

## Symbolism Analysis of the Novel "All the Dangerous Things" by Stacy Willingham

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### Abstract:

This research examines the use of symbolism in Stacy Willingham's novel *All the Dangerous Things* through the lens of New Criticism. The novel's primary themes of trauma, guilt, and loss are explored through many symbols, including dark and light, water, and paintings. These symbols serve to represent the psychological and emotional state of the protagonist, Isabelle, as she navigates the traumatic disappearance of her son. The researcher utilizes qualitative methods, including close reading and thematic analysis, to interpret the meaning of the symbols within the novel's narrative structure. The New Critical approach highlights the intertextual connections within the novel, thereby elucidating how the symbolism contributes to the overarching thematic structure. The analysis reveals that light symbolizes the hope and elusive truth that Isabelle seeks throughout the novel. Water symbolizes the depth of her emotional trauma and her sense of being overwhelmed by memories, and painting symbolizes the impact of past family trauma on her present circumstances. It also provides valuable contributions to the existing literature on contemporary literary studies by elucidating how symbolism shapes meanings in modern literature.

**Keywords:** Symbolism; Contemporary Fiction; Stacy Willingham; *All the Dangerous Things*

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan simbolisme dalam novel "All the Dangerous Things" karya Stacy Willingham dengan menggunakan pendekatan Kritik Baru. Tema-tema yang dijelajahi dalam novel ini adalah trauma, rasa bersalah, dan kehilangan, yang direpresentasikan melalui simbol-simbol seperti gelap dan cahaya, air, dan lukisan. Dalam penelitian ini, peneliti menggunakan metode kualitatif, termasuk pembacaan yang cermat dan analisis tematik, untuk menginterpretasikan makna simbol-simbol tersebut dalam struktur naratif novel. Pendekatan Kritis Baru digunakan untuk menyoroti hubungan intertekstual dalam novel dan menjelaskan kontribusi simbolisme dalam menciptakan struktur tematik yang menyeluruh. Analisis menemukan bahwa cahaya digunakan untuk melambangkan harapan dan kebenaran yang sulit dipahami yang dicari oleh Isabelle di sepanjang novel. Air melambangkan kedalaman trauma emosionalnya dan perasaannya yang diliputi oleh kenangan, dan lukisan melambangkan dampak trauma keluarga masa lalu pada keadaannya saat ini. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan mendalam tentang penderitaan manusia, trauma, dan pencarian kebenaran, serta memberikan kontribusi berharga dalam studi sastra kontemporer dengan menjelaskan bagaimana simbolisme membentuk makna dalam karya sastra modern.

**Kata kunci:** Simbolisme; Fiksi Kontemporer; Stacy Willingham; All the Dangerous Things

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, stories have reflected our deepest fears, desires, and psychological struggles. The psychological thriller genre has emerged as a powerful vehicle for exploring the darkest corners of human consciousness within the vast landscape of literary traditions, particularly in an era when mental health and psychological well-being have gained unprecedented attention. Mar et al. (2011) stated that the modern thriller has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a mere form of entertainment to a sophisticated instrument for examining intricate psychological phenomena. This evolution has given rise to a new genre of literature that deftly interweaves suspense with profound psychological insight, creating narratives that resonate profoundly with contemporary readers' anxieties and experiences.

In recent years, psychological thrillers have increasingly explored the nexus of parenthood and trauma, mirroring broader societal discourses on maternal mental health and the psychological ramifications of loss. As observed by Kaplan (2005), there has been a notable surge in literature exploring the profound psychological consequences of maternal loss and trauma, particularly within the domain of psychological suspense literature. This literary trend has produced works that entertain and elucidate the intricate psychological terrain of traumatized minds, employing sophisticated symbolic frameworks to convey profound truths about the human experience.

In this context, Stacy Willingham's "All the Dangerous Things" (2023) stands out as a noteworthy illustration of how contemporary authors utilize symbolism to delve into the nuances of psychological trauma. The novel, which revolves around Isabelle Drake's frantic search for her missing son, exemplifies the "powerful convergence of symbolic representation and psychological realism in modern thriller fiction" (Thrailkill, 2007). The author displays a high skill level in manipulating light throughout the novel. The sharp glare of light at the moment of falling asleep at night represents hope. Osborn (1967), in his article entitled "Archetypal metaphor in rhetoric: The light-dark family", stated that darkness and light become metaphors for despair and hope.

Willingham's utilization of paintings as symbolic anchors is of significant importance. The protagonist's recollections of paintings from his childhood and the

recurring motif of family photographs function as a means of reminding him of past events involving his brother. This interpretation is pivotal to Willingham's novel, wherein paintings and photographs serve as touchstones of reality and potential sources of deception, reflecting the protagonist's increasingly uncertain comprehension of the truth. Schilling (2024) concluded that incorporating artistic elements as symbols enables the author to proffer meta-commentary on the nature of perception and reality.

The temporal structure of the novel functions as a symbolic representation of the impact of trauma on perception and memory. As Alexander (2013) observes, trauma gives rise to a perpetual present where past events refuse to remain in the past. In her narrative, Willingham skilfully explores this concept through the intricate interweaving of periods. This disruption of chronological time serves as an efficacious symbol of the enduring impact of traumatic experiences, particularly in the context of maternal loss.

This article examines the various applications of symbolism in *All the Dangerous Things* and evaluates its role in shaping the novel's core themes. Willingham's strategic deployment of symbols within the narrative augments the story's atmospheric tension and psychological depth while presenting broader themes such as trauma, guilt, and loss. By undertaking a detailed analysis of the symbolic elements present in the novel, including such concepts as insomnia, light, water, and paintings, this paper demonstrates how symbolism serves not only as a literary device but also as a psychological tool in the construction of this compelling narrative. These analyses enhance our comprehension of the characters and the overarching message that Willingham seeks to convey. In conclusion, *All the Dangerous Things* represents a significant addition to the continually evolving genre of psychological thriller literature, distinguished by its complex symbolic and thematic richness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

New Criticism is a prominent literary theory emphasizing a close reading and detailed analysis of texts. The primary tenet of New Criticism is that the meaning of a text is intrinsic to the work itself, distinct from the author's intentions or the historical context in which it was created (Brooks, 1947). This theory emphasizes examining intrinsic features, such as form, structure, language, and imagery, crucial in conveying meaning and evoking emotions (Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, 1946). New Criticism meticulously



examines the interrelationship between these elements, postulating that the organization and style of the text play a pivotal role in shaping its interpretation. By delving into symbolism, patterns, and underlying meanings, this approach illuminates the intricate interplay between the author's artistic choices and the reader's experience (Abrams, 1993). This framework offers a practical lens for grasping the multifaceted meanings embedded within literary texts, emphasizing textual analysis and the intrinsic qualities of the work.

The New Criticism theory is invaluable for studying symbols in Stacy Willingham's "All the Dangerous Things." It enables the researcher to delve deeply into the author's use of diverse writing elements to convey meaning. As Brooks (1947) elucidates, New Criticism is predicated on meticulously examining the novel's structural elements, linguistic choices, and imagery. This approach is particularly conducive to identifying concealed symbols within the text. This approach allows the researcher to focus on analyzing the text and literary devices in the book rather than being distracted by external factors such as the author's background or historical context. Wimsatt, W. K. and Beardsley (1946) posit that examining these elements can reveal deeper meanings, which is required to comprehend how Willingham employs symbols throughout her novel. By employing New Criticism to examine the symbols in "All the Dangerous Things," researchers can better understand how these literary elements function collectively to generate meaning within the narrative and contribute to our comprehension of modern psychological thrillers. This research should facilitate the acquisition of novel insights into how authors utilize symbolism to construct suspense and delve into intricate themes in contemporary fiction.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative research, emphasizing collecting and interpreting non-numerical data to understand social and human contexts better (Adedoyin, 2020). Qualitative research is an optimal approach for analyzing narrative forms, such as literary works like books and journals, offering detailed insights into the interpretations and perspectives inherent to such textual sources. As Snyder (2019) observes, using qualitative methods also permits systematic comparisons across studies by assessing the quality and depth of results. This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the symbolism in Stacy Willingham's *All the Dangerous Things*, providing an exhaustive examination of its

literary elements. The analysis of symbolism in the novel employs both primary data, comprising excerpts of the text, along with specific words, sentences, and dialogues illustrative of the concept of symbolism, and secondary data from additional sources, such as books, academic journal articles, and online materials, providing theoretical and contextual support.

The data collection process in this study was conducted using a structured approach to facilitate a comprehensive and systematic analysis. At the outset of this study, a comprehensive close reading of the text *All the Dangerous Things* was conducted, a technique considered fundamental to literary analysis. This approach identifies subtle nuances within individual words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters (Greenham, 2018). This process allows for the discernment of the text's deeper implications. Subsequently, pertinent data were highlighted and categorized by identifying elements, including dialogue, narrative techniques, and descriptive passages. This stage facilitated the identification of the elements deemed essential for analysis (Mohajan, 2018). Then, the collected data were correlated with the research questions, thus concentrating the analysis on primary symbols. In the final stage of the process, the data were reduced to exclude superfluous information, thereby retaining only the most pertinent to the study (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006).

The data analysis was designed to derive meaningful insights and address the research questions effectively. Ibrahim (2015) observes that data analysis entails evaluating and processing collected information to uncover pertinent findings. This analytical approach is centred on interpreting the gathered data based on the identified types of symbolism, focusing on the various symbolic elements in *All the Dangerous Things*. The resulting insights are presented in the "Findings and Discussion" section, where the data is subjected to a detailed interpretative and discursive examination. This examination is supported by relevant theoretical frameworks drawn from secondary sources.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Dark and Light

#### *Dark*

"But the fact of the matter is, I can't live my life in the dark anymore. I can't. It's been too long." (P.207) The word dark here, referenced in the initial quote, represents a



multifaceted metaphorical construct operating across multiple psychological and sociological planes. The quotation "I can't live my life in the dark anymore" encapsulates the burden of psychological shadow-dwelling, as described by (Gubitz, 1977). This symbolism of dark manifests in several interrelated layers of meaning. First and foremost, it represents the act of emotional suppression, which can be defined as the deliberate concealment of feelings, memories, or truths that are perceived as too painful or threatening to acknowledge. Word dark becomes a form of self-imposed exile, creating a protective cocoon of ignorance that eventually becomes a prison (DeNicola, 2018)." The phrase "can't live my life" indicates that this darkness has developed into a pervasive aspect of the subject's existence, encompassing all facets of their being. This is consistent with Greenspan's (2004) assertion that prolonged psychological darkness gives rise to patterns of avoidance that become increasingly challenging to overcome.

The temporal aspect of the phrase "it's been too long" introduces another layer of symbolism associated with the "dark" word, suggesting a gradual awakening to the unsustainability of this state. This interpretation aligns with the notion put forth by Brennan (2019) that prolonged concealment can have a significant psychological impact. The concept of dark or darkness in literature also represents a state of emotional hibernation, where personal growth and authentic self-expression become impeded. Osborn (1967) observes that the representation of darkness in literature often functions as a metaphor for stagnation and a hindrance to personal evolution. Moreover, darkness is often associated with various forms of fear, including fear of judgment, vulnerability, change, and, most notably, the fear of self-knowledge. Stump (2010) suggests that literary darkness represents not only the unknown but also the deliberately ignored truths that are actively excluded from our view.

### *Light*

"The moonlight is streaming in through the window like a spotlight, casting its glow directly on her." (P.233) Light imagery in *All the Dangerous Things* presents a sophisticated and intricate narrative of hope, evoking many interpretive possibilities that warrant comprehensive examination. In this context, the concept of light is associated with the symbol of hope, manifested through various literary devices and metaphorical constructs that enrich the narrative's thematic depth. This interpretation follows the assertion by Godfrey (2012) that light is often perceived as a symbol of hope, particularly

in modern literary works that explore psychological terrains. Similarly, Averill et al. (2012) propose that light can gradually manifest hope, suggesting temporal aspects to the symbolism that parallel the protagonist's journey toward self-awareness and emotional resolution.

Skolimowski (2010) asserts that light reflects the unstoppable nature of truth and symbolizes the resilience of hope, providing a theoretical framework to analyze the novel's treatment of illumination as a metaphysical concept. This interpretation is particularly significant when one considers the persistence of hope even in the absence of illumination. This concept is analogous to the moon's constant presence, regardless of its visibility. In light of these considerations, the moon imagery can be a potent metaphor for the enduring quality of hope, even when external circumstances or psychological impediments obscure it.

Additionally, the comparison with the spotlight suggests a dramatic significance, marking the moment as profound and optimistic illumination, which introduces an extra dimension of interpretative complexity. Powers (2022) suggests a meta-narrative analysis of the nature of truth-telling and personal revelation. The spotlight metaphor functions not only to shed light but also to frame the character's experiences within a larger cultural and literary context.

Babb (1998) similarly claims that the depiction of light in literature can be interpreted as a manifestation of universal power. This claim gains particular significance when one considers the novel's use of moonlight imagery. The lunar illumination is a conduit for universal truths, transcending individual experience to resonate with collective human understanding. This universality is further reinforced by Dorson's (1955) observation that moonlight, in contrast to artificial light sources, carries cultural and mythological significance across diverse societies and literary traditions.

The interplay between light and shadow throughout the narrative creates a dynamic tension that reflects the protagonist's internal struggle. Slethaug (1993) asserts that the duality between light and shadow is a metaphor for the complexity of the human psyche, where hope and despair exist in a delicate balance. The variable nature of the moonlight, including its waxing and waning phases and occasional obscuration, provides a sophisticated metaphorical framework for understanding the character's complex emotional journey and evolving psychological development.

The symbolic significance of moonlight in the novel extends beyond mere atmospheric enhancement, functioning as a sophisticated narrative device that integrates themes of hope, truth, and personal transformation. Through a detailed examination of these elements, it becomes evident that the author has crafted a nuanced examination of human resilience and the enduring nature of hope, even in the face of adversity and uncertainty. This multifaceted approach to light imagery demonstrates the author's technical skill while reinforcing the novel's thematic depth and emotional impact.

### **Water**

"Margaret taking a slow step forward and sending a wave of ripples toward my mother, standing before us, water lapping at her calves... as she stretched out her arms and beckoned us forward. That little smile on her lips, and her eyes glassy and gray, filling with tears" (p.320)

This quotation is symbolic due to its deployment of water imagery, which is utilized to convey the depths and transformations of the emotional realm and the submerged memories and recollections that reside within the subconscious. The gentle ripples of water and the sound of it lapping against the shore evoke memories and unresolved emotions between the characters, which signal a moment of profound introspection and the uncovering of unspoken family ties. Water frequently functions as a conduit for these submerged emotions. As Neumann (2015) observes, water represents a profound symbol of the unconscious, which suggests a more profound interconnection between the mother's past and present state. The protagonist's presence in the water, with eyes filled with tears, indicates emotional vulnerability and a willingness to confront suppressed memories. This aligns with Flood's (2021) view that the water is a prominent symbol for the unconscious, where emotional truths often lie hidden. Therefore, the mother's stance and gesture of beckoning the daughters forward can be seen as an invitation into the water and engagement with shared, unspoken histories, thereby initiating both collective and individual transformations.

The multifaceted symbolic representation of water in this passage extends beyond a mere metaphorical depiction, encompassing many psychological and archetypal dimensions that warrant further examination. Mukherji (2011) underscores the importance of water as a liminal space, a threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness, between articulation and the ineffable. This liminality is particularly discernible in how the passage delineates the interconnection between physical and psychological immersion,

where entering the water parallels the characters' descent into more profound psychological awareness.

Furthermore, the auditory elements depicted in the passage—namely, the lapping of water against the shoreline—refer to an acoustic bridge linking the external physical milieu and the internal psychological landscape (Farina, 2009). This sensory detail reinforces the connection between physical experience and emotional resonance, indicating that the characters' engagement with water represents a literal and a metaphorical submersion into the depths of family history and personal identity. Considering the maternal figure's positioning within this aquatic tableau is important. Hollis (2002) claims that the gesture of beckoning represents an invitation to physical proximity and an archetypal call to emotional and psychological integration. The daughters' potential response to this gesture represents a pivotal moment of decision-making, wherein the decision to enter the water symbolizes a willingness to engage with inherited trauma and unresolved familial dynamics.

The passage's convergence of tears and water represents a powerful symbolic synthesis. Albrecht (2019) posits that the confluence of personal emotion (tears) with the universal element (water) suggests a dissolution of individual boundaries and a merging with collective experience. This interpretation is supported by Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, which posits that personal experiences intersect with universal archetypal patterns. The temporal aspect of the water imagery is also worthy of consideration, as it suggests both fluidity and permanence. The ripples on the water's surface represent the immediate, visible manifestations of emotion and memory, while the depths below symbolize the enduring, generational aspects of family history. This duality gives rise to what Thompson McKerrow (1999) terms a temporal paradox, whereby the past and the present coexist within the same symbolic space, thereby enabling the simultaneous examination of immediate emotional states and deep-seated psychological patterns.

### **Painting**

"Painting a picture of me that cast me in the worst possible light: a broken woman, a lost cause." (p.258) The word "painting" in that phrase functions as a compelling metaphor, elucidating how individuals can strategically manipulate perceptions and narratives about others, frequently distorting the fundamental truth. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert that



the essence of metaphor is the act of understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Painting is deliberately crafted to create a false or exaggerated image. This implies that the protagonist is portrayed in a manner that is both unfair and misrepresentative and not reflective of their authentic identity. This linguistic device reinforces the problematic notion that societal judgments and evaluations can be both superficial and significantly detrimental to the individual (Dixon et al., 2012).

Rumelhart and Ortony (2017) observed that the process of representation is the primary means by which meaning is produced and exchanged within the social sphere. They suggested that the intricate, multifaceted experiences that comprise the human condition are often reductively simplified into pervasive negative stereotypes. Such selective, agenda-driven representations may result in an incomplete or inaccurate portrayal of a person's true character and lived experience (Dilevko, 1998). Zuromskis (2009) asserts that an implicit element of aggression is inherent within every camera utilization as a representational device. This implies that an individual's narrative can be selectively simplified and detrimentally altered through strategic storytelling techniques. The camera, functioning as a tool of visual representation, has the capacity to frame, filter, and manipulate the viewer's perception of reality, potentially resulting in an incomplete or misleading depiction (Anderson, 1996).

In conclusion, the metaphorical "painting" employed in the original passage is an illustrative example of how individuals can be subjected to selective, agenda-driven representation that distorts the truth and perpetuates harmful societal stereotypes. This linguistic device underscores the significant influence such misrepresentation can exert on an individual's sense of self-worth, agency, and capacity to convey their authentic narrative.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of symbolism in Stacy Willingham's "All the Dangerous Things" demonstrates how the author utilizes many symbolic elements to investigate themes about trauma, psychological hardship, and the pursuit of truth. Through juxtaposing dark and light, Willingham creates a narrative landscape that reflects the protagonist's internal journey. The dark represents emotional suppression and psychological stagnation; the light symbolizes hope and revelation. This complex interplay of light and dark mirrors the

internal journey, creating a landscape that reflects the protagonist's psyche and serves as a vehicle through which the reader may explore the depths of their psyche concerning the text. The recurrent word water is an effective metaphor for the depths of unconscious emotions and submerged memories—particularly in familial relationships. Additionally, the symbolism of the painting illustrates how narratives and perceptions can be distorted to alter truth and identity. These elements function in concert to construct a text with intricate layers. This text advances the psychological thriller genre and offers new insights into the nature of trauma, memory, and the human psyche.

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