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An analysis of Miguel's family identity in Lee Unkrich's *Coco* (2017)

JERIKO PASSA BAKTI NUGROHO
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: jerikonugroho24@gmail.com

TRI PRAMESTI
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: tripramesti@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This study examines the family identity of Miguel Rivera as portrayed in the script of Coco (2017), written by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina. Two central questions guide the research: what conflicts Miguel faces in connection with his family identity, and how he comes to understand and discover his true family identity throughout the narrative. The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from Erik Erikson's framework of psychosocial development, with particular focus on the stage known as Identity vs. Role Confusion, which addresses the struggle between externally imposed roles and an individual's own developing sense of self.The study adopts a qualitative approach, employing content analysis as its method of inquiry. The data consist of selected dialogues, character actions, and narrative sequences taken directly from the script of Coco (2017), chosen for their relevance to Miguel's experience of family identity conflict and discovery. The scope of analysis is intentionally focused on Miguel Rivera as the central character, with other characters treated as supporting figures rather than independent subjects of study.Two primary findings emerge from the analysis. To begin with, Miguel's conflicts with his family identity follow an escalating pattern rooted in the Rivera family's long-standing prohibition of music, a prohibition that operates as a form of identity foreclosure, denying Miguel the space to explore who he genuinely is. These conflicts grow in intensity as the story progresses, moving from quiet suppression at home to conditional blessings that require Miguel to surrender his sense of self entirely. Additionally, Miguel's path toward understanding his family identity proves to be neither sudden nor solitary. It unfolds gradually through his relationships with Ernesto de la Cruz, Héctor, and his ancestors, each encounter dismantling a layer of the false identity he had constructed until he arrives at the truth: that his family identity was never built on the rejection of music, but on the quiet devotion of a man named Héctor who only ever wanted to go home.The study concludes that the script of Coco offers a nuanced and emotionally resonant portrayal of family identity formation, one that speaks directly to the concerns at the heart of Erikson's theoretical framework. Miguel's journey makes clear that a genuine sense of family identity is not something that can be inherited without question or escaped without consequence. It must be sought, tested, and ultimately chosen.

Keywords: Conflict, Family identity, Identity vs Role Confusion, Psychosocial Development

INTRODUCTION

Family identity is an important aspect in literary works because it reflects the values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives shared within a family and passed down from one generation to another. Family identity influences the way family members think, behave, communicate, and make decisions in their daily lives. In many literary works, family

identity is closely tied to traditions, expectations, and rules that every family member is expected to follow. These shared values can create a sense of belonging and unity, but they can also become a source of conflict when an individual holds desires or perspectives that differ from those of the family. As a result, the tension between personal interest and family expectation frequently emerges as a central issue in literary narratives, reflecting the complexity of relationships within a family (Hall, 1997). Family identity is also closely related to cultural values, since family traditions and beliefs are typically shaped by social and cultural backgrounds that continue to evolve over time (Woodward, 2002). This tension is particularly visible during adolescence. According to Santrock (2011), adolescence is a period marked by significant physical, cognitive, and socioemotional changes, during which individuals actively search for a sense of identity and belonging within their social environment. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory situates this process within the broader relationship between the individual and their social world, arguing that identity is closely tied to the surrounding environment, especially during adolescence, when individuals begin to question who they are and what position they occupy within family and society (Erikson, 1968). Erikson terms this stage Identity versus Role Confusion, in which adolescents attempt to reconcile personal desires with the expectations imposed by parents, family traditions, and broader social environments. Family, in particular, functions as the first social environment in which values, behavior, and emotional understanding are shaped, making family relationships central to the development of a stable sense of identity.

Coco (2017), written by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, dramatizes this conflict through the story of Miguel Rivera, a young boy with a strong passion for music whose family strictly forbids it because of a painful misunderstanding in the past. The Rivera family believes that Héctor, an ancestor, abandoned his wife and daughter to pursue a career in music, and this belief has hardened into a family identity that prioritizes loyalty and shoemaking over musical expression. Miguel, who secretly idolizes the musician Ernesto de la Cruz, is unable to openly pursue his passion, creating a conflict between his personal interests and the identity constructed by the Rivera family. This conflict intensifies when Miguel enters the Land of the Dead and discovers that Héctor never abandoned his family but was murdered by Ernesto de la Cruz, who stole his songs to build his own fame. This revelation reshapes Miguel's understanding of his family's history and gradually transforms the Rivera family's relationship with music, culminating in the moment Miguel helps Mama Coco remember Héctor by singing "Remember Me" (Unkrich & Molina, 2017).

Several previous studies have examined identity conflict in literary works from different angles. Baso (1998) found that identity conflict in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* grows out of the cultural and social forces surrounding the protagonist rather than beginning at home. Hidayat (2002) showed that social class and the perceptions of others can function as an externally imposed identity in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. Novemelia (2014) and Ismiati (2014) demonstrated that identity development in young protagonists is shaped as much by relationships and alternative figures as by individual self-discovery. Suriwati (2015) and Widyaningrum (2022) further argued that family and community expectations can function as the central obstacle in an identity journey, while Ramadhan (2023) highlighted the gap between the identity a person is handed and the identity they are quietly building for themselves. Taken together, these studies confirm that identity conflict remains one of the most enduring concerns in literary analysis. However, none of them examine family identity as a construct that operates across generations a shared

identity that a family builds around a wound and passes down as though it were simply the truth.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing Miguel Rivera's family identity conflict and discovery in the script of *Coco*, using Erik Erikson's theory of Identity versus Role Confusion. Specifically, this study aims to identify the conflicts Miguel experiences in relation to his family identity and to explain how he comes to understand and discover his true family identity throughout the narrative. In doing so, this study argues that the Rivera family's inherited identity built around the rejection of music functions as a form of identity foreclosure that Miguel must work through, rather than simply accept, in order to arrive at a more genuine understanding of who his family truly is.

LITERATURE RIVIEW

Characterization

Characterization is an important element in literary works because it helps readers understand the personality, behavior, and conflicts experienced by characters within a story. According to Abrams (1999), characterization is the way an author presents and reveals the traits of a character, either directly or indirectly, through actions, dialogue, and interaction with other characters. Kennedy (2007) similarly argues that characters can be analyzed through their speech, behavior, appearance, and the way other characters respond to them. Forster (1927) further distinguishes between flat characters, who remain unchanged throughout a story, and round characters, who are capable of growth and transformation. Miguel Rivera exemplifies a round character whose sense of identity develops significantly over the course of the narrative.

Characterization is also closely tied to conflict, since a character's behavior and personality shape the way they respond to situations and relationships within a story. Through characterization, readers gain access to a character's emotional struggles, desires, and perspectives, making it a central tool for analyzing how a character experiences conflict within family relationships and social environments. In the script of *Coco*, Miguel's characterization emerges through his dialogue, actions, and conflicts with the Rivera family (Unkrich & Molina, 2017). He is portrayed as passionate, curious, and determined, secretly nurturing his love of music out of fear of disappointing his family. This portrayal illustrates how family expectations can shape an individual's thoughts, behavior, and emotional condition.

Erik Erikson's Theory of Identity

According to Erikson (1968), identity development constitutes a crucial stage in human life, particularly during adolescence, a stage he terms Identity versus Role Confusion. During this stage, individuals attempt to understand who they are and what role they occupy within family and society. Identity, in Erikson's framework, is formed through social interaction, emotional experience, and relationships with the surrounding environment; individuals who successfully navigate this stage develop a stable sense of identity, while those who do not may experience role confusion and emotional conflict.

Building on Erikson's framework, Marcia (1966) identifies four identity statuses that describe how individuals navigate the process of identity formation: diffusion,

foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Miguel's early experience of having the identity of a shoemaker imposed on him without the opportunity for exploration reflects what Marcia describes as *foreclosure* an identity accepted prematurely, under external pressure, without genuine self-examination. Kroger (2007) further argues that identity development during adolescence is shaped not only by personal exploration but also by the social and familial context in which a young person grows up, suggesting that family plays a central role in either supporting or hindering the formation of a stable identity.

In relation to the script of *Coco*, Miguel's conflict reflects Erikson's theory precisely because it stages a struggle between personal passion and an inherited family identity. The Rivera family's rejection of music, rooted in a traumatic misunderstanding involving Héctor, has hardened into an identity imposed upon every family member, leaving Miguel to feel at odds with the very identity he is expected to carry. Miguel's journey through the story his gradual discovery of the truth about his family's history reflects the process by which foreclosed identity can be reopened and worked through. As he uncovers the misunderstanding at the root of his family's hatred of music, Miguel is able to reconcile his personal passion with his family's values, arriving at a more genuine and self-chosen sense of identity. Erikson's theory therefore provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing both the nature of Miguel's conflict and the process through which he comes to understand and discover his family identity.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design. This type of research focuses on analyzing data in the form of words, such as dialogues and narrative text, rather than numerical data, making it well suited to literary studies that examine family conflict, identity, and psychological aspects reflected in a literary work. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach that focuses on understanding meaning, context, and human experience through the analysis of words, images, and narratives.

This study applies a psychological approach, using Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development as its main analytical framework, particularly the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion. This approach is used to understand Miguel's family identity and the conflicts he experiences, as well as how family relationships, values, and expectations shape his understanding of himself and his family throughout the story.

Wellek and Warren (1956) argue that a psychological approach in literary analysis allows readers to examine the inner life of characters, their motivations, and the emotional conflicts that drive their actions.

The primary data source of this study is the script of *Coco*, particularly the dialogues and narrative sequences that depict Miguel's family conflict, family relationships, and evolving understanding of family identity. Secondary sources, including books, journals, and previous studies related to family identity, characterization, and Erikson's theory, are used to support the analysis. In this research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument, responsible for selecting, collecting, and interpreting the data based on Erikson's stage of Identity versus Role Confusion.

Data were collected using library research techniques, following four steps: (1) reading the script of *Coco* several times; (2) identifying dialogues and narrative parts that depict family conflict and family identity; (3) grouping the data according to Miguel's

experiences and conflicts throughout the story; and (4) selecting the most relevant data for analysis. The data were then analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis, following four steps: (1) explaining the context of each selected dialogue or narrative excerpt; (2) analyzing the conflicts Miguel experiences in relation to the Rivera family identity; (3) interpreting Miguel's understanding of family identity through the lens of Erikson's theory; and (4) drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of Miguel Rivera's family identity conflict and discovery in the script of *Coco* (2017). The discussion is organized around the two research questions guiding this study: the forms of conflict Miguel experiences in relation to his family identity, and the gradual process through which he comes to understand and discover his true family identity. The analysis draws on selected dialogues and narrative sequences from the script, interpreted through Erik Erikson's theory of Identity versus Role Confusion.

Miguel's Conflict in Relation to His Family Identity

Miguel Rivera is a twelve-year-old boy from Santa Cecilia whose family, the Riveras, has banned music for generations following the disappearance of Mamá Imelda's musician husband. While every member of the family has accepted this inherited identity without question, Miguel has grown up harboring a deep love of music that he has been forced to hide, and it is this gap between who his family needs him to be and who he truly is that gives rise to the conflicts examined in this section.

Abuelita: "No music!"

Miguel: "I think we're the only family in México who hates music... And my family's fine with that... But me? I am NOT like the rest of my family..." (Unkrich, 2017: 6–7).

When Abuelita shouts "No music," she is not simply enforcing a household rule; she is, without realizing it, telling a twelve-year-old boy that the most honest part of who he is has no place in the family he was born into. Miguel's quiet admission that he is not like the rest of his family is the first true thing he says in the story, and it points directly to the crisis Erikson describes in the stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion, in which a young person begins to sense that the identity handed to them by their environment does not fit. Rather than being allowed to grow openly into who he is, Miguel is left to wear two faces the obedient Rivera son on the outside, and someone else entirely within.

This suppression follows him beyond the home. When Abuelita finds him at Mariachi Plaza, she does not ask what he was doing there; she simply announces, with total confidence, that her grandson wants nothing to do with music, while Tío Berto adds a warning that treats musicians in a public square as something dangerous rather than joyful (Unkrich, 2017: 13–14). Miguel's reply, "Yes, Tío Berto," is the response of someone who has learned that agreement is the fastest way out. Erikson would recognize this pattern of repeated suppression as a direct contributor to role confusion, since what is shut down each time is not a passing interest but a core part of who Miguel actually is.

The family's expectations are reinforced through ritual as well as rule. During the Día de los Muertos preparations, Papá leads Miguel through a familiar call-and-response "You

are a Rivera. And a Rivera is...?" to which Miguel answers, "...A shoemaker. Through and through" (Unkrich, 2017: 23) Miguel does not say this the way someone says something they believe; he says it the way someone fills in a blank because that is what the blank requires. This is what Erikson terms *foreclosure* a condition in which a young person's identity is decided for them before they are given any chance to decide it for themselves. The tragedy is not that Papá is unkind, but that he genuinely believes he is passing something valuable down to his son, when he is in fact closing a door Miguel has been quietly trying to push open his whole life.

The tension finally breaks open when Abuelita discovers that Miguel has been carving musical notes into the shoes he makes:

Miguel: "I'm gonna be a musician!"

Abuelita: "You want to end up like that man? Forgotten? Left off your family's ofrenda?!"

Miguel: "I don't care if I'm on some stupid ofrenda!"

Abuelita: "There. No guitar, no music."

Miguel: "I don't wanna be in this family!" (Unkrich, 2017: 25–27).

Abuelita's question about being forgotten reveals that the family's fear has never truly been about music itself, but about the man who left and the terror of history repeating itself. Miguel's final words are pulled from a boy who has simply run out of ways to be both himself and a Rivera at the same time the most acute expression of role confusion, the moment the gap between assigned identity and felt identity becomes too wide to keep pretending it is not there.

This wall follows Miguel even into the Land of the Dead, where he meets the very ancestors who built the ban:

Mamá Imelda: "Don't make this hard, mijo. You go home my way, or no way."

Miguel: "You really hate music that much?"

Mamá Imelda: "I will not let you go down the same path he did." (Unkrich, 2017: 46–47).

Miguel's question is not a challenge but an exhausted attempt to understand something that has never made sense to him. Mamá Imelda's answer reveals more than she intends she is not talking about music, but about the fear that abandonment could happen again, and the ban is simply the wall she built to prevent it. The rest of the family falls into line without question, offering instructions rather than reasons, which is exactly how a closed identity system sustains itself across generations. In Erikson's framework, this complete absence of any supportive figure within the family is one of the most damaging conditions a young person in crisis can face.

Later, when Miguel confronts Mamá Imelda directly, his anger begins to shift into something closer to grief:

Miguel: "You're ruining my life! Music's the only thing that makes me happy... But I don't wanna pick sides! Why can't you be on MY side? That's what family's supposed to do, support you." (Unkrich, 2017: 80–81).

Miguel no longer sees his musical identity and his family identity as two things that cannot coexist; he wants both, and is finally brave enough to say so — one of the clearest

signs, in Erikson's framework, that a young person is moving toward resolving their identity crisis, not by choosing one side, but by imagining a version of themselves large enough to hold everything they love.

This search for belonging leads Miguel to Ernesto de la Cruz, whom he believes to be his true ancestor:

Miguel: "Did you ever regret it? Choosing music over... everything else... Leaving your family?"

De la Cruz: "Sí. But I could not have done it differently... You and I, we are artists, Miguel! We cannot belong to one family. The world is our family!" (Unkrich, 2017: 88–89).

De la Cruz's grand declaration is not a resolution to Miguel's identity conflict but an escape from it an invitation to silence the part of Miguel that still loves his family by insisting that loving them was always the wrong instinct. Erikson would see this as one of the most dangerous points in an unresolved identity crisis, where exhaustion tempts a young person to sever one part of themselves rather than do the harder work of holding both together.

The conflict reaches its lowest point when Héctor reveals that de la Cruz built his legacy on stolen songs:

Héctor: "Those were MY songs you took. MY songs that made YOU famous."

Miguel: "But I'm your family!"

De la Cruz: "And Héctor was my best friend." (Unkrich, 2017: 91–96).

For Miguel, this is not merely a betrayal but a collapse. The Rivera identity never fit him, and the de la Cruz identity which had felt like finally breathing is now gone as well. Erikson describes the deepest point of an identity crisis as the moment when every available identity has been tried and found wanting, leaving the young person with nothing to hold onto. That is precisely where Miguel stands at the end of this scene, stripped of both the family he was born into and the family he chose.

Miguel's Understanding and Discovery of His Family Identity

Miguel's journey toward discovering his true family identity is neither immediate nor solitary. It unfolds gradually through a series of encounters that dismantle the false identity he had constructed around Ernesto de la Cruz and replace it with a truer, harder-won understanding of who his family really is.

Visiting His Idol's Tomb. Standing alone in de la Cruz's mausoleum, Miguel admits what he has never said openly at home: ″Our family thinks music is a curse. None of them understand, but I know you would have... To seize my moment!" (Unkrich, 2017: 29–30). This marks the first time Miguel reaches toward an identity of his own choosing rather than simply resisting the one imposed on him what Erikson would recognize as the opening move of identity exploration.

Entering the Land of the Dead. Upon crossing over, Miguel meets his ancestors directly rather than through family stories alone. Tía Rosita's affectionate greeting "We're your

family, mijo!" (Unkrich, 2017: 33–34) affirms the Rivera family's enduring values of unity and affection even beyond death, while Tía Victoria's suspicion that Miguel's arrival is connected to an unresolved issue marks the beginning of a deeper reckoning with where he truly belongs.

Meeting Ernesto de la Cruz. When Miguel finally asks de la Cruz for his blessing, his introduction leads not with confidence but with need: "The rest of our family, they wouldn't listen. But I... I hoped you would?" De la Cruz responds without hesitation: "My boy, with a talent like yours, how could I not listen?" (Unkrich, 2017: 85–86). For a boy who has spent his life being told to hide his most authentic part, this effortless acceptance feels ike being offered the family identity the Riveras never gave him though his warmth, as later scenes reveal, is not what it appears to be.

Confronting Héctor. When Héctor reveals that he once played music alongside de la Cruz, Miguel refuses to believe it: "You don't know what you're talking about..." (Unkrich, 2017: 68). His denial reflects less loyalty to de la Cruz than a need to preserve the identity he has built around that belief. From Erikson's perspective, this marks the point at which Miguel begins to question the assumptions that have guided his self-concept.

Discovering Héctor Is Family. The turning point arrives when Miguel recognizes Héctor in an old photograph:

Miguel: "That's my Mamá Coco. That's my Mamá Imelda. Is that... you?"

Héctor: "We're... ...family?"

Miguel: "My whole life, there's been something that made me different... and I never knew where it came from. But now I know. It comes from you. I'm proud we're family!" (Unkrich, 2017: 99–100).

This is the moment of what Erikson calls identity achievement the point at which Miguel's long process of questioning and exploration resolves into a clear understanding of who he is and where he belongs.

Requesting Mamá Imelda's Blessing. Rather than rejecting either side of his family history, Miguel works to unite them, insisting that Héctor be remembered despite his absence: "You don't have to forgive him... But we shouldn't forget him." Mamá Imelda's admission "I wanted to forget you" followed by Miguel's simple reply, "Family comes first" (Unkrich, 2017: 105–106), demonstrates the development of fidelity: a commitment to the values and relationships that define him, complexity and all.

Discovering His Family Identity. The story resolves when Héctor and Mamá Imelda give Miguel their blessing with no conditions attached (Unkrich, 2017: 121), and Miguel returns home to sing "Remember Me" to Mamá Coco, restoring Héctor's place within the family's memory: "These aren't just old pictures, they're our family, and they're counting on us to remember them" (Unkrich, 2017: 123–127). Music, once forbidden, becomes the very means by which the family's memory and identity are restored. Rather than opposing

his family, Miguel uses his passion to strengthen it demonstrating that his love of music and his loyalty to the Riveras were never conflicting identities, but complementary parts of who he is.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Miguel Rivera navigates his family identity in the script of *Coco* (2017), with particular attention to two central concerns: the conflicts that arise between Miguel and his family over the course of the story, and the gradual process through which he comes to recognize and embrace his true family identity. The analysis was guided by Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, with emphasis on the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion.

With regard to the first research question, the study found that Miguel's conflicts with his family identity do not appear all at once but build steadily from the very beginning of the narrative. The Rivera household, shaped by a deeply rooted ban on music, leaves Miguel in a constant state of tension between what his family expects of him and what he feels within himself. He is pulled away from Mariachi Plaza, made to recite a family identity he does not believe in, and ultimately watches his guitar destroyed in front of him. Blessings are offered, but only on the condition that he surrenders music entirely. This escalating pattern reflects what Erikson terms role confusion a state in which a young person cannot reconcile the identity handed to them with the one growing inside them. The breaking point arrives when Miguel discovers that de la Cruz, the man he believed to be his true ancestor and the anchor of his musical identity, had built his entire legacy on stolen songs and betrayal.

With regard to the second research question, the study found that Miguel arrives at an understanding of his family identity not through a single dramatic revelation, but through a series of encounters that gradually reshape how he sees himself and where he comes from. His decision to enter de la Cruz's mausoleum marks the moment he first steps beyond the boundaries his family set for him. From there, his journey through the Land of the Dead becomes a process of uncovering the truth meeting Héctor, learning of his true lineage, and eventually standing before Mamá Imelda not as a boy running from his family, but as one fighting to hold it together. When he finally sings to Mamá Coco and restores Héctor's place within the family's memory, Miguel demonstrates what Erikson calls fidelity: a wholehearted commitment to values that a person has chosen for themselves rather than had chosen for them. His love of music and his love of family, the analysis shows, were never truly in conflict.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that *Coco* portrays family identity not as something inherited passively or accepted without question, but as something that must be examined, tested, and ultimately reaffirmed through understanding. Miguel's journey, read through Erikson's framework, illustrates that a genuine sense of family identity begins with confronting the truth of where one comes from, and that authentic belonging emerges only when individual identity and family legacy are allowed to coexist rather than compete.

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