

Opportunistic Behaviors of Harlan Family in Knives Out (2019): Oliver E. Williamson's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the opportunistic behavior of the Harlan family in the film *Knives Out* (2019) through the theoretical framework of Oliver E. Williamson's concept of opportunism. The research aims to identify the indicators, manifestations, and motivations behind opportunistic actions depicted in the film. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the analysis draws from primary data in the form of scenes and dialogues, supported by secondary data from literature and theoretical reviews. The findings reveal that opportunistic behaviors in the Harlan family are driven by economic dependency, greed, and information asymmetry. Key indicators include manipulation, deceit, and exploitation of trust, as seen in Ransom's framing of Marta to nullify the will and Walt's coercion using Marta's mother's immigration status. The study demonstrates the relevance of Williamson's theory in analyzing fictional narratives, offering a unique interdisciplinary perspective. However, the research is limited to this theoretical approach and film, suggesting opportunities for future studies to explore psychological or sociological dimensions of opportunism in other works. This research highlights how cinematic storytelling can reflect complex human behaviors and ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: Opportunism, *Knives Out*, Economic Dependency, Information Asymmetry.

1. Introduction

Literature is a form of human expression that can be written or oral works reflecting life and social reality through imaginative language. According to (Arafah in Angelia, F., & Widyaningrum, 2024) Literature is a written work by its author which has artistic value. According to (Sumardjo in Lafamane, 2020) Literary works are an attempt to record the contents of the writer's soul, this recording uses language tools. Literature is a form of recording with language that will be conveyed to others. A literary work is a story, narrative, or experience that is presented as a reflection of life. (Simaremare et al., 2023).

Not only as a language art, literature is also a reflection of real life. In its development, the film is a piece of literary work. Films allow viewers to more easily identify the emotions and actions of characters through the narrative presented. According to (Klarer in Susiati, 2019) films can be categorized as a semi-text genre that is not only influenced by literature but also influences literature and literary criticism. Techniques found in films such as camera angles, editing, montage, and slow

and fast motion are often parallel to the characteristics of literary texts and can be explained within a textual framework. Many films try to expose conflicts and issues that occur in everyday life, including opportunistic behavior that we often encounter in political, social, and economic life. Literature can be said to be a representation of society that is formed and forms the values that exist in society (Rahmayani, 2023). *Knives Out* is one example of a film that is very appropriate for this phenomenon. This film raises a social phenomenon that commonly appears in society, namely the issue of inheritance. The issue of inheritance often gives rise to various forms of conflict between family members. This conflict is often marked by tension in personal relationships and a struggle for interests. In this context, the film highlights the opportunistic behavior that arises when individuals or groups take advantage of situations or information that is not evenly distributed among the parties involved.

Human behavior is often considered difficult to understand. However, many experts provide in-depth explanations of human behavior. One interesting view comes from the famous psychologist, B.F. Skinner defines behavior as a response produced by a particular stimulus and controlled by the consequences that follow the response. (Skinner, 1938). According to Levitis et al. (2009), behavior is a coordinated response that occurs internally (either through action or not) in all living things, both individuals and groups, to internal and external stimuli. However, this response does not include changes that are easier to understand as part of long-term growth or change. In general, behavior includes all actions, responses, or reactions shown by individuals in their interactions with the environment. Skinner classifies human behavior into two types. First, is respondent behavior, which is a reflex action that appears as an automatic response to a particular stimulus. Second, is operant behavior, which is behavior that is formed through the learning process, where individuals act to obtain the desired consequences. Behavior plays a very important role because most adult human actions fall into this category, which is influenced by behavioral contingencies, namely the causal relationship between a particular action and the consequences it produces. Opportunism and behavior are closely related, especially in the context of individual or group actions to pursue personal interests.

Opportunism is a form of behavior that arises as a result of interaction with certain conditions, such as information imbalance (Williamson, 1977). Opportunism is a self-interested assumption. This is not only a matter of self-interest, but opportunists tend to seek self-interest through deception or even manipulation (Williamson, 1996). Opportunistic behavior is often found in various fields, such as economics, sociology, and psychology, because it usually appears in situations that are full of competition, involve trust, or an imbalance of power. Although this behavior is often encountered in everyday life, studies of opportunism in family relationships, especially in fiction, are still rare. The family can be considered a small picture of the wider society. Therefore, stories about families in films or novels are very suitable as material for studying opportunistic behavior. Williamson explains several important things about the theory of opportunism. First, opportunism often occurs when there is an imbalance of information. This means that people who have more information will usually use it for personal gain. Second, this behavior can be recognized by acts of manipulation, lies, and betrayal of trust. Third, opportunism often occurs in relationships where there is an imbalance of power or dependence of one party on the other. According to (Williamson, 1993), rather than responding to opportunistic behavior in the same way, a wise person will try to give and receive a commitment that can be trusted. In film analysis, this theory is very relevant. Films, as a form of a fictional story, present characters, and

settings that can be analyzed through opportunism theory. Characters in films are often depicted as having various personal interests and making decisions that are influenced by the situations around them. The setting in the film also plays an important role because it can create conditions that trigger opportunistic behavior, such as an imbalance of power or economic dependence. In other words, Williamson's theory provides a precise way to understand how opportunistic behavior develops in a story and how it shapes conflict and the course of the story.

The film *Knives Out* (2019), directed by Rian Johnson, offers a compelling portrayal of opportunistic behavior within the Harlan family. Set against the backdrop of a mysterious death and a contentious inheritance battle, the film showcases how individuals exploit trust, manipulate information, and act dishonestly for personal gain. Each family member, driven by greed and entitlement, becomes embroiled in a web of deceit, revealing the darker aspects of human nature. Despite its critical acclaim and nuanced storytelling, the opportunistic tendencies of the Harlan family remain largely unexplored through the lens of economic theory.

Over the years, *Knives Out* has been analyzed from various perspectives. For example, Devi & Degaf (2021) Explore commissive speech acts, such as promises, refusals, and threats, to understand how they contribute to the narrative. Sandberg (2020) Examines the nostalgic elements in the film, focusing on the revival of the Golden Age mystery genre as a form of social critique. Husien & Nurhidayat (2022) Use a Marxist framework to analyze the social mobility and class struggle depicted in the film. Gonzalez (2023) Highlights the role of the setting as a narrative device that shapes character dynamics and plot development. Meanwhile, Szeljack (2023) Analyzes the visual language of social class through elements of chaos and order in the film's *mise-en-scène*, revealing socioeconomic disparities. Davis (2023) Explores the social commentary in the film, highlighting how societal issues are integrated into the narrative. Basid et al. (2021) Analyze sentence structure using Charles J. Fillmore's Case Grammar, which provides insight into the use of language in the film. Tamrin et al. (2022) Examine maxim non-compliance in conversation, showing how these violations create deep conversational implicatures. Gunatika et al. (2021) Also analyze types of maxim non-compliance, focusing on flouting as the dominant form used by the characters. Ananta (2021) Explores the use of police language and narrative in the context of forensic linguistics, highlighting how investigative language is used to develop plot and character. Rifansa (2021) Uses a postcolonial approach to analyze the practice of "othering" Hispanic characters, revealing how the film reflects socio-political tensions related to ethnic discrimination in the United States.

While these studies contribute significantly to the discourse on *Knives Out*, they predominantly focus on linguistic, socio-political, and aesthetic dimensions. None have applied Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism a framework traditionally used in organizational and economic studies to analyze character behavior in the film. This gap highlights the need for a fresh approach that bridges economic theory with literary analysis, offering new insights into the dynamics of opportunistic behavior in fictional narratives.

The Harlan family's internal conflict presents a unique opportunity to apply Williamson's theory of opportunism in a novel context. The family's dependence on Harlan's wealth, coupled with their willingness to deceive and manipulate one another, mirrors real-world scenarios where individuals exploit asymmetrical information and trust for personal gain. The film serves as a microcosm of societal dynamics, making it a fertile ground for examining how opportunistic behavior unfolds in complex relational settings.

This research not only fills a gap in the literature but also extends the applicability of Williamson's theory beyond its traditional domains. By analyzing the Harlan family's actions, the study offers a multidisciplinary perspective that integrates economic theory with narrative analysis,

enriching both fields and providing a deeper understanding of opportunism in fictional and real-life contexts.

The core concept of this research revolves around the application of Williamson's theory of opportunism to analyze the behavior of the Harlan family in *Knives Out*. Williamson's theory identifies key indicators of opportunistic behavior, such as the exploitation of information asymmetry, manipulation of facts, and breach of trust. These indicators serve as analytical tools for examining the characters' actions and interactions within the narrative.

This study focuses on identifying how these indicators manifest in the film, exploring the motivations behind each character's actions. By doing so, it sheds light on the ethical dilemmas and power dynamics inherent in opportunistic behavior. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the broader implications of such behavior, highlighting its relevance in understanding trust, relationships, and decision-making in both fictional and real-world scenarios.

This research seeks to achieve three primary objectives: To identify the indicators of opportunistic behavior in *Knives Out* using Williamson's theory as a framework.; To analyze the portrayal of opportunistic behavior through the actions and decisions of the Harlan family members.; To explore the underlying motivations, such as economic dependence, greed, and information asymmetry, driving the Harlan family's behavior.

The urgency of this research lies in its potential to bridge economic theory and literary studies, providing a fresh perspective on a well-studied film. Opportunism, though widely studied in organizational contexts, remains underexplored in narrative settings. This study not only contributes to the field of literary analysis but also enriches economic discourse by demonstrating the versatility of Williamson's framework.

By analyzing the Harlan family's behavior, this research highlights the ethical and relational consequences of opportunism, offering valuable insights for understanding trust and decision-making. These findings are particularly relevant in today's context, where familial and societal dynamics are increasingly influenced by economic pressures and individualistic tendencies.

The analysis is grounded in both primary and secondary data. Primary data includes dialogue, scenes, and character interactions from the film, while secondary data comprises existing literature on opportunism and previous studies on *Knives Out*. Key scenes, such as the revelation of Harlan's will and the characters' subsequent actions, provide a rich basis for examining the indicators of opportunistic behavior. Supporting literature, such as Williamson's seminal works on transaction cost economics, further validates the theoretical framework used in this study.

This research introduces a novel approach by applying Williamson's theory to a narrative setting, specifically a family drama embedded in a mystery-thriller film. While previous studies have analyzed opportunism in economic and organizational contexts, this study extends the theory's applicability to literary and cinematic analysis. The integration of economic and narrative analysis offers a unique contribution to both fields, highlighting the interconnectedness of ethical behavior, power dynamics, and storytelling.

The significance of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of opportunism by demonstrating its relevance in narrative settings. Practically, it provides insights into the ethical and relational consequences of opportunistic behavior, offering lessons applicable to real-life scenarios. By analyzing the Harlan family's actions, the study underscores the importance of trust and ethical decision-making in navigating complex interpersonal relationships.

This study contributes to the fields of literary studies, economic theory, and social psychology by offering a multidisciplinary perspective on opportunism. It demonstrates how economic concepts can be applied to analyze fictional narratives, enriching both theoretical and practical understanding.

The findings also provide a basis for future research, encouraging scholars to explore the intersection of economics and literature in other narrative contexts.

Beyond academic contributions, this research has broader implications for understanding human behavior and decision-making. Highlighting the ethical dilemmas and relational dynamics inherent in opportunism, it encourages a more nuanced view of trust and power in both personal and societal contexts. The findings are relevant not only for scholars but also for practitioners in fields such as organizational behavior, ethics, and conflict resolution.

This introduction provides a comprehensive overview of the research, addressing its problem statement, theoretical foundation, objectives, and significance. By bridging economic theory and literary analysis, this study offers a unique perspective on opportunism in fictional narratives, contributing to a deeper understanding of human behavior and its implications in various contexts.

2. Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical approach utilizing qualitative methods. Qualitative research, as defined by Strauss & Corbin (2008), involves the interpretation of non-numerical data to explore the underlying meaning and patterns in the subject of study. Meanwhile, (Sugiono in Harahap, 2020) Stated that qualitative research is research that is used to examine the conditions of natural objects, where researchers are key instruments. This approach is suitable for examining the opportunistic behavior of the Harlan family as depicted in *Knives Out* (2019). The study integrates Oliver E. Williamson's opportunism theory as the primary theoretical framework, focusing on the exploitation of information asymmetry, manipulation of facts, and breach of trust within the narrative. This research was conducted for 4 months, from September to December.

The rationale for using a qualitative descriptive approach is based on the research objectives, which aim to explore and analyze nuanced human behaviors and interactions depicted in the film. The chosen methods allow for in-depth exploration of dialogue, character development, and visual elements, aligning with the study's objective to uncover the underlying motives and dynamics of opportunistic behavior.

The scope of this study focuses on analyzing the film *Knives Out*, directed by Rian Johnson, with particular attention to its narrative, characters, and thematic elements. The formal object of the study is opportunistic behavior, interpreted through Williamson's theory, which emphasizes the economic, social, and ethical dimensions of opportunism. Data collection involved two primary sources: primary data derived directly from the film, including character dialogue, monologues, and key scenes depicting opportunistic actions, and secondary data obtained from relevant literature, such as journal articles, books, and online resources discussing *Knives Out* and opportunism theory.

To collect and organize data, several techniques were employed. First, a detailed film analysis was conducted by repeatedly watching *Knives Out* to capture nuances in dialogue, character interactions, and visual storytelling. Key scenes exemplifying opportunistic behavior such as the reading of Harlan's will and the subsequent interactions among family members were selected and analyzed. Observations and thematic patterns were documented through note-taking. Additionally, a literature review was performed to examine prior studies on the film and opportunism theory, thereby identifying gaps and providing a context for the current analysis.

The study ensured the validity and reliability of its findings through triangulation, which involves cross-verifying data using multiple sources, theories, and methods. Specifically, source triangulation was applied by comparing insights from the film with academic literature and expert

analyses, while method triangulation was achieved by integrating qualitative analysis with theoretical evaluation. This approach aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The data analysis followed qualitative research principles, emphasizing interpretation and contextualization. Key steps included thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to opportunistic behavior, character analysis focusing on the actions and motivations of key characters (e.g., Ransom, Linda, Walt, and Joni) through the lens of Williamson's theory, and scene analysis to explore pivotal moments that highlight opportunistic actions and their impact on the narrative. Finally, an interpretative process was conducted to connect the film's portrayal of opportunism with theoretical concepts.

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, which, combined with Williamson's theory, ensures a thorough analysis of the research problem. This methodology captures the complexities of human behavior while also highlighting broader societal implications of opportunism, particularly in familial contexts. However, the study is not without limitations. Due to the interpretative nature of qualitative analysis, subjectivity may introduce biases. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on *Knives Out* limits the generalizability of the findings to other narratives or contexts. Lastly, reliance on secondary data for theoretical validation may constrain the depth of the analysis. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the depiction of opportunistic behavior in film and its relevance to theoretical frameworks.

This methodology section presents a structured approach to examining opportunistic behavior in *Knives Out*. Through the integration of qualitative methods and a robust theoretical framework, the study establishes a solid foundation for ensuring the validity and reliability of its findings, providing meaningful insights into the interplay between economic theories, ethical considerations, and narrative storytelling.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Result

This chapter presents the findings and critical analysis of opportunistic behavior depicted in the Harlan family in *Knives Out* (2019) based on Oliver E. Williamson's opportunism theory. The data is presented in subsections, accompanied by figures and tables for clarity. Here the writer uses two qualitative data, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data comes from several dialogues and scenes. Secondary data comes from relevant literature, including journal articles, books, and online sources, especially those discussing *Knives Out*, opportunism theory, and related economic and sociological concepts.

Table 1. Data classification based on source:

| Dialogues | Scenes |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Linda's Dependency on Harlan's Financial Support (Scene 01:13:57)• Walt threatens Marta with deportation (01:27:11). | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ransom exploiting knowledge of the will (01:19:17)• Richard lying about the family's financial independence (00:08:03)• Joni stealing from Harlan by double-dipping tuition fees (00:20:37)• Linda's Dependency on Harlan's Financial Support (Scene 01:13:57) |

| | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Richard lies to the police about his family's self-reliance and hides his dependence on Linda (00:08:03). • The Harlan Family's Outrage at Marta's Inheritance (Scene 01:11:19) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swaps medication labels to implicate Marta in Harlan's death (01:49:25). • Walt threatens Marta with deportation (01:27:11). • Richard lies to the police about his family's self-reliance and hides his dependence on Linda (00:08:03). • Meg attempts to guilt Marta into returning the inheritance to the family (01:20:50). • Joni embezzles Harlan's school payments for Meg's tuition while maintaining a façade of honesty (00:20:37). • Joni pretends to support Marta to regain her favor and influence (01:12:14). • Walt is Fully dependent on managing Harlan's publishing company (00:16:50) • Relies on the inheritance due to lack of personal income (01:49:37) • Relies on Harlan to fund Meg's education through double-dipping (00:20:37) • Relies on Linda's inheritance due to a prenuptial agreement (01:14:00) • Relies on Harlan's financial support for her education (01:20:50) • The Harlan Family's Outrage at Marta's Inheritance (01:11:19) |
|--|--|

3.1.1. Indicators of Opportunistic Behavior

Opportunistic behaviors in the film are categorized into three key indicators as derived from Williamson's framework: exploitation of information asymmetry, changing facts and lying, and breaching promises or fraud.

Table 2. displays three primary indicators of opportunistic behavior observed in the film *Knives Out*.

| Indicator | Scene | Description |
|--|--|---|
| Exploitation of Information Asymmetry | Ransom exploiting knowledge of the will (01:19:17) | Ransom uses his knowledge to manipulate Marta and alter |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| | | perceptions of guilt. |
| Changing Facts and Lying | Richard lying about the family's financial independence (00:08:03) | Richard misrepresents the family's reliance on Harlan to maintain their reputation. |
| Breaching Promises and Fraud | Joni stealing from Harlan by double-dipping tuition fees (00:20:37) | Joni embezzles funds from Harlan under the pretense of education expenses. |

3.1.2 Indicators of Opportunistic Behavior

Characters from the Harlan family exhibit distinct manifestations of opportunistic behavior:

1. Linda Drysdale

Hides her dependency on Harlan's financial support while projecting an image of independence.

Example Scene: Linda's business is revealed to have been built using Harlan's million-dollar loan (01:13:57).



Picture 2.1 (Scene 01:13:57)

*Marta : He wanted you to build something from the ground up, like your parents.
Ransom : something from the ground up, like my parents. yeah. My mom built her business from the ground up with a million-dollar loan from granddad.*

Figure 1. Linda's Dependency on Harlan's Financial Support (Scene 01:13:57)

In this scene, Ransom unveils the truth about Linda's so-called "self-made" success, stating that her business was built with a substantial financial loan from her father, Harlan. This revelation starkly contradicts Linda's public image of being an independent and self-reliant businesswoman who achieved success on her own merits. Linda's carefully cultivated persona as a self-made individual masks her financial reliance on her father's wealth, underscoring her opportunistic tendencies. This dependence is further highlighted by her sense of entitlement when the inheritance is given to Marta, suggesting that her financial achievements and stability were more a product of privilege than personal effort. The scene sheds light on the complex dynamics within the Thrombey family, where the economic dependency on Harlan underpins the opportunistic behavior of its members. Linda's actions exemplify the subtle exploitation of familial resources while maintaining a façade of independence, a hallmark of the opportunism explored in Oliver E. Williamson's theoretical framework.

2. Ransom Drysdale

Manipulates facts about Harlan's death and attempts to frame Marta.

Example Scene: Swaps medication labels to implicate Marta in Harlan's death (01:49:25).



Figure 2. Ransom's Manipulation of Medication Labels (Scene 01:49:25)

In this scene, Ransom meticulously swaps Harlan's medication labels in a calculated attempt to frame Marta for Harlan's death. By exploiting his knowledge of Harlan's medical treatment and the inheritance details, Ransom crafts a sinister plan to ensure that Marta appears responsible for administering the wrong medication, thus activating the "slayer rule," which would invalidate her inheritance. This act underscores Ransom's opportunistic and manipulative nature, as he uses deception and asymmetric information to create a narrative that benefits him at the expense of others. His calculated actions reveal a deep sense of entitlement and greed, as he is willing to risk Marta's livelihood and reputation to reclaim what he perceives as rightfully his. This pivotal moment exemplifies Williamson's theory of opportunism, highlighting how individuals may exploit gaps in information and trust to achieve personal gain, regardless of ethical considerations or the harm caused to others.

3. Walt Thrombey

Exploits Marta's vulnerable position by threatening her with her mother's immigration status to pressure her into relinquishing the inheritance.

Example Scene: Walt threatens Marta with deportation (01:27:11).





Walt : And we want to protect you. You see what this kicks up with the press and the scrutiny, and we know... with your mother...
Marta : ...with my mother. What did Meg tell you.
Walt : This isn't about who - you're missing the point, we're not attacking you with this. Marta if your mom came here illegally, criminally, if you come into this inheritance with the scrutiny that entails I'd be afraid that could come to light. That's what we're all trying to avoid here. We can protect you from that happening, or if it happens.

Figure 3. Marta's Emotional Response to Walt's Threats (Scene 01:27:11)

In this pivotal scene, Walt discovers that Marta's mother is an undocumented immigrant and uses this sensitive information as leverage to manipulate Marta into relinquishing her inheritance. Walt, aware of Marta's vulnerable position and her deep concern for her family, subtly threatens her with the potential exposure of her mother's illegal status, which could result in deportation. By couching his threat in the guise of offering "protection," Walt attempts to frame his manipulative behavior as a concern for Marta's well-being. His calculated approach, however, reveals his true intent: to pressure Marta into giving up her inheritance and returning the wealth to the Thrombey family. This exploitative act not only underscores Walt's opportunistic behavior but also highlights his willingness to exploit the asymmetry of information for personal gain, disregarding the emotional and ethical implications for Marta and her family. This scene exemplifies Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism, where self-interest manifests through deceptive and manipulative actions, especially in situations of power imbalance.

4. Richard Drysdale

Lies about his family's financial independence and conceals his infidelity to maintain his position. Example Scene: Richard lies to the police about his family's self-reliance and hides his dependence on Linda (00:08:03).



Picture 2.3 (Scene 00:08:03)
Lieutenant Elliott : Seems like all his kids are self-made overachievers.
Richard : ...Sure

Figure 4. Richard's Lies About Family Independence (Scene 00:08:03)

In this scene, Richard deceives Lieutenant Elliott by agreeing with the claim that all Harlan's children are "self-made overachievers." This deliberate misrepresentation conceals the family's financial reliance on Harlan, including Richard's dependency on his wife, Linda, due to their prenuptial agreement. Richard's opportunism is further exposed through his refusal to confess his infidelity to Linda despite Harlan's insistence, as seen in later scenes. This deceit underscores Richard's manipulative nature and his inability to confront truths that would jeopardize his financial security and social standing. His actions reveal a pattern of exploitation, where he uses his relationship with Linda to maintain his lifestyle, aligning with Williamson's view of opportunism as self-interest that manifests through manipulation and dishonesty.

5. Meg Thrombey

Manipulates Marta by appealing to her morality and leaks sensitive information about Marta's mother.

Example Scene: Meg attempts to guilt Marta into returning the inheritance to the family (01:20:50).



Figure 5. Meg's Manipulation of Marta's Guilt (Scene 01:20:50)

In this scene, Meg appeals to Marta's morality and guilt, leveraging her family's financial struggles to convince Marta that returning the inheritance is the "right" thing to do. She highlights her dire situation, mentioning that her mother is broke and she may have to drop out of school. However, her apparent support for Marta is revealed to be insincere when it becomes clear that she also leaked sensitive information about Marta's mother's undocumented immigration status to Walt, enabling him to use it as a coercive threat. Meg's opportunistic behavior demonstrates how

she manipulates relationships to achieve personal and familial gain, reflecting Williamson's theory of opportunism through the exploitation of emotional and informational vulnerabilities.

6. Joni Thrombey

Joni is Harlan's daughter-in-law who engages in opportunistic behavior by embezzling funds and manipulating relationships. She exploits Harlan's trust by double-dipping her daughter Meg's tuition payments and later feigns support for Marta to serve her interests.

Example Scene: Joni embezzles Harlan's school payments for Meg's tuition while maintaining a façade of honesty (00:20:37).



Figure 6. Joni's Embezzlement of Tuition Payments (Scene 00:20:37)

In this scene, Harlan confronts Joni about her fraudulent behavior after discovering that she has been accepting tuition payments twice—once directly from Harlan and once from his office wiring funds to the school. Her deceptive actions, totaling \$100,000 annually over four years, are an example of her abuse of Harlan's trust for personal financial gain. Despite being caught, Joni attempts to downplay her actions by framing them as a “mix-up,” revealing her unwillingness to take responsibility. This act of betrayal exemplifies Williamson's concept of opportunism, where individuals prioritize personal benefit through deceit and manipulation, regardless of its impact on others.

Example Scene: Joni pretends to support Marta to regain her favor and influence (01:12:14).



Figure 6.1 Joni's Manipulation of Marta (Scene 01:12:14)

In this scene, after the family learns that Marta is the sole heir to Harlan's estate, Joni approaches Marta with an insincere attempt at solidarity. She suggests that Marta contact her privately on social media, pretending to care about Marta's situation while aiming to manipulate her into returning the inheritance. Joni's calculated friendliness contrasts sharply with her earlier dismissal of Marta, demonstrating her opportunistic ability to shift allegiances when it benefits

her. This behavior highlights Joni's willingness to exploit relationships for personal gain, further aligning with Williamson's theory of opportunism by leveraging emotional manipulation to achieve her objectives.

3.1.3 Motives Behind Opportunistic Behavior

The opportunistic behavior exhibited by the Harlan family in *Knives Out* (2019) stems from three primary motives: economic dependency, greed and entitlement, and information asymmetry. With the existence of information asymmetry, fraud or opportunistic behavior will increase (Dwi Prawitasari & Dwiana Putra, 2019). Opportunism includes the use of deception, such as hiding information, manipulating facts, or misleading others to gain an advantage in a transaction or relationship (Wenas et al., 2020). This behavior usually occurs in situations where there is an imbalance of information between the parties involved and allows one party to exploit the other. These factors, drawn from Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism, provide insight into why the family resorts to manipulative and deceptive actions following Harlan's death.

1. Economic Dependency

Many family members rely heavily on Harlan's wealth to sustain their lifestyles, despite presenting an illusion of independence. Linda, for example, prides herself on being self-made but built her business with a million-dollar loan from Harlan. Walt's livelihood depends entirely on running Harlan's publishing company, while Joni relies on Harlan for financial support to cover her daughter Meg's tuition fees. The reading of Harlan's will, in which Marta is named the sole beneficiary, triggers panic among family members who realize their economic dependency is at risk. Their financial reliance on Harlan explains their desperation to discredit Marta and reclaim the inheritance.

Table 3. Economic Dependency of Harlan Family Members

| Character | Dependency on Harlan | Example Scene |
|-------------------------|---|----------------|
| Linda Drysdale | Built her business with a loan from Harlan | Scene 01:13:57 |
| Walt Thrombey | Fully dependent on managing Harlan's publishing company | Scene 00:16:50 |
| Ransom Drysdale | Relies on the inheritance due to lack of personal income | Scene 01:49:37 |
| Joni Thrombey | Relies on Harlan to fund Meg's education through double-dipping | Scene 00:20:37 |
| Richard Drysdale | Relies on Linda's inheritance due to a prenuptial agreement | Scene 01:14:00 |
| Meg Thrombey | Relies on Harlan's financial support for her education | Scene 01:20:50 |

Table 3 highlights the pervasive financial dependency of the Thrombey family on Harlan, a central factor driving their opportunistic behavior following his death. Each character's reliance on Harlan underscores their inability to achieve true independence, despite outward appearances of success. Linda, for instance, built her business with a substantial loan from Harlan while

presenting herself as self-made, and Walt's entire livelihood depended on managing Harlan's publishing company. Joni's double-dipping of tuition payments for her daughter Meg further exemplifies this dependency, as does Meg's reliance on Harlan's financial support for her education. Richard, who lacks his wealth due to a prenuptial agreement, relies entirely on his wife Linda, whose financial stability is tied to Harlan. Even Ransom, who claims to rebel against the family's expectations, ultimately counts on inheriting a share of Harlan's estate due to his lack of personal income. This web of dependency fuels the family's resentment and manipulative actions when the inheritance is left to Marta, revealing their sense of entitlement and desperation to secure their economic stability. These dynamics are emblematic of Oliver E. Williamson's concept of opportunism, where individuals exploit relationships and circumstances to safeguard their interests.

2. Greed and Entitlement

A strong sense of entitlement to Harlan's fortune drives the family's behavior. They view the inheritance as a birthright rather than a privilege. This entitlement is evident during the reading of the will, where family members react with outrage upon learning that Marta, a non-family member, is the sole heir. The resentment toward Marta's newfound fortune drives them to manipulate, threaten, and discredit her in an attempt to reclaim what they believe is rightfully theirs. Ransom's sense of entitlement is particularly pronounced; he frames Marta for Harlan's death to invalidate the will and secure his share of the inheritance.



Picture 3.1(Scene 01:11:19)

Linda : You little bitch. Did you know about this? What did you do to him to make this happen, were you two what were you *boinking* my father?
Richard : Linda!
Jacob : Anchor baby!
Walt : Marta! Jacob! And Linda. please!
Joni : Linda please - Marta, you need to tell us though,
Walt : Yes Marta, did dad discuss this with you?
Joni : You need to tell us everything you know about this and we need to talk about this,
Walt : This isn't what dad wanted, this isn't fair but we can work this out

Figure 7. The Harlan Family's Outrage at Marta's Inheritance (Scene 01:11:19)

The Harlan family's reaction to the will reading is a powerful display of their entitlement to Harlan's wealth and their deep-seated resentment when it is left to Marta. As the announcement unfolds, the family members collectively exhibit a mix of disbelief, outrage, and frustration, unable to fathom how someone outside their lineage could inherit everything. This reaction underscores their assumption that Harlan's fortune was a birthright, owed to them by their familial connection, regardless of their contributions—or lack thereof. Their entitlement manifests in verbal attacks, guilt-tripping, and attempts to manipulate Marta, with some even resorting to

threats and coercion. This sense of ownership over Harlan's assets not only highlights their dependency on his wealth but also reveals their unwillingness to accept his autonomy in making decisions about his estate. Their collective anger toward Marta reflects a broader dynamic of opportunism, as they quickly pivot from passive entitlement to active measures aimed at reclaiming the inheritance, demonstrating their prioritization of personal gain over fairness or respect for Harlan's wishes. This scene epitomizes Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism, where greed and self-interest drive manipulative behaviors in the face of perceived threats to one's position.

3. Information Asymmetry

Exploitation of information asymmetry is a hallmark of opportunism, as described by Williamson. Family members like Walt and Ransom use their knowledge of Marta's vulnerabilities to manipulate her. Walt, for instance, discovers that Marta's mother is an undocumented immigrant and threatens to expose this information unless Marta relinquishes the inheritance. Similarly, Ransom's awareness of the contents of the will and Harlan's medical treatment enables him to craft a plan to frame Marta for Harlan's death. The imbalance of information gives these characters an upper hand, allowing them to exploit Marta's ignorance and vulnerabilities.



Marta : ...with my mother. What did Meg tell you.

Figure 8. Walt Threatening Marta Using Her Mother's Immigration Status (Scene 01:27:11)

Walt's exploitation of Marta's mother's undocumented immigration status is a calculated act of opportunism, using asymmetric information to manipulate Marta and coerce her into relinquishing her inheritance. Armed with the knowledge of her mother's vulnerable legal status, Walt frames his threat as a concern for Marta's well-being, disguising his true intent to reclaim the family fortune. By leveraging this sensitive information, Walt preys on Marta's fears and emotional ties to her family, knowing the severe consequences deportation could have on her mother. His actions underscore a deeper sense of entitlement and desperation, revealing his inability to accept Harlan's decision to leave his wealth to Marta. Walt's use of coercion highlights his willingness to exploit any available advantage, regardless of the moral or ethical implications, to restore his family's financial dominance. This manipulation aligns with Oliver E. Williamson's

theory of opportunism, which posits that individuals will exploit vulnerabilities and information asymmetries to advance their self-interest, often at the expense of others. Walt's actions not only jeopardize Marta's emotional and legal stability but also expose the underlying dysfunction and greed within the Thrombey family.

3.1.4 Patterns of Behavior in Conflict Resolution

The patterns of behavior exhibited by the Harlan family during conflict resolution reveal their reliance on manipulation, deceit, and exploitation to achieve personal goals. These behaviors, rooted in opportunism, manifest as a response to perceived threats to their financial security and familial dynamics after Harlan's death. By analyzing their actions, it becomes clear that these patterns align with Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism, wherein individuals prioritize self-interest over collective harmony, particularly in situations of asymmetry and uncertainty.

1) Escalation Through Manipulation

When confronted with the loss of Harlan's inheritance, family members resort to manipulation as a primary strategy to regain control. For instance, Walt uses Marta's mother's undocumented immigration status as leverage, crafting a threat to coerce Marta into surrendering the inheritance. Similarly, Joni feigns support for Marta in an attempt to manipulate her emotionally, framing herself as an ally while secretly working to undermine her.

2) Avoidance of Accountability

Throughout the conflict, family members consistently evade accountability for their actions and financial dependencies. Linda projects an image of independence while masking her reliance on Harlan's loan, and Richard conceals his infidelity to maintain his marital and financial security. This pattern is further seen in Joni's denial of wrongdoing when confronted about double-dipping Meg's tuition payments, as she attributes the fraud to a "mix-up."

3) Displacement of Blame

The Thrombey family frequently shifts blame to Marta, despite her innocence in Harlan's death. They exploit her vulnerable position as an outsider and caretaker, accusing her of manipulating Harlan to secure the inheritance. This displacement of blame serves to protect their self-image and deflect from their opportunistic tendencies.

4) Fragmented Unity

While the family initially presents a united front against Marta, their internal divisions quickly emerge as they vie for individual benefits. Ransom's betrayal of his own family underscores this fragmentation, as he manipulates events to frame Marta and nullify the will, all while maintaining a façade of solidarity.

Table 4. Patterns of Opportunistic Behavior in Conflict Resolution

| Pattern | Description | Scene |
|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Escalation Through Manipulation | Family members use threats or false alliances to regain control | Walt threatens Marta (01:27:11) |
| Avoidance of | Members deny or conceal their financial | Joni denies |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Accountability | dependency and wrongdoings | embezzlement (00:20:37) |
| Displacement of Blame | Accusations against Marta deflect attention from the family's opportunism | Family accuses Marta (01:11:19) |
| Fragmented Unity | Individual interests override collective goals | Ransom's betrayal (01:49:25) |

These patterns reflect the family's inability to resolve conflict constructively, as their actions are driven by privilege and self-preservation rather than a genuine attempt to reconcile. The behavior of each member reflects the broader theme of opportunism, as their actions are driven by self-interest that overrides ethical values, where power dynamics, economic dependency, and information asymmetries are exploited to achieve personal ends. This is consistent with Williamson's assertion that opportunistic behavior is most pronounced in situations of uncertainty and imbalance, as seen after Harlan's death. The Thrombey family's fragmented and deceitful approach to conflict resolution ultimately reinforces their dysfunction and greed, demonstrating the stark contrast between their professed values and their actual behavior. This theme of opportunism extends beyond individual relationships, reflecting the social conditions in which people will exploit unfair or uncertain situations for personal gain, both within the family and in society.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study show how opportunistic behavior depicted in *Knives Out* is in line with Oliver E. Williamson's concept of opportunism, which reveals manipulation and deception as tools for personal gain. Opportunism is behavior that takes advantage of situations for personal gain, in the film *Knives Out* opportunistic behavior is the main topic to be discussed. Using Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism, this study examines opportunistic actions in the context of the family. Williamson defines opportunism as an action based on self-interest at the expense of others through manipulation, deception, or exploitation of asymmetric information (Williamson, 1977).

The film *Knives Out* provides a clear picture of opportunism in the context of the Thrombey family, especially after the death of Harlan Thrombey, who left a large inheritance. One of the central issues raised in this study is the economic dependence experienced by the Thrombey family members on Harlan's wealth. Although they try to present an image as financially independent individuals, in reality almost all family members depend on Harlan's financial support. Conditions such as these create opportunities for opportunism because economic dependence creates incentives to manipulate circumstances to maintain financial stability (Williamson, 1996).

The actions of each character in the Harlan family demonstrate how self-interest can override family loyalty, especially in high-stakes scenarios such as the division of an inheritance. This study has the potential to expand our understanding of how the concept of opportunism, which is usually

applied to economic and organizational contexts, can be used to analyze human behavior in a literary context. In addition, this study opens up opportunities for future research that combines economic theory with literary and film analysis to explain human behavior in various social contexts. The results of this study also highlight the importance of understanding the social and economic background in analyzing opportunistic behavior, both in the real world and in fiction, and its impact.

1) Comparison with Previous Research

This study successfully connects the findings with eleven previous studies that discuss the film *Knives Out* from various perspectives. In general, the difference lies in the theoretical approach used, where this study uses Oliver E. Williamson's opportunism theory to analyze opportunistic behavior. Although there are similarities in topics such as social themes and class dynamics, this study stands out for its unique approach to the character's economic motives. Different from previous studies, this study uses Williamson's economic theory to highlight opportunistic behavior in interpersonal conflict. By connecting economic theory and cinematic narrative, this study offers a new analytical perspective by applying Williamson's economic theory.

Some relevant but different focused studies are Devi & Degaf (2021) who examine commissive speech acts, Sandberg (2020) who highlights nostalgia and genre evolution, and Husien & Nurhidayat (2022) who use a Marxist approach to discuss social mobility. This study enriches the discussion by providing a new perspective on how opportunistic behavior is influenced by economic dependence and information imbalance.

Other studies such as Gonzalez (2023) who focuses on the setting, Davis (2023) who explores social criticism, and Szeljack (2023) who analyzes visual elements and class symbolism are also relevant to this study because they all discuss social themes and class dynamics, although using different approaches. This study provides additional contributions by highlighting manipulation and opportunistic actions as driving factors of conflict between characters.

In addition, several studies such as Basid et al. (2021), Tamrin et al. (2022), and Gunatika et al. (2021) who discuss linguistic aspects and communication manipulation provide a background that enriches the analysis in this study, although their main focus is different. The findings of this study strengthen their results by adding a new dimension in the form of an analysis of opportunistic behavior based on economic theory.

This study also complements the analysis of Ananta (2021) who highlights narrative techniques and Rifansa (2021) who discusses social issues through a postcolonial approach. Although the focus is different, all of these studies enrich the discourse on how the film *Knives Out* reflects various social issues through characters and narratives.

2) Novelty and Strength

Based on previous research, there has been no research that discusses the application of opportunism theory in the context of film, especially in the film *Knives Out*. The main novelty of this study lies in the application of Williamson's opportunism theory in film analysis, an approach that is rarely used in film studies. This study makes significant contributions to both economic

theory and film criticism. This study shows the relevance of economic concepts in understanding character motivations and actions in fictional narratives. This interdisciplinary approach enriches literary criticism and economic theory by illustrating how opportunism drives the storyline and character development in *Knives Out*. This analysis also highlights the psychological and ethical implications of opportunistic behavior, especially in the context of trust and power imbalance. This study also provides new insights by linking character behavior to economic theory, which enriches the study of the representation of human behavior in film. The results of the study confirm that opportunism, as explained by Williamson, is not only relevant in the context of organizations and markets but also relationships between individuals within families, as depicted in *Knives Out*.

3) Weaknesses and Suggestions

Despite its strengths, this study also has several limitations. The scope of this study is limited to Williamson's theoretical framework and the film *Knives Out*. Future research could explore other dimensions, such as the psychological motives behind opportunistic actions or the role of sociocultural factors in shaping character behavior. Additionally, expanding the analysis to include other films or genres could provide comparative insights and further validate the application of Williamson's theory to fictional narratives.

4. Conclusion

This research highlights the opportunistic behaviors exhibited by the Harlan family in *Knives Out* (2019) through the lens of Oliver E. Williamson's theory of opportunism. The analysis identifies three primary indicators of opportunistic behavior: exploitation of information asymmetry, manipulation and deceit, and breach of trust. These behaviors are vividly portrayed through the characters' actions and interactions, particularly in their responses to the unexpected distribution of Harlan's inheritance.

Economic dependency, greed, and information asymmetry emerge as key drivers of the Harlan family's opportunism. Characters such as Walt, Joni, and Ransom exploit their knowledge of vulnerabilities and manipulate situations to serve their self-interest, often at the expense of others. For instance, Ransom uses his awareness of the altered will to frame Marta, while Walt leverages Marta's mother's undocumented immigration status to pressure her into relinquishing the inheritance. These actions align with Williamson's assertion that opportunism is rooted in self-interest combined with deceit, especially in scenarios where trust and information are imbalanced.

This study contributes to the understanding of opportunistic behavior by applying economic theory to a cinematic narrative, thereby offering an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges literature, economics, and film studies. The findings underscore the relevance of Williamson's theory in analyzing fictional representations of complex human behaviors, particularly in contexts of conflict and resource distribution.

However, the research is limited to Williamson's framework and the film *Knives Out*. Future studies could build on this foundation by incorporating psychological or sociological theories to explore deeper motives behind opportunistic actions or by analyzing similar behaviors in other films

or genres. This approach would further enrich the understanding of opportunism in both real-life and fictional contexts.

In conclusion, *Knives Out* serves as a compelling case study of opportunism, showcasing how greed, entitlement, and manipulation shape interpersonal dynamics within a family. The film not only provides entertainment but also invites reflection on ethical dilemmas and the consequences of self-serving behaviors, making it a valuable resource for both academic and practical explorations of opportunism.

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