

Symbolism and Its Meaning in *The Children on the Hill* by Jennifer McMahan

Aisyah Hidayah¹✉, Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama²

UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya^{1,2}

✉ 03030321087@student.uinsby.ac.id

Abstract:

This paper examines the symbolism and its meaning in the novel *The Children on the Hill* by Jennifer McMahan. Symbolism is a literary tool used to subtly convey abstract and underlying meanings. Using a descriptive qualitative method analysis, this research aims to analyze the symbols found in the novel and what they represent within the context and theme of the story. By closely reading and thoroughly examining the novel, the researcher found several recurring themes in the story. Perrine says a symbol should be a recurring theme or phenomenon repeated and emphasized within the story. The meaning of a symbol should be connected to the entire context of the story. Based on that definition, the researcher found three prominent symbols in the novel: butterfly, fire, and monster. Each symbols have several meanings and interpretations. However, by connecting them to the theme and context of the novel, all of them can be interpreted as a second chance, rebirth, or resurrection.

Keywords: symbols; monster; butterfly; fire

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini ditulis untuk meneliti simbolisme yang terdapat dalam novel *The Children on the Hill* karya Jennifer McMahan. Simbolisme adalah perangkat sastra yang digunakan untuk menyampaikan suatu pesan secara tersirat. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisa symbol-simbol yang terdapat di dalam novel tersebut beserta artinya sesuai dengan teman dan konteks cerita. Dengan menerapkan pembacaan cermat dan pemeriksaan menyeluruh terhadap novel, peneliti menemukan beberapa tema yang berulang dalam cerita. Menurut Perrine, simbol adalah menjadi tema atau fenomena yang diulang dan ditekankan dalam cerita. Makna simbol harus terhubung dengan seluruh konteks cerita. Berdasarkan definisi tersebut, peneliti menemukan tiga simbol menonjol dalam novel; kupu-kupu, api, dan monster. Setiap simbol memiliki beberapa makna dan interpretasi. Namun, dengan menghubungkannya dengan tema dan konteks novel, semuanya dapat diartikan sebagai kesempatan kedua, kelahiran kembali, atau kebangkitan.

Kata kunci: simbol; monster; kupu-kupu; api

INTRODUCTION

One of the oldest rules in storytelling is "show, don't tell." This rule creates tension and provokes readers' curiosity about the story and how it unfolds. One way to convey a message without directly telling the reader is through symbols. By foreshadowing the endings or message of the story indirectly through symbols, authors can allow the reader to theorize, thus broadening their imagination and thoughts.

This paper examines the symbolism in the novel *The Children on the Hill* by Jennifer McMahon. The author is a well-published American novelist who has written several other best-selling novels, including *The Drowning Kind*, *The Winter People*, etc. On her website, McMahon stated that she was interested in writing about the unexpected, the dark side, and the fear that haunts her. Her motto as a writer is to "write something that scares you."

This dictum translated well in her book, *The Children on the Hill*. This novel is a psychological thriller published in 2022. The book is written from two perspectives: Violet Hildreth, also known as Vi, around 40 years ago, and Lizzy Shelley in 2019. This paper, however, will focus on the symbols presented in Vi's point of view.

Vi was a 13-year-old girl obsessed with monsters. She lived with her grandmother, Helen Hildreth, and younger brother, Eric Hildreth, in Vermont. One day, a girl of Vi's age, Iris, stayed at their home. Vi's grandmother told her to treat Iris like a sister. However, Iris' suspicious behaviour and lack of memories lead them to believe she is a monster. After conducting an investigation, Vi found out that the monster she thought was Iris was herself. Upon learning the truth, Vi ran away and started a new life by helping young girls like her find a new purpose in life.

Throughout the book, the author subtly hints at the story's ending. *The Children on the Hill* has a strong and recurring theme of rebirth, second chances, letting go of the past, and finding one's place in the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Structuralism

Structuralist criticism concerns itself with order and structure. According to Eagleton (2008, p. 78), Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye introduced the early structuralism draft. Discontent with the unstructured way of literary criticism, Frye

proposed a school of analysis theory to put order into the discipline. Structuralism Structuralists believe that there is an order in which a story unfolds. Even though the plot and character are starkly different, the theme and motif of the story stay the same. Thus, a structured analysis is needed to analyze those stories. One way to explore a literary work is by finding and observing the signs and essential symbols in the story.

Symbols

According to Abrams & Harpham (1957), a literary symbol is applied to something beyond itself. Symbols usually represent an object, idea, function, etc. The meaning of a symbol is generally regarded as common knowledge. For example, fire symbolizes flammable objects, broken glass is used as a sign for fragile objects, etc. In literature, however, the meaning of a symbol does not occur naturally. Instead, it is influenced by social conventions and norms (Abrams & Harpham, 1957: 325). Some cultures might interpret an object as something inverse to other cultures. Thus, incorporating a symbol in a literary work may spark much discussion and research. More often than not, authors would use fague symbolism to initiate multiple interpretations and underlying meanings behind simple objects. Research and studies should occur to compensate for our lack of understanding of the meaning behind these symbols.

Symbols can manifest in every literary device, whether as a character, an object, a plot point, a dialogue, or else. Guth (2003) stated that to immerse in a story entirely, one must be aware of the symbolism and its implications. Perrine (1974: 214), in his book *Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*, listed key factors that should be observed in determining symbolism:

1. The story itself must show that a detail is to be taken symbolically. It means that symbolic phenomena can be identified by repetition, emphasis, or position;
2. The meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the story. It means that the meaning of the symbol can be identified inside the text, not outside it;
3. To be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning;
4. A symbol may have more than one meaning.

Review of Related Studies

Due to being released so recently, the researcher found difficulties in finding preview studies related to the book. Sa'adah et al. (2023) analyzed the inspiration from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley in the novel, focusing on the parallel of Victor Frankenstein and Helen Hildreth in their work of playing God. Apart from this article, the researcher finds references from some book reviews to further understand the story. In his review, Sheridan (2022) praised the book by saying that the mysteries and the "cat and mouse game" between Lizzy and Vi are so engaging. On the other hand, Sheehy (2022), while still finding the book enjoyable, is quite disappointed by the lack of suspense and the simple plot. However, the two articles still recommend the book to people who love horror stories.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods are the principles of data collection and analysis. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze *The Children on the Hill*. Qualitative research is collecting non-numeral data to gather in-depth insight and understand the concept of the work (Bhandari, 2020). In *Qualitative Researching*, Mason (2002) stated that qualitative research should lead to discussions, either explanations or arguments. The data is collected from *The Children on the Hill* novel and gathered through close reading of the source material. Applying the theory of structuralism and symbols analysis, the researcher will analyze the recurring symbols in the book and tie them to the story's theme.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following list is the result and analysis of symbols in *The Children on the Hill*.

Monster

Monster is the most prominent theme in the book. The main character is a girl obsessed with studying and finding monsters.

"We talk about monsters. We go to see monster movies at the drive-in on Saturday nights in the summer. We go on monster hunts. And we're writing a book. The Book of Monsters. We're putting everything we know about them into it, and Eric's drawing the illustrations." (p. 50)

The novel is heavily influenced by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Vi's favourite book, as she feels that the book is specifically written for her (p. 12).

Monsters are a famous symbol in many works of literature. It mainly predominates myths, folklore, legends, fairy tales, and fiction. However, the term "monster" may spark confusion. What defines a monster? The modern definition of monsters is those who do not fit into society's accepted norms or innate physical or psychological characteristics (Lawrence, 2015). Although physical appearance might influence people's outlook on monsters, not all are inherently hideous. However, in other instances, like in *Frankenstein* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a creature who is physically unappealing to the mass are perceived as monsters, even when they have a good heart. Weinstock (2016) writes in his book *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters* that monsters challenge our perception of the world and subvert our understanding of how things and people should be. Monsters are used to present something that is not supposed to be there. In the book, the characters discussed this matter, unintentionally alienating said "monster" in the process. The dialogue that describes this interaction is written as follows:

"That's how it is in monster movies," Eric explained. "The monster always dies."

"Why?" Iris asked.

Vi wasn't sure how to answer.

"Because they don't belong," Eric said, voice low. (p. 110)

Using monsters in literary works usually adds horror elements to the story. In contrast, figurative monsters represent the character's internal conflict and struggle to find their true identity. In Violet's case, it means her struggle to remember her past and shows the audience her self-perception. After learning that the past her grandmother told her is a lie, she struggles to find her footing in her own life. She thinks of herself as a monster and feels she does not belong. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, Vi decides to create her fate by becoming something nobody thought she would be. Violet's decision not to follow her grandmother's steps is the subversion of the monster trope in this book.

Butterfly

The second symbol that often appears in this novel is that of a butterfly. Two objects in the book have butterflies attached, although only one plays an essential part in the story. The first is Dr. Hildreth's lighter, and the second is a carving on the lampshade in her office. The former was mentioned several times and was one of the driving forces of the plot, one instance was as follows:

Gran responded, lighting a cigarette with her gold Zippo lighter with the butterfly etching on it. (p. 10)

The characters remember the lighter almost forty years after childhood, highlighting the butterfly curving on it, as stated below:

An old gold Zippo lighter with a butterfly engraved on the front. (p. 134)

The butterfly is a prevalent symbol in literature. The meaning of a butterfly varies depending on the culture and context in which it is used. One of the most captivating aspects of butterflies is their ability to do metamorphoses. Many associate that aspect with change and transformation (Rhys, 2020). The shift from a mere caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly is often associated with transforming into a better version of oneself. According to Macrae (2007), the butterfly symbolizes rebirth and resurrection in Christianity. Greek mythology describes the goddess Psyche as a beautiful woman with butterfly wings. Etymologically, Psyche means "soul," and she is regarded as the goddess of souls. Hence, butterflies are also used to symbolize the soul, and metamorphosis represents the soul's ascension from a body to a greater realm.

In the context of *The Children on the Hill*, butterflies can be used to symbolize Vi's transformation from a good and obedient girl to a rogue and wanted woman who abducts young girls. Even though her intentions are revealed to be good and benevolent, Vi's transformation drives her sister to be suspicious of her, thus starting the story's main plot. The butterfly in Dr. Hildreth's lighter can also symbolize rebirth and resurrection. Helen Hildreth believes that she is doing her experiment subjects a favour by wiping their whole identities and giving them a second chance to live a life she thought was the best for them. Wiping one's whole memory can represent the theme of rebirth and resurrection. Given that people forget their entire past, they will start fresh, as if they were being brought back to live as a different human being.

Fire

The last symbol that will be discussed in this paper is fire. When reading the book, people might be fixated on the theme of monsters, rebirth, and vengeance. However, there is also another recurring usage of fire in the story. The book's cover is a house on fire, a foreshadowing of the events at the climax of Vi's point of view. The use of fire in Vi's chapters is a motif used multiple times to highlight her intelligence and problem-solving skills. In her forgotten memories, Vi, or more precisely Susan Poirier, allegedly used fire to commit arson to escape her abusive family (p. 278). While trying to help Iris remember



her past, Vi sets the woodshed beside their house on fire to distract her grandmother. Near the end of the book, after killing Dr Hildreth in a fist of rage, Vi sets the lab her grandmother created on fire and escapes the scene (p. 267).

Like butterflies, fire represents life and death, as it is a crucial part of human life, yet so dangerous it can cause death. *Frankenstein*, one of the main influences in *The Children on the Hill*, is titled *The Modern Prometheus* in the early publications. Prometheus himself is the name of a titan who defied Zeus, the king of gods, and stole fire for humanity, whom he loved a lot. Because of his actions, human beings can progress beyond imaginable. However, since he defied the king of gods, the titan was punished for eternity by having his intestines eaten by a giant eagle. Prometheus' fire represents progress, advancement, and life for the creatures he is helping. Thus, in Greek mythology, fire can be associated with life.

Meanwhile, it also caused his eternal suffering and punishment, a fate worse than death (Tearle, 2021). Due to its nature of not leaving any traces wherever it goes, fire represents purification and starting anew. In Christianity, fire can be a representation of purification, purging a person from one's sin (Hunt, 2019).

Violet and her association with fire can be interpreted as her seeing through her grandmother's lies and manipulation. She uses fire to solve her problems and escape dire situations, representing her leaving her previous life and starting a new one. Her past self, Susan Poirier, died after that incident, and she was reborn as a new person with a new name and identity. Then, after learning the truth about her grandmother, Vi abandoned the life and lies given to her and decided to start over as a changed person. This time, it is by her choice.

CONCLUSION

One of the most essential rules in storytelling is "show, don't tell." To implement that rule, many authors will try to be subtler with their intention of the story. They accomplish that by incorporating symbols within the text. The use of each symbol differs from one story to the other since the symbolism of an object and idea itself is dependent on the context and cultural background of the story. After close reading the source material, the researcher will analyze symbols found in the 2022 novel *The Children on the Hill* by Jennifer MacMahon. The most prominent recurring symbols in the story are monsters, butterflies,

and fire. Considering the story's context, the researcher believes these symbols are tied together. The monster represents Vi's internal struggles and how she sees herself as a hideous and evil monster. Butterflies represent her rebirth and resurrection as a new person free from her grandmother's influence. Furthermore, fire represents her rejection of her grandmother's teaching and starting clean as her person. Therefore, the three symbols represent Vi's desire and her journey to leave her past life and start anew as a reborn person.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., & Harpham, G. G. (1957). A Glossary of Literary Terms. In *College Composition and Communication* (Vol. 8, Issue 4). WADSWORTH CENGAGE Learning. <https://doi.org/10.2307/354930>
- Bhandari, P. (2020). *What Is Qualitative Research? | Methods & Examples*. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/qualitative-research/>
- Eagleton, T. (2008). *Literary theory: An introduction* (Anniversar). University of Minnesota Press.
- Guth, H. P. (2003). *Discovering literature: Stories, poems, plays* (G. L. Rico (ed.); 3rd ed.). Prentice Hall.
- Hunt, C. (2019). *The Symbolism of Fire (From Literature to Religion)*. Firefighter Garage. <https://firefightergarage.com/symbolism-of-fire/>
- Lawrence, N. (2015). *What is a monster?* University of Cambridge. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/what-is-a-monster>
- Macrae, I. J. (2007). Butterfly chronicles: Imagination and desire in natural & literary histories. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 13(2), 11–29. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ842750.pdf>
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications. http://www.sxf.uevora.pt/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Mason_2002.pdf
- Perrine, L. (1974). *Literature: Structure, sound, and sense* (L. Perrine (ed.); 2nd ed.). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Rhys, D. (2020). *Butterfly Symbolism and Meanings*. Symbolsage. <https://symbolsage.com/butterfly-symbolism-and-meanings/>
- Sa'adah, S. I., Rochmah, M., & Nuristama, R. U. (2023). Tracing the legacy: Comparing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Jennifer McMahan's *The Children on the Hill*. ... *Journal: International* ..., 3(4), 1–6. <https://journal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/elite/article/view/30352%0Ahttps://journal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/elite/article/download/30352/10916>
- Sheehy, M. F. (2022). *The Children on the Hill Review – A Not-So-Scary Novel About the Monsters of Our Past*. Slay Away. <https://www.slayawaywithus.com/post/the-children-on-the-hill-review>



- Sheridan, D. (2022). *Book Review: The Children on the Hill by Jennifer McMahon*. Criminal Element. <https://www.criminalelement.com/book-review-the-children-on-the-hill-by-jennifer-mcmahon/>
- Tearle, O. (2021). *The Curious Symbolism of Fire in Literature and Myth*. Interesting Literature. <https://interestingliterature.com/2021/03/fire-symbolism-in-literature-religion-myth/>
- Weinstock, J. A. (2016). *The Ashgate encyclopedia of literary and cinematic monsters*. Routledge.