

Conference Paper

Making Meaning of the Pandemic Through Symbols in Literary Work

Irma Rahmawati, Wahyu Budi

Dian Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia

ORCIDIrma Rahmawati: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2171-6644>**Abstract.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is still a thing people think about and deal with. It affects everything, including literature. Arguably, making meaning of a pandemic through literature can be a helpful strategy to cope with the situation. This paper aims to observe the meaning of the symbols in a novel by Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*. The story possesses various symbolic meanings and can relate to the metaphorical point of view of the pandemic. The paper uses a qualitative methodology to focus on finding the symbols, the themes represented, and the meaning of the symbols for each character and relating them to post-pandemic situations using a qualitative methodology. The theory of symbolism by Susanne Langer is employed to identify and analyze the symbols in *Moby Dick*. This paper results on the symbols' relevance and creates meaning for the situation of the post Covid-19 pandemic.

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Rahmawati; email:
irma.rahmawati@undira.ac.id**Published** 18 July 2023Publishing services provided by
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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic teaches us a lot. Literature also has played a significant role in defining who we are as people and in enhancing our lives. Reading literature can achieve mindfulness, comfort, and peace after all changes this pandemic has brought.

The researcher is interested in examining the post-pandemic situation from literary perspective and believes that literary work has a variety of literary devices, such as symbols, that the author utilizes to communicate with the reader. The qualitative research framework is employed to help strengthen the arguments of symbolism in literary work. Everyone who reads this research is expected to gain interest in literature reading and interpreting to post-pandemic situation.

The use of symbolism in the literary element is one of the arguments discovered by researchers. Gilad Elbom, a senior lecturer at Oregon State University, argues symbolism as the notion that an object can convey a different meaning than its literal appearance. In

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his presentation, Elbom illustrates color, in this case red, to strengthen his explanation. For example, the color of red can signify a variety of things, like passion, love, or dedication. Red might not represent the literal meaning but to find the hidden meaning. In other words, the readers can interpret symbolism however they prefer.

Making meaning of the COVID-19 post-pandemic in the lens of literature has come up an idea to utilize the symbol in a literary work and relate the meaning to the post pandemic situation.

One of the literary works that uses of symbolism as a literary device is novel. Novel is a long piece of original text with some complexity that imaginatively relates to human experience, typically through a connected series of events involving a particular set of people. Simply put, a novel is a relatively long story that is generally published as a book and in which the characters and events are created by the author using their imagination.

The novel used in this research is *Moby Dick* written by Herman Melville [1]. According to the origin of the novel *Moby Dick*, it was first published in England on October 18, 1851, with its original title, *The Whale*, then published in America as *Moby Dick* on November 14, 1851. This novel tells about Captain Ahab to take revenge on a white whale named *Moby Dick* who ate his leg. Ahab's obsession has made him called as madman by his crew, but he is able to force them with his charisma and speeches, showing that it is a noble thing to do. Among the crew is Ishmael, the narrator of this novel and this novel is presented from his point of view. Ishmael's narrative contains references to bad omens. For example, Ishmael comments that the name "Ahab" is synonymous with the name of the cruel king of the Old Testament. The name of the ship Ishmael was in, *The Pequod*, is ironically a tribe from Connecticut whose village was destroyed in 1637.

The researcher chooses the topic on the symbols in the novel with three fundamental purposes. First, the Langer's theory is chosen to be the basis for discussing symbols that are communicated through literary works. Second, according to the previous research from Jozi Joseph Thwala [2] on *An Examination of Symbolism in J.P. Shongwe's Poetry*, it reveals that symbolism requires imaginative interpretation of the reader's emotions and reactions. The research also has found a similarity of symbolism analysis which focuses on the importance of symbolism as a literary device and conveying meaning. Third, the research gap, based on state of the art, reveals many researches discussed about the symbols in literary work, but to connect it to the post COVID-19 pandemic situation, this has not been discussed in the previous researchers.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Novel

A novel is a story long enough to fill a book, where the characters and locations are usually imaginary. The word "novel" comes from the Italian word novella, and from the Latin novellus in the 16th century [3]. Novels are not expected to be educational sources, such as treatises or morality dramas; nevertheless, in varying degrees of implication, even the "purest" works of fiction convey a philosophy of life. Any good work of fiction is entertainment, and if the novel can educate or inspire, then captivating the reader is best. Novel writers, like poets, can articulate the unclear thoughts and feelings of a society through the use of appropriate and imaginative language and symbols.

2.2. Symbol

In a way, "symbol" is defined as follows:

1. A symbol is something that is usually a visible sign that replaces an idea or object,
2. Symbols are words, signs, or signs, which are used to represent something else such as meaning, quality, abstraction, ideas, and objects,
3. Symbol is anything that is given the meaning by general agreement and / or by agreement or custom,
4. Symbols are often defined in a limited way as a conventional sign, something that is built by society or individuals with a certain meaning that is more or less standardized and agreed upon or used by members of the community itself. The meaning of symbols in this context is often contrasted with scientific signs [4].

2.3. Theme

Themes in literary works are the main ideas or underlying meanings that the author explores in novels, short stories, or other literary works. The theme of a story can be conveyed using characters, settings, dialogue, plot, or a combination of these elements. In a simple story, the theme may be moral or the message: "Don't judge a book by its cover." In more complex stories, the main theme is usually a more open exploration of some basic aspects of society or humanity [5].

3. Research Methodology

This paper utilizes a basic qualitative design under a qualitative research approach. This approach might be effective for comprehending ideas, perspectives, or experiences. It can be utilized to uncover intricate details about a situation or to generate new study concepts.

Researchers use qualitative approach to analyze the symbols contained in the novel. The method used in this research is that the researcher read some books to obtain more relevant data about the research, utilizing bibliographies from reference books, and looking for figurative language to find out the meaning of symbols in Moby Dick.

To answer the research questions, the researcher uses some literature theories and mainly uses Langer's theory on symbolism. This research uses Moby Dick as the primary data

Procedure of collecting and analyzing data has implied by the researcher to read the novel first to understand the contents of the story in the novel. The researcher then identifies each symbol relevant to the story. The data and theory that the researcher collects to make this research are mostly from library books and those that the researcher has because of their more complete information and then searches for the most reliable and relevant additional information about the symbolism and theory via the internet. Lastly, the researcher examines the novel, especially in the symbols contained in the novel. Finally, the researchers drew conclusions after conducting the analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

According to Langer [6], symbol is a term that can make readers, viewers, etc., think that a word has a function that includes more than just language. Symbols allow a person to describe what is conveyed; symbols do not stand only as a substitute for an object. Therefore, meaning is represented by a symbol, and where there is meaning, there is an understanding of the symbol [6]. Symbols found in Melville's Moby Dick.

4.1. The White Whale/Moby Dick

This novel centers on human interactions with nature, either by trying to control it, tame it, understand it, profit from it, or, in Ahab's case, conquer it. This novel implies that nature, like the whale, is an impersonal and incomprehensible phenomenon. Humans

tend to treat nature as a creature that has motives or emotions like humans even though nature is not dependent on humankind.

Before discussing Moby Dick functions as a symbol of nature (or, for that matter, the mother nature against the advancement of mankind), it makes sense to understand why Moby Dick serves as a symbol of so many different ideas. The White Whale is one of the most commonly used symbols in western culture, because it can refer to almost anything: nature, God, bad thoughts in the human mind, and so on. In the novel, the White Whale has different meanings for different characters. For Ahab, Moby Dick was the embodiment of all things evil, and the pope was well aware of what he was doing to the human race that came into contact with him. To other characters, especially Starbuck, he is just an ordinary whale.

The White Whale symbol is a blank slate because the reader knows nothing about the whale. These symbols are characters that exist largely through the thoughts and interpretations of others. Readers' understanding towards Moby Dick comes from the other characters' understanding of him. Because these characters are often not objective - Ahab, for example, is completely obsessed with whales – it is hard to get a definite picture of Moby Dick's personality, if it actually has one. This does not mean that the reader ignores what other characters have to say about Moby Dick. Instead, the reader needs to read their descriptions with their own subjective opinion, just as we do with anyone's opinion.

The White Whale symbol can also be symbolized as God. A chapter in Moby Dick's novel, 'The Whiteness of the Whale,' discusses the color of the whale by comparing it to the whiteness of other objects. There is a discussion about whiteness representing beauty, majesty, innocence and purity. Many books and religious references talk of the color white in relation to God and Heaven. But Ishmael is not sure whether the white color of Moby Dick is a symbol or not. This is an indication that people see different symbols at different things. What appears to be spiritual representation to one person may look like something else to another.

When Starbuck tries to reason with Captain Ahab, Ahab is referring to all objects having masks. For Ahab, this was a power he couldn't conquer, but he had to put in the effort. By killing the whale, he will conquer the power hidden behind the mask. For some, this manifests God's immense and out-of-reach power. Ahab probably mistook this for evil, even though it was just an unstoppable and indestructible force beyond anyone's reach.

In short, Ahab's quest to hunt down the White Whale can be perceived as mankind's desire to prove their dominance over nature. Moby Dick may also be a symbol of Divinity

or spirituality. The first is a discussion of the whale's white color, a parallel that appears in all spiritual literature such as the Bible. The second is Captain Ahab's quest to unmask Moby Dick, in order to conquer a power that cannot be conquered. And the last one is whaling which symbolizes the human search for higher goals and spiritual things.

4.2. Starbuck as the voice of reason

Starbuck's character is the opposite of Ahab's character - where Ahab is driven by emotion, Starbuck is driven by common sense. Because they have very different personalities, the two characters constantly debates in their pursuit of the White whale. In this argument, we can see that Starbuck represents the rational side of the human soul, and Ahab represents the emotional side of man.

Towards the end of the novel, as Pequod comes closer to the White Whale, the relationship between Ahab and Starbuck becomes quite strained. Ahab has indicated that he won't listen to excuses, and it has become clear to Starbuck that Ahab's insanity will most likely lead to the death of many of the crew. Starbuck considers killing Ahab in an attempt to save everyone in chapter 123. But Starbuck's kindness does not allow him to kill Captain Ahab, who continues his mission to eventually kill everyone except Ishmael. However tempted Starbuck may be to meet his family again, he is able to control his emotions, unlike Ahab.

4.3. The ship of bad omen, Pequod

The Pequod is an essential part to the story. Without Pequod, the voyage to hunt down Moby Dick may not have happened. It was the ship that carried Ahab's crew on their final journey. The ship's name comes from an extinct Native American tribe, the Pequot, in Massachusetts ravaged by disease, war, and death. The ship was clearly a symbol of doom and failure. The shape of the ship itself is also a bad omen, dark paint with the bones and teeth of whales hunted in the past, a reminder that death is always happening at any time.

4.4. The bond of friendship and the coffin of life

In Moby Dick, Ishmael and Queequeg have an unusual relationship. Although the two figures differ in race, culture, and religion, Ishmael does not consider this difference very important. Ishmael was initially disgusted and afraid of Queequeg's appearance and

background, but he soon realized that Queequeg was a steadfast, loyal, compassionate, and talented person. The two men became "married," in Queequeg's sense, meaning that they vowed to join their destiny and lay down their lives for one another. Ishmael's friendship with Queequeg provides warmth and meaning to Ishmael's life. Melville [1] suggests that everyone should help each other make up for any shortcomings of a friend or partner. Queequeg's boat-shaped coffin also saved his best friend, Ishmael, who could be considered the fruit of their friendship even though Queequeg was gone. This coffin was designed to hold Queequeg's corpse originally, but was later turned into a boat and was ultimately used to save Ishmael until another ship arrived to save him.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

5.1. Conclusion

The researcher examines several of the main symbols in the novel *Moby Dick*. The symbol of the White Whale or *Moby Dick* symbolizes the mother nature and/or divine/spiritual world. To Captain Ahab, the whale represented all things evil. Starbuck thinks that *Moby Dick* is just a white whale like any other animal. Ishmael is both amazed and confused to determine whether the white whale has any meaning or it is just an ordinary animal.

Starbuck's character can be interpreted as a symbol of human common sense while Ahab is a symbol of human emotion. Starbuck always tries to persuade Ahab to stop hunting *Moby Dick* just because he is obsessed with hunting him down even though in the end it fails and Ahab and his crew die in vain, including Starbuck himself.

The *Pequod* ship can be symbolized as a ship of doom. First, the name *Pequod* itself comes from an American tribe that was destroyed by plague and war. Second, the ship's appearance of the ship itself looks old and creepy, decorated with the bones and teeth of a whale that has been hunted before.

Queequeg's boat-shaped coffin has two symbols in this case, death and life. Originally this chest was made after Queequeg was sure that he would die from an illness he suffered. However, things improve and Queequeg changes his mind to make the chest function as a boat as well. This boat saved Ishmael's life when the *Pequod* sank and he was the only one alive. This boat can also be interpreted as the fruit of friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg.

5.2. Suggestion

After drawing conclusions, the researcher makes several suggestions. For English Language and Literature learners, they must know the meaning and explanation of each symbol in literary works. Learn about symbols by knowing the context in literary works and making this research as a guide in studying symbols.

From the analysis, we can assume the Pandemic COVID-19 as the White Whale. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has primarily affected human health and has been implicated as a major factor in an increase in death cases around the world. COVID-19 can be the symbol of anxiety. People tried hard to prevent the transmission of the virus and let it stay away. Captain Ahad may represent the people who cope with the pandemic COVID-19 situation. The pandemic could inflict emotional trauma.

Prospective researchers are expected to be able to examine all the symbols contained in the literary work to be studied. They must be able to analyze symbols using another point of view. Researchers must understand appropriately since language is flexible and can adapt to certain situations.

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