

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDY OF MOTIF DIFFERENCES IN *RAGNAROK* AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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### ABSTRACT

**This research aims to formulate the similarities and the differences of the death motif employed in *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation.** Both of these stories use the same motif of death but with different portrayal and explanation of the death. These two stories have a paradoxical difference that needs to be addressed. This study will answer the research gap found in previous intertextual studies. The data used in this research are *Ragnarok* in the epic poem Voluspa and the Book of Revelation in the Bible. **This research utilizes qualitative descriptive method and the theory of Genetic Structuralism to dissect the data. The findings show that even though the death motifs are prevalent in these two works, the themes riding the motifs are different.** This happens because of the different collective subjects and the world views in which the works are created.

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Motif is a narrative tool used verily in literature. Motifs are dominant ideas in literature that encompass elements within the works (Sudjiman, 1990). Freedman (1971) said that motif is a symbolic thing that informs the reader about the mind structure of characters, the total structure of a story, or a moral of a story. Motif, in a way, performs its function like a synecdoche, that is, motif as a part stands for the whole. Motifs give readers the sense that the piece that they read is holistic and unbroken. Motifs appear consistently to connect and to develop the theme of the literature.

Same motif usage in different literature does not necessarily have the implication that the themes are also the same. There has been several researches discussing the same motif usage in literature (Karib, 2013; Kasaeian Z., Dehbashi M., Ouliaeinia H., Matian A., Mahdavizadeh M., 2006; Hejaiej, 2010). The research states that a motif can have a different meaning in



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different context (Karib, 2013). Kasaeian et al. (2006) have a different proposition stating that the same motif will have similar idea in its philosophy even though the literatures are created in different cultures, religions, or languages. A different research adds that the analysis of motif in literature will provide a new way of reading and giving meaning by looking through social and culture context (Hejaiej, 2010).

One of the most used motif in literature is a death motif. Shakespeare (1609) employs this in his sonnet 73. He writes, for example, “sunset fadeth”, “black night doth take away”. Shakespeare uses this to express the fleeting life. Another example of death motif in a contemporary work can be found in the movie *The Hours* (2002). That movie tells about three different characters in different perspectives. However, those three characters are filled with death motif throughout the story. Virginia Woolf was a suicidal woman who is fighting through depression and loneliness while Laura Brown, who seems like a happy wife with a son and a husband, also attempted suicide. Clarissa Vaughn was a little bit different, she watched over a man who was fighting his illness, was dying, and in the end committed suicide. As Freedman has said (1971), the same motif usage provides the reader with the sense of congruity and wholeness despite three different perspectives.

Apocalyptic stories, the stories that narrate the end of the world scenarios, are usually common with the usage of death motif. In a sense, apocalypse is the death of a world that correlates to as why death motifs are prevalent in this kind of story. There are two types of the apocalyptic stories which are circular and linear (Moniz, 2014). The themes that regularly appear in the apocalyptic stories are related to the death and rebirth theme.

Two apocalyptic stories that make use of death motif that are, arguably, appealing to be compared are *Ragnarok* in the poem *Voluspa* and the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation in Bible. These two stories are similar to one another; both are eschatological and using the death motif comprehensively throughout the stories. Nonetheless, it seems that the themes of the motifs of each story are very different one to another. There has been previous studies that compare these two that stated that the *Voluspa* is a transformation text from the Bible



(Wachoka, 2012; Hultgard, 1990; McKinnel, 2008). They have argued that *Voluspa* was heavily influenced by the Bible. Hultgard further adds that The *Voluspa* is a product of syncretism between Christianity and the old belief of the Viking paganism (1990). However, although the similarities of both stories are remarkable, the impressions upon reading both works are different; *Ragnarok* gives an impression of a gruesome battle of the gods while The Book of Revelation gives an impression of cataclysm. Although intertextual analysis can give a good comparison of these two literary pieces, the dissection of death motif can give a deeper explanation of the works and answer the paradoxical differences at hand.

*Ragnarok* and Book of Revelation both employ the death motif in their stories. *Ragnarok* is a term from Viking. *Ragnarok* is written in the *Voluspa*, an old epic poem from Viking, while the Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible, the holy book of Christianity. These two works have different cultural background and language. These two literary pieces tell about the chronicle of the apocalypse at the end of the world. *Ragnarok* utilizes and incorporates the death motif in the final battle between the gods and their adversaries. The death of the gods has major implications on the narrative. On the other hand, the Book of Revelation makes use of it in the form of punishment and judgment. Every judgment befalls on the world will bring about death to the world and its inhabitants. Although these two stories have the same motif and a similar narrative, the difference in the portrayal of the death has certain implications that their meaning also differ from one another. These implications suggest that their difference could very well be rooted in their socio-cultural context. Therefore, the theory of genetic structuralism that analyzes both the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of a literary work is suitable to be applied in this research.

This research will answer how the death motifs in these two works are portrayed differently. This research also argues that the difference of the motif have different meaning related to their socio-cultural context. The analysis on this research is conducted by employing the concepts and theories from genetic structuralism. The findings of this research will enrich the explanation and give new knowledge in the debate about *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lucien Goldmann (1981) proposes a theory called Genetic Structuralism, which is a method of analyzing literary works dialectically by examining the relation between the structure and history. This theory is based on the three tenets of fundamental characteristics of human action; they are (1.) the tendency of fitting the realities to their respective environment and its characteristic through cognitive coherence and, thus, making it indispensable (2.) the tendency of creating structural forms which have consistent pattern out of its units (3.) the tendency to modify and develop the structure of which it materializes a unit.

In addition to the three tenets that he proposes, Lucien Goldmann also introduces several different concepts in the theory. There are six concepts constructing the theory. Those concepts are human facts, collective subject, structure of literary works, world vision or view (*vision du monde*), understanding, and explanations (Faruk, 1999). These concepts are based on the understanding that literary works cannot be understood by itself, but rather connecting it to the extrinsic value.

Human facts are the result of all human behavior, either verbal or physical action. Those facts can manifest into, but not limited to, social activities, political activities, or cultural creations such as philosophy, art, craftsmanship (Faruk, 1999). Human facts are structure full of meaning and importance. Therefore, human facts have an impact to alter the world to achieve a better balance between the subjects and the environment (Goldmann, 1981).

The second concepts that Goldman explains is about collective subject. Collective subject is a group of individuals who share similar cultures, purposes, lifestyles, and views of life. In other words, Collective subject is trans-individual with social facts (Nurhasanah, 2015). Faruk (1999) also adds that subject collective may be form in familial group, working colleagues, territorial group. Based on this explanation, collective subject is essentially social creatures who live under the same rules, norms, or customs.



Third concept in genetic structuralism is called the structures of literary works. The structure of literary works is a crucial element in the literary works itself. The structure is built upon the world vision of a social group. The structure of the literary works to make a thematic unity and coherence based upon the view of the author on a particular social group (Faruk, 1999).

The fourth concept explained by Goldman is about the world vision (*vision du monde*). World vision is an understanding of the world in its totality with regard to its complexity and its entirety (Goldmann, 1981). That is to say, a world vision is an idea held by particular social group in their effort to make grasp of the reality. Goldman (1981) adds that world vision is not empirical facts but rather a structure of ideas, aspirations, and feelings that embrace a social group. This world vision will manifest in the literary work because an author is a part of a particular social group.

The fifth and the sixth concepts are the dialectic between understanding and explanation. Goldman states that understanding means describing the structure and explanation means to incorporate those things in much bigger structure (Faruk, 2012). Goldmann also stated that world vision cannot be understood without an attempt of learning the whole and the whole can only be figured out by thoroughly comprehending the part of the whole. According to Goldman (1981), these dialectical processes are the way of truly examining literary works.

There have been previous intertextual studies comparing the *Voluspa* and the Bible. These studies conducted have said that the the *Voluspa* and *Ragnarok* are the transformation text of the Bible. They argue that the several elements from Christianity are carried over to the paganism belief of the Viking and this is reflected in the *Voluspa* poem (Wachoka, 2012; Hultgard, 1990; McKinnel, 2008). However, these studies do not answer the paradoxical differences that arise between the two works regarding the motif and their themes.

There are also studies that research the two pieces of work individually and separately which will be helpful in interpreting the stories. Several studies that are related to this research are the studies concerning the Viking mythology and the Norse pantheon (Winterbourne, 2004; McCoy, 2016). They also argue that the belief system of the Viking mythology recorded in the



epic poems and prose have been influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, Himes (2017) disagree by saying that the Nordic world view contrasts with the Christianity world view. There are also researches conducted to analyze the Book of Revelation that aid this study (Horrell, 2015; Slater, 2019). These studies provide the insight and the understanding of the apocalypse story.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Comparative Literature is the framework of this research. Bassnett (1993) says that comparative literature is a methodology in literary criticism that was created to deal with a world in which there are ideas that are transforming. This method goes beyond the boundaries of era, genre, form, and field (Stallknecht & Frenz, 1961). This comparative literature method is very appropriate to dissect the two literary works that have been described above. Even though *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation were created from two different languages and cultures, there are similarities in the narrative. From the explanation presented in the background, it can be seen that the two stories have the same motif that is the motif for death. Therefore, the assessment will be carried out using an assessment of the death motif contained therein.

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative method by utilizing the concepts of genetic structuralism. Data collection techniques were conducted by (1) reading both stories and related literature to gain an understanding (2) identifying the death motifs in both stories. The data analysis technique is conducted by (1) interpreting and exploring what the death motifs are portrayed and presented in both stories (2) comparing the differences and the similarities by employing the concepts of genetic structuralism.



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## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Motif in *Ragnarok*

The plot in *Ragnarok* revolves around the motive for death. This motif is very crucial in the development of stories and covers the core patterns of the story. Death here befalls the gods, the world, and all of its contents. However, the story does not end with death. Campbell (1949) states that the story of the apocalypse has a revival or resurrection events at the end of the story. This also happens in *Ragnarok* where some of the gods and the contents of the world will be revived at the end of the story. However, the ending of this story is written significantly less in this poem. This poem emphasizes the essence of the story in the *Ragnarok* battle written from verses 44-56 (13 verses) and the ending that tells the story of life is only told in seven verses from verses 57-64. This indicates that this poem considers that war and battle very crucial in this story. The battles fought by Odin, Thor and Freyr against their enemies are the essence of the *Ragnarok*.

Then arises Hlin's second grief,  
When Odin goes with the wolf to fight,  
And the bright slayer of Beli with Surt  
Then will Frigg's beloved fall. (Thorpe, 2004, p. 14)

This stanza tells about Odin's fight with Fenrir, the big wolf. Hlin is the name of the wife of the god Odin; Hlin is also known as Frigg. Odin is the chief god in the Norse pantheon. He is described as a very powerful and wise god. However, even the powerful deity could not avoid his destiny. The first line states that Hlin will fall into extreme sorrow. This implies that Odin lost his battle and fell dead. As stated in the last line that the beloved figure of Frigg would fall. Fall is a form of expression in the motif for death. Byatt (2011) adds that Odin was already damaged before he went to battle the wolf; he sacrificed one of his eyes to obtain runic powers and knowledge. Therefore, his fall was already predetermined before he even went to the battle. The same stanza also tells about the battle between bright slayer of Beli which is none other than Freyr, the god of the sun and rain, with the fire giant Surtr. Freyr is one of the most respected and beloved deities in the Norse pantheon because he is the one who gives blessings





to the earth. The 56th verse of the first line says, "sun darkens". Then it can be concluded that the god responsible for the sun had died in his fight with Surtr. Byatt (2011) suggests that the reason of Freyr's lost is because he no longer had his sword to fight with the giant. Death motif again is obvious in this battle. Other death motif is also found in the next stanza which tells about Thor's fight against Jormundgand.

Then comes the mighty son of Hlôdyn:  
(Odin's son goes with the monster to fight);  
Midgârd's Veor in his rage will slay the worm.  
Nine feet will go Fiörgyn's son,  
bowed by the serpent, who feared no foe.  
All men will their homes forsake.(Thorpe, 2004, p. 15)

The death motif is clear in this stanza. This stanza tells the battle of Thor the protector of the Earth with Jormundgand (Midgard's Veor), the big snake who always threatens the existence of the earth. Thor is the strongest god in the Norse pantheon. Thor is portrayed as a god who never loses his battles in Norse myth. That is also true in the *Ragnarok*; in this battle, Thor did manage to kill this large snake in his anger. However, Thor also finally had to fall dead (bowed) after he walked nine steps. This implies that Thor died because the Jormundgand's poison destroyed Thor from within. According to Winterbourne, Thor is known as the protector of Earth and the pillar that sustains the world humanity lives in (2004). Therefore, Thor's death also caused humans to flee their homes because their protector had been killed and the earth is no longer sustainable.

The three deaths experienced by the three great gods become the main idea and an integral soul of the story. The motif for death becomes a recurring central pattern in the *Ragnarok* story. The death of the three great gods in the pantheon indicates that the motif of death is very important in the story. Viking people believe that no one is able to escape the fate and this premise extends to gods themselves. Thus, the deaths of the three gods are already predetermined and they already know it. However, they are not wavered by their fate. Instead,





their bravery and heart enable them to face the death and their deaths are glorified as the result (Winterbourne, 2004, p. 119).

#### 4.2. Motif in Book of Revelation

The story in the Book of Revelation begins with warnings of impending disaster. The warning was sent to seven existing churches. The warning tells the people about the tests that they will undergo. For those who cannot pass the test given to them, they will get a death sentence.

Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Both verses above state the warnings and the commands to repent must be carried out by followers of the church. For those who do not want to obey they will get darkness (removal of lamp stand from its place) and for those who obey, they will get blessings from the tree of life. These warnings are also found in the following verses such as those who idolize money (verse 8), believe in idols (verse 12), eat forbidden foods (verse 20), and lack of faith (Chapter 3 verses 2 & 15-16). These warnings are a kind of prelude to disaster and judgment that will be sent down to the face of the earth.

The judgment that brought death on earth began with the blowing of seven trumpets. Each of these trumpets would bring death and disaster on earth. The first trumpet would bring hail and fire and burn a third of the trees in the world (8: 6-7). The second trumpet called for a large meteor that hits the sea and kills one third of the population in the ocean (8: 8-9). The third trumpet would bring a stone that falls from the sky and poison a third of the entire rivers and body of water (8: 10-11). The fourth trumpet would "turn off" one third of the light held by the sun, moon and stars (8: 12-13). The fifth trumpet would call grasshoppers that will eat people who are not followers of God (9: 4). The sixth trumpet would bring armies that will kill people



through fire, smoke and sulfur (9: 13-21). The seventh trumpet will bring a far greater disaster in seven bowls (11: 15-19)

The Seven bowls are far more devastating than the seven trumpets. The first bowls inflicted sores to people who worshipped the beast (16:1-2). The second bowl would turn all seas into blood which made all the creatures in the sea died (16:3). In addition, the third bowl made the rivers and springs into blood (16:4-7). Furthermore, in the fourth bowl, the sun would scorch men (16:8-9). The fifth bowl would bring pain and darkness upon the beast and his kingdom (16:10-11). The sixth bowl would dry up the Euphrates river and bring about three unclean spirits to gather people of the earth for the battle of Armageddon (16:12-16). The last bowl would bring great earthquake, divide the great city, and bring cataclysmic events (16:17-21). From the explanation above about the disaster story that was delivered by seven trumpets and the seven bowls, it was obvious the motif of death is prevalent in the story. Existing disasters will bring death to land, sea and human beings. This motif is repeated continuously in this part of the story. Death here serves as a judgment handed down by divine power symbolized by the trumpets and the bowls. The judgment that befalls upon man is a symbol of faithful suffering that will transform the suffering into salvation (Barr, 1984, p. 49).

#### 4.3. Death Motif Comparison in *Ragnarok* and Book of Revelation

The *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation are both telling about the portrayal of doomsday. The portrayals that they have also accompany the same motif they have. The motifs that are used in both works as recurring ideas are death motifs. However, these motifs have differences in the meaning that they imply. The death motif in *Ragnarok*'s work is presented in the battles between the characters. While the motif for death in the Book of Revelation is death that comes from judgment. This certainly implies there is something that underlies the difference in this depiction of death.

The collective subject in *Ragnarok* is the Vikings. Vikings are known as people who like war and are bloodthirsty (Downham, 2012). Fighting is an important part of the Viking faith.



Lucien Goldmann (1981) in his theory of genetic structuralism explains the concept of the collective subject. Collective subject means designation for social groups that have the same culture, goals, lifestyle, and outlook on life (Goldmann, 1981). The Vikings believe that Valhalla is a concept of heaven where they are free to wage battle and fight every day. This indicates that the Vikings are a nation that values war and combat as sacred. Another thing to note is that they believe that those who are entitled to enter Valhalla are those who died in battle. The concept of belief certainly implies that death in battle is a sacred and high position. It is by the battle that they can prove their bravery, prove that they are warriors, and receive the highest fame (Winterbourne, 2014). This belief is reflected in Voluspa's work where the gods will ultimately get the highest favor in their lives by dying on the battlefield. This is different from the understanding in the Book of Revelation because the collective subject of the Book of Revelation is Christians.

The Book of Revelation regards the concept of death as horrifying. Death is symbolized as torture and punishment. Death will come to those who do not obey the commandments mentioned in the earlier verses. This concept is in line with Christian religious beliefs. Christians believe in eternal death and eternal torment will be inflicted on those who do not obey God's commands. Thus, their beliefs are also reflected in literary works that show the concept of death as a punishment and judgment.

Lucien Goldman (1981) says that the structure of literary works is developed by the world vision of a social group. World vision is an ideology belonging to certain social groups about the world that can crystallize in literary or philosophical works. This world vision is crystallized in two stories of *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation. The Vikings have a view of the reality that war is their identity and death is a gift. Garini (2017) argues that death and suicide in western view is regarded as a great loss and unbearable burden. However, that does not seem to be case here. Death in Viking culture is considered as the highest honor and gift that they may get. This fondness for war is portrayed in their literary work. This is different from the Book of Revelation which has a world view that is based on Christian teachings.



Christian teaching has the concept that eternal death is a punishment that will be received by those who disobey the commandments from God. Therefore, death in this work is described as punishment according to the world vision they believe in.

The difference in the world view results in the difference concept of death. While Ragnarok is created under the belief of paganism, the Book of Revelation is written on monotheism belief. This also creates a difference on which entity meet the death. In Ragnarok, the gods meet their demise and die which is crucial to their belief of fatalism (Winterbourne, 2014). However, none of the death in the Book of Revelation is telling the death of the God; it is just the world and its inhabitants. Subsequently, the world and his faithful followers will be resurrected by the God's will as He envisions it to be. Monotheism religions believe that God is immortal and cannot die unlike paganism who believes that gods are human-like divine beings. McCoy (2016) has stated that the Ragnarok has received influences from the Judeo-Christian tradition which makes Ragnarok has a rebirth element in the end of the story. This is contradictory to fatalistic belief that the Viking people. Thus, it can be said that Ragnarok is an amalgam of the two works while still pertains the majority of the world view of the Viking.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Both *Ragnarok* and Revelation have the same motif. However, this does not automatically indicate that the themes and messages they carry are the same. This can be seen from the two fundamental differences between the meaning of death in *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation. One work conveys that death is an achievement and other work gives the message that death is a horrifying event.

The difference in the meaning of death that exists within the same motif is based on differences in social groups and the world vision they have. *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation are two literary works created in different cultures. These cultures have their respective belief concepts. The concepts of belief are reflected in their literary works. Therefore, even though the great stories and motifs of *Ragnarok* and the Book of Revelation are the same as an apocalypse story



and a story full of motif for death. Both works have different understandings about the concept of death. The differences that they have are a result of the world vision differences on which they are written.

These findings have shown that despite the intertextual relation between these two works are remarkably profound; each story has its own individual characteristic and understanding based on the belief and the culture on which they stand. Conceivably, additional researches can be conducted to scrutinize how the different belief system of paganism and monotheism are reflected in these stories.

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