribute to the construction of its occult narrative and supernatural horror atmosphere. Among the identified signs, the treehouse emerges as one of the most significant supernatural symbols due to its recurring appearance and its close association with the cult devoted to King Paimon. Through Peirce's semiotic framework, the treehouse functions not merely as a physical structure but as a sign that generates multiple layers of meaning throughout the narrative.

3.1 Treehouse Acts as Sacred Space

In general, treehouse referred to the place that is reminds safe, youthful, playful, nostalgic childhood memories for the young people, especially the children. However, horror genre constructs such a contradictive view of treehouse in general. As what has stated through Jones (2010), treehouse generally functions as a familiar, safe, and playful space which associated with childhood, family intimacy, and everyday life. However, in horror perspective treehouse serves as a gateway into disorder, fear, and the inversion of social norms.

Additionally, *Hereditary* movie construct treehouse reminds sacred space which belong to the sect of Paimon. The study of Canbolat and Gültekin (2025) states that sanctuary which can be considered as sacred space is a physical area infused with deep symbolic meaning which intertwined to as religious values. Throughout the data below, the treehouse within *Hereditary* movie features occult ceremony and figurative.

The following data will show the exact object of the treehouse and its correlation between the Graham family and the sect of Paimon, as well as to the sign acts as supernatural sign throughout the *Hereditary* movie

> **Steve exits a back door to approach a very large TREEHOUSE. It is joined to a sturdy oak and hovers fifteen feet above the ground.** We are subtly BOOMING DOWN from this wide view (as Steve begins to climb the tree) to arrive at a parked CAR - one of two family cars - in the foreground (Aster et al., 2018).
>
> **Steve pokes his head into the treehouse,** where he finds:

CHARLIE – a plump, androgynous fourteen years old girl – **lying asleep on the floor.** She wears a parka and pajama bottoms. Beside her is a DRAWING PAD and an open SHOEBOX.

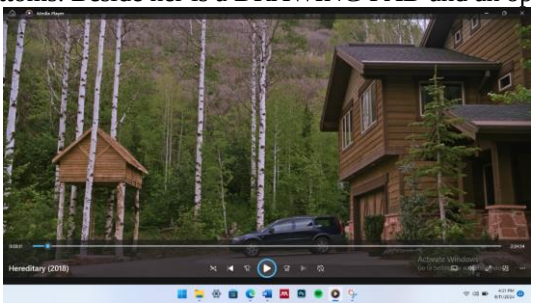


Figure 1. The Treehouse within Graham House Yard

Table 1. Semiosis Process of Data 1

CATEGORY		SIGN
Representamen	Legisign	A massive treehouse within the Graham's house yard where it features Charlie sleep inside the treehouse.
Object	Symbol	The treehouse acts as symbol insofar as its interpretation is arbitrary with the object general meaning. It goes supernatural because of the series of activities within the treehouse which hold by beyond Graham family and Paimon cult.
Interpretant	Rheme	The treehouse belongs to the Graham family as it portrays throughout the Graham family house yard and there is Charlie which its family member sleeping inside the treehouse. The space reminds a supernatural space of the Paimon's cult which belong to the Graham family.

Throughout the data, it reveals the connection between the treehouse and the Graham family as well as signifying of the treehouse which act as supernatural sign. In the other hand, the treehouse within the Graham house yard reminds the Graham family own ship to the treehouse. A territory such as house yard serves as an essential statement of ownership which encompassing within, including to structure such as houses. As the data portrays Charlie within the treehouse is not signifying that the treehouse only belong to Charlie, it signifying that it belongs to the Graham family by the character Charlie and also how the movie script says that the treehouse is within the Graham family house-yard. Thusly, this proves that the representamen is *Legisign* by how personal building such as treehouse within a family house yard denotes own ship through the society.

The treehouse acts as sacred space which also refers to as supernatural sign that is able to interprets by series of activities within the treehouse which connected to the sect of Paimon. According to the study of Lebedev and Prilutskiy (2024), sanctuary refers to a mystical space in which ritual perform through the space, as well as it means space of power which associated with special beliefs significant events. Thus, the treehouse acts as *Symbol* because horror genre, specifically *Hereditary* movie utilize this structure form different by how the treehouse have to construct. Also, the interpretation would be *Dicisign* by how the treehouse and its surroundings made statement regarding the object in order to imply the meaning.

3.2 The Role of The Sigil of Paimon

Every belief such as occultism which are summon the demons hold sigils in such significant role such as identity and power. As well as stated through the study of Hesselink (2026), a sigil is a charged graphic mark that is formed and activated to connect a practitioner with an invisible referent such as a spirit, deity, force, intention, or protective power, and its function is not just to represent something but to actually do something in ritual practice, such as calling, binding, channeling, transforming, or expressing that relation. Throughout *Hereditary* movie, the sect of Paimon shows to have sigil of Paimon and it shows as the sect identity, etc.

Throughout the *Data* below, the sigil of Paimon has not officially introduced through the narrative. However, it features the use of the sigil to the person belong to the sect of Paimon by interpret through the character Annie wore the necklace.

She wears a delicate NECKLACE bearing an ORNATE SIGIL, which she compulsively fingers (Aster et al., 2018).

Table 2. Semiosis Process of Data 2

CATEGORY	SIGN

Representamen	Sinsign	A gold necklace which featuring an ornate sigil which worn by Annie. The sigil will further be unleashed as the sigil of Paimon which related to the sect of Paimon because of it position within the sect which act as the identity of the sect. Paimon worshipers, the treehouse, and any kind of activities related to the Paimon sect (such as ritual for calling a spirit) are often include the sigil).
Object	Symbol	The sigil of Paimon act as a symbol sign through the *Hereditary* movie, because of the meaning or interpretation of the sigil is arbitrary, the meaning holds by the sigil is general to public. The sigil of Paimon also act as supernatural sign, because of the position of the sigil in the sect of Paimon which is the identity of the sect, it also holds a value of Paimon.
Interpretant	Dicisign	The sigil of Paimon functions as a complex signifier of collective identity and supernatural authority within the Paimon sect, establishing a direct link between the physical world and the spiritual entity. As a symbolic sign, its meaning is derived through arbitrary interpretation and convention, yet it maintains a specific value as a supernatural marker that identifies the sect's followers and their ritualistic activities, such as spirit invocation. Crucially, the use of the color gold within the sigil serves as a semiotic layer that conveys multiple meanings, suggesting a sense of high status, sacredness, or the inherent value attributed to the entity of Paimon within the sect's hierarchy. Thusly, the representamen characterized by its ornate golden material and its presence on Annie's person which reinforces the sigil's role as both a badge of elite membership and a conduit for the entity's presence.

In the data, the sigil of Paimon shows to have function as the identity of the sect where it can be seen that it worn by Annie in form of the necklace feature. Through the study of Hesselink (2026), sigil functions as the identity of a sect because it serves as a charged graphic mark that names, represents, and helps preserve a group's distinct presence or authority. In that sense, the sigil is not just decoration or a logo which it works such visible sign of membership, tradition, and shared meaning that marks the sect as separate from others.

The culmination of the treehouse's symbolic transformation occurs in the movie's final sequences, where Peter enters the structure and encounters cult members performing a ritual. The presence of black candles, red-cloaked worshippers, and collective bowing practices provides direct evidence of the treehouse's function as a sacred ritual space. In semiotic terms, these elements operate as Sinsigns because they represent specific and observable occurrences within the narrative. Their symbolic significance is further reinforced by their connection to ritual worship and supernatural devotion. The scene confirms that the treehouse is not merely a domestic structure but a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of King Paimon. This finding supports Lebedev and Prilutskiy's (2024) argument that sacred spaces are characterized by ritual practices and symbolic activities that distinguish them from ordinary locations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Hereditary utilizes the treehouse as a complex supernatural sign that evolves from a seemingly ordinary family structure into a sacred occult sanctuary. Through the interaction of representamen, object, and interpretant, the sign acquires meanings associated with secrecy, ritual, supernatural power, and cult worship. The analysis illustrates how Ari Aster strategically employs visual and narrative signs to construct a sense of unease while gradually revealing the hidden influence of the Paimon cult. Consequently, the treehouse functions as a central supernatural symbol that reinforces the movie's themes of hereditary fate, occult manipulation, and the intrusion of supernatural forces into domestic life.

4. CONCLUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that the supernatural signs portrayed throughout Ari Aster's *Hereditary* constitute a highly structured semiotic system through which the hidden influence of the Paimon cult is progressively disclosed. Rather than functioning as isolated horror elements, the signs operate as interconnected components of a broader network of meaning that guides both the characters and the audience

toward the realization of an inherited occult destiny. Through recurring signs such as the Sigil of Paimon, ritual spaces, Charlie's drawing pad, clicking noises, glints of light, human manikins, ritual ceremonies, triangular symbols, the movie constructs a continuous process of semiosis in which visible phenomena consistently point toward an invisible supernatural reality. As a result, the horror of *Hereditary* emerges not merely from frightening events but from the gradual accumulation of signs that reveal the inevitability of the Graham family's submission to King Paimon.

The application of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model demonstrates that each supernatural sign functions through the dynamic relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant. The Sigil of Paimon symbolizes the demon's authority and presence, while locations such as the treehouse and attic transform from ordinary domestic spaces into sacred ritual sites through repeated cultic occupation. Similarly, Charlie's drawings, preserved animal heads, human manikins, clicking noises, glints of light, and ritual practices operate as signs that gradually reveal the cult's long-term objective of preparing a human vessel for Paimon. The triangle pointed northwest and the whippoorwill bird further contribute symbolic and indexical meanings associated with surveillance, death, occult activity, and predetermined fate. Collectively, these signs create a coherent semiotic structure that narrates the themes of hereditary possession, cultic control, and supernatural determinism.

The findings indicate that *Hereditary* can be understood not only as a supernatural horror movie but also as a narrative of semiosis, in which every supernatural sign contributes to the construction of the movie's final meaning. The study further demonstrates that supernatural horror is generated through the systematic organization of signs that expose an unseen structure of power operating across generations. Consequently, this research contributes to semiotic studies by illustrating how supernatural signs function as narrative mechanisms that communicate complex cultural, religious, and occult meanings within horror texts. At the same time, the limitations of this study suggest opportunities for future research to examine non-supernatural signs within *Hereditary*, conduct comparative analyses between the screenplay and movie adaptation, or apply alternative theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalytic, cultural, or ideological approaches, to broaden the understanding of Ari Aster's work and supernatural horror narratives in general.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions and recommendations can be proposed for future research. First, future researchers are encouraged to explore other forms of signs in *Hereditary*, particularly non-supernatural signs, to examine how visual elements, character interactions, dialogue, and cinematic techniques contribute to the construction of meaning within the movie. Second, further studies may investigate the representation of family relationships, inherited trauma, religious beliefs, and cultic practices in *Hereditary* by employing different theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalytic, cultural, or ideological approaches. Third, comparative research between the movie and its screenplay may provide a deeper understanding of how supernatural signs are developed, modified, or emphasized through the process of cinematic adaptation. Finally, researchers interested in semiotic studies are encouraged to apply Peirce's semiotic theory to other horror movies to identify similarities and differences in the ways supernatural signs are constructed and interpreted. Such investigations may broaden the understanding of how signs function not only as elements of horror but also as narrative devices that communicate cultural beliefs, psychological experiences, and underlying ideological meanings.

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