Journal of Language
Volume 8, Number 2, pp: 390-396
e-ISSN: 2685-8878 | p-ISSN: 2655-9080
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30743/jol.v8i2.14433

The Croods Cave, Fire, and Sun: A Barthesian Semiotic Analysis of *The Croods*

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Article Info

Article history:
Received: September 30, 2026
Accepted: November 05, 2026
Published: November 13, 2026

Keywords:
Symbolism; Semiotic Analysis; Roland Barthes; The Croods; Protection; Change; Hope.

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the symbolic meanings of the cave, fire, and sun in the animated movie *The Croods* (2013)**,** directed by Kirk DeMicco and Chris Sanders. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, this study explores how these symbols convey deeper meanings beyond their literal interpretations. The analysis is divided into two parts**:** the first explores the denotative and connotative meanings of the cave, fire, and sun; the second examines how these symbols reflect the values of protection, change, and hope. The cave, denotatively a place of shelter, connotatively symbolizes protection as well as fear and ignorance. Fire, as a literal tool for survival, represents transformation and the acceptance of change. The sun, essential for life, symbolizes hope and new beginnings. These three symbols are essential narrative elements that visually and thematically represent universal human experiences. Through a qualitative descriptive method and narrative analysis, this study reveals how symbolic elements in animated films like *The Croods* can offer profound insights into personal growth, emotional resilience, and the human journey.

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1. Introduction

The Croods is a 2013 animated adventure-comedy film produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by 20th Century Fox. It is directed by Chris Sanders and Kirk DeMicco, who also wrote the script. The movie takes place in a fictional prehistoric era called "The Croodaceous", featuring a variety of fantastical creatures.

Human life is not far from art and literature, because literature is a part of human feelings (Okunoye, 2008). Literature is a medium for expressing human feelings and thoughts in the form of written works and films. On the other hand, according to Kwang-su in Rizki (2022)**,** literature is a form of expression that contains human feelings and concepts in a certain form.

Film has a close relationship with literature and has had a significant impact on literary studies. Since its inception in the early 20th century, film has been an interesting medium for its creators to explore various aspects of life. Filmmakers have continuously tried to convey human stories in unique and innovative ways. This medium serves as an effective tool to shape and influence the way people think, perceive, choose, and have opinions.

Symbols in films often play a significant role in conveying the messages. For example, the use of colors, objects, and characters can reflect deeper themes, such as social struggles or injustice. As Fadaee explains that symbolism can be people, situations, actions, or elements of nature, "a literary symbol is something that has a deeper meaning than its literal meaning. It's

a thing, a person, a situation, an action, or anything else in the story that has a literal meaning but also suggests or represents other meanings" (Fadaee**,** 2011).

Symbolism is one of the literary devices that is most rich in nuance and implied meaning. Symbols also have a strong relationship with literary works. The use of symbols in literary works often has multiple meanings depending on the context of the story, where a single symbol can represent multiple conflicting meanings. For example, fire can symbolize destruction and evil, but it can also symbolize regrowth and the cycle of life (Glatch**,** 2023).

A literary work often uses symbolism to deepen the meaning of the work. Ivan Ostashchuk (2017) explains that symbolism can take the form of an object, something in the character's environment in the story, or a situation. Symbolism allows authors to freely add double interpretations to literary works. According to Bai in Zain (2021)**,** symbolism has two different meanings, an obvious literal meaning and a symbolic meaning that is deeper than the literal meaning. Thus, symbolism makes the themes of literary works universal.

The Croods (2013) tells the story of a prehistoric family living in a cave. Grug, the father, is very protective of his family with very strict rules and prevents them from exploring and facing new things. However, when their cave is destroyed by a natural disaster, they are forced to find a new, safer place to live. On their journey they find danger, forcing Eep to call Guy by blowing a conch shell. The Croods family and Guy begin a journey to find a new place to live.

2. Literature Review

Symbolism provides an alternative meaning beyond the original one, adding greater depth to a literary work through its use. Symbolism is a fundamental literary device that employs objects, characters, or events to represent abstract ideas or concepts beyond their literal meaning. Shaw in Fadaee (2011) stated that symbol is something used for, or regarded as, representing something else. More specifically, a symbol is any element intended as a symbol and has more meaning than what is displayed. A symbol is viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolized (Fadaee: 2011). Meanwhile, Peirce in Settineri (2017) states that, a symbol is a sign that refers to the object. It represents by the operation of a law, usually an association of general ideas that causes the symbol to be regarded as referring to that item (Settineri: 2017). It can be concluded that a symbol is an object or idea that has a certain meaning that encourages people to think deeper than what they initially understood.

Symbolism is a literary element used in a work of literature to help the reader understand the work(Rizki: 2022). Such as understanding an object, character, or event that has a deeper meaning beyond its literal meaning. It functions within two levels: the signifier (the physical form of the symbol) and the signified (the meaning or idea that the symbol represents). In cinema, this duality allows filmmakers to use common objects or motifs to carry significant narrative weight. Symbols often emerge in patterns or recurring visual motifs, helping to underline the thematic messages of a film.

Symbols in film can serve multiple functions. According to Edgar-Hunt (2010), symbols can represent characters' emotions, foreshadow plot developments, or reflect societal concerns. In animated films, which are often created to engage both children and adults, symbolic elements are often designed to communicate simple ideas while conveying deeper meaning to the audience.

Meanwhile, meaning is a combination of semiotics from both theoretical and terminological sides. According to Pelc in Noth (1990), meaning is used semiotically when the term is associated with any kind of sign, not only words, sentences, texts, but also symptoms, signs, symbols, representative images or statues. According to Benny in Lubis (2024), semiotics is a science that examines the signs in people's lives. In simple terms,

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semiotics is the science of signs. Semiotics studies the system, a rule that produces the meaning of signs. In the beginning, the meaning does not exist prior to interaction. For each meaning, a symbol is needed to be interpreted together in a communication process. After that, an object or a 'symbol' becomes a certain symbol and has meaning.

2.1 Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Barthes (1986) identifies semiology as the science studying ideas-in-form because the focus of the study is on significations away from the content. Yet, it is important to consider the unity of the interplay between form, and ideology "historical" explanation. Barthes adds that semiology is the correlation between the signifier, and the signified to form the sign, all in one process. In his theory, Barthes developed semiotics into two levels of signs, namely the degree of denotation and connotation. Denotation' tends to be described as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning of a sign. The term 'connotation' is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional etc.) (Chandler: 1994)

Barthes continued this thinking by emphasizing the interaction between text and the personal and cultural experiences of its users, the interaction among conventions in the text and the conventions experienced and expected by its users. Barthes's idea is known as the "order of signification", which includes denotation (the actual meaning according to the dictionary) and connotation (a double meaning born of cultural and personal experience).

2.2 Symbolism of the Cave, Fire, and Sun

1. Symbolism of the Cave
   Denotation: Caves are fundamental to human history. They are simultaneously places of shelter and places of deep, dark danger (Crane: 2015).
   Connotation: In Plato's allegory of the cave, the cave represents a metaphor for ignorance and knowledge. In Plato's Republic, the light of universal truth exists outside the metaphorical cave, in which the majority of humans livef. In the darkness of the cave, people cannot see the truth; therefore, they remain in the darkness of ignorance. It is only through abstract thinking that they may escape the cave and gain access to philosophical insight and self-liberation. Leaving the cave, then, means attaining enlightenment and truth (Georgiadou: 2005).
2. Symbolism of the Fire
   Denotation: using fire as a source of protection from predators, as a source of light, and/or as a source of heat (Bellomo: 1994).
   Connotation: Anything emanating heat, light or change (or for humans, passion) could be subsumed under the doctrine of a universal fire. The analogies to life were particularly powerful. That fire ate (feeding on pabulum ignis), grew, decayed, breathed and died seemed to emulate the cycle of living beings (Pyne: 2016).
3. Symbolism of the Sun
   Denotation: The Sun gives out heat and light. Plants and animals need these things to stay alive. Without the Sun, nothing on Earth could survive. (Harman: 2015)
   Connotation: "sun" symbolizes hope, renewal, and the promise of a new beginning. It represents light and guidance that the speaker eagerly anticipates, offering comfort and direction in times of darkness and confusion. (Vinh: 2024).

3. Research Method

Polkinghorne (2005) explains the purpose of qualitative research is to enrich the understanding of an experience. The writers may choose appropriate examples of that

experience to encapsulate. Qualitative methods are methods for assessing, collecting, and describing data in order to explain the subject of the study. Qualitative methods take a realistic and interpretive approach to the subject. The design of this study is to understand and analyze the symbols and themes contained in the film. Content analysis helps in identifying, interpreting, and categorizing recurring symbols in the context of the story. By examining the visual and narrative elements in *The Croods*, this study will analyze how each symbol contributes to the main theme that is being conveyed.

There are several reasons underlying the use of qualitative research in this study. First, qualitative research is one type of research that is often used in literary research. Second, qualitative research is used to analyze the meaning of the symbols contained in the film, so that the expected research results will be obtained.

The research design that will be carried out is a qualitative method with a narrative approach. The narrative approach is one of the approaches used in qualitative methods as a substitute for case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology and ethnography (Creswell: 2015). The narrative approach uses the phase of retelling the character's life using structural devices such as plot, setting, activity, climax and ending. The author chose the narrative research approach as the data analysis design. Narrative research is an inquiry strategy in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then often retold or returned by the researcher into the narrative chronology.

4. Discussion

The discussion analyzes the symbolic meanings of the cave, fire, and sun in *The Croods* using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The analysis is structured into two parts first the symbolic meanings of each element, and second how those symbols reflect the values of protection, change, and hope.

4.1 The Symbolic Meanings of the Cave, Fire, and Sun

4.1.1 *The cave*

Denotation:

The cave is portrayed as a physical shelter that protects the Croods family from external dangers. It is the center of their life and survival, where strict rules are applied by Grug to avoid risk and danger. This matches Crane's (2015) Caves are fundamental to human history. They are simultaneously places of shelter and places of deep, dark danger.

Connotation:

This cave represents more than just a place to live. It symbolizes Grug's fear of change and his desire to control and protect his family by isolating them from the outside world. In Plato's allegory of the cave, the cave represents a metaphor for ignorance and knowledge. “In Plato's Republic, the light of universal truth exists outside the metaphorical cave, in which the majority of humans livef. In the darkness of the cave, people cannot see the truth; therefore, they remain in the darkness of ignorance. It is only through abstract thinking that they may escape the cave and gain access to philosophical insight and self-liberation. Leaving the cave, then, means attaining enlightenment and truth“ (Georgiadou: 2005).

4.1.2 *The Fire*

Denotation:

Fire is introduced by Guy as a tool for protection, and survival. This is a discovery that the Croods family had not known before. “using fire as a source of protection from predators, as a source of light, and/or as a source of heat” (Bellomo: 1994).

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Connotation:

When Grug and his family saw fire for the first time, they were scared, but also curious. The fire had a huge impact on their lives, changing the way they survived from the old way of life to a more modern one. "Anything emanating heat, light or change (or for humans, passion) could be subsumed under the doctrine of a universal fire. The analogies to life were particularly powerful. That fire ate (feeding on pabulum ignis), grew, decayed, breathed and died seemed to emulate the cycle of living beings" (Pyne: 2016).

4.1.3 *The sun*

Dennotation:

When the croods lost their cave. Guy guide The Croods to follow the light of the sun in search of a better life. "sun" symbolizes hope, renewal, and the promise of a new beginning. It represents light and guidance that the speaker eagerly anticipates, offering comfort and direction in times of darkness and confusion. (Vinh: 2024).

Conotation:

At the beginning of the movie, light from the sun marks the time for the Croods' survival. Grug and his family often avoid the outside world when it gets dark and only come out when the sun rises. "The Sun gives out heat and light . Plants and animals need these things to stay alive. Without the Sun, nothing on Earth could survive" (Harman: 2015).

4.2 How the Symbols of the Cave, Fire, and Sun Reflect the Values of Protection, Change, and Hope

1. The Cave as Protection

The cave, while symbolizing physical protection, also becomes a barrier to growth. Grug believes the cave is the only safe place, imposing fear-based restrictions. His overprotectiveness is challenged as the family realizes that survival also requires adaptation. Thus, the cave reflects both tangibel and emotional protection, yet also the limits of staying in comfort zones.

2. The Fire as Change

Fire symbolizes dramatic change. It brings discomfort at first, but also opportunities. Through fire, the Croods learn new ways to survive, such as cooking food and navigating dangers. It becomes a metaphor for transformation suggesting that change, while intimidating, is necessary for progress.

3. The Sun as Hope

The sun symbolizes light at the end of hardship. When the Croods lose their home, the sun becomes a guiding force. It encourages them to move forward and believe in a better tomorrow. The sun's rising each day serves as a metaphor for hope, no matter how dark the night, the light always returns

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the symbols of the cave, fire, and sun in *The Croods* (2013) using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, several conclusions can be drawn. Denotatively, the cave is portrayed as a shelter that protects the Croods family from dangers. However, connotatively, it symbolizes protection but also reflects ignorance and fear of change. Grug's attachment to the cave highlights human resistance to stepping out of their comfort zones in pursuit of growth and enlightenment. Similarly, fire is denotatively presented as a tool introduced by

Guy that brings protection, warmth, and survival. Connotatively, fire symbolizes change and transformation; it marks the beginning of the Croods' transition from primitive survival methods to a more progressive and adaptive way of life.

Furthermore, the sun denotatively represents a source of light and life necessary for survival, but connotatively, it embodies hope, renewal, and the pursuit of a better future. The act of following the sun functions as a symbolic representation of the Croods' transition from fear-based isolation toward growth, exploration, and the embrace of new opportunities. Ultimately, through Barthes' framework, these three visual elements do not merely serve as background settings, but actively drive the narrative, illustrating the broader human journey of overcoming fear and adapting to change.

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