



Revealing The Theme of Regret Through Symbolism and Narrative Structure: A New Critical Study of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) using a New Criticism approach to reveal how regret is transformed into acceptance through symbolism and narrative structure. A qualitative method with close reading was employed, focusing on the novel's formal elements and supported by relevant secondary sources. The findings show that recurring symbols such as the library, green books, chess, and whales together with the cyclical narrative structure, create organic unity that reflects Nora Seed's struggle with regret and her eventual self-acceptance. The study concludes that the novel demonstrates how formal elements interact to affirm the theme of embracing self-worth through the reconciliation of regret.

INTRODUCTION

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) has captured wide attention among global readers, winning the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Fiction and being translated into multiple languages. The novel narrates the journey of Nora Seed, whose life is marked by disappointment and regret. Overwhelmed by her failures and feelings of inadequacy, Nora attempts suicide and enters the "midnight library," a liminal space between life and death. Within this library, she is given the opportunity to experience countless alternative lives by choosing from the books that line the shelves. Yet, after traversing multiple versions of existence, Nora ultimately discovers that her original life is the one she truly desires.

The central theme of the novel is regret, a universal human experience that Haig frames through a unique interplay of symbolism and narrative structure. Symbols such as the library, the books, Mrs. Elm as the librarian, and even the motif of time encapsulate Nora's ongoing struggle with regret. At the same time, the novel's repetitive narrative structure—where Nora inhabits one alternative life after another reinforces the cyclical process of confronting and undoing regret. Together, these formal elements construct a narrative that guides Nora, and by extension the reader, toward reconciliation and self-acceptance.

Regret, as the novel's central concern, is conveyed through Haig's use of symbolism and narrative design. Although *The Midnight Library* is widely recognized as a self-help book for its motivational and philosophical tone, there has been relatively little discussion of its intrinsic elements. Most existing studies focus on its popularity and extrinsic aspects, while the formal features that give the story its

depth are often overlooked. This study argues that these intrinsic elements particularly symbolism and narrative structure significantly enrich the novel's thematic exploration of regret. The midnight library itself stands as an ambiguous symbol both a place of redemption and reflection where Nora confronts her regrets and explores countless alternative lives in search of meaning. Yet, despite these chances to correct her past, she ultimately realizes that her real life is what she truly desires, revealing the paradox of regret and acceptance.

This research applies New Criticism as the theoretical framework. Emerging in the mid-20th century, New Criticism treats a literary text as an autonomous entity, emphasizing close reading and analysis of its intrinsic elements rather than the author's biography, historical context, or reader response (Tyson, 2006). Central to this approach is the concept of organic unity, the idea that all formal elements of a text such as imagery, symbolism, structure, and linguistic devices interact to shape its overall meaning.

New critics strongly believe that formal elements are the components of the meaning of a literary work. Cleanth Brooks is one of the literary figures who introduced new criticism. William van O'Connor in *A Short View of the New Criticism* quotes Cleanth Brooks' opinion that believes that the meaning of a poem is formed from its elements. Brooks uses 'paradox' and 'irony' as a form to describe the implied meaning or indirect words in poetry. The message conveyed in the poem will be damaged if we paraphrase or simplify the words. Brooks' opinion has become a guide used by many critics to criticize other literary works, not just poetry.

In this study, particular attention is given to symbolism and narrative structure as the primary vehicles through which *The Midnight Library* conveys its theme of regret. M.H. Abrams, in a glossary of literary terms, defines symbols as applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself (Abrams 2020). Different from imagery, symbols are able to provide a depiction of a word or phrase that refers to something with a bigger picture.

Symbolism provides concrete representations of abstract ideas, such as choice, time, and hope, while the novel's non-linear narrative structure with Nora Seed repeatedly moving across alternative lives, mirrors her psychological state of uncertainty and her confrontation with regret. This aligns with what Herman describes as "polychrony," where multiple temporal layers coexist within a narrative framework (King, 2004). Alongside these elements, New Critical devices such as paradox, irony, and ambiguity are also considered as part of the novel's internal complexity.

Numerous scholars and critics have examined *The Midnight Library*, yet most discussions have emphasized extrinsic approaches such as psychology, philosophy, or sociology. Despite these contributions, relatively few studies have examined the novel through its intrinsic elements. From a New Critical perspective, which emphasizes close reading and textual autonomy, the novel's symbolism and narrative structure serve as powerful devices that articulate the theme of regret. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on these formal elements, arguing that they form the organic unity of the novel.

Several studies on *The Midnight Library* have provided different critical perspectives. Rehan and Zahra (2021) in *Existentialism and Absurdism in The Midnight Library* analyzed Nora's journey through Camus's existentialism and the absurd. Kusumaningrum (2021), in *Depression in The Midnight Library*, examined Nora's psychological struggles using Beck and Alford's theory of depression. Meanwhile, Nahdirah (2022) in *A Sociological Analysis of Suicide in The Midnight Library* applied Durkheim's theory to interpret Nora's attempted suicide.

While these studies focus on philosophical, psychological, and sociological aspects, the present research differs by using a New Critical approach, emphasizing how symbolism and narrative structure create organic unity in revealing the theme of regret and acceptance.

METHOD

The research employs a qualitative method, focusing on textual interpretation rather than quantifiable data (Anderson, 2010). Data collection relies on library research, with Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) serving as the primary text. Supporting sources include books, journal articles, and previous studies relevant to New Criticism, symbolism, and narrative structure.

New Criticism is a literary approach that emphasizes the analysis of a work's intrinsic elements as the primary means of interpretation. Rather than relying on external contexts, this approach focuses on the internal complexities of the text such as plot, character, and setting as the foundation for understanding meaning. As O'Connor (1949) cites Schorer, "What we need in fiction is a devoted fidelity to every technique which will help us discover and evaluate our subject matter" (p. 493). Schorer underscores that these elements serve as deliberate techniques employed by authors to shape and communicate the essence of their narratives. Within this framework, researchers can examine how such formal components operate collectively to illuminate the central issue of a literary work.

Imagery and symbolism are two key formal elements explored in this study. According to Abrams (1999), imagery refers to "images used to represent objects that can be perceived by all the senses in poems and other literary works" (p. 121). In literature, imagery functions as the author's way of describing objects or experiences through words, phrases, or sentences that appeal to the human senses, allowing readers to perceive what the character feels or sees.

Abrams (1999) further explains that in the context of New Criticism, imagery not only carries explicit descriptive meaning but also conveys implicit ideas that shape and control the overall theme of a literary work (p. 122). In relation to this, Abrams (1999) defines symbols as "a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself." Unlike imagery, which appeals primarily to sensory experience, symbolism extends meaning beyond the literal, representing abstract concepts or broader interpretations. Together, imagery and symbolism serve as integral formal devices through which deeper layers of meaning in *The Midnight Library* emerge, linking sensory representation with philosophical reflection.

The analysis is conducted through close reading, identifying key passages that illustrate the use of symbols and non-linear narrative techniques, and then interpreting how these contribute to the theme of regret.

Finally, the findings are presented descriptively in the Results and Discussion section, demonstrating how the novel's intrinsic elements operate cohesively to express the protagonist's journey of undoing regret.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Midnight Library* focuses on how its formal elements particularly symbolism and narrative structure work together to express the central theme of regret and the protagonist's journey toward self-acceptance. Using the New Criticism approach, this section explores how Matt Haig constructs meaning through recurring imagery, metaphors, and cyclical narrative patterns that mirror Nora Seed's psychological struggles. Each symbol and structural choice contributes to the novel's organic unity, revealing how the tension between despair and hope ultimately leads Nora to embrace the value of her own life.

Central Symbols of Regret

In *The Midnight Library*, Matt Haig structures the novel around central symbols that articulate Nora Seed's struggle with regret and her journey toward self-acceptance. The library itself functions as the most prominent image, serving as both a literal and symbolic shelter. It is a liminal space "between life and death," (Haig, 2020, p.29) where Nora repeatedly returns after inhabiting alternative lives. This ambiguity of existence highlights the complexity of the novel's narrative, while the library also echoes Nora's teenage refuge in school, reinforcing its symbolism as a safe haven and a place of denial. Within the framework of New Criticism, the library embodies the tension between escape and confrontation, acting as both a sanctuary and a transit point in Nora's existential journey.

The green books within the library extend this symbolism by representing hope and the possibility of renewal. Their endless variations embody Nora's regrets, each volume granting access to an alternative life where she might undo a past decision. (Haig, 2020, p.31) While the green color connotes growth and healing, the books ultimately reveal irony: though they promise perfection, each life disappoints, reminding Nora that regret is universal and that fulfillment lies not in endless choice but in acceptance. This dual symbolism of hope and irony deepens the organic unity of the novel, linking structure and theme through recurring imagery. As Nora explores different lives, the green books transform from

escapist fantasies into tools of insight, guiding her toward reconciliation with her “root life.”

A key facilitator in this journey is Mrs. Elm, the librarian figure who reappears as Nora’s guide. More than a mentor, Mrs. Elm provides a steady, nonjudgmental presence, allowing Nora to reflect on her choices without imposing conclusions. Her role aligns with Hugo’s explanation of “sliders,” individuals suspended between life and death who encounter a guide tied to emotionally significant memories (Haig, 2020, p.145). Thus, Mrs. Elm is both thematically and structurally essential, representing compassion, stability, and the possibility of growth through guided self-exploration.

Other recurring motifs reinforce Nora’s evolving perception of regret and connection. The whale imagery, appearing through photos and emojis exchanged with Izzy, symbolizes both freedom and enduring friendship. This motif underscores the unique, almost nonverbal way Nora and Izzy communicate, paralleling how whales connect through frequencies beyond human perception. The imagery becomes especially poignant given Izzy’s death in Nora’s root life, marking Nora’s regret at failing to accompany her to Australia. Through alternative lives where their bond is renewed, the whale motif illustrates Nora’s longing for connection, as well as the inevitability of loss.

The chess game emerges as another significant symbol, encapsulating strategy, sacrifice, and infinite possibility (Haig, 2020, p.195). Nora learns from Mrs. Elm that, like in chess, life requires both sacrifice and perseverance; pawns may become queens through persistence, while major sacrifices can yield greater rewards. This imagery teaches Nora that progress and meaning come from continuing forward despite setbacks. Chess thus operates not only as a pastime but as a metaphorical lesson in resilience, illuminating the strategic choices required to embrace life’s complexity.

Equally central are the philosophical reflections embedded in Nora’s consciousness. Haig weaves references to thinkers such as Thoreau, Schrödinger, and Sartre into the narrative, making philosophy both a personal passion and a symbolic guide for Nora. Thoreau’s belief in pursuing dreams and accepting unexpected outcomes shapes Nora’s acceptance of imperfection, while Schrödinger’s theory of multiple universes underpins the novel’s concept of alternative lives. These reflections emerge organically from Nora’s thoughts, symbolizing her intellectual framework for processing regret and moving toward acceptance. By internalizing philosophical perspectives, Nora reshapes her identity and learns to reconcile with her root life.

Narrative Structure: Cyclical Patterns and Resolution

The narrative structure of *The Midnight Library* mirrors Nora’s inner conflict through its cyclical, episodic design. Each cycle begins with Nora selecting a green book, entering an alternative life, and ultimately returning to the library disappointed. This repetitive pattern underscores her dissatisfaction and emphasizes the futility of searching for a perfect existence. The library itself functions as the pivot point anchoring these cycles, while the Book of Regrets serves as a record of her accumulated disappointments. (Haig, 2020, p.34) As Nora gradually realizes that the purpose of these cycles is not to find the “best” life but to release regret, the book grows lighter, symbolizing her emotional progress. This structure reflects the tension between hope and despair, aligning narrative form with thematic content.

The climax arrives when the Midnight Library begins to collapse, symbolizing Nora’s psychological breaking point after countless failed attempts at fulfillment. This dramatic moment crystallizes her struggle between choosing life or surrendering to despair. Her declaration “I AM ALIVE” (Haig, 2020, p.271) becomes the turning point, both affirming her decision to live and signaling her self-acceptance. The resolution follows as Nora returns to her root life, armed with newfound clarity to repair relationships and embrace imperfection. Thus, the cyclical structure resolves into organic unity: the symbols of library, books, whales, chess, and philosophy converge with the narrative form to illustrate Nora’s journey from regret toward acceptance and self-worth.

Through its symbols and structure, the novel achieves organic unity, where every formal element reinforces the central theme of regret. The tension between hope and despair, the irony of seemingly perfect lives proving unfulfilling, and the paradox of needing to imagine alternatives in order to value reality, all coalesce into a coherent meaning.

Thus, *The Midnight Library* demonstrates how symbolism and narrative structure not only embody the theme of regret but also chart a path toward its undoing. By highlighting the interplay of these intrinsic elements, the novel exemplifies New Criticism’s focus on the text’s internal complexity, revealing regret

as both burden and catalyst for self-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig achieves organic unity through the interplay of symbolism and narrative structure, as examined through the New Criticism approach. The recurring imagery, such as the library as a safe haven, the green books as hope and renewal, Mrs. Elm as a guide, the whale motif as connection and regret, chess as life strategy and sacrifice, and philosophical reflections as self-discovery, collectively conveys the theme of regret and the search for acceptance. The novel's narrative structure, in which Nora repeatedly enters alternative lives only to return to the library, mirrors her psychological struggle with regret. This repetition culminates in a climax where she chooses life, marking her transformation from despair to self-acceptance. Ultimately, the novel's formal elements demonstrate that regret, though painful, can function as a path toward clarity, growth, and self-worth. Through its symbols and structure, *The Midnight Library* affirms the theme.

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