

The Representation of Symbols in Wolfgang Borchert's Short Story *Nachts Schlafen Die Ratten Noch*

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Abstract

This article explores the representation of symbols in Wolfgang Borchert's short story *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch*, which reflects the social and psychological conditions of post-war German society. The story portrays trauma, grief, and subtle hope through simple yet powerful symbols. Symbols such as urban ruins, rats, and characters are analyzed to uncover deeper meanings related to themes of trauma, humanity, and hope. This study adopts a qualitative approach, using literature review as the primary method. Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs provide the theoretical foundation to examine how symbols construct meaning. The analysis reveals that the symbols in this short story not only reflect post-war realities but also convey universal humanistic messages. Through this approach, the article highlights the essential role of symbolism in literature as a medium for expressing emotions, collective experiences, and social meanings that cannot always be conveyed explicitly.

Keywords: *Symbol, representation, post-war, Wolfgang Borchert, German short story*

Introduction

Literature plays a crucial role in portraying social, psychological, and humanitarian conditions across different eras. One example of German literary work which rich in symbolic elements representing post-war experiences through symbolic language is the short story *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* by Wolfgang Borchert. The story is set in post-World War II Germany, where trauma, grief, and loss have become part of daily life. In this simple yet touching short story, Borchert embeds symbols that convey both deep sorrow and a faint glimmer of hope for those who feel shattered.

In literary approaches, symbols are used to convey deeper meanings beyond surface descriptions. Pradopo (2005) states that symbols in literary works have connotative meanings and represent particular ideas. Suhartono (2006) also emphasizes that symbols help authors reveal psychological tensions and social realities that cannot be expressed literally.

The study of representation in literature is an important approach to understanding how meaning is constructed through symbols. Stuart Hall (1997) explains that representation is an active process of meaning-making that connects concepts in the mind with language or

signs. Language, including symbolic language serves as a medium to shape and communicate complex social realities. According to Hall, representation is not a passive reflection but actively shapes how we see, understand, and assign meaning to things.

In order to deepen the analysis of symbols in this short story, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory serves as the analytical framework. Peirce categorizes signs into three types: icons (which resemble the object), indices (which have a causal relationship with the object), and symbols, whose meanings must be learned and understood through specific cultural and social contexts. According to Peirce (1931), symbols have a conventional relationship with the objects they represent, and their meanings are shaped through cultural and interpretative processes. Signs are triadic: the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what is being referred to), and the interpretant (the meaning constructed). In a literary context, symbols like "rats" or "ruins" in Borchert's story can be seen as representamens that refer to concrete objects but evoke interpretants such as fear, trauma, or hope.

A study by Wicaksono (2017) shows that representation in literature is a form of social construction reflecting cultural values in society, but it does not specifically highlight the use of symbols in literary texts or link them with particular historical and psychological contexts. Unlike that study, this research integrates Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of symbolism to analyze the symbolic meanings in post-war literature, enabling a deeper understanding of the traumatic experiences represented through symbols.

Based on the background above, this research focuses on two main problems: First, the identification of symbols found in the short story *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch*, and second, the analysis of how these symbols represent deeper meanings related to the themes of trauma, hope, and humanity.

This study aims to identify the symbols in the short story and analyze their meanings within the post-war social and psychological context. The expected benefit is to contribute to the development of symbolism studies in literature and provide new insights for readers and literature educators to understand symbols as vital elements in conveying humanitarian messages.

Method

This research uses a qualitative method that focuses on interpreting the meanings of symbols in literary works. This method is chosen because qualitative research enables in-depth understanding of phenomena based on the context and meanings that emerge in the text (Moleong, 2013). According to Nasution (2023), qualitative research data is presented in the form of words, sentences, narrative expressions, and images. The qualitative approach is used to describe symbolic elements in Wolfgang Borchert's *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* and how these symbols represent the post-war social conditions.

The data collection technique used in this research is literature review of the text. Generally, literature review involves discussing materials or readings relevant to a research topic or findings. Data was obtained by reading the short story *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* and analyzing the symbols that appear in the text, such as the ruins, rats, and characters, to interpret their symbolic meanings in the post-war social and historical context. Secondary literature was also reviewed to support symbolic interpretation. According to Yusuf (2019), a literature review is a description or analysis of literature relevant to a specific field or topic.

Results and Discussion

Wolfgang Borchert's short story *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* presents strong symbolic representations related to the social and psychological conditions of post-war society, especially children who were indirect victims of the destruction. Analysis based on representation theory (Hall, 1997) and symbolism theory (Peirce, 1931) shows that the elements in the story not only hold literal meanings but also implicitly convey social messages through symbols. This section presents the identified symbolic representations in the text and explains how these symbols shape certain social representations.

1. Symbol of City Ruins

The ruins in the story represent the physical and psychological destruction of German society after the war. Fitriani (2021) also states that the symbol of city ruins reflects the collapse of family and safety. Borchert writes:

“Das hohle Fenster in der vereinsamten Mauer gähnte blaurot voll früher Abendsonne. Staubgewölke flimmerte zwischen den steilgereckten Schornsteinresten. Die Schuttwüste döste.”
(The hollow window in the lonely wall yawned blue-red with the early evening sun. Dust clouds shimmered between the upright remnants of chimneys. The rubble desert dozed.)

This personification emphasizes that ruins are not merely background settings but also reflections of a society “asleep” in trauma, loss, and helplessness. According to Hall (1997), representation does not just convey facts but shapes perceptions of reality. In this context, the ruins become a visual metaphor for a broken way of life. For Jürgen, the main character, the ruins are not just where his brother's body is buried but also symbolize his emotional attachment and inability to move on from the past.

2. Symbol of Rats

The rats in the title *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* (“Rats Sleep at Night”) are ambivalent symbols. Rats can represent threats to his brother's corpse, symbols of further destruction. However, the old man's statement that rats sleep at night becomes a symbol of hope. Rats represent death, danger, and fear looming over children's lives in post-war times. Harwati (2016) also noted that rats symbolize the bitter reality of post-war life: death and destruction. In the dialogue:

“Wenn du mich nicht verrätst, sagte Jürgen da schnell, es ist wegen den Ratten. ... Ja, die essen doch von Toten. Von Menschen. Da leben sie doch von. Wer sagt das? Unser Lehrer.”
(If you don't tell on me, said Jürgen quickly, it's because of the rats. ... Yes, they eat the dead. People. That's what they live on. Who said that? Our teacher.)

However, the old man replies:

*“Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch. Nachts kannst du ruhig nach Hause gehen.
Nachts schlafen sie immer. Wenn es dunkel wird, schon.”
(Rats sleep at night. You can go home peacefully at night. They always sleep
at night. Once it’s dark, for sure.)*

This “white lie” becomes a symbol of hope and a psychological defense for Jürgen, reversing the rat’s meaning from threat to recovery. From Peirce’s (1931) perspective, this symbol invites interpretation because its meaning is not fixed and heavily depends on social context and reader experience. It also illustrates how a single representamen can produce multiple interpretants.

3. Symbol of the Character Jürgen

Jürgen represents the younger generation forced to bear the trauma of war. His silence and watch over the ruins reflect psychological immaturity but also a small heroism in preserving family values. As Suhartono (2006) notes, character symbolism in literature reflects unspoken social realities. Jürgen becomes a symbol of resilience and suffering experienced by the post-war generation. Lestari (2022) also states that Jürgen represents the youth who have lost their future.

*“Ich muss doch aufpassen, sagte Jürgen unsicher. Immerzu? fragte der Mann,
nachts auch? Nachts auch. Immerzu. Immer.”
(I have to keep watch, said Jürgen hesitantly. Constantly? asked the man. At
night too? At night too. Constantly. Always.)*

4. The Old Man as a Symbol of Hope

The old man symbolizes hope and recovery. He uses soothing lies to relieve Jürgen of a burden too heavy for a child. His actions and words demonstrate humanity and solidarity amid destruction, offering a future to the younger generation. Sudarmoko (2018) also sees the old man as a father-figure conveying humanistic values.

5. Symbol of the Rabbit (*Kaninchen*) and Color

The rabbit offered by the old man symbolizes new life and hope. In the dialogue:

*“Weißt du was? Jetzt füttere ich schnell meine Kaninchen, und wenn es dunkel
wird, hole ich dich ab. Vielleicht kann ich eins mitbringen. Ein kleines oder,
was meinst du?”
(You know what? I’ll feed my rabbits quickly now, and when it’s dark, I’ll pick
you up. Maybe I’ll bring one. A little one, what do you think?)*

In German literary symbolism, rabbits, especially white ones represent life, innocence, and new beginnings, in contrast to rats which symbolize death. The green color of the rabbit’s food also symbolizes hope amid the grayness of the ruins.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the symbols in Wolfgang Borchert’s *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* reflect trauma, physical destruction, and emotional burdens experienced

by post-war German society. Symbols such as city ruins, rats, and the character Jürgen clearly express the social and psychological conditions of people trying to survive amid the rubble of the past, showing the complexity of their experiences dealing with loss and devastation.

The meanings of symbols in *Nachts schlafen die Ratten noch* reflect various aspects of post-war societal struggle. Some of them are:

1. **The symbol of city ruins** emphasizes the destruction of family and safety, visualizing trauma and loss experienced by post-war society.
2. **The symbol of rats** represents the threat of death and ongoing destruction, yet also contains a glimmer of hope through protective lies.
3. **The character Jürgen** symbolizes the younger generation bearing trauma, while also embodying a small act of heroism that emerges from his sense of responsibility to guard the ruins.
4. **The old man** symbolizes hope and solidarity, reflecting humanitarian values and the instinct to protect children caught in the midst of chaos.
5. **The white rabbit** offered by the old man represents new life, innocence, and hope for a better future, further supported by the green-colored rabbit food, which reinforces the emergence of hope amid the grey ruins.

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