Symbols of Human Values in *Maleficent* (2014): A Semiotics and Deconstruction Approach

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Abstract. Maleficent (2014), directed by Robert Stromberg, is a reinterpretation of the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, revived to highlight the other side of a character long perceived as a villain. This study aims to explore the key symbols found in the film Maleficent and to understand the meanings they convey. The research focuses on how these symbols represent human values. A descriptive qualitative approach is employed, using Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of symbols and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Primary data are taken from the film's visual and verbal elements, while secondary data come from relevant literature. The findings reveal that the symbols in Maleficent reflect human values such as compassion, virtue, truth, and peace. These symbols include her wings, the curse, flowers, the kiss, the thorn wall, the crown, the term *beastie*, and Diaval shape shifting each illustrating human values. The film challenges the conventional notion of an absolute boundary between "good" and "evil." This study concludes that Maleficent strategically employs symbolism to deconstruct traditional moral binaries through the use of symbolic elements.

Keywords: symbol, maleficent, semiotic, deconstruction, human values

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Human Values are universal values that can be developed to shape an individual's character. These human values consist of truth, virtue, peace, compassion, and nonviolence (Sukayasa & Awuy). The importance of studying or analyzing human values lies in their role in the formation of human beings as social creatures. Analyzing human values within a literary work facilitates readers or viewers in understanding and recognizing the human values embedded in the work. Through the introduction of these human values, literature can be effectively utilized in education, particularly in literature learning**.** (Hermansyah, 2017)

The significance of human and moral values is also reflected in the resurgence of classic children's films, now revisited through a new perspective deconstruction. Derrida first introduced this concept in his work *Of Grammatology*, where he examined the interaction between language and meaning formation. Deconstruction is a philosophical method that challenges dominant or conventional interpretations of texts or history and rejects the existence of absolute or singular truth (Constantin & Sitorus, 2023).

For instance, the classic children's film *Beauty and the Beast* has undergone such a reinterpretation. In the 1991 version, Belle is portrayed as passive, kind, and intelligent, akin to a traditional damsel in distress. However, in the 2017 adaptation, Belle is reimagined as a more independent and active character, even depicted as an inventor like her father.

A similar transformation occurs in *Snow White*. The 1937 film depicts Snow White as very gentle, passive, and reliant on male assistance, reinforcing the stereotype that a good woman must be submissive, beautiful, and passive. The antagonist in this version is portrayed as a symbol of pure jealousy and evil without a complex background, reflecting patriarchal views and the physical judgment that a woman's loss of beauty equates to moral corruption. In contrast, the 2012 film *Snow White and the Huntsman* presents Snow White as strong, brave, and actively fighting evil. The villain is also given a clear backstory involving past trauma. In this narrative, the boundary between "good" and "evil" is no longer absolute.

Similarly, the 1959 *Sleeping Beauty* film has been reinterpreted through the perspective of the traditionally villainous character in the 2014 film *Maleficent*. In this version, Maleficent is depicted as a young, kind hearted fairy living in Moors, a magical realm filled with mystical creatures, and a protector of nature. However, after being betrayed by Stefan, her friend and first love who cuts off her wings to give to the human king in his quest for the throne, Maleficent becomes vengeful. Over time, her pain and anger slowly fade due to her love and remorse for Aurora, the king's daughter whom she cursed as a baby. This love and regret ultimately lift the curse. The film concludes with Aurora becoming queen and symbolizing peace and unity between the human world and the magical realm.

As demonstrated in *Maleficent*, this study aims to show that the concepts of good and evil are not simply black and white. Maleficent, initially seen as a villain filled with vengeance, is portrayed as a character with softness and compassion. Human values such as empathy, love, and forgiveness are embodied in Maleficent, the so-called villain in *Sleeping Beauty*. Moreover, the moral messages presented in this story are relevant to today's generation, which is heavily influenced by gadgets and social media, where people are often judged superficially or based on others' narratives. This film invites viewers to think more critically, understand others' perspectives, and realize that every person has a unique story that may not be immediately apparent.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on *Maleficent* has been conducted by Diani, Lestari, and Maulana (2017) in their article titled "Representation of Feminism in the Film *Maleficent*." This study examines feminist representation using John Fiske's semiotic approach, focusing on aspects of reality, representation, and ideology. This research focuses on how the film *Maleficent* portrays female empowerment and the concept of ecofeminism through visualization, characterization, and narrative.

Meanwhile, another study was carried out by Natalia, Sili, and Valiantien (2019) in their article entitled "Motivation of Stefan Character in *Maleficent* Film (2014)." This research focuses on analysing Stefan's actions in the film, such as his betrayal of Maleficent, usurpation of power, ambition, fear of losing social status, and desire for recognition. However, this study concentrates solely on Stefan as an individual, without addressing how his actions contribute to patterns of gender representation, power dynamics, and narrative structure within *Maleficent*.

Another study was conducted by Dhiba and Juwita (2024) in their article "*Maleficent* (2014) and Attachment Theory: Understanding the Emotional Depths of Villainy." This study explores Maleficent's character through the lens of attachment theory, emphasizing emotional aspects such as love and revenge that shape her villainous side. The theoretical approach in this analysis highlights

the individual's emotional relationships but does not explore other dimensions of Maleficent's character.

There was also research conducted by Setyawan, Prasetyowati, & Kurniasih (2020). This study discusses the character change of the main character Maleficent in Maleficent (2014) with the approach of mise-en-scène analysis, which is the visual aspect of the movie such as costumes, lighting, setting, and actors' movements. This research found that Maleficent undergoes three character changes, from protagonist to antagonist and back again to protagonist, which is influenced by betrayal and emotional conflict. Through the mise-en-scène aspect, especially the movement and appearance of the characters, Maleficent's emotional and psychological changes are clearly visualized, showing that her character transformation is not only due to the storyline, but also strongly supported by visual cinematic elements.

Additionally, research by Khan (2017), titled "*Maleficent*: Reimagining *the Sleeping Beauty* with a Postmodernist Perspective," focuses on the elements of intertextuality and narrative revision of the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. This study highlights how *Maleficent* challenges dominant narratives and gives voice to a character traditionally viewed as the villain.

From the above discussion on studies related to the film *Maleficent*, it is apparent that universal human values have not yet been fully addressed. Research on this topic is particularly compelling considering the widespread influence of values and ideologies disseminated through social media and the internet, which can negatively affect the personality development of today's youth. An examination of the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* and the film *Maleficent*, both viewed by adolescents aged 13 and above, could contribute significantly to the study of changing values and ideologies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a semiotic approach according to Charles Sanders Pierce and deconstruction according to Jacquees Derrida. Pierce distinguishes three kinds of signs according to the sign's relationship with its denotatum, namely icons, indexes, and symbols. Pierce explains the relationship between signs to be a trilingual relationship between representment, interpretant, and object. The three concepts are interrelated and become the basis for seeing signs as part of a representation of meaning that represents certain things (Isnaini, 2017). Derrida explains that deconstruction is a system of thought that expresses strong resistance to general ideas. The attention of deconstruction reading is on everything in language and textuality that rejects and expands general ideas to produce new ideas. When reading a signifier, meaning does not immediately become clear. Meaning is constantly moving along the chain of signifiers. Therefore, it can be seen that deconstruction is an effort to destabilize the main meaning by tracking hidden meanings that escape attention (Setyawati, 2020). These two approaches were chosen because they are in accordance with the study of hidden meanings in the narrative of Maleficent, which represents good and bad human values through symbols

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research analyzes the symbols of human values in Maleficent (2014) through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory. The results of the analysis

show that this movie contains various visual and narrative signs that form symbolic meanings related to humanity, as well as dismantling the classic binary structure between good and evil characters.

1. **Emphaty**

   `Symbol: Maleficent's kiss to Aurora.`

In the movie Maleficent, this action breaks the classic "Prince saves Princess" value that has been believed for a long time. The movie promotes and voices a new view that empathy and true love do not have to come from a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, but can also come from a loving relationship between a mother and a child.

2. **Tolerance**

   `Symbol: Aurora's crown on the day of her coronation.`

The crown Aurora wears when crowned queen symbolizes tolerance and reconciliation between the two previously hostile worlds of humans and Moors. Aurora is biologically human but she was raised by Moors, which makes her the central figure who bridges the differences, cultures, and perspectives of the two groups. The crown she wears symbolizes acceptance and signifies that leadership does not have to come from the dominant group. This action reflects the principles of tolerance and multiculturalism, namely the belief that differences are not a threat, but a wealth to be embraced. Not only that, this symbol also implies recognition of equality and trust in individuals outside of their home group.

3. **Justice**

   `Symbol: Maleficent's wings`

In the film, Maleficent's wings symbolize personal freedom and power. When her wings are stolen by Stefan this is similar to a human rights violation where one's rights and power are taken away by others for personal gain. It can also be linked to the violation of freedom, the right to one's own body and choices. Later, when the wings are reunited with Maleficent's body, it symbolizes the restoration of justice. This is in line with the principle of restorative justice which focuses on repairing harm and restoring the rights of victims.

4. **Freedom**

   `Symbol: A thorn wall`

In the movie Maleficent, the thorny wall that Maleficent deliberately builds reflects the image of defending freedom, dignity, and identity from external threats. This wall is not only a defense but also a symbol that freedom must be defended and guarded from oppressive forces that want to dominate. This parallels the reality that power often sacrifices the freedom of others for the sake of power and control.

5. **Unconditional love**

   `Symbol: A flower given by Diaval to calm Aurora as a baby.`

In the scene when Aurora was a baby and kept crying, Diaval came to give her a flower to drink next to her. This flower can symbolize unconditional love because it is given selflessly, reflecting a pure love that does not demand reciprocation or recognition. It also adds to the complexity of the "antagonist" character that love can come from unexpected places.

6. Compassion

Excerpt:
> Aurora: "I know who you are. You're the one who's been watching over me all my life".

Timestamp: 1:00:00-1:00:00

In this dialogue, Aurora acknowledges that Maleficent is a protective figure who has been secretly guarding and caring for her. This is an emotional confession where Aurora shows trust and love to Maleficent. On the other hand, Maleficent, who initially intends to take revenge, develops into a loving and protective figure. In some countries, this mother figure culture is very common and valued. The behavior shown by Maleficent such as caring, protecting, and giving love to a child who is not her flesh and blood is considered as true affection if it is based on love and sacrifice.

7. Solidarity

Excerpt:
> Maleficent: "I need you to be my wings".

Timestamp: 23:36-23:39

Maleficent uttered this dialogue after rescuing Diaval, a crow, from the cruelty of the peasants by turning him into a human. Diaval is not only a spy for Maleficent but also a loyal friend and companion who helps her out of her dark times. Not only does Diaval transform into a human and a raven, he is often transformed into various forms to help Maleficent, such as a wolf, a dragon, and a horse. This shows solidarity in the values of loyalty, cooperation, and emotional support.

8. Honesty

Excerpt:
> Maleficent: "Aurora...there is an evil in this world...and I cannot keep you from it".

Timestamp: 1:10:00 hingga 1:11:00.

Maleficent's dialogue symbolizes honesty. Maleficent feels guilty for the curse she has uttered, and honestly says her regret. She admitted her mistake to Aurora. In any culture or narrative, daring to admit mistakes even in front of the victim is a very strong form of honesty. In this movie, Maleficent also does not seek justification or blame others, she admits that her act of revenge has hurt innocent people in the past.

9. Equality

Excerpt:
> Aurora: "Hello, fairy godmother."
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> Maleficent: "Hello, Beastie."

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Timestamp: 1:25:30-1:26:30
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The phrase "Beastie" is Maleficent's special nickname for Aurora. In a general sense, this nickname is usually used for something bad, ugly, or insulting. However, in the movie Maleficent, this call is an intimate affectionate nickname that is full of emotional closeness as the story progresses. It reflects how Maleficent accepts Aurora for who she is despite being the daughter of King Stefan. Maleficent slowly let's go of her hatred, she no longer sees Aurora as an "enemy child" but as a human being who has value, dignity, and deserves to be treated with compassion.

10. Social responsibility

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Excerpt:
        Maleficent: "I revoke the curse. And let it be no more".

Timestamp: 1:37:00-1:38:00
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In the dialog, Maleficent is trying to lift her own curse. This is a symbol of accountability for what she has done. She realizes that she loves Aurora as much as her own child and tries to make amends. She realizes the social and emotional impact of her actions on the lives of others, namely Aurora. The story emphasizes that even "evil" characters can assume social responsibility and love.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that Maleficent (2014) not only revives the classic fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, but also actively deconstructs conventional meanings of antagonists and protagonists through visual and narrative symbols that are rich in meaning. Through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, symbols such as wings, curses, kisses, crowns, as well as the relationships between characters in the film succeed in revealing various human values such as empathy, tolerance, justice, compassion, solidarity, honesty, freedom, unconditional love, equality, and social responsibility.

The symbolism presented in this movie is able to show that the boundary between "good" and "evil" is not absolute. Maleficent, who is portrayed as a villain in the classic narrative, represents deep human values. On the other hand, the "good" character in the classic story, King Stefan, is shown to be manipulative and cruel. This invites the audience, especially the digital generation who are easily influenced by one-sided narratives, to think critically, understand other points of view, and not judge someone only from the external image.

Thus, Maleficent becomes an effective medium in delivering moral messages that are relevant to today's social development, as well as an important example of how visual works can shape, criticize, and challenge the absolute structure of values in society.

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