

---

## Symbolism in Alfonso Cuarón's *A Little Princess*: A Percian Semiotic Analysis

**Siti Nurhaliza, Safitri Hariani**

Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara  
Medan, Indonesia

E-mail: [sitihaliza419@gmail.com](mailto:sitihaliza419@gmail.com)

---

### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received: April 15, 2026

Accepted: April 29, 2026

Published: May 11, 2026

---

### Keywords:

*Symbolism;*

*Semiotics;*

*Imagination;*

*resilience*

---

### Abstract

This study explores the use of symbolism in Alfonso Cuarón's film *A Little Princess* (1995). Using a qualitative descriptive method and semiotic analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's theory, this research identifies how symbolic elements function as representations of the main character's emotional journey, personal transformation, and inner resilience. The findings reveal three types of symbols based on Peirce's classification. Natural symbols include weather and atmosphere (cold weather and snow, the smell of warm food, colorful sky like a peacock's tail). Conventional symbols consist of color symbols (black dress, dark tones, bright colors during the birthday scene), object symbols (Emily the doll, birthday cake, the locket), and nature symbols (colorful sky, cold weather, warm wind). Singular symbols include imagination as a shield, the magic circle, and the attic transformation. These findings demonstrate that Cuarón employs symbolism not only for visual storytelling but also as a narrative tool to express deeper emotional and psychological meanings. The symbols effectively convey Sara Crewe's struggle against injustice and her ability to endure adversity through imagination and empathy, enriching the film's themes of loss, identity, hope, and resilience.

---

### Corresponding Author:

**Siti Nurhaliza**

Faculty of Literature, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

E-mail: [sitihaliza419@gmail.com](mailto:sitihaliza419@gmail.com)

---

## 1. Introduction

Film is a powerful medium for conveying messages to the audience, where various elements such as story, characters, setting, and visual symbols work together to create deeper meanings (Elvina Juniatri, Sururuddin, & Mila Wahyuni, 2022). Each of these elements is interconnected in shaping a particular interpretation of a work. It serves as a medium of visual communication that effectively delivers messages through the use of imagery, dialogue, audio, and symbolic representations. *A Little Princess*, a film adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's renowned novel, exemplifies a work abundant in symbolism. The narrative follows Sara Crewe, a young girl who endures hardship and clings to hope, while the film incorporates various symbolic motifs---including dolls, dreams, windows, and enclosed spaces---that convey profound underlying significance.

The movie *A Little Princess* premiered in the United States on May 10, 1995. It was directed by Alfonso Cuarón, a filmmaker from Mexico who is recognized for his artistic visual storytelling and emotionally resonant narratives. The screenplay was crafted by Richard LaGravenese alongside Elizabeth Chandler, adapting the story from the original novel *A Little Princess* written by Frances Hodgson Burnett. LaGravenese, who is also known for writing scripts such as *The Fisher King* and *P.S. I Love You*, played a pivotal role in shaping the screenplay. His contribution helped to portray the central character's imagination and emotional resilience through a script that is both poetic and deeply moving.

*A Little Princess* (1995) follows the story of Sara Crewe, a young girl whose life is dramatically altered after the death of her father. Once wealthy and privileged, Sara is sent to a strict boarding school, where she faces poverty and mistreatment by the headmistress, Miss Minchin. Despite her hardships, Sara retains her strength, kindness, and imagination, believing in the power of inner beauty and compassion.

Previous studies on *A Little Princess* have mostly concentrated on ideological themes such as feminism and social class, leaving visual symbolism in the film less examined. While researchers like Wardani et al. (2021) highlight the presence of feminist and American values, and others such as Byachkova (2020) explore symbolic space and imagination as psychological tools, few have delved into how visual elements---like colour, objects, and nature---communicate emotional and thematic meaning. This gap offers an opportunity to reexamine the film through a symbolic lens, allowing for a more focused analysis of how visual symbolism supports character development and enhances narrative depth (Kurniawati & Anwari, 2023).

Although previous studies have offered valuable insights into ideological and narrative symbolism in *A Little Princess*, few have provided a focused analysis of the film's use of visual symbolism---such as colours, objects, and natural elements---and their roles in expressing emotional development and thematic depth. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the types and meanings of symbolic elements used in Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation.

Thus, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of symbolism are found in the film *A Little Princess*?
2. How are the meanings of these symbols represented in the film?

The findings are expected to provide new perspectives for literary and cinematic analysis, especially within the field of English literature and visual storytelling.

This film was selected for analysis due to its rich use of visual and narrative symbolism that enhances the storytelling beyond mere dialogue and plot. *A Little Princess* (1995), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, combines cinematic artistry with emotional depth, making it a compelling subject for symbolic and semiotic study. Moreover, compared to other literary adaptations, *A Little Princess* stands out for its ability to convey complex themes such as loss, imagination, identity, and resilience through subtle symbolic cues. The symbolism embedded in everyday objects (such as the doll and locket), natural settings, and visual contrasts offers a unique opportunity to analyse how meaning is constructed and conveyed visually. This makes the film particularly suitable for a semiotic analysis using Peirce's theory.

In addition, while many previous studies have focused on the film's ideological or feminist dimensions, fewer have explored the depth of its visual symbolism in relation to narrative structure and character development. Thus, this study aims to contribute a new perspective by investigating the film's symbolic elements as a central narrative device.

Therefore, this study is conducted because the film *A Little Princess* (1995) presents rich visual symbolism that effectively portrays emotions and character development. Furthermore, there has been limited academic focus on analysing visual symbolism in this film. By applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, this research aims to provide a new perspective on the study of symbolism in film.

## 2. Literature Review

The term "symbol" is derived from the Greek word *sym-ballein*, which means to throw something (an object or action) that is related to a concept. Symbols typically originate from metonymy, which involves using the name of one thing to refer to another that is associated with it or is one of its attributes. According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, a symbol

or emblem is a type of sign, image, word, badge, or similar item that represents something or conveys a particular meaning. For instance, the colour white is often considered a symbol of purity, rice is regarded as a symbol of prosperity, and the cap (*kopiah*) is recognized as a distinctive marker of Indonesian identity.

Scholars from different disciplines have approached symbolism from various angles. Carl Jung (1978) views symbols as fundamental to understanding the human psyche, arguing that symbols emerge in dreams and myths as expressions of the unconscious mind. For Jung, symbols bridge conscious and unconscious experiences, helping individuals process psychological conflicts and gain self-awareness. In art, including film, symbolism serves to convey themes, emotions, or messages that are not always explicitly expressed (Guatri, 2023). While Jung emphasizes the psychological and universal dimensions of symbols, Charles Sanders Peirce offers a more structural and systematic framework for analysing how symbols generate meaning through triadic relationships between signs, objects, and interpretants (Peirce, 1931).

Rather than treating these perspectives as competing, this study integrates both: Jung's insights help explain why symbols resonate emotionally, while Peirce's framework provides the analytical tools to classify and interpret them systematically. Symbolism acts as a bridge between literature and film, allowing both forms of art to convey deeper meanings. In literature, symbols such as characters or objects can represent specific ideas or themes, encouraging readers to delve into hidden meanings (Yahya, 2024). Similarly, in film, visual symbols---such as colours, objects, or motifs---add layers to the narrative, creating a more profound experience for viewers (Fadaee, 2011).

Charles Sanders Peirce, a foundational figure in semiotics, provides a detailed and systematic framework for understanding signs and symbols. He divides signs into three categories: icons, indexes, and symbols. Symbols, in Peirce's view, are signs that relate to their objects through a rule or learned convention, rather than resemblance (as in icons) or physical connection (as in indexes) (Peirce, 1931). Peirce's triadic model of the sign includes three essential elements: the representamen (the form the sign takes), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning generated in the mind of the observer). This process forms what Peirce calls "semiosis," the dynamic interpretation of signs through mental association.

Peirce's approach is particularly useful in film and literary analysis, as it accommodates both fixed and fluid meanings depending on context. Symbols are not interpreted in isolation but within systems of cultural knowledge, genre, narrative structure, and viewer experience. In the context of *A Little Princess*, Peirce's categories allow for a nuanced analysis of the symbolic elements in the script. By applying Peirce's semiotic framework, this study seeks to illuminate how the film script communicates layered meanings through natural, conventional, and singular symbols, enriching the viewer's understanding of character development, emotional resonance, and thematic depth.

According to Peirce's semiotic theory as cited in Liszka (1996), symbols can be classified into three types: natural symbols, conventional symbols, and singular symbols. Each of these types has unique characteristics that allow them to function differently within a narrative.

**1. Natural symbolism** refers to symbols that people encounter in their daily lives, which can be visually observed and often appear in everyday situations. For example, smoke is directly associated with fire, or tears are directly associated with sadness. Natural symbols arise from cause-and-effect relationships or universal human experiences, making them intuitively understandable across cultures.

- 2. Conventional symbolism** refers to symbols whose meanings are formed based on mutual agreement within a particular community, culture, or social system. There is no natural or causal relationship between the form of the symbol and the object it represents. Conventional symbols are widely used in everyday life, particularly in verbal and visual communication, as well as in legal and social contexts. Their meaning is determined by social convention; these symbols can also change over time and differ between cultures. In this study, three aspects of conventional symbolism are analysed: colors, objects, and nature.
- 3. Singular symbols** are highly personal and unique to a character or narrative context. They are not culturally universal but instead derive meaning from specific emotional or situational experiences. A singular symbol's meaning is only understood by a specific individual, arising from personal experiences, memories, or emotional connections to an object or event. For example, a locket given by a deceased parent may hold profound meaning for one character but mean nothing to others.

While previous studies on *A Little Princess* have offered valuable insights, they have largely focused on ideological themes such as feminism and social class (Wardani et al., 2021) or explored symbolic space and imagination as psychological tools (Byachkova, 2020). Kurniawati and Anwari (2023) have examined narrative symbolism, but few have systematically analyzed the film's visual symbolism---such as colors, objects, and natural elements---using a structured semiotic framework like Peirce's.

This study differs from prior research in three significant ways. First, it applies Peirce's triadic classification of symbols (natural, conventional, singular) to a film context, providing a systematic rather than impressionistic analysis of visual symbolism. Second, while previous studies have often treated symbolism as a supplementary narrative device, this research positions symbolic elements as central to understanding the protagonist's emotional journey and psychological transformation. Third, this study focuses specifically on Alfonso Cuarón's cinematic adaptation rather than Burnett's original novel, recognizing that film employs unique visual and auditory symbolic resources that differ from literary symbolism. By bridging semiotic theory with film analysis, this research offers a new perspective on how visual symbolism supports character development and enhances narrative depth in *A Little Princess*.

### 3. Research Method

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach is utilized by the researcher. Creswell (2014) explains that qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups attach to social or human issues. This approach is focused on describing the characteristics of a phenomenon without altering variables. Qualitative descriptive research emphasizes understanding the significance and context of human experiences, often involving data collection through observations or document analysis, which provide comprehensive, detailed descriptions of the topic being studied.

#### 3.1 Data Source

The primary data source for this research is Alfonso Cuarón's film *A Little Princess* (1995), specifically the film script written by Richard LaGravenese and Elizabeth Chandler. The film script serves as the main document for analysis, as it contains dialogues, scene descriptions, and visual directions that embed symbolic meanings. Additionally, key scenes from the film were viewed repeatedly to capture non-verbal symbolic elements such as color palettes, lighting, and visual compositions that may not be fully captured in the written script alone.

---

### 3.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection involved a multi-stage process. First, the researcher obtained the film script of *A Little Princess* from reliable sources. Second, the researcher watched the film multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, visual style, and symbolic content. Third, scenes containing potential symbolic elements were identified and documented. Fourth, secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, and reviews related to symbolism in film and Peirce's semiotic theory were examined to support the analysis. The data gathered included dialogues, scene descriptions, visual imagery (colors, objects, settings), and character actions that carry symbolic potential.

### 3.3 Analytical Procedures

The data analysis followed six systematic steps:

1. Watching the film repeatedly. The researcher watched the film *A Little Princess* several times to become familiar with its narrative flow, visual style, and recurring motifs. Repeated viewing allowed the researcher to capture subtle symbolic details that might be missed in a single viewing.
2. Reading the screenplay carefully. The film script was read thoroughly to identify dialogues, scene directions, and descriptive passages that contain or imply symbolic meanings. The script provided a textual foundation for analysis, complementing the visual data from the film.
3. Identifying symbolic elements. Based on the theoretical framework of Peirce (1931) and Liszka (1996), the researcher identified visual and narrative elements in the film that function as symbols. These included natural elements (weather, sky, wind), conventional symbols (colors, objects), and singular symbols (imagination, magic circle, attic).
4. Classifying symbols based on Peirce and Liszka. Each identified symbol was classified into one of three categories: natural symbols (those with cause-and-effect or universal relationships), conventional symbols (those whose meanings are socially or culturally constructed), or singular symbols (those with unique, personal meanings within the narrative context).
5. Interpreting meanings contextually. Each symbol was interpreted within its specific narrative and cinematic context. The interpretation considered the character's emotional state, the scene's atmosphere, and the broader thematic framework of the film (loss, hope, imagination, resilience).
6. Drawing conclusions. The findings were synthesized to answer the research questions: what types of symbolism are found in *A Little Princess* and how are their meanings represented in the film. Conclusions were drawn based on patterns identified across the data.

### 3.4 Validation Strategies

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were employed. First, *triangulation* was achieved by using multiple data sources (film script, film viewing, and secondary literature) to cross-check interpretations. Second, *peer debriefing* was conducted by discussing the identification and classification of symbols with the second author to minimize subjective bias. Third, *thick description* was provided by presenting detailed contextual information for each symbol, allowing readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Fourth, *reflexivity* was practiced by documenting the researcher's interpretive decisions throughout the analysis process, ensuring transparency in how conclusions were reached.

## 4. Discussion

The use of symbolism in *A Little Princess* (1995), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, plays a significant role in conveying emotional depth, character development, and thematic complexity. Through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the symbols in the film can be categorized into three distinct types: natural symbols, conventional symbols, and singular symbols.

This section interprets each symbol within its narrative context, connects findings to Peirce's triadic model of sign (representamen-object-interpretant), and compares the results with prior research on symbolism in film and literature.

### 4.1 Natural Symbols

A natural symbol is a symbol whose meaning comes from a direct relationship between the sign and the thing it represents, or has a natural cause-and-effect relationship. It is called natural because the relationship between the sign and its meaning occurs naturally, not because of societal or cultural habits.

#### Data 1: Weather and atmosphere

In a scene that drastically changes Sara's life, the harsh and unsympathetic headmistress, Miss Minchin, calls Sara to her office. After receiving news that Sara's father has died in the war, she heartlessly decides that Sara must leave her luxurious room and be treated as a servant. In an atmosphere that suddenly turns dark and silent, Miss Minchin delivers her order:

“You'll move to the attic and work as a servant... Report to Mabel in the kitchen promptly at 5 a.m. (LaGravenese, 1995, p.14).”

This line is spoken as the visual atmosphere of the film becomes dark and tense. This change in mood reflects the natural symbol of Sara's inner turmoil. The darkness that envelops the room reflects her emotional devastation, loss of love, and the destruction of her childhood. From Peirce's perspective, the darkness functions as a natural symbol because its meaning (sadness, despair) arises from a universal human association between darkness and emotional suffering, not from cultural convention alone. This finding aligns with Guatri's (2023) observation that visual atmosphere in film serves as a symbolic extension of character psychology.

#### Data 2: Cold Weather and Snow

After being moved to the cold, dark attic, Sara spoke with her best friend, Becky, shivering in the cold. During the conversation, Sara asked a question:

“Is it ever this cold where you come from? (LaGravenese, 1995, p.16)”

This question is uttered in the bitter cold of winter, depicting suffering and isolation. The cold weather symbolically reflects loneliness and emotional suffering, making it a natural symbol of Sara's separation from love and comfort. In Peirce's framework, cold weather functions as an indexical symbol: it points to (indexes) the physical reality of Sara's impoverished condition while simultaneously symbolizing her emotional isolation. Unlike previous studies that focus on ideological themes (Wardani et al., 2021), this analysis reveals how weather functions as a non-verbal narrative device that externalizes internal states.

#### Data 3: The Smell of Warm Food

In the midst of her suffering, Sara tried to cheer Becky up by imagining the aroma of delicious food. With imagination and a small smile on her face, she said:

“Smell those sausages! (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 23)”

This scene shows the power of Sara's imagination in creating hope. The aroma of warm food is a natural symbol of comfort and hope for a better life, especially in situations of hunger and deprivation. From a Peircean perspective, the imagined smell functions as a natural symbol because the human association between warmth/nourishment and emotional security is universal and intuitive. This finding extends Byachkova's (2020) discussion of imagination as a psychological tool by demonstrating how sensory imagery (smell) concretizes abstract hope.

#### **Data 4: Colorful Sky like a Peacock's Tail**

As she reminisced about India and her happy childhood, Sara pointed out the beauty of the sky to Becky and said with admiration:

“The sky... is all different colors... like a peacock's tail (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 17).”

These words describe Sara's imaginative and beautiful inner world. The colorful sky is a natural symbol of inner freedom, hope, and escape from painful reality. In Peirce's triadic model, the sky (representamen) evokes the interpretant of freedom and transcendence, which stands in contrast to her physical confinement in the attic. This natural symbol operates independently of cultural learning, as the association between expansive sky and emotional freedom is universally accessible. This supports Kurniawati and Anwari's (2023) emphasis on how visual symbolism enhances narrative depth.

### **4.2 Conventional Symbols**

Conventional symbols are symbols whose meanings are formed based on mutual agreement within a particular community, culture, or social system. In this case, there is no natural or causal relationship between the form of the symbol and the object it represents. Conventional symbols are widely used in everyday life, particularly in verbal and visual communication, as well as in legal and social contexts. Their meaning is determined by the system; these symbols can also change over time and differ between cultures.

#### **a. Color Symbol**

##### **Data 1: Black Dress (Mourning)**

Upon hearing the news that Sara's father had passed away, Miss Minchin immediately instructed her sister to fetch a simple black dress from Sara's room. With an expressionless face, she said:

Miss Minchin: “Amelia, go to Sara's room and find a simple black dress (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 13).”

This command refers to the social convention that black is a symbol of mourning. In this context, black dresses are a conventional symbol of loss and sadness, as well as the beginning of Sara's suffering as an orphan and servant at the school. Peirce classifies color symbolism as conventional because the meaning of black (mourning, death) is culturally specific rather than universal; in some cultures, white symbolizes mourning. This finding aligns with Liszka's (1996) observation that color meanings are both culturally conditioned and context-sensitive.

##### **Data 2: Dark tones**

After Miss Minchin's order, Sara lost her room, status, and comfort. When she was moved to the dark attic, the mood of the film also became gloomy. The film's color palette

shifts to dark and muted tones, representing Sara's emotional breakdown, loss of social identity, and the beginning of her hardships. This deliberate use of muted tones symbolizes emotional suppression, powerlessness, and sorrow. Unlike the natural darkness discussed earlier, these dark tones are manipulated by the filmmaker as a conventional visual code for despair, demonstrating how color functions as a conventional symbol that communicates meaning through artistic convention rather than natural causation.

### **Data 3: Bright Colors During the Birthday Scene**

In the scene of Sara's birthday party, the room is decorated with bright colors and full of cheerfulness. Miss Minchin announces the purpose of the event:

"We're celebrating Sara's birthday (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 13)."

The warm and bright colors used in this scene symbolize happiness, love, and social belonging, making the sudden emotional shift that follows even more striking. Sara's birthday celebration is surrounded by colorful decorations, symbolizing joy, love, and social acceptance. These meanings are widely understood in social contexts, making the use of bright colors a conventional symbol of festivity and belonging. This contrast between bright and dark tones throughout the film creates a visual semiotic system that guides audience emotional responses without explicit dialogue. This technique exemplifies how conventional symbols operate through binary oppositions (light/dark, warm/cold) to generate meaning, a pattern also observed in other cinematic adaptations of children's literature (Yahya, 2024).

### **b. Object symbol**

#### **Data 1: Emily the Doll**

Before leaving for the battlefield, Captain Crewe gave Sara a doll named Emily as a memento. He said softly:

"Whenever you're afraid, or miss me terribly... just tell Emily. She'll get the message to me... when you hug her, you'll be getting a hug from me."  
(LaGravenese, 1995, p. 6)

Emily, Sara's doll, serves not only as a plaything but as a symbol of emotional continuity, inner strength, and a spiritual connection to her father. Peirce would classify Emily as a conventional symbol that has acquired singular qualities through Sara's personal attachment. While dolls generally symbolize childhood and innocence within Western culture (a conventional meaning), Sara's specific relationship with Emily transforms it into a singular symbol of paternal love. This dual nature---both conventional and singular---demonstrates the flexibility of Peirce's classification system.

#### **Data 2: Birthday Cake**

After becoming a servant, Sara received a surprise from her friends. They brought her a small cake that they had managed to save. In a warm atmosphere, Lottie said:

"We brought you something we rescued..." (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 21)

The cake serves as a symbol of friendship, recognition, and belonging. Culturally, a birthday cake is a universal sign of celebration and caring. Despite their poverty, her friends' gift represents emotional wealth. From a Peircian perspective, the cake functions as a conventional symbol because its meaning (celebration, care) is derived from social ritual rather than any natural property of the cake itself. This finding extends Fadaee's (2011) analysis of object symbolism in literature by demonstrating how similar symbolic mechanisms operate in cinematic narratives.

---

### Data 3: The Locket

In one emotional moment, Sara pleads not to be separated from her mother's precious keepsake:

"The locket with Mama's picture? Oh, Papa, please!" (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 26)

The locket, which contains a photo of Sara's late mother, symbolizes maternal love, memory, and emotional grounding. When Miss Minchin confiscates the locket, it represents not only the stripping of material possessions but also the severing of Sara's emotional and familial identity. Peirce's triadic model illuminates this moment: the locket (representamen) points to (indexes) Sara's deceased mother while simultaneously symbolizing (conventional symbol) maternal love. The loss of the locket thus disrupts both the indexical connection to her mother's memory and the symbolic meaning of familial belonging, intensifying the emotional impact of the scene.

### c. Nature Symbol

#### Data 1-3 (Synthesized): Sky, Cold Weather, and Warm Wind

The film repeatedly uses natural elements to convey emotional and thematic meaning. The colorful sky symbolizes inner freedom and hope. Cold weather represents loneliness, suffering, and alienation. The warm wind symbolizes nostalgia, family warmth, and emotional comfort. These nature symbols function across Peirce's categories: some operate naturalistically (cold directly causes discomfort, thus symbolizing suffering), while others operate conventionally (wind as "spirit" or "memory" is culturally constructed). This hybrid functioning demonstrates that symbols in film rarely belong exclusively to one category but often operate across multiple semiotic modes simultaneously. This complexity, largely unexplored in previous studies of *A Little Princess* (Wardani et al., 2021; Byachkova, 2020), reveals the sophistication of Cuarón's visual storytelling.

### 4.3 Singular Symbols

Singular symbols are highly personal and unique to a character or narrative context. They are not culturally universal but instead derive meaning from specific emotional or situational experiences. A singular symbol's meaning is only understood by a specific individual. These symbols usually arise from a person's personal experiences, memories, or emotional connections to an object or event.

#### Data 1: Imagination as a Shield

Before leaving for the battlefield, Captain Crewe assured Sara that miracles really do exist if she believes in them:

"Magic has to be believed. That's the only way it's real." (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 6)

This sentence became a personal symbol of hope and psychological protection for Sara. Imagination became an escape and a source of strength. In Peirce's framework, this is a singular symbol because its meaning is not accessible to external observers without knowledge of Sara's specific history and psychological state. While previous studies have discussed imagination in *A Little Princess* (Byachkova, 2020), this analysis contributes by demonstrating how imagination functions semiotically as a personal symbol that enables Sara to transform her lived reality. This internal semiotic process---reinterpreting the world through belief---distinguishes Sara's psychological resilience from mere escapism.

### **Data 2: The Magic Circle**

In the bedtime story, Captain Crewe reads the legend of Sita and the magic circle:  
"This is a magic circle. So long as you stay inside it... no harm can come to you." (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 2)

This magic circle is a personal symbol of emotional protection, love, and the imaginary boundary between the real world and fantasy. This symbol operates as a singular symbol because its meaning derives from Sara's specific emotional need for security after her father's departure. Unlike conventional symbols of protection (e.g., a shield in Western culture), the magic circle's meaning is intimately tied to Sara's personal history and relationship with her father. The breaking of the circle when Sita steps outside becomes an allegory for Sara's own vulnerability when separated from paternal love. This narrative device exemplifies how singular symbols can generate powerful emotional resonance within a specific character arc.

### **Data 3: Attic Transformation**

In her most desperate moments, Sara imagined the attic as a beautiful room filled with food:

"See that table there? It's covered with a beautiful cloth... and trays of good things to eat." (LaGravenese, 1995, p. 23)

Initially depicted as a symbol of punishment and isolation, the attic is transformed by Sara's imagination into a place of wonder and refuge. This transformation highlights her psychological resilience and creative strength. This scene illustrates the power of imagination as a form of resistance and survival, where Sara reclaims agency over her environment by reinterpreting her space through symbolic storytelling. In Peircian terms, the attic undergoes semiotic transformation: from a conventional symbol of punishment (culturally understood as such) to a singular symbol of personal empowerment. This semiotic flexibility---the ability of a single sign to carry multiple, even contradictory, meanings depending on the observer's interpretive framework---is central to understanding how film symbolism operates dynamically rather than statically. This finding offers a new contribution to scholarship on *A Little Princess* (Kurniawati & Anwari, 2023) by demonstrating how symbolic transformation parallels psychological transformation in the protagonist.

## **4.4 Findings and Contributions**

In summary, the analysis of *A Little Princess* through Peirce's semiotic framework reveals that the film employs all three types of symbols: natural, conventional, and singular. Natural symbols such as weather and darkness intuitively convey emotional states through universal human associations. Conventional symbols such as colors, objects, and culturally coded natural elements communicate meaning through shared social agreements. Singular symbols such as imagination, the magic circle, and the transformed attic carry unique, personal meanings embedded in Sara's specific psychological journey.

This study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it extends previous ideological readings of *A Little Princess* (Wardani et al., 2021) by demonstrating how visual symbolism supports and deepens the film's thematic concerns. Second, it provides a systematic application of Peirce's semiotic framework to a cinematic text, moving beyond impressionistic interpretations of symbolism toward a structured analytical method (Liszka, 1996; Peirce, 1931). Third, by identifying the dynamic operation of symbols across multiple categories, this study reveals how Cuarón's film uses semiotic complexity to represent the

psychological complexity of childhood trauma and resilience—an aspect largely unexplored in previous literature (Byachkova, 2020; Kurniawati & Anwari, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that symbolism in Alfonso Cuarón's *A Little Princess* functions not merely as visual ornamentation but as a central narrative device that conveys the protagonist's emotional journey, psychological transformation, and inner resilience. Through the application of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, the analysis reveals three distinct types of symbols operating within the film: natural symbols (weather, atmosphere, sky, cold, warm wind), conventional symbols (colours such as black and bright tones, objects such as Emily the doll, the birthday cake, and the locket), and singular symbols (imagination as a shield, the magic circle, and the transformation of the attic). Each symbol type contributes uniquely to the film's thematic exploration of loss, hope, identity, and resilience.

The natural symbols intuitively externalize Sara's internal emotional states through universal human associations, such as darkness representing despair and cold symbolizing isolation. The conventional symbols draw on shared cultural meanings—black for mourning, bright colours for joy, the locket for maternal love—to communicate themes accessible to a broad audience. The singular symbols, deeply personal to Sara's character arc, demonstrate how imagination functions as a psychological coping mechanism and a form of resistance against oppressive circumstances. Together, these symbolic layers enable the film to convey complex emotional and thematic content without relying solely on dialogue.

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on cinematic symbolism and demonstrates the applicability of Peircean semiotics in film analysis. Unlike previous studies that have focused predominantly on ideological themes such as feminism and social class (Wardani et al., 2021) or explored imagination as a psychological tool (Byachkova, 2020), this research provides a systematic classification of visual symbolism grounded in a structured semiotic framework and reveals how different symbol types interact to produce narrative depth (Kurniawati & Anwari, 2023).

For future research, several directions are recommended. First, comparative studies across different adaptations of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel—including earlier film versions or the 1995 film's television adaptations—could examine how different directors employ varied symbolic strategies to represent similar narrative themes. Second, cross-directorial studies comparing Cuarón's use of symbolism with that of other directors known for visual storytelling (such as Guillermo del Toro or Tim Burton) could identify distinctive stylistic signatures in cinematic symbolism. Third, research exploring how child audiences perceive and interpret visual symbolism in films like *A Little Princess* could bridge the gap between semiotic analysis and audience reception studies. Fourth, longitudinal studies examining how the symbolic elements in children's literature adaptations have evolved over time could illuminate broader cultural shifts in how resilience and imagination are visually represented. Such research would extend the findings of this study while contributing to the interdisciplinary dialogue between semiotics, film studies, and childhood studies.

## References

- Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa. (n.d.). Lambang. In *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*. Retrieved from <https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/lambang>
- Byachkova, V. A. (2020). Symbolic space and imagination as psychological tools in children's literature. *Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 15(2), 45-58.

- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Cuarón, A. (Director). (1995). *A little princess* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Fadaee, E. (2011). Symbols, metaphors, and similes in literature: A case study of *Animal Farm*. *Journal of English and Literature*, 2(2), 19-27.
- Guatri, G. (2023). Analisis representasi visual: Kajian kekerasan simbolik dalam film. *Jurnal Kajian Film dan Seni Media*, 2, 293-312.
- Juniatri, E., Sururuddin, & Wahyuni, M. (2022). Pesan moral pada film Mencari Hilal: Analisis semiotika Roland Barthes. *Journal of Religion and Film*, 1(2), 96-115.
- Jung, C. G. (1978). *Man and his symbols*. Picador.
- Kurniawati, D., & Anwari, A. (2023). Visual symbolism and narrative depth in Alfonso Cuarón's *A Little Princess*. *Journal of Film and Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 67-82.
- LaGravenese, R. (1995). *A little princess* [Screenplay]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Liszka, J. J. (1996). *A general introduction to the semiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Indiana University Press.
- Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Symbolism. In *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/symbolism>
- Peirce, C. S. (1931-1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vols. 1-8). Harvard University Press.
- Rizki, U. (2022). *An analysis of symbolism found in Disney's 2015 Cinderella live action movie* [Undergraduate thesis]. Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara.
- Wardani, N. K., Putri, D. A., & Sari, M. (2021). Feminist and American values in *A Little Princess*: A critical analysis. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(2), 89-104.
- Yahya, N. (2024). Analisis makna simbolisme dalam karya A'idh Abdullah Al-Qarni: Telaah buku "Al-Qur'an Berjalan". Retrieved from: <https://repository.iainpare.ac.id/id/eprint/6880/1/2020203879203021.pdf>