



The semiotic construction of bourgeois femininity: A Peircean analysis of social identity in Monet's Woman with a Parasol

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Abstract.

This study deconstructs the visual representation of 19th-century French social identity through a Peircean semiotic analysis of Claude Monet's masterpiece, *Woman with a Parasol* (1875). While traditional art criticism often views the work as a spontaneous impression of light, this research reveals a deliberate semiotic construction of bourgeois femininity. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model—specifically the Proposition → Indexical → Legisign framework—the study examines how visual elements such as the parasol, the white summer dress, and the low-angle perspective function as signs of social status and gender roles. The analysis finds that the painting serves as a visual claim for the 'leisure class' identity, where the female figure (Camille) is elevated both physically and psychologically as a symbol of domestic harmony and modern urbanity. By mapping the interaction between spontaneous brushstrokes (index) and rigid social conventions (legisign), this research concludes that Monet's impressionism is not merely a formal innovation but a manifestation of the cultural ideology of the 19th-century French bourgeoisie. These findings provide critical insights for visual communication design in understanding how aesthetic choices can be used to construct and communicate complex social identities.

Keywords: Bourgeois Femininity, Peircean Semiotics, Social Identity, Claude Monet, Impressionism, Visual Construction.

Introduction

Visual art serves as a profound and multifaceted medium for communication, possessing the unique capacity to convey complex layers of meaning that often transcend the cognitive and expressive boundaries of verbal language. Within the specific domain of painting, every constitutive visual element—ranging from the selection of the color palette and the structural organization of composition to the subtle nuances of human gesture—functions as a deliberate sign that forms a stratified architecture of meaning. These artworks do not merely exist as passive vessels for aesthetic contemplation; rather, they operate as active communicative vehicles through which an artist transmits personal expression, ideological critiques, and socio-cultural observations directly to the recipient. This inherent communicative power renders works produced during revolutionary shifts in art history, such as the French Impressionist era, particularly fertile ground for rigorous scholarly analysis.

The emergence of Impressionism in the mid-to-late 19th century represented a radical aesthetic and ideological rupture from the traditional, rigid values championed by the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and the official Paris Salon. Pioneers of this movement, most notably Claude Monet, rejected the conventional, theoretical style of Academic Realism, which prioritized polished finishes and "significant" themes derived from classical mythology or historical heroism. For the Impressionists, the primary objective of art shifted toward capturing the *immediacy* of human perception and the

transient, fleeting effects of light and atmosphere upon the modern landscape. Recent scholarship suggests that this shift was not merely a technical evolution but a manifestation of a broader philosophical transformation in how society perceived time and reality (Pandanari, 2024).

Claude Monet, as the foremost proponent of this "modern vision," recognized that capturing natural sunlight and spontaneous optical effects was essential for achieving a more authentic visual experience. One of his most iconic and semiotically rich works, *Woman with a Parasol* (1875)—also referred to as *The Stroll*—exemplifies this mastery. Painted *en plein air* in the meadows of Argenteuil, the work captures the movement of clouds and the rhythmic swaying of grass through bold, spontaneous brushstrokes that evoke the physical sensation of a summer breeze (Billa, 2024). Beyond its technical brilliance, the painting serves as a vital historical document that visualizes the domestic and feminine ideals prevalent within the socio-cultural fabric of 19th-century France. The female figure portrayed—Monet's wife, Camille—is far from a passive model; she functions as a signifier of the identity, roles, and socio-economic dynamics of an era transitioning into the height of industrial modernity.

Decoding the multi-layered meanings embedded within such a visual text requires a rigorous semiotic approach—the systematic study of signs and the processes through which meaning is generated within visible phenomena. Within the framework of modern art theory, a sign is understood not as a static entity but as a dynamic mechanism of interpretation that occurs within the observer's mind (Yunus & Muhaemin, 2022). This is particularly relevant when examining works that balance technical spontaneity with rigid social conventions.

In contemporary academic discourse, Monet's oeuvre has been subjected to various scholarly interpretations. Bai (2023) has examined these works through biographical themes, specifically focusing on the intimate memory of Camille. Billa (2024) has provided technical analyses concerning the evolution of Monet's painting style, while Whitmore (2014) established significant correlations between Impressionist aesthetics and the fashion of Parisian modernity. Despite the breadth of this existing research, a significant research gap remains: many approaches remain confined to purely historical, technical, or biographical domains. There is a lack of systematic analysis regarding the process of *visual semiosis*—specifically how Monet's formal visual elements operate as a complex sign system to encode class and gender ideologies.

This study aims to fill this scholarly void by reading *Woman with a Parasol* as an active visual proposition that constructs socio-cultural arguments regarding the 19th-century French bourgeoisie. The rise of the middle class fundamentally reshaped French society, manifesting in new cultural practices such as 'leisure time' (*temps libre*)—a privilege previously reserved exclusively for the aristocracy. While previous applications of semiotics have been used to decode modern digital posters (Muntazori, 2020), public signage (Aryani & Yuwita, 2023), and contemporary illustrations (Ramadhani et al., 2023), its potential to deconstruct class and gender ideology within European Impressionism remains underexplored. The relevance of this study lies in its capacity to decode implied messages regarding female identity and social class in the context of communal understanding. By moving beyond purely aesthetic description, this research seeks to reveal how visual choices in light, accessory, and perspective serve as sophisticated signifiers of social status and the gendered expectations of the 19th-century "leisure class."

Methods

Qualitative-Inductive Research Design

The foundational methodology of this inquiry is rooted in a qualitative research design, which is purposefully selected to describe and interpret visual phenomena through the researcher's analytical perspective. This approach is fundamentally inductive, as the analytical trajectory moves from the observation of specific visual cases—in this instance, the granular formal elements of Monet's painting—to the establishment of broader socio-cultural rules, conventions, or thematic

interpretations. Unlike quantitative frameworks that prioritize statistical generalizability, qualitative inquiry in art and design allows for a deep immersion into the "materiality of the sign," facilitating an understanding of how aesthetic choices function as vehicles for ideological messaging (Sumartono, 2017).

Data Collection and Library Research Techniques

To ensure a rigorous empirical foundation, data collection was executed through advanced library research techniques aimed at exploring the multi-layered meanings embedded within the artwork through authoritative written studies and historical references. This process involved the systematic gathering and critical review of primary and secondary sources, including academic journals, seminal literature on semiotic theory, and historical archives that discuss the career of Claude Monet, the socio-political climate of 19th-century French culture, and the technical evolution of the Impressionist movement. By synthesizing these diverse sources, the study establishes a contextual bridge between the artist's individual creative act and the broader collective understanding of the "leisure class" during the transition to industrial modernity.

Preliminary Formal Analysis and Semiotic Grounding

Before the application of specific semiotic models, a preliminary analysis of the formal visual elements—specifically figure, composition, and lighting—is conducted to provide a robust sensory foundation for critical interpretation. This stage ensures that the subsequent semiotic deconstruction is anchored in the physical properties of the canvas. From a semiotic perspective, visual communication is treated as an active sign system where messages are transmitted from the sender (the artist) to the receiver (the observer) according to specific cultural and technical codes (Ramadhani et al., 2023). This meaning-making is viewed not as a static event but as an active, recursive process that evolves over time as social contexts shift (Fiske, 2016).

The Peircean Triadic Framework

The core analytical framework of this study is Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics, a cornerstone of modern semiotic theory that moves beyond dyadic structures to account for the role of interpretation. Peirce posited that a sign does not exist in isolation but is an irreducible relationship between three essential elements: the representamen (the sensory form of the sign), the object (that which the sign represents), and the interpretant (the meaning or mental effect generated in the mind of the recipient) (Sunarti, 2021).

As illustrated in Figure 1, these three components form a dynamic process of semiosis. For a sign to be meaningful, all three components must be present, as the interpretant serves as the vital link that connects the visual representamen to its socio-cultural object.

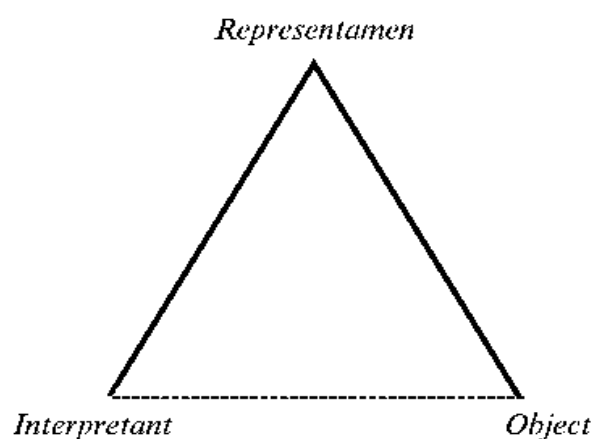


Figure 1. C.S. Peirce's Triadic Semiotics Sign Typology
Source: Saragih et al., 2019, in Yumiolda & Zulkifli, 2022

Operationalization through Peirce's Trichotomies

To operationalize this theory for the critical deconstruction of *Woman with a Parasol*, the research applies Peirce's trichotomies of signs, which classify the sign relationship across three dimensions:

1. Based on the Representamen: Signs are categorized as qualisigns (qualities), sinsigns (actual things or events), or legisigns (established laws or social conventions).
2. Based on the Relationship with the Object: This study distinguishes between icons (similarity), indices (causal or physical relationships), and symbols (social conventions or cultural rules).
3. Based on the Interpretant's Understanding: The meaning ranges from a mere possibility (rheme) and a statement of fact or reality (dicent/proposition) to a logical reason or social argument (argument) (Aryani & Yuwita, 2023; Yunus & Muhaemin, 2022).

Strategic Model: Proposition → Indexical → Legisign

While Peirce identified 27 complex sign categories, this study identifies ten primary signs considered most significant and realistic for visual analysis (Muntazori, 2020). These signs are grouped based on their logical connections, specifically through potentiality (abduction/induction) and deductive pathways.

Among these combinations, this study strategically isolates the deductive model of Proposition → Indexical → Legisign. This model is fundamental to the study as it explains the specific mechanism of visual semiosis: it identifies how a visual claim regarding modernity or femininity (the proposition) is anchored in the physical, causal traces of light and movement (the index) to ultimately reflect and reinforce the established social norms and cultural identities of the 19th-century bourgeoisie (the legisign). This systematic, multi-layered approach allows the research to move beyond a mere aesthetic description of Monet's work toward a critical deconstruction of the socio-cultural values embedded within the painting's structural hierarchy.

Results and Discussion

Visual Analysis Results: The Compositional Architecture






The masterpiece *Woman with a Parasol* (1875) was first unveiled to the public during the Second Impressionist Exhibition in Paris in 1876. To comprehend the semiotic depth of this work, it is necessary to first deconstruct its formal visual elements, as the aesthetic surface provides the sensory data for the subsequent semiosis process. The painting is a sophisticated synthesis of light, movement, and perspective, as shown in Figure 2.






Figure 2. The Painting *Woman with a Parasol* by Claude Monet (1875)
Source: www.nga.gov, 2024

The formal deconstruction reveals eight primary visual elements that establish the painting's narrative and structural hierarchy. These elements, ranging from the central figure of Camille to the technical execution of the brushstrokes, are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Visual Elements of The Painting

No	Visual elements	Description	Technical Characteristics	Functions in Composition
1	Female Figure (Camille) 	A woman in a white dress with blue accents in a dynamic pose.	Centered composition; flowing dress and ribbons reflecting wind movement.	Main focal of the painting; creating an impression of natural movements.
2	Parasol 	A white and green umbrella tilted at an angle.	Decisive brushstrokes; variations of white and bluish colors with dark shadows.	Creating visual contrast; adding dynamics; showing light source and effects.
3	Boy Figure (Jean) 	A boy in a relaxed pose at the bottom left.	Small scale on canvas; simple brushstrokes with softer colors.	Providing compositional balance; creating perspective and family narrative.
4	Meadow 	Grass and wildflowers with rich natural textures.	Vertical brushstrokes; broken color technique with green, yellow, and blue.	Creating an impression of depth; showing natural light effects.
5	Sky and Clouds 	Voluminous white clouds occupying half of the canvas.	Gradations from bright blue to grayish white; strokes follow cloud shape.	Creating three-dimensional effects and showing atmospheric perspective.
6	Lighting and Shadow	Outdoor lighting with sunlight from the upper right.	Colored shadows (not pure black); light reflection on shadows.	Separating figures from background; identifying midday conditions.

		
7	Brushstrokes 	Characteristic Impressionist variations for each element. Broken color painting technique; broad for clouds vs short vertical for grass. Demonstrating spontaneity and the artist's creative process.
8	Composition and Perspective 	Structure following the rule of thirds with low angle. Main figure at intersection; diagonal line; view from below. Creating visual dynamics and giving an impression of prestige.

Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

The atmospheric quality of the scene is significantly enhanced by Monet's strategic color palette. The use of high-key colors reflects the "Plein Air" philosophy, where the artist seeks to capture the optical truth of light as it appears in nature rather than the local color of objects. The dominant color scheme and its psychological implications are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Dominant Color Scheme

Main Color	Function	Psychological Effects
White	Dress, parasol, clouds	Purity, high social status, tranquility
Blue	Sky, clothing details, shadows	Calmness, contemplation, harmony
Green	Meadow, shadows	Peace, connection with nature
Grey gradient	Shadows, cloud details	Depth, dimension, naturalism

Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

Furthermore, the technical innovations applied by Monet, such as painting *en plein air*, were crucial in capturing the fleeting effects of light and movement. These techniques are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Impressionist Techniques in *Woman with a Parasol*

Techniques	Application in Painting	Resulting effects
Broken Color	Colors not smoothly blended, applied adjacent to one another	Glowing color effects, optical blending
Plein Air	Painted outdoors in one session	Capturing spontaneous light effects and fleeting moments
Colored Shadows	Shadows use color, not black	More natural and vivid visual results
Depiction of the Atmosphere	Reduced contrast in the background	Creating the impression of depth
Firm brush strokes	Visible and expressive brushstrokes	Demonstrating energy and spontaneity

Source: Personal documentation, 2025

Discussion: The Peircean Semiotic Construction of Bourgeois Identity

The application of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics to Claude Monet's *Woman with a Parasol* (1875) reveals that the painting operates as a complex sign system, moving beyond mere aesthetic representation toward a sophisticated construction of social identity. By utilizing the **Proposition -> Indexical -> Legisign** model, this research deconstructs the visual layers that define the intersection of gender, class, and 19th-century modernity. The semiosis process within this masterpiece demonstrates how aesthetic choices are inextricably linked to cultural structures (Situmeang, 2015).

The Propositional Level: Modernity as an Aesthetic Claim

At the propositional level, Monet's painting functions as a radical aesthetic manifesto that challenges the rigid, theoretical style of Academic Realism championed by the Paris Salon (Pandanari, 2024). The painting conveys a visual claim that true beauty resides in the transitory quality of light and movement rather than in static, polished details (Yunus & Muhaemin, 2022). This proposition marks a significant departure from traditional values, advocating instead for an art form connected to modern everyday life (Phillips, 1912).

The dynamic posture of Camille, leaning slightly backward to counter the force of the wind, serves as a visual statement—a proposition—that human existence in the modern era is a continuous and harmonious reaction to natural forces. Monet proposes that spontaneity is the fundamental essence of modernity. By employing technical innovations such as painting *en plein air*, he asserts that the "truth" of a moment can only be captured through an immediate and energetic creative process (Billa, 2024). This mechanism of meaning interpretation forces the observer to prioritize the intensity of visual experience over formal perfection (Rasul, 2018).

The Indexical Level: Traces of Reality and the Artist's Presence

The indexical layer of the painting provides the factual and causal anchor for Monet's propositions. Unlike icons which rely on similarity, indexical signs are characterized by a direct physical or causal relationship between the sign and its object (Aryani & Yuwita, 2023). In *Woman with a Parasol*, visual elements act as direct traces of the environmental conditions during the creative act.

The parasol and the shadows cast upon Camille's white dress are direct indices of the sun's high position, precisely identifying the temporal reality as midday. More importantly, the expressive brushstrokes function as indices of the wind's velocity and direction (Billa, 2024).



Figure 3. Brush Strokes Following the Direction of the Wind on a Dress
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

As illustrated in Figure 3, Monet's brushstrokes on Camille's dress follow the flow of the garment's curves with soft, slightly curved lines, capturing the physical interaction between the wind and the subject. This indexicality is further reinforced by the treatment of the surrounding landscape.



Figure 4. Brush Strokes Following the Direction of the Wind on the Grass
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

As shown in Figure 4, the direction in which the grass and wildflowers lean determines the origin of the wind and captures the sensation of a fleeting outdoor moment. These marks serve as a "body of dialogue" between Monet's energetic process and the natural world, reflecting a deep emotional and physical outpouring through the visible hand of the artist (Rasul, 2018).

The Legisign Level: Class Identity and Gender Conventions

The most critical layer of analysis is the Legisign, where visual signs intersect with the established social laws and cultural conventions of the 19th-century French bourgeoisie. The activity depicted—a leisure stroll in nature—is a legisign of the burgeoning middle-class practice of "leisure time" (*temps libre*), an escape from industrial urban life for recreation.

Camille's white summer dress and parasol function as potent legisigns of the Victorian ideal of femininity and high social status.



Figure 5. *19th-century French parasol accessory*
Source: metmuseum.org, 2025

As evidenced in the historical context of Figure 5, the parasol was a regulated social accessory that symbolized female modernity and bourgeois membership. Its primary function was to protect the wearer from the sun, maintaining the "white skin" that differentiated the leisure class from the tanned skin of the working class (Mix, 2011).



Figure 6. *19th Century French Bourgeois Women's Summer Dress*
Source: metmuseum.org, 2025

Similarly, the fashion of the dress, as exemplified by the historical reference in Figure 6, acts as a sign of domestic propriety and fashion modernity (Whitmore, 2014). The presence of Jean reinforces the sign of idealized motherhood and domestic harmony, where the woman is the center of the family structure. Paradoxically, Monet chose to depict Camille in elegant bourgeois attire despite his own financial instability, creating a romanticized visual aspiration (Frag, 2015). Thus, the painting functions as a cultural construct placing women at the center of the bourgeois narrative.

Dialectical Synthesis: The Interaction of Spontaneity and Convention

The power of *Woman with a Parasol* lies in the dialectic between the spontaneous Index (the brushstroke) and the rigid Legisign (the bourgeois convention). This interaction is a manifestation of how signs and meanings in visible phenomena can be understood through systematic study (Situmeang, 2015). Monet uses a radical technique—firm and visible brushstrokes—to represent a highly controlled and idealized social class.

This synthesis proves that the painting is an active process of meaning-making that evolved over time (Fiske, 2016). Every element—from the low-angle perspective to the broken color technique—serves as a found foundation for critical interpretation (Yumeilda & Zulkifli, 2022). Ultimately, Monet was utilizing the tools of Impressionism to encode a specific vision of modernity—one that celebrated personal freedom while remaining deeply anchored in the hierarchical social structures of the French bourgeoisie.

Conclusions

This research has successfully deconstructed the intricate system of visual meaning within Claude Monet's *Woman with a Parasol* (1875) by utilizing the robust framework of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics. The analysis confirms that the artwork is far more than a mere realistic representation or a spontaneous impression of light; it is a complex construction reflecting the socio-cultural and aesthetic dynamics of 19th-century Europe. By mapping the interaction between the representamen, object, and interpretant across eight primary visual elements, this study demonstrates how formal artistic choices function as signs within a multi-layered narrative of social identity.

The primary finding reveals that Monet's Impressionist technique is inherently a manifestation of the cultural ideology of the rising 19th-century French bourgeoisie. Through the Proposition -> Indexical -> Legisign model, the research has decoded how technical spontaneity (index) is dialectically linked to rigid social conventions (legisign). Accessories such as the parasol and the white summer dress are not merely aesthetic details but are regulated social signs that communicate "leisure class" status and idealized domestic gender roles. Furthermore, the study identifies that the painting serves as a visual claim for domestic harmony, positioning the female subject at the center of a bourgeois narrative that masked the era's underlying financial and social turbulence.

Despite the depth of the semiotic deconstruction provided, this study possesses several limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis is strictly focused on a singular masterpiece, which, while iconic, may not fully represent the entire technical and ideological breadth of the Impressionist movement. Secondly, the research relies primarily on a Peircean triadic framework; therefore, the nuances of other semiotic traditions, such as Barthesian myth-making or Saussurean structuralism, were not explored in this context. Lastly, the scope of the socio-cultural analysis is limited to the mid-19th-century French bourgeois context, which may limit the generalizability of these findings to Impressionist works produced in other geographic or temporal settings.

Based on these findings, several avenues for future research are recommended. Scholars could expand this framework by conducting a comparative semiotic analysis between Monet and other key Impressionist figures, such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir or Edgar Degas, to identify broader patterns in the visual construction of class identity. Additionally, future studies could apply the Proposition -> Indexical -> Legisign model to contemporary digital art and advertising to examine how 19th-century bourgeois aesthetic values continue to influence modern visual communication strategies. Finally, integrating interdisciplinary approaches that combine semiotics with quantitative eye-tracking technology could provide empirical data on how modern observers process the "spontaneous" signs identified in Impressionist works today.

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