

## Animals as a medium for criticism and reflection: Zoo-semiotics in the short story “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” by Triyanto Triwikromo

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### Abstract

This research analyzes the short story “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” by Triyanto Triwikromo using a zoo-semiotic approach from Thomas Albert Sebeok, who studies the role of animals as signs in human symbolic communication. The animals in this short story not only function as characters but also as a reflection of human identity to convey criticism of anthropocentrism and a reflection of human morality. By using zoo-semiotic theory, this research reveals that the zoo narrative in the short story is an allegory of human life, which is full of hierarchy, contradiction, and manipulation. Animal characteristics are seen as ethograms that can be interpreted symbolically. The symbolism of animals, such as elephants, worms, and other creatures, reflects humans' weaknesses, who often project their nature and internal conflicts onto animals. This research contributes to the study of contemporary Indonesian literature and expands the application of zoo-semiotics in literary studies, especially in exploring the relationship between humans and animals.

### Kata Kunci:

antroposentris;  
etogram; hierarki;  
moralitas; zoo-  
semiotika;  
simbolisme hewan

### Abstrak

**Hewan sebagai media kritik dan refleksi: Zoo-semiotika pada cerpen “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” karya Triyanto Triwikromo**

Penelitian ini menganalisis cerpen “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” karya Triyanto Triwikromo dengan pendekatan zoo-semiotika dari Thomas Albert Sebeok, yang mempelajari peran hewan sebagai tanda dalam komunikasi simbolis manusia. Hewan di dalam cerpen ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai karakter dalam cerita, tetapi juga sebagai cerminan identitas manusia untuk menyampaikan kritik terhadap antroposentris dan refleksi moralitas manusia. Dengan menggunakan teori zoo-semiotika, penelitian ini mengungkap narasi kebun binatang dalam cerpen tersebut menjadi alegori kehidupan manusia yang penuh dengan hierarki, kontradiksi, dan manipulasi. Sifat-sifat hewan dilihat sebagai etogram yang dapat dimaknai secara simbolik. Simbolisme hewan, seperti gajah, cacing, dan makhluk lainnya, mencerminkan kelemahan manusia yang sering memproyeksikan sifat dan konflik internalnya pada hewan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian sastra Indonesia kontemporer dan memperluas aplikasi zoo-semiotika dalam studi sastra, khususnya dalam mengeksplorasi hubungan manusia dan hewan.

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## 1 Introduction

Studying animal behavior typically falls under the domain of scientific studies, particularly ethology (a branch of biology and psychology). In the context of critical theory, ethology is often used as a lens to understand human behavior through analogy. The relationship between humans and animals is not merely biological but is also laden with symbolic, ethical, and political meanings (Haraway, 2003). The concept of semiotics can be used to interpret these symbols. Semiotics not only serves to study tangible signs but also fictional and representational ones (Eco, 1976). Fictional representations of animals are not solely presented as biological representations but also as metaphors.

A comparison of traditional semiotics, which tends to be anthropocentric, and ethology, which prioritizes animal behavior as part of nature to interpret the symbols within human-animal relationships (Sebeok, 1975). Further, Sebeok explains that the workings of semiotics can incorporate animal sign systems, such as "species-specific codes," referred to as ethograms (Sebeok, 2001). This statement involves an in-depth analysis of how humans, as observers, can translate the communication codes of animals. By integrating semiotics and ethology, Sebeok introduces the concept of zoo-semiotics, paving the way for a more inclusive and holistic study of human-animal relationships and the symbolic world.

This study is essential to delve deeper into the role of animals in shaping narratives and meanings within this work. Thus, several questions are formulated: first, do these animals function as metaphors, allegories, or symbols of specific social conditions? Second, how does the story's relationship between humans and animals reflect broader worldviews? Moreover, how do the language and signs used to depict these animals articulate particular social critiques? The zoo-semiotic approach can provide deeper insights into the complex relationships between humans, animals, and culture in literature, particularly in the short story collection “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang.”

To highlight the novelty of this research, previous studies on Triyanto Triwikromo's works are first reviewed. Triwikromo's short stories that have been analyzed include “Morgot,” which discusses women's social issues (Chamalah et al., 2017). The short story “Penguburan Terakhir Sitaesmi” reveals the author's desire to merge irrational elements with rational ones (Nasution, 2020). This story has also been examined to explore women's identities (Lestari, 2017). Women's issues are further addressed in the short story “Malam Sepasang Lampion” (Nafiyah & Mardikantoro, 2016). Representations of female oppression are also found in “Pengadilan Terakhir” (Hutagalung, 2015). In the short story “Tak Ada Eve di Champs-Élysées,” the author offers societal perspectives on the existence of transgender individuals (Kalpaltaru, 2015).

In the short story “Surga Sungsang,” discussions about spatial relations and colonial discourse are explored (Rahmawati, 2017). The short story “Ular di Mangkuk Nabi” depicts discrimination related to race, religion, ethnicity, and intergroup issues (SARA), representing the defamation of Jewish people, the marginalization of immigrants, racial extermination, violations of minority rights, the killing of vulnerable groups, and the 1965 human tragedy in Indonesia (Kurniawan, 2011). In the short story “Celeng Satu Celeng Semua,” the use of rhetorical figures is examined, which creates an aesthetic effect through semantic strategies, imaginative descriptions, and emphatic narration, including imagery related to sight, hearing, movement, touch, and smell (Eligia et al., 2015). This short story has also been analyzed to demonstrate that the author and their social group are aware of their struggle to express their ideas. The issues discussed involve a deep understanding of the relationship between humans and God, nature, and humanity, expressed through a problematic hero character (Kusuma, 2016). The short story “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” has been studied to examine the opposition between animal instincts and human impulses (Hidayatika & Fadhilla, 2024).

Additionally, this story has been analyzed using Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics to explore icons, indices, and symbolic signs (Fadhilla et al., 2022).

Various scholars have researched the use of animals as symbols in literature. In Indonesia, studies on animal representation in literary works remain relatively rare. Research on translation strategies in George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm* has been conducted using the concept of domestication (Saroh, 2021). Cultural semiotics and representation in Indonesian literature have been explored as references for readers to understand the culture and social context influencing the use of symbols, including animal symbols, in Indonesian literary works (Damono, 2020; Faruk, 2015b). Beyond literary works, semiotic methods have also been applied in other fields, such as film studies and art and architecture studies. For instance, the film *Perfect World* was analyzed using Barthes’ semiotics (Noviana, 2020), while *Rise of the Guardians* was studied using Peirce’s semiotics (Wijayanto & Haryati, 2020). Research on the ornaments of traditional Acehese houses employed Peirce’s semiotics (Helmi, 2023).

Based on previous studies, no research has examined the short story “*Sesat Pikir Para Binatang*” using the concepts of zoo-semiotics and Thomas A. Sebeok. This approach can be applied to analyze Triyanto Triwikromo’s strategy in “*Sesat Pikir Para Binatang*” in using animals as symbols to critique various aspects of social, political, and moral life in Indonesia. Triyanto Triwikromo is well-known for frequently employing satirical and allegorical approaches in his works.

The article titled “Animals as a Medium for Criticism and Reflection: Zoo-Semiotics in the Short Story *Sesat Pikir Para Binatang* by Triyanto Triwikromo” offers significant novelty in the field of literary and semiotic studies in Indonesia, particularly in the context of zoo-semiotics. This research examines how Triyanto Triwikromo uses animal characters in “*Sesat Pikir Para Binatang*” as symbols to represent social, political, moral, and cultural aspects of human life, especially within Indonesian society. The application of zoo semiotics seeks to uncover the signs and symbols presented through animal characters in the story.

This study analyzes how these animals are used as metaphors or allegories to construct social critique and reflect human relationships with the environment and power structures. By exploring the social and moral messages conveyed through the representation of animals in Triyanto’s short story, the study also examines the author’s efforts to articulate criticism of the “errors in thinking” phenomena occurring in society.

The short story uses animals as a medium of expression, broadening insights into Indonesian literary studies by introducing zoo-semiotics as an approach capable of identifying and analyzing the symbolic role of animals in literary narratives. Thus, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the use of animals in contemporary Indonesian literary works. With these objectives, the study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to zoo-semiotic studies while offering new perspectives on understanding contemporary Indonesian literature, mainly through animal symbols as tools for social critique and reflection.

## 2 Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach using the zoo-semiotic analysis method. This method is used to understand and interpret the signs and symbols embedded in the representation of animals within the short story collection. This descriptive-qualitative study aims to uncover symbolic meanings in literary texts (Faruk, 2015a). Based on previous research, animal representation in literary texts is rarely discussed using zoo-semiotics. For this reason, this research provides novelty in looking at the representation of animals in literary texts. Animals in literary texts can not only be

discussed as symbolic animals but can be positioned as actual animals by paying attention to the animal behavior presented by the author.

The data for this research is in the form of short story texts and animal symbolism in the short story "Sesat Thinking of Animals" by Triyanto Triwikromo. Animal representations are found through this data, and the units to be analyzed are determined. The parts analyzed are quotations that use animal representations in the form of ethograms, namely forms of animal behavior. The primary data source was obtained from a collection of short stories entitled *Misguided Thoughts of Animals*, which was published in 2016 by the publisher Grasindo. Studies of the related literature also support this research in building a strong theoretical foundation in studying zoo-semiotics and literary semiotics. Literature on semiotics, zoo-semiotics, and social criticism in literature is used as a reference to analyze the text in depth and provide relevant theoretical perspectives. This secondary data is from relevant journals, books, and academic articles.

Zoo-semiotics is used as the main conceptual framework to study the role and meaning of animals as symbols in literary works. The first step is to identify the main themes in the short story, such as criticism of power, social injustice, human-animal relations, and morality. Once the themes are identified, the symbolism of the animals in the story is analyzed to understand how these themes are constructed through the characters and behavior of the animals (ethograms). As the organism is observed, the ethogram can be viewed by noting and grouping the animal's behavior in the narrative. Then, the ethogram will become data regarding the function of animal behavior as signs and reveal the characterization of animals as representatives of specific cultures or ideologies.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Animal Symbolism in the Perspective of Zoo-Semiotics

Animal symbolism in literary works generally positions animals as symbolic animals. Animals can be seen as the animals themselves based on the animal behaviors raised by the author using the zoo-semiotic perspective. In this short story, animals become signs that humans symbolically construct to reflect traits, behaviors, and values that are often a criticism of humans themselves. In the short story "*Sesat Pikir Para Binatang*", the main character is Kalam, a new zoo worker. Director Noah supervises him in carrying out the task of finding an animal, which is his twin (Triwikromo, 2016). Director Noah states that humans have a "twin" in the animal world. The animals in the zoo become a reflection of human nature. In zoosemiotics, this illustrates the way humans project their moral values, strengths, and weaknesses onto animals. In secondary zoosemiotics, animals are no longer just biological creatures but are used as symbols or reflections of human identity. It is a critique of humans who are searching for themselves. Searching for a "twin" shows human ignorance of themselves, which is then transferred to the animal world, which is easier to describe through its traits.

In animals, as well as in humans, zoosemiotic events have six dimensions, conveniently discussed under three headings: zoo pragmatics, which deals with the origin, spread, and effect of signs; zoosemantics, which deals with their significance; and zoosyntactics, which deals with codes and messages (Sebeok, 1969). Sebeok points out that analysis of animal symbolism can be determined by observing animal behaviors commonly referred to as ethograms (Sebeok, 1979).

In Table 1, there are representations of several animals, such as lions, hyenas, elephants, and worms. The animal behavior described by the author is a lion that has a response to roar and attack humans if humans attack it first. Similarly, snakes will spit out venom if they feel threatened by humans. Elephants are also described as attacking humans if they feel unsafe and uncomfortable around humans. This ethogram shows that animal savagery will not happen without a trigger. In this case, humans are the instigators of the animal's ferocity. Animals are also depicted as not harming

each other. This ethogram depicts animals that understand tolerance between species. At the same time, the text also discusses humans attacking fellow humans. By comparing these conditions, the author wants to show that animals are more capable of maintaining harmony than humans, who are easily ignited and hurt fellow humans. The efforts made by the character Aku (I) in the text to find his twin as an animal are not always as expected. Character Aku (I) hopes to have a strong, tough animal twin. However, at the end of the story, Aku turns out to resemble a worm, an animal that is never considered to exist in the zoo. This condition illustrates the irony that happened to Aku's character. Even animals do not want to be equated with humans, like the Aku character in the text.

**Table 1: Ethograms in the Short Story "Sesat Pikir Para Binatang"**

Datum	Page	Excerpt	Ethogram
1	160	“He has become a completely tame animal?” Noah shook his head. It made me imagine that amidst the roars of lions, the screams of monkeys, the squawks of starlings, the chaos of otters, the fuss of green frogs, the meows of small cats, the slurping of black-spotted dogs, the clamor of camels, and the noisy human traffic, the leopard could have ripped Noah's body apart in the cage. Animal rage is unpredictable, isn't it?	Lions roar; monkeys scream; starlings tweet; dogs bark; cats meow.
2	155	“Lions only tear people's bodies apart if they are hurt first. Cobras won't spit out venom if humans don't antagonize the spoon-headed beast.”	Lions tear apart human bodies; cobras spew venom
3	164	I dared not say anything to the hyenas. I just thought to myself, “If you were my twin animals, I would be the most powerful creature in Halasnom. I would be able to eat anyone alive.	The mighty predatory hyena
4	164	“At 12:03am, so many worms emerged from the bushes and potholes. ...My twin is just a worm?”	Worms emerge from shrubs and soil
5	159	“A twin will never hurt you under any circumstances.”	Animals do not injure in the same species
6	159	“At first I thought the elephant was the animal that clung to my soul. ... However, one day it kicked me and stepped on my foot.”	Elephants kick and stomp

### 3.2 The Zoo as an Allegory of Life

In the short story “Sesat Pikir Para Binatang” by Triyanto Triwikromo, the zoo is not just a setting but also a symbol of human life full of hierarchies, contradictions, and manipulations. Zoos are often perceived as places with clear rules and systems, where animals are categorized and placed in cages according to their species. However, if it is observed deeply, zoos also reflect the reality of human life. This short story describes a hierarchical social structure through the existence of more dominant animals (e.g., lions, elephants) and weaker or oppressed ones (e.g., worms, mice) in the zoo. Zoos can also be described as manipulative. Animals in zoos appear to live an “organized” life, but they are actually confined and deprived of freedom, just like humans in social systems, which limit their space and freedom. Zoos can also be described as a contradiction in terms. Zoos are often packaged as places of entertainment and education, but behind that, many animals suffer from exploitation. This statement can be analogous to human life, which appears organized and harmonious but is full of conflict and injustice.



In Datum 1, the zoo's relationship between humans and animals is portrayed as a coexistence of living beings, each busy with their own activities. The interaction between humans and animals in the zoo symbolizes a broad human life. Datum 2 demonstrates that animals do not attack humans unless they feel threatened, contrasting with human behavior, where individuals might harm each other when in a position of power. In Datum 3, a human character imagines preying on others if given the strength of a hyena. The zoo setting is a metaphor for human life, filled with hierarchy, conflict, and manipulation. In zoo-semiotics, a zoo is a secondary system where animals are not merely biological entities but also symbols that reflect human society.

### 3.3 Animals as Metaphors of Humiliation and Identity Paradox

Historically and culturally, animals have often been used as symbols of humiliation, weakness, or ugliness in various literary and philosophical traditions. It is because humans often position themselves as higher beings than animals, so all traits considered immoral or inferior are attached to animals. However, this short story is different. Humans are asked to look for similarities in animals. Humans look for animals that are strong and tough. Humans fail to find these similarities because humans find similarities in weak and helpless animals, namely worms. Worms are often portrayed as despicable creatures because they live in the ground, are small, and are easily stepped on. In this story, the worm may reflect an oppressed class of people who have no voice and are easily manipulated.

In Datum 4, the protagonist discovers that his twin is a worm. After searching the Halasnom Zoo, Kalam finds that his twin animal is not what he envisioned. Among all the strong and tough animals in the zoo, Kalam finds similarities between himself and a worm—a creature often deemed lowly and disgusting. In zoo-semiotics, this reveals a paradox. Animals considered vile are used to critique human perceptions of their superiority. Human arrogance, which places humans above animals, is challenged by the idea that humans, like worms, are small parts of a vast ecosystem.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Human-Animal Relations as Critique and Reflection

After understanding animal symbolism from a semiotic perspective, one can find the relationship between humans and animals in the text to convey criticism. In this regard, Sebeok highlights that humans often project their traits and values onto animal behavior, whether in literature, art, or everyday communication. It is relevant in literary zoo-semiotics, such as in the analysis of the short story “*Sesat Pikir Para Binatang*,” where animals are not only characters but also used as a tool for social criticism of humans.

#### 4.1.1 Critique of Anthropocentrism

The relationship between humans and animals in literature is often depicted as humans assuming control over the ecological hierarchy, which includes animals, the environment, plants, trees, and abiotic elements (Alvian Guntur Prasetya Aziz et al., 2024). Interactions between humans and animals in texts addressing ecological issues frequently illustrate humans as the dominant majority and animals as the minority. In the story, the narrator describes a seemingly mutual relationship with an elephant, but eventually, the elephant harms him. In zoo-semiotics, humans cannot entirely control animals, even though cultural narratives often show humans trying to manipulate animals. It reflects a critique of human exploitation of nature and animals, suggesting that nature can “fight back” unexpectedly.

Anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are the most significant entities in the world, has long dominated Western thought and culture. This philosophy asserts that morality applies exclusively to humans and that human needs and interests hold the highest and most important value (Keraf, 2014).

The environmental ethics paradigm of anthropocentrism can also be found in literary narratives (Alvian Guntur Prasetya Aziz et al., 2024). In "Sesat Pikir Para Binatang," humans are no longer the central entities. Animals, such as elephants and worms, become voices of critique against humans. From a zoo-semiotic perspective, animals highlight human selfishness in perceiving themselves as the center of everything. As creatures considered lower than humans, animals instead reveal humanity's inability to understand its place in the world.

#### 4.1.2 Reflection on Human Morality

The concept of moral hierarchy suggests that each individual has different moral obligations. By living according to social norms and fulfilling all moral responsibilities, an individual is considered to have a higher moral quality (Hardiman, 2019). Such individuals are believed to foster harmonious relationships within their communities. The concept of a "twin" is used in the story to depict imagined moral hierarchies among animals. Animals are perceived as purer, uncorrupted, and free of human "sins." Animals can maintain harmony among themselves because they do not harm members of their species. Generally, animals will not use venom to attack other animals of their kind except when defending against other species under threat (Rosmalia, 2020).

In contrast, humans are often portrayed as manipulative and greedy creatures. Sebeok observes that animals in human culture frequently serve as representations of morality, contrasting with human weaknesses. The short story illustrates how animals maintain harmony within their species better than humans do among themselves. For example, the protagonist Kalam aspires to have a hyena as his twin, believing hyenas to be intelligent and capable of problem-solving better than lions, cheetahs, and even primates (Taman Safari Indonesia, 2023).

Morality must be expressed in practical actions, rooted in Kant's categorical imperative, to create a quality life in the present and the future (Durasa, 2023; Murtadlo & Khobir, 2023). Belief in God is a fundamental requirement for moral behavior (Krueger et al., 2010). In this story, animals are depicted as possessing a religion that enables them to treat each other with compassion and respect.

While humans create complex systems of morality through religion, they often fail to implement them. Conversely, animals in this story are positioned as simpler creatures that can live in harmony without moral conflict. In Sebeok's zoo-semiotics, the story illustrates how humans often project moral concepts onto animals to evaluate themselves.

## 5 Conclusion

The short story "Sesat Pikir Para Binatang" utilizes animals as complex symbolic signs to reflect human weaknesses, contradictions, and paradoxes. Through Sebeok's zoo-semiotics, animals in this story can be interpreted in three ways: first, as a critique of human perceptions of their superiority; second, as symbols of human moral frailty often mirrored in animal behavior; and third, as a medium to explore human relationships with nature, which are often characterized by exploitation and imbalance. The story emphasizes the profound symbolic connections between humans and animals, highlighting critiques of anthropocentrism and reflections on human morality.

This research contributes to contemporary Indonesian literary studies by introducing zoo-semiotics as an approach to uncovering the symbolic meanings of animals in literature, particularly as tools for social critique and moral reflection. The study also broadens the scope of zoo-semiotics into the realm of literature, underlining the importance of understanding the role of animals as symbolic communicative media that can represent the dynamics of human-animal relationships.

While this study provides significant insights, it acknowledges its limitations and opens avenues for further research. Future studies could compare the use of animals as media for social critique in

other literary works, both within Indonesia and internationally, to identify universal or unique narrative patterns and symbolism. This study would contribute to the global development of literary studies.

### Disclosure Statement

The author(s) claim there is no conflict of interest.

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