

The Main Character's Identity through the Narrative Structure in *Saltburn* (2023)

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A B S T R A C T

Film narratives construct character identity by strategically controlling perspective and information. While previous studies on *Saltburn* (2023) focus on social class or psychology, this research examines the structural mechanics of identity concealment. By integrating Gérard Genette's focalization and David Bordwell's information distribution, this study analyzes how Oliver Quick's identity is constructed across the Three-Act Structure. Findings show that identity is initially established as marginalized through internal focalization and restricted narration. It is then deconstructed into an ambiguous entity through external focalization and suppressed information, and finally revealed as a dominant criminal agent through zero focalization and unrestricted access. The study contributes to narratology by demonstrating how classical theories effectively decode identity engineering in complex contemporary films. Ultimately, it proves that character identity is a product of "who sees" and "who knows," which dictates audience perception.

Keywords: *Saltburn*, Focalization, Information Distribution, Narratology

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INTRODUCTION

Film, as a modern narrative form, holds a central position in contemporary literary and media studies. Films do not merely present stories; they construct meaning through the integration of visual, audio, and organized plot structures. As argued by (Fadilah et al., 2025), "films do more than just convey information and introduce audiences to new perspectives or lifestyles; they provide profound ways of seeing and feeling that can be deeply fulfilling." (Sudarisman, 2016) further adds that the dynamic nature of film automatically positions it as a cultural agent that conveys symbolic messages, with visual language serving as an additional technique in its delivery. (Maulana & Nugroho, 2018) emphasize that the message of a film is profoundly shaped by its narrative, which organizes facts and stories, so that meaning emerges from the arrangement of story elements, rather than merely visual representation. Therefore, analyzing *Saltburn* (2023) from a narrative perspective is highly academically relevant, as this film constructs meaning through narrative patterns that function as both textual and audiovisual structures simultaneously.

Saltburn (2023), directed by the Academy Award-winning filmmaker Emerald Fennell, serves as a compelling case study for this narrative complexity. Set in the mid-2000s, the film follows Oliver Quick, a student struggling to find his place at Oxford University, who is drawn into the world of the charming and aristocratic Felix Catton. Felix invites him to *Saltburn*, his family's sprawling luxury estate, for a summer that eventually spirals into a series of disturbing events. The title "*Saltburn*" itself refers to this ancestral manor, which functions not merely as a setting, but as a symbolic space representing the unattainable peak of the British class hierarchy. Since its release, the film has garnered significant critical acclaim, including multiple nominations at the 77th British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) and the 81st Golden Globe Awards. The primary reason for selecting *Saltburn* as the object of this research is its

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intricate narrative craftsmanship. Unlike conventional psychological thrillers, *Saltburn* utilizes a sophisticated architecture of perspective that deliberately misleads the audience, making it a perfect subject for analyzing how identity is constructed and deconstructed through the interplay of focalization and information control.

In this context, characters play a central role in the construction of film narratives. As argued by (Khotimah et al., 2023), "Without well-developed characters, a compelling plot cannot be constructed." This principle highlights that the success of a plot is inseparable from the depth and complexity of the characters developed within it. In its evolution, film has utilized various storytelling techniques to create profound narrative experiences. One prominent modern narrative strategy is narrative reversal, a technique that unexpectedly alters the direction of the story and the audience's understanding. According to (Pérez López, 2020), narrative reversal is a storytelling device designed to make the reception of a narrative an experience dominated by surprise, influencing how audiences aesthetically comprehend and appreciate the story. Contrary to conventional psychological thrillers, the narrative complexity in *Saltburn* (2023) aligns with what Buckland (2009, p. 3) defines as a plot where events are not merely interwoven but 'entangled,' creating a 'perplexing' experience that forces the audience to reconstruct the protagonist's identity from scratch. Consequently, *Saltburn* (2023) stands out due to its narrative structure, which employs this intricate reversal to strategically manage audience perception.

This phenomenon of identity transformation is central to narratology studies because it highlights how film narratives regulate audience access to information. As noted by (Aulia & Pratiwi, 2020), film narratives are often constructed based on deliberate delays, displays, or concealments of information. An analysis of *Saltburn* must focus not only on what is narrated, but on how narrative techniques organize perspective and information. Therefore, this research fills a gap in existing analyses of *Saltburn* (2023) by shifting the focus from thematic analysis to structural mechanics. By applying Gérard Genette's focalization and David Bordwell's information distribution, this study reveals how the narrative structure itself – rather than just character actions shapes audience perception. Specifically, this study aims to analyze how the narrative structure of *Saltburn* (2023) constructs and reveals Oliver Quick's identity throughout the story, and to examine the role of focalization and information distribution in controlling audience perception and concealing Oliver's true identity.

The fundamental importance of narrative structure in film lies in its ability to organize raw story events into a meaningful experience for the audience. As noted by (Maulana & Nugroho, 2018), the message of a film is profoundly shaped by its narrative architecture, where meaning emerges from the arrangement of elements rather than mere visual representation. In contemporary cinema, this structure becomes even more critical when dealing with "puzzle films" that rely on intricate layers of deception (Buckland, 2009). Without a robust narrative framework, complex stories risk becoming incoherent; however, when executed with precision, the structure itself becomes the primary tool for manipulating audience perception and constructing character identity.

Despite the growing interest in *Saltburn* (2023), existing scholarly works have predominantly focused on its thematic and sociological implications. For instance, (Panjaitan, 2024) explored the film through the lens of social class dynamics and discrimination using Max Weber's theory. While this study provides a crucial understanding of the British class hierarchy depicted in the film, (Panjaitan, 2024) positions the protagonist, Oliver Quick, primarily as a symbol of class disparity. By focusing on the sociological outcomes, this previous research overlooks the specific narrative mechanisms the "how" that allow Oliver to navigate and deceive that very social structure in the eyes of the audience.

Furthermore, (Putri, 2024) investigated the film by focusing on the protagonist's psychopathic nature through psychoanalytic models. This study successfully deconstructs Oliver's internal psychological traits and motives as a "criminal mind." However, (Putri, 2024) analysis is limited to the character's psyche and does not address the formal narratological techniques used to conceal this psychopathy until the film's resolution. There is a clear lack of

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analysis regarding how the film's focalization shifts and information delays function as a "narrative mask" that keeps the audience in a state of epistemological uncertainty.

In a broader narratological context, other researchers have applied structural theories to different cinematic works, yet often with a different focus. (Setiadi, 2025) analyzed identity crises in *Kung Fu Panda* using Todorov's narrative structure, which focuses on the restoration of equilibrium. While effective for linear heroic journeys, Todorov's model is insufficient for the "entangled" and "perplexing" plot of *Saltburn* (Buckland, 2009). Similarly, (Rasyid, 2023) examined characterization in *Suicide Squad* through overt dialogue and actions. These prior studies demonstrate a recurring trend in film analysis that prioritizes visible character traits over the invisible structural regulation of "who sees" and "who knows."

The synthesis of these observations reveals a significant research gap: the absence of a structural narratology analysis that accounts for the deliberate manipulation of identity in *Saltburn*. While thematic and psychological studies exist, they do not explain the technical synergy between Genette's focalization and Bordwell's information distribution. This research, therefore, fills this academic void by shifting the focus from "what" the character is to "how" the narrative structure constructs and reveals that identity across the Three-Act Structure as formalized by Syd (Field, 2005). By providing this structural mapping, the study contributes to the field by demonstrating that classical narratological theories remain the most effective tools for decoding the sophisticated engineering of contemporary cinema.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative research design grounded in film narratology, following the framework described by (Creswell & Poth, 2016), the central concern of this research is tracing how a narrative system constructs and dismantles identity, qualitative textual analysis is the most appropriate approach. The theoretical framework integrates two complementary frameworks: (Genette, 1980) theory of focalization, which distinguishes between who sees the perspective through which events are (Bordwell, 1985) theory of information distribution, which addresses the range and depth of knowledge made available to the audience at any given point, differentiating between restricted narration, suppressed information, and unrestricted access. Together, these frameworks allow the researcher to map not only what is shown, but how much the audience is permitted to know and when.

The primary data source is *Saltburn* (2023), directed by Emerald Fennell, accessed in its full-length legal version via YouTube Films, which allowed for precise timestamp documentation and repeated scene access. The analytical focus is centered on the protagonist, Oliver Quick, whose identity undergoes systematic construction, deconstruction, and revelation across the film's narrative structure. Secondary data, comprising academic journals and prior studies on the film, were integrated throughout the analysis to strengthen interpretive depth. Data collection proceeded through documentation study as described by Moleong (1989), involving three steps: first, multiple complete viewings of the film using a structured observation sheet to log timestamps, character interactions, and dialogue; second, targeted re-viewings in which scenes were marked wherever a shift in focalization or audience knowledge was observable; and third, transcription of relevant dialogue with accompanying timestamps into a scene-by-scene annotation log, which served as the working data.

From the initial observation, 8 candidate scenes were selected from the film. These were then subjected to purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016), applying three eligibility criteria: (1) the presence of a significant shift in focalization type, as defined by (Genette, 1980); (2) an instance of deliberate information withholding or disclosure, as theorized by Bordwell (1985); and (3) a pivotal moment in the construction or transformation of Oliver Quick's identity. This yielded eight key scenes distributed across the Three-Act Structure formalized by Field (2005): two scenes in Act 1 (Setup), four in Act 2 (Confrontation), and two in Act 3 (Resolution).

Data analysis followed the four-step procedure outlined by (Moleong, 1989): identifying, classifying, mapping, and synthesis, operationalized as four integrated stages.

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First, identification: each scene was annotated using two theories, with one addressing focalization type (internal, external, or zero) and the other addressing information distribution (restricted, suppressed, or unrestricted). Second, categorization: the annotated scenes were grouped by dominant focalization type and arranged within their respective acts, clarifying which narrative mechanisms were active at each structural stage. Third, mapping: scenes were sequenced chronologically and traced against the Three-Act Structure to observe how each focalization shift corresponded to a transformation in Oliver Quick's identity status, with both dialogue and narrative atmosphere treated as evidence of perspective control (Bordwell, 1985). Fourth, synthesis: the mapped findings were interpreted in relation to the research objectives, drawing correlations between the structural pattern of focalization shifts and the trajectory of identity transformation. To strengthen the credibility of the interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016), findings were cross-checked against existing scholarly readings of the film (Panjaitan, 2024; Putri, 2024) and against (Buckland, 2009) broader framework for puzzle films, throughout these stages to strengthen the analysis depth and theoretical validity of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings in an integrated format, consistent with qualitative film narratology practice (Creswell & Poth, 2016), wherein each finding is immediately contextualized within the theoretical framework. Each sub-section opens with a findings statement—a concise declaration of the observed narrative pattern followed by a scene-level discussion that draws on dialogue and narratological interpretation. This study identifies that the construction of Oliver Quick's identity is not a collection of fixed character traits but rather a series of analytical constructs derived from the strategic intersection of focalization and information distribution.

The progression of this identity engineering is systematically mapped across the three-act structure. In Act 1, Oliver is established as a Marginalized Outsider through the synergy of internal focalization and restricted narration. This status subsequently shifts in Act 2, where he is deconstructed as an Unreliable Narrator and Infiltrator through external focalization and suppressed information. Finally, Act 3 culminates in the revelation of Oliver as a Criminal Mastermind and Dominant Agent, facilitated by zero focalization, unrestricted narration, and the use of analepsis.

The Setup (Act 1)

Finding: In Act 1, the narrative constructs Oliver Quick's identity as a socially marginalized outsider through the combined operation of internal focalization and restricted narration, which systematically withholds counter-evidence and aligns the audience's epistemic position with Oliver's subjective account of reality.

The construction of Oliver's marginal identity begins in the scene of his first encounter with Michael Gavey during a freshman dinner at Oxford. Narratively, this scene is structured to limit the audience's awareness to the immediate interaction at the table, effectively isolating the characters from the wider social environment of the university. This spatial restriction, paired with the ambient noise of a bustling hall from which Oliver and Gavey are conspicuously excluded, functions as a narrative signal of social marginalization before a single word is spoken. Gavey's opening question operates as a verbal confirmation of the isolation already established by the narrative positioning (00:05:16 - 00:05:27):

"So you're a Norman no-mates too, then, Oliver Quick?" (00:05:16)

Oliver's response: *"Isn't everyone? It's only the first night"* is presented through a perspective that privileges his subjective experience. Gavey further emphasizes this isolation by remarking:

"Look around you, it's just me and you, mate." (00:05:27)

In the context of narrative structure, this dialogue serves to establish Oliver's ontological status as an individual residing outside the university's dominant social hierarchy. The restriction of information in this scene causes the audience to accept the premise that

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Oliver is a marginal entity lacking social capital. In (Genette, 1980) terms, this constitutes internal focalization: the narrative presents events as filtered through Oliver's experience, where the audience has no access to any focalizing agent that might contradict this self-presentation. (Bordwell, 1985) concept of restricted narration operates simultaneously: by limiting the narrative field to Gavey's verbal assessment and Oliver's passive confirmation, the audience is denied any external perspective. Consequently, the narrative forces an acceptance of Oliver's isolation as an objective truth, as there is no competing information available within the storyworld to refute Gavey's claim.

This epistemic restriction is further reinforced in a later scene at a bar, when Oliver discloses his family background to Felix Catton – an aristocratic student and the owner of the *Saltburn* (00:17:43 – 00:17:57). The narrative atmosphere of this encounter is meticulously structured to signal a moment of deep intimacy and confession, utilizing a quiet, focused tone that encourages the audience to receive Oliver's disclosure as genuine. Oliver describes his family in terms of dysfunction and hardship:

"They've got problems... mental health and addiction and stuff... dad was, kind of, dealing and stuff." (00:17:43)

Felix's empathetic response: *"Sounds awful, really"* (00:17:57) functions not only as a character reaction but as a narrative endorsement of Oliver's claims. By having a character of Felix's high social standing validate the story, the narrative reinforces the credibility of Oliver's persona. Because restricted narration denies the audience any comparative information against which to test this narrative, Oliver's identity as a subject from a dysfunctional background is accepted as fact. The consistent use of internal focalization in Act 1 thus positions Oliver at the center of a narrative of suffering, establishing his foundational identity as a marginalized subject before the deconstruction process begins in Act 2.

The Confrontation (Act 2)

Finding: In Act 2, the narrative systematically dismantles the identity established in Act 1 through a shift from internal to external focalization and the deployment of a suppressed information strategy, which together render Oliver an ambiguous and unreliable entity whose motives the audience can observe but no longer access from within.

The first significant crack in Oliver's constructed identity occurs when Felix drives him to his parents' home without prior notice on his birthday. The narrative structure enacts a sudden shift in focalization before any dialogue is spoken: the narrative perspective, which had previously privileged Oliver's subjective view, now aligns with Felix's observation as he encounters the house – a well-maintained, middle-class property that directly contradicts the poverty narrative Oliver had constructed. This external focalization (Genette, 1980) positions the audience alongside Felix as a witness rather than an accomplice to Oliver, opening an information gap that internal focalization had previously sealed.

The confrontation reaches a verbal climax when Oliver's parents mention his sisters (01:20:09), prompting Felix to interrogate the prior narrative:

"You told me you were an only child, Oliver?" (01:20:13)

Oliver: *"No, I've always talked about my sisters."* (01:20:14)

The narrative registers this exchange by granting equal weight to Felix's skepticism and Oliver's defensive, nervous response, a departure from the asymmetric structure of Act 1. In narratological terms, Oliver's attempt to revise the leaked information in real time confirms his status as an unreliable narrator in the sense articulated by Booth (1961). Felix's conclusive verdict upon their return to *Saltburn* (01:22:17-01:22:20) formally terminates the audience's epistemic contract with Oliver:

"It's fucking weird, is what it is, mate. Honestly, I don't even know where to start. I mean, you're a fucking liar, Ollie."

Through Genette's lens, this moment marks the total collapse of Oliver as the focalizing agent. The audience is now fully detached from Oliver's perspective, realizing that the "truth" they previously held was merely a narrative construct. (Bordwell, 1985) theory of narration explains this as a shift in the range of knowledge: the narrative moves from being restricted

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(sharing Oliver's lies) to omniscient-but-distanced, where the audience knows more than Oliver's persona admits, yet less than his actual intentions.

In the next scene, Oliver's identity is further destabilized in a subsequent confrontation with Venetia Catton (01:48:13 - 01:50:25), who is grieving following Felix's death. The narrative focus intensifies as Venetia directly challenges Oliver's ontological status:

"I just couldn't stop laughing... because I remembered that... you only knew him for... six months? You hardly knew him, Ollie. You have nothing to do with him, with us, with here. Nothing at all. You're just a stranger. Stranger fucking danger." (01:48:13-01:48:58)

Venetia's "stranger fucking danger" remark is followed by an extended metaphor that functions as a narratological reframing (01:49:37-01:50:25):

"I think you're a moth... drawn to shiny things, batting up against the window, just desperate to get in. Well, you've done it now. You've made your holes in everything. You'll eat us from the inside out."

The moth metaphor is significant not only for its content but for its structural position within the narrative. Because it is delivered by an external focalizer, it carries an epistemological weight that Oliver's own self-presentation can no longer match. Bordwell's (1985) suppressed information strategy is at its peak here: the narrative deliberately withholds Oliver's interiority during Venetia's accusations. While the audience observes Oliver's reaction, they are denied access to his internal thoughts or motives.

This creates a state of permanent ambiguity: the narrative no longer explains Oliver; it only displays his "infestation." By framing Oliver as a "moth" that "eats from the inside out," the narrative structure shifts from exploring a character's identity to documenting a predatory process. Oliver is no longer a protagonist to be understood, but a "menacing anomaly" whose true nature the narrative is actively concealing through the refusal of internal focalization. The audience is left in a state of epistemic suspension, observing the destruction Oliver causes without understanding the fundamental "why" behind his actions.

Oliver's identity as a parasitic figure is further intensified in the scene set within the study of Sir James Catton—the father of Felix and Venetia Catton (01:52:47–01:53:22) where the narrative employs external focalization to manifest Oliver's resistance against the family's authority. Amidst the atmosphere of mourning following Venetia's death, James attempts to discreetly negotiate Oliver's departure to preserve the family's privacy:

"I think it's time, Oliver, for you to go home discreetly tonight,It would be best if the family was able to grieve in private" (01:52:47–01:53:03).

The portrayal of this scene generally positions the audience as detached observers witnessing Oliver's refusal objectively. When Oliver insistently responds:

"But I just think it's best if I stay, just for the time being" (01:53:10)
a profound narrative discrepancy emerges. This tension reaches its climax when James asks in a tone of disbelief, "You won't go?" (01:53:21), to which Oliver replies with a chillingly authoritative statement: "I don't see how I can" (01:53:22).

From (Bordwell, 1985) perspective, the strategy of suppressed information operates at its peak here; the narrative deliberately conceals the true motives behind Oliver's desire to remain, thereby creating an epistemic distance between the audience and the character. Oliver's refusal to leave is no longer perceived as a gesture of sincerity, but rather as an aggressive effort to maintain his position within *Saltburn*. Through the use of external focalization, the audience is left to feel a sense of unease regarding Oliver's forceful presence, while simultaneously preparing for the transition toward Oliver's total dominance in the final act as a dangerous subject.

The Resolution (Act 3)

Finding: In the final act, the narrative structure undergoes a significant transition toward unrestricted narration and zero focalization (Genette, 1980). This phase marks the point where the narrative is no longer bound to the subjective or restricted perspective of any character, shifting instead to a position of full informational authority. Through this shift, a

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total narrative reversal occurs, in which all previously suppressed information is revealed retrospectively to deconstruct Oliver Quick's identity for the final time.

This final identity revelation begins with the encounter between Oliver and Elspeth Catton, the mother of Felix and Venetia, who is in critical condition and bedridden with the aid of a ventilator (01:58:16). Following the sequential deaths of Felix, Venetia and James, Oliver explicitly declares his claim of authority over the estate (01:58:32 - 01:58:36):

"It's been a privilege to look after you, just as it'll be a privilege to look after Saltburn."

This statement confirms Oliver's ontological shift from a marginalized outsider to the dominant subject in control of the *Saltburn* hierarchy. The irony of Oliver's role as a "caregiver" serves as a narrative signifier of his successful infiltration, a goal that had been strategically concealed from the audience through the internal focalization of the previous acts. The peak of this identity deconstruction is manifested through Oliver's monologue at 01:58:59 - 01:59:28:

"Thank God. After all those terrible accidents... But... is there really ever such a thing as an accident, Elspeth? I don't know. Accidents are for people like you. For the rest of us, there's work. And unlike you, I actually know how to work."

This dialogue serves as a crucial narrative instrument, acknowledging Oliver's criminal agency. The use of the word "work" refutes the previous acts' presentation of events as mere "accidents," revealing them instead as calculated, teleological actions. Oliver's identity here transforms into a "criminal mastermind" who possesses the competence to manipulate the social and physical reality of the Catton family.

The transition toward zero focalization is reinforced through the deployment of completing analepsis (flashbacks) (01:59:30-02:02:05). These flashbacks allows the audience to see all of Oliver's plans with unrestricted access to information that was previously "suppressed" by (Bordwell, 1985) strategy of restricted narration.

Oliver's identity, previously constructed as a marginalized subject (Act 1) and an ambiguous infiltrator (Act 2), finally reaches its endpoint as a dominant and predatory subject. Through this unrestricted narration, the audience's perception undergoes a total reorientation; the audience realizes that the identity they accepted in the beginning was a byproduct of selective knowledge management. This resolution act closes the narrative cycle by establishing Oliver's identity as the absolute ruler of *Saltburn* who has successfully subverted the class hierarchy through systematic identity engineering and criminal acts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the construction of Oliver Quick's identity in *Saltburn* (2023) is the result of systematic information management structured within three narrative acts. By integrating Gérard Genette's theory of focalization and David Bordwell's theory of information distribution, the research finds that the protagonist's identity is not static but transforms alongside shifts in the narrative perspective provided to the audience. In Act 1, restricted narration and internal focalization establish Oliver as a socially marginalized subject. In Act 2, the transition to external focalization and suppressed information deconstructs this premise, repositioning him as an unreliable narrator. Finally, in Act 3, unrestricted narration and zero focalization perform a total narrative reversal, deploying analepsis to reveal Oliver's criminal agency and his final identity as a dominant subject. The broader implications of these findings suggest that contemporary cinema increasingly relies on "narrative engineering" to challenge the audience's cognitive reception and moral judgment. This research emphasizes that character identity is not merely a product of characterization but a sophisticated result of regulating the flow of knowledge. Beyond the scope of this film, the study contributes to the field of film narratology by demonstrating how classical structural theories remain essential for decoding complex modern narratives that utilize identity as a tool for plot subversion. For future research, this analytical framework could be applied comparatively to other 'puzzle films' to identify broader structural patterns in narrative deception.

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