

A Study of Symbolism in Josh Malerman's Bird Box

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A Study of Symbolism in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*

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ABSTRACT

This article is about A Study of Symbolism in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. The novel is about a post-apocalyptic thriller that follows the story of Malorie, a young woman navigating a world overrun by mysterious creatures that, upon being seen, drive people to madness and suicide. This article exposed the symbols and their meaning in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. The approach used in this study is an intrinsic approach because symbol is one element of intrinsic approach. Frederick William Dillistone's symbolism theory is used to analyze symbols and their meaning. This research uses descriptive qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions, and it generates non-numerical data. The results of this study show that there are 9 symbols used in the story: 1. Birds which symbolize alarm, 2. Blindfold which symbolize protection, 3. Motherhood which symbolize sacrifice, 4. River which symbolize journey, 5. Unseen Entity which symbolize fear and terror, 6. Safe House which symbolize safety and security, 7. Draw Well which symbolize medicine, 8. Dogs which symbolize guide, 9. Box which symbolize physical barrier and hope. The results of this thesis demonstrate the intricacy and potency of symbolism in *Bird Box*. The symbols explored in the study deepen the readers' understanding of the novel's themes, heighten the narrative's emotional impact, and contribute to the broader conversation on the power of symbolism in contemporary literature.

Keywords: *symbol, symbolism, symbolize, dillistone's theory, qualitative method*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Symbolism is a literary term that represents a particular mood or sentiment in a written work. It is the utilization of an individual, object, word, or event to represent something else, such as an idea, in literature. X.J Kennedy (2005: 251) states that "symbols typically do not have a specific meaning, instead, they serve as a hint." Symbols serve as an explanation of the story, a single object, a series of objects, a physical representation, a shape, a gesture, a sound, a color, and a scent. All these things represent a part of human nature, the lack of concern of nature toward human suffering, futile desire, human responsibility, and the romanticism of youth. However, it's crucial to recognize that different individuals may perceive symbols differently, as symbols are typically associated with different cultures or personalities.

In this article, the story is set in a world where the sight of mysterious creatures drives people to madness and suicide. To survive, the characters must wear blindfolds and rely on their other senses to navigate their surroundings. The novel primarily follows the character of Malorie Hayes, a young woman who finds herself pregnant during the early days of the apocalypse. She seeks refuge in a house with a group of survivors, all struggling to adapt to this new world of darkness. Malorie, along with her fellow survivors, must venture outside occasionally, blindfolded, in search of supplies and a safer place to live. Throughout the novel, the theme of fear is pervasive as the characters grapple with the unknown, relying on their instincts and the limited information they have about the creatures. The symbolism of the blindfold and the birds, which act as a warning system in the presence of the creatures, adds depth to the story, exploring themes of perception, survival, and the power of human connection. The novel received critical acclaim for its suspenseful storytelling and its exploration of

themes such as fear, motherhood, and the fragility of human sanity. It garnered significant attention and gained wide readership, ultimately leading to a successful film adaptation released on the Netflix streaming platform in 2018.

This research uses Frederick William Dillistone's symbolism theory. One of Dillistone's interesting thoughts is about symbols. "A symbol is originally an object, a sign, or a word, which is used to recognize each other and with a meaning that is already understood" (Dillistone, 2002: 21). Dillistone defines that a symbol is the image of a real or imaginary object that evokes feelings or is aroused by feelings. Feelings relate to objects, to each other, and to the subject. The theory of symbols is presented at length by combining the views of experts from the various fields as a source of reference for his research to influence his view of symbols and their strengths. Dillistone defines symbols by matching and placing two different parts in the form of images, language, and others, to create a new relationship in which the two elements are still distinguishable but bound together each other. The two parts can refer to something real, concrete, and designate something bigger. According to Dillistone, the symbol comes from the verb basically symbolled in Greek means to match, the two parts to be matched are called symbol. Symbols are often found in everyday life with various forms and purposes for their use, both in relation to scientific activities or in building relationships with the transcendent or God. This study is very interesting because symbols have survived to this day and humans often relate to symbols.

The problem statements of this study are: What are symbols and their meanings exposed in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*? The objective of the study is: To expose the symbols and their meaning in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. This study holds significance in enhancing our literary appreciation, exploring the depths of symbols, unraveling themes, and meanings, contributing to cultural and social conversations, and adding to scholarly discourse. It offers valuable insights into the power of symbolism and its impact on the interpretation and understanding of contemporary literature. This research is crucial to enhancing and expanding knowledge of symbols in novel significance. Each symbol has a unique meaning and message that is made clear to the reader by this research because a symbol in a story is an element of a literary work that can affect the meaning of a story. This research is anticipated to benefit those who want to study the meaning of symbols that can influence stories and situations in novels, movies, or stories. The scope of this study is symbolism in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. The limitation of this study is symbols and their meaning in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. The reason for choosing the topic of symbolism in *Bird Box* novel is because it is very interesting to discuss, which has a lot of meaning in each symbol on the novel and to have more views about symbol in the literary work. By choosing symbolism as a thesis topic, the researcher aims to unravel the layers of meaning within the narrative, explore the author's artistic choices, analyze the thematic significance, and contribute to the academic discourse surrounding the novel. The chosen topic offers a unique and valuable opportunity to engage with a captivating work of contemporary literature and deepen our understanding of symbolism as a literary device.

2. METHOD

This research uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative method is a type of research that involves in-depth interviews, focus groups, or observations to collect data that is rich in detail and context. It is often used to explore complex phenomena or to gain insight into people's experiences and perspectives on a particular topic. According to Grove (2003:11), describe a qualitative approach as "a systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences and situations to give them meaning". The literary approach used in this study is symbolism approach which discusses the symbols and their meaning exposed in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box* based on the symbolism theory of literature by Frederick William Dillistone.

⁵ The instrument of this study is the writer itself, as the main observer who participates in observing and analyzing the data to procedure the valid result in the reading text taken from the novel *Bird Box* by Josh Malerman. The writer ² as a research instrument collect and identifies data based on predetermined types and analyzes ⁵ data based on topics regarding the meaning of symbols and how the symbol is exposed in the novel. The writer uses this fictional text as the data source. The writer reads the novel and classifies the symbolism in the novel.

² The data collection procedure in this study is carried out with the following steps. The first is reading the novel *Bird Box* by Josh Malerman. The second step is understanding the novel, especially the sentences that show meaning of symbols. The third step is finding and collecting related data that supports the analysis. In the last step, organizing and classifying data to differentiate data into categories or classes according to the discussion.

The data analysis procedure used in this research is the descriptive analysis technique. The following steps are the procedures for analyzing the data. The first is collecting data from the selected novel. The second is analyzing the identified data to find out the meaning of symbols. The last step is drawing a conclusion based on the data that has been interpreted.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section will present the analysis symbol that appears ² in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*. The novel follows the character Malorie Hayes, a woman ⁶ who must find a way to guide herself and her children to safety despite the potential threat from entities which cause people who look at them to kill themselves. ⁴ The story is partially told via flashbacks and takes place during two time periods. The use of symbols is found throughout their adventure, each symbol will be explained in this section.

3.1 Symbolism of Birds

One of the most prominent symbols in the novel is birds. Throughout the novel, birds are used as a symbol of alarm warning system. They also symbolize the idea of intuition and the importance of trusting their instincts. The birds in the novel are used as an alarm system to warn the characters of the entity's presence, as in the following quotation: "So that's dinner?" Felix asks. ¹ "An alarm system" Tom smiles. "Alarm system?" Felix asks. Jules says, "We're going to hang the box outside. By the front door. We'll be able to hear them in here." (Malerman, 2014: 95)

Tom, Malorie, and the other survivors use birds as an early alarm warning system to detect the presence of the unseen entity. The bird's ability to sense danger before it arrives is a symbol for the survivors who need to stay alert and be aware of their surroundings to survive. Birds can indeed function as alarm warning systems in certain contexts. Many bird species have evolved to be highly attentive to their surroundings and possess keen senses, allowing them to detect and respond to potential threats. It's important to note that while birds can serve as alarm warning systems, their responses are not always foolproof or universally applicable.

3.2 Symbolism of Blindfold

Another significant symbol in the novel is the blindfold. The most significant symbol in the novel is the blindfolds that the characters wear to avoid seeing the entity that drives people to commit suicide. Blindfolds are a symbol of not being able to see, and in the case of *Bird Box* they symbolize the fear of the unknown. In the novel, the blindfold is a symbol of protection and safety. It's important to note that the blindfolds in *Bird Box* are specific to the story and are not

representative of blindfolds used in real-life situations or practices., as in the following quotation: "Do not take off your blindfolds," Malorie says. "I ought to remove your blindfolds myself," the man says suddenly. "Keep your blindfolds on!" she yells at the children. "Open your eyes, for Christ's sake!" the man shouts. "Do not remove your blindfolds!" Malorie screams again. (Malerman, 2014: 44)

When Malorie reaches the river, she meets a man and after that both argue very long. The man says he is not wearing the blindfold anymore. For 4 years, Malorie argued that blindfolds are the strongest protection in this new world. Even though the man is forcing Malorie and the children to take off the blindfold, Malorie still with her principle of not seeing the outside world at that time. Malorie knows the risks of removing the blindfold, people would kill themselves after seeing the invisible creature. At the end of the debate, the man dead in a horrible way and Malorie continues her journey safely with the children.

3.3 Symbolism of Motherhood

Another important symbol in *Bird Box* is the role of motherhood. Malorie is forced to raise her two children in a world that is incredibly dangerous and must do so while blindfolded. This can be seen as a symbol of the challenges that come with parenthood, and the need to protect and guide her children through difficult times. Malorie's character is a symbol of motherhood, and the sacrifices mothers make for her children. In the novel, Malorie is pregnant and gives birth to two children, whom she names Boy and Girl. Malorie's primary concern is the safety and survival of her children, and she goes to great lengths to protect them from harm. Her character represents the idea of selfless love, and the sacrifices mothers make to ensure their children's safety and well-being, as in the following quotation: "You are saving their lives for a life not worth living." (Malerman, 2014: 3)

In a moment of self-doubt, Malorie wonders whether her protective parenting style defeats the purpose of raising children, which is to offer them a happy and meaningful life. It is Malorie's desire to see the children not only survive but also prosper that motivates her to leave the home where they live safely for several years and embark on a dangerous journey down the river. To her, it is a risk worth taking. These words of internal thought from Malorie reveal the deeply troubling struggle that marks her life. Here, she struggles with the purpose of her existence and thinks of the horrors her children will have to endure. As in the entirety of the novel, Malerman attempts to develop character alongside mood to build a feeling of both suspense and near hopelessness. Moreover, the novel also explores the idea of maternal instinct, which is the innate desire to protect and care for one's offspring. Malorie's character exemplifies this instinct, as she is willing to risk her own life to protect her children. In this sense, motherhood is a symbol of strength, sacrifice, and resilience in the face of adversity.

3.4 Symbolism of River

The river is another important symbol in the novel. The river symbolizes a journey and a path to salvation. The river is a powerful symbol in the novel, as it symbolizes the journey of life. In the novel, Malorie and her two children travel down a river blindfolded to reach a place of safety. The river symbolizes the need to adapt to new situations to survive. In the novel, Malorie and the

children embark on a perilous journey down the river in search of a sanctuary. The river symbolizes a path to safety, as it is the only way for them to reach their destination. It also symbolizes the journey of life and the obstacles one must overcome to reach one's destination. To escape the danger outside, Malorie and her two children must travel down a river blindfolded.

However, there is not a specific quotation about rivers in the novel. The river symbolizes as a means of escape and a pathway to safety for the characters, as they navigate a world where looking at an unseen entity drives people to madness and death. It is important to note that the specific symbolism of a river can vary across cultures and personal interpretations. Symbolic meanings can also change depending on the context in literature, art, or individual experiences.

3.5 Symbolism of The Unseen Entity

The unseen entity is a significant symbol in the novel. It symbolizes the fear of the unknown and the terror that comes with it. The characters in the novel are afraid of the entity because they cannot see it. It is a symbol for the things in life that the reader fears but cannot understand or control. The entity that drives people to commit suicide is the most significant symbol in the novel. It symbolizes the fear of the unknown and the power of the mind to create its own realities. The entity is never described in the novel, which adds to its mystery and makes it an even more potent symbol, as in the following quotation:

¹ Rowing blindfolded is even harder than Malorie had imagined. Many times, already, the rowboat has run into banks and gotten stuck for a period of several minutes. In that time, she was besieged by visions of unseen hands reaching for the blindfolds that cover the children's eyes. Fingers coming up and out of the water, from the mud where the river meets the earth. The children did not scream, they did not whine. They are too patient for that. (Malerman, 2014: 14)

Malorie describes the invisible creatures as being very numerous and having many arms that are always trying to pull blindfolds on children. These invisible creatures are also not only on land, but they are also in river water and even in mud. However, the children are not afraid, they do not scream or whine, they are very patient because they are already to the presence of these creatures.

3.6 Symbolism of The Safe House

The safe house is a symbol of security and protection. In the novel, the survivors barricade themselves inside a safe house to protect themselves from the dangers outside. The safe house symbolizes the need for safety and protection in a world that is dangerous and unpredictable. The house in the story is a symbol of safety and security. It symbolizes the limitations of our own perspectives and the dangers of becoming too comfortable in our surroundings. In the story, the characters stay in the house for too long, and this leads to a false sense of security. Finally, the house where Malorie and the other survivors hide can be seen as a symbol of safety and security.

Furthermore, the safe house is a place of relative safety and shelter during the dangerous and uncertain world of *Bird Box*. It symbolizes as a temporary haven where the characters can find a momentary sense of security and gather their strength before venturing out into the perilous outside. ² In the novel *Bird Box* by Josh Malerman, there is not a specific quote that explicitly refers

to a safe house. However, the overall concept of seeking safety and refuge from the mysterious creatures that drive people to madness is a central theme of the book.

3.7 Symbolism of Draw Well

The system of taking ground water through deep wells/pumps is the definition of a well. Usually, infiltration wells will be used by the surrounding community as the main source of water to help meet their daily needs. In this novel, the well symbolizes medicine, as in the following quotation:

Blindfolded, they step from the house. The well is twenty yards away. Malorie once told them that the water in the well was the only medicine they'd ever need. Because of this, Malorie knows, the children have always respected the well. They never complained about fetching water with her. At the well now, the ground is bumpy beneath their feet. It feels unnatural, soft. (Malerman, 2014: 8)

Before the children were born, Malorie with Tom and the others always fetch water from the well to drink every day. Well water is very useful for drinking and medicine, besides that for flushing urine and feces.

3.8 Symbolism of Dogs

Dogs play a significant symbolic role throughout the story. While birds are the primary symbols in the book, symbolizing the presence of danger, dogs also carry symbolic meaning, particularly in relation to trust, protection, and companionship. The dogs in the novel possess a heightened sense of intuition. They can perceive the presence of the creatures and react accordingly, as in the following quotation: "We need guides." Tom speaks. "What do you mean?" Felix asks. "I mean I'm going to go looking for dogs." (Malerman, 2014: 77)

Tom thinks that he and his housemates need a guide or an alert system. Tom thinks that he would go out to find a street dog who no longer has a master. Tom thinks that way because a few weeks ago when Jules was fetching water from the well, Jules feels something nearby that scares Jules and comes back home. Everyone is afraid at home and almost all day does not drink water from the well.

3.9 Symbolism of Box

The box is a recurring symbol that holds significant meaning throughout the story. The box serves as a physical barrier, protecting the characters from the mysterious creatures that drive people to madness and suicide when looked at directly. The characters in the novel, including the protagonist Malorie, rely on the box as a means of shielding themselves from the dangers outside. The box can embody hope and the will to survive. It becomes a symbol of resilience and the characters' determination to protect themselves and their loved ones. The box represents a beacon of hope, a way to hold onto life and persevere in the face of extreme adversity. Overall, the symbolism of the box in *Bird Box* encompasses containment, protection, fear, blind faith, emotional suppression, isolation, hope, and survival. Its presence throughout the novel underscores the characters' struggle to navigate a dangerous world while preserving their sanity and humanity, as in the following quotation: The communal birdsong swells and peaks before it

¹ flattens, twists, and the boundaries explode. Malorie hears it like she's inside of it. Like she's trapped in an aviary with a thousand madcap birds. It feels like a cage was lowered over them all. A cardboard box. A bird box. Blocking out the sun forever. (Malerman, 2014: 177-178)

The box also symbolizes fear and anxiety. Whenever the characters are exposed to the unknown or the outside world, they become vulnerable to the creatures. The box becomes a symbol of their anxieties and the fear that accompanies the potential danger lurking beyond its confines. In the novel, characters must rely on their sense of hearing and other senses to navigate the world. By blindfolding themselves, they can protect their sanity and survive. The box, in this sense, can be seen as a metaphorical representation of their blind faith in their survival instincts and their trust in their senses.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel *Bird Box* by Josh Malerman is a gripping tale that explores the power of fear, and the lengths people will go to to survive in a world plagued by mysterious creatures. Symbolism plays a significant role throughout the story, enriching the narrative and providing deeper meaning to various elements. After analyzing the symbols in Josh Malerman's *Bird Box*, it can be concluded that there are there are 9 symbols used in the story: 1. Birds which symbolize alarm, 2. Blindfold which symbolize protection, 3. Motherhood which symbolize sacrifice, 4. River which symbolize journey, 5. Unseen Entity which symbolize fear and terror, 6. Safe House which symbolize safety and security, 7. Draw Well which symbolize medicine, 8. Dogs which symbolize guide, 9. Box which symbolize physical barrier and hope.

In conclusion, the symbolism in *Bird Box* enriches the narrative by exploring themes of fear, survival, and human condition. The novel employs birds, blindfold, motherhood, river, the unseen entity, safe house, draw well, dogs, and box as powerful symbols, inviting ¹¹ readers to reflect on the nature of fear, the importance of human connection, and the lengths individuals will go to protect what they cherish.

The results of this study explain how the characters such as, the birds, dogs, the ¹² entity unseen, the motherhood, and the settings such as, the river, draw well and the safe house of a story play an important role in explaining the meaning of symbols from a novel. The use of symbolism in *Bird Box* novel is a testament to the power of literature to convey complex ideas and emotions using simple yet powerful symbols.

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