

Symbolic Language Of The Constructions Of Fantasy Within The European Medieval Society In Lily Murray’s Novel Sleeping Beauty

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse symbolic language in the construction of fantasy in Lily Murray’s novel Sleeping Beauty using Roland Barthes’s theory of semiotics. The study focuses on the representation of magical elements and curses as literal signs, as well as the function of symbolic language in constructing fantasy. The method used is qualitative research with a semiotic approach. Data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and descriptions containing fantasy symbols are analysed through two stages: the primary modelling system (denotation) and the secondary modelling system (connotation and myth). The results of the study indicate that symbols such as a green light, a spinning wheel, a spindle, a prick, a curse, a green flame, thorns, the dragon’s roar, transformation, a kiss, spun gold (golden hair), a bird, lightning, a shadow, and fire function as literal signs that construct the fantasy world. At the connotative level, these symbols extend beyond their literal meanings and function as cultural myths commonly found in fairy tales and fantasy narratives, such as representing fate, punishment, transformation, and danger. These findings indicate that the fantasy in Sleeping Beauty is constructed through a system of signs that reflects the cultural values and imagination of medieval European society.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published June 27th 2026



KEYWORDS

Symbolic Language, Fantasy, Roland Barthes, Sleeping Beauty.

ARTICLE LICENCE

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1. Introduction

The study of symbolic language in literature, particularly in the context of fantasy, offers a rich field of study to be explored through a semiotic approach. Symbolic language allows literary works to convey meanings that transcend literal meanings through the use of signs and symbols imbued with cultural values. In fantasy literature, these symbols play a crucial role in constructing an imaginative world while representing ideas about idealism, fear, hope, and moral lessons (Suardi & Ernawati, 2025). Therefore, an analysis of symbolic language is essential for understanding how meaning is formed and communicated within a literary work (Rahman, 2018; Abbas et al., 2024; Nahdhiyah et al., 2022).

Roland Barthes’s semiotics provides a framework for understanding how signs and symbols operate within a text and for uncovering the deeper meanings behind them. Fantasy literature has long served as a form of escapism that reflects humanity’s collective desire to explore possibilities beyond everyday reality (Tolkien et al., 2008; Junaid et al., 2026; Andini et al., 2022). The symbols and imagery that appear in fantasy works often carry meanings tied to specific cultural and historical contexts, particularly the European Middle Ages, which exerted a significant influence on the development of Western fantasy (James & Mendlesohn, 2012). Within this tradition, fantasy serves as a narrative vehicle for understanding the mysteries of existence, the divine order, and the moral struggles faced by humanity (Weda et al., 2022; Yaumi et al., 2023; Abbas et al., 2023).

Sleeping Beauty by Lily Murray is a work that exemplifies the use of symbolic language in fantasy literature. As an adaptation of the classic Disney fairy tale, this novel retains various elements characteristic of fairy tales, such as curses, magic, spinning wheels, enchanted sleep, and kisses, which serve as key motifs that encapsulate themes of love, culture, and redemption. Through these symbols, the story presents representations of fate, transformation, danger, and the battle between good and evil, which are hallmarks of Western fantasy.

Several researchers have analyzed Sleeping Beauty as a classic fairy tale and as a modern adaptation. The Irresistible Fairy Tale examines the cultural and social evolution of Sleeping Beauty within the European fairy tale tradition (Zipes, 2012). He argues that its enduring appeal lies in its use of universal symbols such as the curse, the cursed sleep,

and the kiss that awakens her, which serve as moral allegories about destiny and transformation. Similarly, *Sleeping Beauty* continues to influence modern narratives due to its integration with mythical structures and magical motifs inherited from medieval European culture (Haase, 2004).

Williams and Carter (2019) analyze *Sleeping Beauty* in the context of modern media adaptations, suggesting that Disney's reinterpretations, as well as those by Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and contemporary authors, reflect evolving cultural values regarding destiny, gender, and virtue. However, these studies focus on the historical and moral dimensions of the fairy tale and rarely discuss the semiotic mechanisms underlying the construction of fantasy. Lily Murray's adaptation, although closely related to Disney's animation style, introduces a narrative that visually and linguistically maintains a medieval atmosphere in fantasy, making it a subject of importance for semiotic analysis. Previous research on symbolism in fairy tales and fantasy literature offers valuable insights into how meaning operates in imaginative texts. Tolkien (2008), in *On Fairy-Stories*, describes fantasy as a "secondary world" constructed through symbolic language that invites readers to believe in the impossible.

Semiotic analysis also allows for an exploration of the roles of characters and symbols in constructing romance and fantasy. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the antagonist Maleficent is portrayed as the embodiment of evil, serving as the primary obstacle to the Princess's happiness. This representation aligns with (Duarte, 2021) view that villains in Disney adaptations often represent external obstacles that strengthen the hero's journey. Furthermore, symbols of love, heroism, curses, and rescue form a narrative that is not only emotionally compelling but also reflects Western cultural values. Several researchers have analyzed *Sleeping Beauty* as a classic fairy tale and as a modern adaptation. The *Irresistible Fairy Tale* examines the cultural and social evolution of *Sleeping Beauty* within the European fairy tale tradition (Zipes, 2012). Then Carter reveals how the romantic language in the traditional version of *Sleeping Beauty* masks patriarchal control behind the guise of love (Carter, 1990). This study elucidates the story's symbolic elements, providing a lens through which to view the Disney adaptation as both a continuation and a simplification of the original narrative's complexity. Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* also utilizes color and sound to convey symbolic meaning. For example, the interplay of pink and blue during the fairy's magic duel reflects the themes of choice and individuality within a rigid structure of fate.

Fantasy serves not only as a form of escape but also as a means of exploring alternative realities and social norms from different perspectives. Through the imaginative world constructed within the narrative, readers gain a space to reflect on various issues regarding love, courage, identity, and morality. Therefore, the symbolic language in *Sleeping Beauty* allows for layered interpretations of the themes of romance and fantasy, ensuring the story remains relevant to readers from diverse backgrounds. The popularity and cultural relevance of Disney novels, particularly *Sleeping Beauty*, make them an intriguing subject for semiotic analysis. Although previous studies have examined *Sleeping Beauty* from historical, cultural, and fairy-tale adaptation perspectives, research specifically analyzing Disney's use of symbolic language to construct romance and fantasy in Lily Murray's adaptation remains limited. Based on this, this study aims to explore how the use of Disney's symbolic language in Lily Murray's *Sleeping Beauty*, as a construction of romance and fantasy, goes beyond mere entertainment to convey timeless cultural messages.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach by applying Roland Barthes's theory of semiotic analysis to examine symbolic language in the construction of fantasy in Lily Murray's novel *Sleeping Beauty*. The material object of the study is Lily Murray's novel *Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty*, published in 2018 as part of the *Disney Classics* series. Meanwhile, the formal object of the study consists of symbolic language and the meanings of romantic and fantasy elements analyzed through Roland Barthes's semiotic theory. Secondary sources include journal articles and theories related to this study that enrich the semiotic analysis. Data was collected by carefully and thoroughly reading the novel *Sleeping Beauty*. Relevant sections of the text were then identified and classified according to the research topic. The collected data was recorded and organized by creating an inventory list, providing explanations for each data point, and presenting the data in descriptive form. The final step involved analyzing the data and drawing conclusions from it. In this study, the analysis was conducted using Roland Barthes's semiotic framework through two stages of interpretation: a primary modeling system to identify denotative meanings and a secondary modeling system to uncover connotative meanings and the myths embedded in symbolic signs. Through this process, this study interprets how the symbols in *Sleeping Beauty* transcend their literal form to convey cultural ideas inherited from medieval Europe.

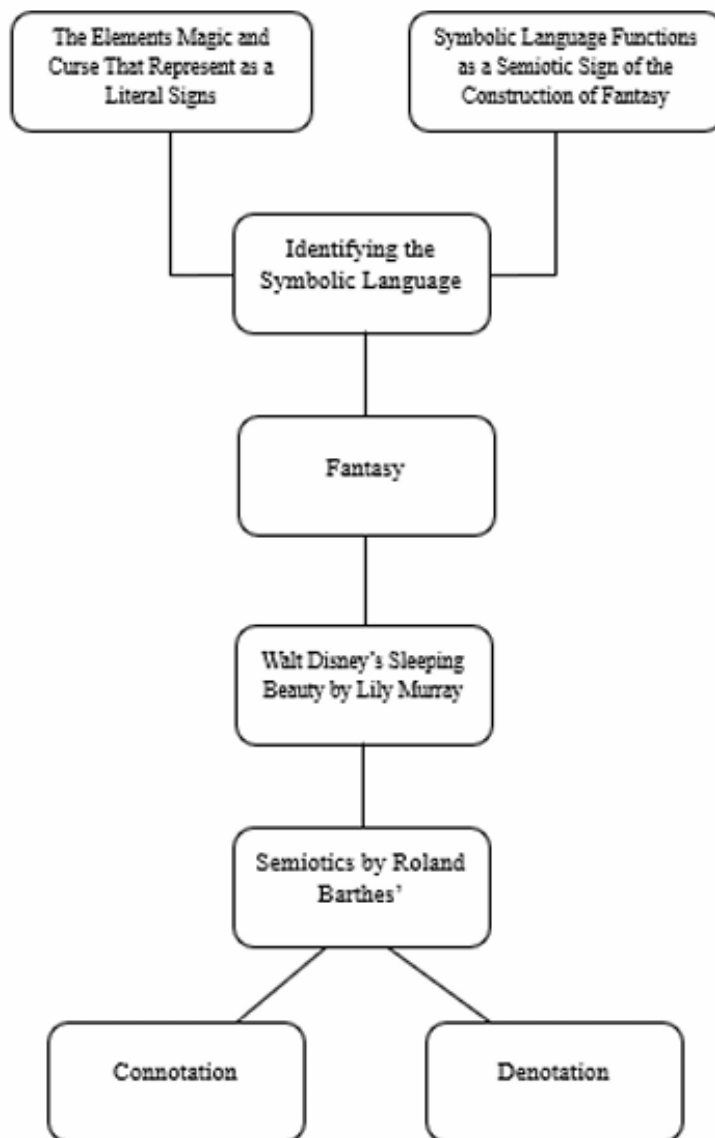


Figure 1. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Framework

As illustrated in Figure 1, this study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the symbolic language of romance and fantasy in Walt Disney's adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, as directed by Lily Murray. Barthes' semiotics provides a systematic approach to understanding how meaning is constructed through signs, which are central to the novel's narrative elements. Through this theory, the author will explore the symbolic language of the constructions of fantasy within the novel.

3. Results and Discussion

A semiotic analysis of Lily Murray's novel *Sleeping Beauty* (2018) was conducted using Roland Barthes's theory, which focuses on the primary sign system (denotation) and the secondary sign system (connotation and myth). The research findings are presented based on two research questions: the representation of magical elements and curses as literal signs, and the function of symbolic language in constructing fantasy.

3.1 Primary Modeling System

In the primary modeling system, signs are understood based on their literal meanings. According to Barthes (1972), the primary modeling system operates at the level of denotation, in which signs convey meaning through what they literally represent. The results of the analysis show that fantasy elements such as a green light, spinning wheels, spindles, pricks, curses, a green flame, thorns, the dragon's roar, transformation, a kiss, spun gold (golden hair), a bird, lightning, shadows,

and fire function as denotative signs that construct the basic structure of the fantasy narrative. The meaning derived stems from the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified without involving cultural or ideological interpretation. The following presents several explanations regarding the meaning of denotative signs in these fantasy elements. For example, the signifier 'green light' refers literally to light that appears green. This meaning is based on its visible physical characteristics and does not involve symbolic interpretation.

"A ball of green light appeared in the fireplace." (Murray, 2022)

Table 1. Barthes' diagram of sign

A green light	"Green light" refers to light that is visible and appears green in color, which represents its literal physical appearance (Oxford Appearance Learner's Dictionaries, 2023).
A visible green illumination appears at a specific location.	

The phrase "a ball of green light" consists of the noun "ball," which refers to a round object, and "green light," which denotes visible illumination that appears green. Similarly, the signifier 'spinning wheel' denotes a machine used to spin fibers into thread, emphasizing its practical function as defined in dictionary sources.

"It transformed itself into a spinning wheel." (Murray, 2022)

Table 2. Barthes' diagram of sign

A spinning wheel	A spinning wheel denotes a device used to spin fibers into thread or yarn, which is its literal defined in function, as dictionaries (Merriam-Webster, 2023).
A physical tool used to produce thread.	

The term "spinning wheel" refers to a mechanical device used to spin fibers into thread (Merriam-Webster, 2023). In this sentence, the object changes into a spinning wheel. The literal meaning of the spinning wheel emphasizes its function as a tool for textile production. Therefore, the sign formed by this relationship represents a visible, recognizable object used for spinning thread, which physically appears in the scene.

"Touch the spindle." (Murray, 2022)

Table 3. Barthes' diagram of sign

A spindle	"Spindle" refers to a thin, pointed rod used spinning, describing in its physical form and practical use (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023)
A small pointed part of a spinning tool.	

The word "spindle" refers to a thin rod or pointed tool that forms part of a spinning wheel and is used in the spinning process (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). In the narrative, the instruction directs Aurora to make physical contact with this object. The literal meaning highlights the spindle as a sharp, pointed tool.

"Aurora touched it, pricking her finger." (Murray, 2022)

Table 4. Barthes' diagram of sign

She pricked her finger	The signifier "prick" denotes a small puncture or wound caused by a sharp object, which describes the literal physical (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2023).
A small puncture wound on the skin.	

The verb "prick" means to make a small hole in the skin with a sharp object (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2023). This sentence describes the physical result of Aurora touching the spindle. The literal meaning emphasizes a minor puncture wound caused by a pointed object.

"She will prick her finger and die!" (Murray, 2022)

Table 5. Barthes' diagram of sign

A curse	A curse is a spoken statement believed to bring harm or misfortune, reflecting its literal lexical meaning (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).
A verbal statement intended to cause harm.	

The signifier "curse" refers to a spoken expression intended to bring harm or misfortune. At the denotative level, it is understood as a verbal utterance with a specific intention. In the story, the curse is delivered through speech, making it a linguistic act. The sign represents a spoken statement with an explicit, harmful intent.

In other words, the word "transform" means to change completely in form or appearance (Merriam-Webster, 2023). A dragon is a large, mythical reptilian creature often depicted with wings and the ability to breathe fire. In the story, the character physically transforms into a dragon. The word "thorns" refers to sharp, pointed growths on plants (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). The adjective "thick" indicates density, while "forest" refers to a large area covered with trees or vegetation. In this sentence, numerous sharp plant growths appear around the castle. At this level, the sign refers only to its physical characteristics as thorny vegetation surrounding a building. The signifier "kiss" denotes the act of touching with the lips, describing a physical action and an expression of affection. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (2023), "kiss" refers to the act of touching someone with the lips as a sign of love or greeting. In the context of the story, this relationship produces a visible sign of physical affection. The adjective "golden" or the phrase "spun gold" refers to gold formed into thin strands and having a bright yellow appearance. The verb "shone" means to give out bright light. Literally, this sentence describes Aurora's hair as bright yellow, resembling gold. The word "birds" refers to animals that have feathers and wings and are capable of flight. In the narrative, their presence indicates the presence of living creatures within the environment. The sign represents biological entities that are physically present in the setting. The word "lightning" refers to a sudden flash of light in the sky caused by an electrical discharge. In the story, this phenomenon appears as part of the environment. The sign represents a natural atmospheric event that is visible and observable. The signifier "shadow" refers to a dark shape that is produced when an object blocks light. According to its literal definition, a shadow forms on a surface when an object blocks light from reaching that area, creating a darker region. Furthermore, the phrase "burning" refers to the process of being consumed by fire. In the story, spinning wheels are burned, indicating physical destruction. The sign represents the transformation of objects through combustion. Thus, these signs function as literal elements that support the progression of the story and construct the fantasy world within the narrative.

The findings indicate that the primary modeling system constructs denotative meaning through the relationship between signifier and signified. Each sign found in the narrative initially functions as a literal meaning derived from the dictionary and observable descriptions. This is consistent with (Barthes, 1972), who states that meaning is generated directly through linguistic form and conceptual understanding.

3.2 Secondary Modeling System

This section presents the findings of the secondary modeling system, which focuses on the connotative meanings of the signs identified in the primary modeling system. At this level, denotative signs function as new signifiers that generate

deeper meanings shaped by cultural values, narrative conventions, and ideological structures, as Barthes proposes. These meanings are often referred to as myths, reflecting how a text naturalizes certain beliefs and norms within society. Based on the analysis, several patterns of connotative meanings can be identified throughout the data. The following presents several patterns of connotative meaning found in Lily Murray's novel *Sleeping Beauty*.

Table 6. Barthes' diagram of sign

Green light	A visible green-colored light	
A mythic marker of magical presence and otherworldly forces (Barthes, 1972)		Supernatural presence
A visible green illumination		

In Table 6, the sign of green light, which at the denotative level refers to visible colored illumination, functions at the connotative level as a representation of supernatural presence. The unusual color of the light indicates that the phenomenon is not natural but is associated with magical forces. This reflects a common convention in fairy tales, in which light signifies enchantment or otherworldly power. This process reflects Barthes' second-order signification, in which denotative signs function as new signifiers that generate deeper meanings shaped by cultural values and narrative conventions. Through this relationship, the sign becomes a symbolic representation of supernatural presence in the narrative (Barthes, 1972).

Table 7. Barthes' diagram of sign

Spinning wheel	A tool used to spin thread	
A myth of predetermined destiny (Warner, 1995)		Fate
A physical spinning tool		

In Table 7, the spinning wheel evolves from a literal object into a symbol of fate and inevitability. Within the narrative, its presence is closely linked to the curse placed upon Aurora. Thus, it signifies that the character's life is governed by a predetermined destiny rather than personal control. The spinning wheel is culturally associated with destiny and inevitability in European folklore, reflecting the myth of predetermined fate (Warner, 1995). The relationship between the signifier and the signified at this level produces the myth of predetermined destiny. This process reflects Barthes' second-order signification, in which denotative signs function as new signifiers that generate deeper meanings shaped by cultural values and narrative conventions (Barthes, 1972).

Table 8. Barthes' diagram of sign

Spindle	A pointed spinning tool	
A symbol of concealed threat in ordinary objects (Barthes, 1972)		Hidden danger
A thin rod used in spinning		

In the data presented in Table 3, the spindle, which is denotatively a sharp tool, signifies danger and the narrative's turning point. It becomes the medium through which the curse is realized, marking the moment of transition from safety to vulnerability. In fairy-tale narratives, objects of peril often serve as symbolic markers of threats that manifest unexpectedly within the everyday sphere. The relationship between the new signifier and signified produces the myth of threat and danger. This process reflects Barthes' second-order signification, in which denotative signs function as new signifiers that generate deeper meanings shaped by cultural values and narrative conventions (Barthes, 1972).

Table 9. Barthes' diagram of sign

Pricked finger	A small puncture wound	
A symbolic turning point from innocence to danger (Zipes, 2012)		Transition
A physical injury		

In Table 9, the act of pricking the finger does not merely represent a physical injury but also signifies a symbolic transition. It reflects a movement from innocence into a state of consequence, which is a recurring motif in fairy tales. In fairy-tale narratives, physical injury often symbolizes transformation or the crossing of boundaries between different states of existence. The relationship between the new signifier and signified produces the myth of transformation. This process reflects Barthes' second-order signification, where denotative meaning develops into deeper cultural and ideological meaning. The sign no longer functions merely as a literal wound but also as a symbolic representation of transition and transformation within the narrative (Barthes, 1972)

Table 10. Barthes' diagram of sign

Curse	A harmful spoken expression	
A myth of supernatural retribution (Warner, 1995)		Moral punishment
A verbal act intended to cause harm		

In Table 10, the sign "a harmful spoken expression" from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, the curse signifies supernatural punishment because, in fairy tales, curses are commonly associated with magical authority and destructive power. In fantasy narratives, curses often symbolize supernatural beings' ability to control destiny and suffering. The curse reflects medieval beliefs in supernatural retribution and moral punishment imposed by higher or darker powers (Warner, 1995). The relationship between the new signifier and signified produces the myth of doom and supernatural punishment. This process reflects Barthes' second-order signification, where denotative meaning develops into deeper cultural and ideological meaning (Barthes, 1972).

Additionally, the sign of thorns, which at the denotative level refers to sharp plant structures, functions at the connotative level as a representation of obstacles and trials. The dense growth around the castle indicates isolation, serving as a symbolic barrier separating Aurora from the world. This reflects a common convention in fairy tales, in which thorns signify the trials that test worthiness or the difficulties that must be navigated before achieving resolution. The sign of transformation, which at the denotative level refers to a change in form, functions at the connotative level as a representation of metamorphosis and the instability of identity. The act of Maleficent physically altering her appearance into a dragon indicates that identity within the narrative is fluid rather than fixed. This reflects a common convention in fairy tales and fantasy narratives, in which transformation signifies a shift in power or the revelation of a character's true, often destructive, nature. The sign "physical contact with lips" from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, the kiss signifies true love and salvation because the act of affection breaks Aurora's curse and awakens her from magical sleep. In fairy tales, true love's kiss is commonly represented as a symbolic force capable of overcoming evil and restoring harmony. The sign "golden-colored hair" from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, golden hair signifies nobility, purity, and ideal beauty because gold is culturally associated with value, elegance, and perfection. In fairy tales, golden physical appearance often symbolizes innocence and royal identity. The sign "flying animals" from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, birds signify harmony, freedom, and peace because they are commonly associated with nature, innocence, and emotional tranquility in fairy tales. Their presence around Aurora reflects a peaceful relationship between humans and nature. The sign "a bright flash" from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, lightning signifies danger, tension, and supernatural threat because storms and lightning in fantasy narratives are commonly associated with chaos,

fear, and the presence of powerful magical forces. the sign “visible flames” from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, fire signifies chaos, destruction, and danger because flames in fantasy narratives are commonly associated with violence, fear, and uncontrollable power. The fire surrounding the castle intensifies the atmosphere of conflict and danger within the story. the sign “burned objects” from the denotative level functions as a new signifier in the secondary modeling system. At the connotative level, the burned spinning wheels signify authority and protection because the king orders their destruction to prevent Aurora from encountering the spindle and fulfilling the curse. In fairy tales, destroying dangerous objects often symbolizes attempts to control fate and maintain safety.

Therefore, the data presented above can answer the second research question by demonstrating how connotative meanings and myths are formed through a secondary modeling system in relation to cultural interpretations and ideological meanings. These findings indicate that secondary modeling systems transform denotative signs into connotative meanings and myths through cultural and ideological interpretation. These signs evolve beyond their literal meanings and function as cultural myths commonly found in folklore and fantasy narratives. This suggests that signs such as curses, spinning wheels, and characters' inability to escape their fate imply that they have little control over their lives. In line with this, (Zipes, 2012) states that fairy tales often depict life events as inevitable and normalize fate as an undeniable reality. In addition, the study found ideological representations of gender. Aurora is depicted through symbols associated with beauty, purity, and passivity, such as golden hair and enchanted sleep. Conversely, male characters are represented through symbols of action, heroism, and rescue. This pattern indicates that the symbolic language in *Sleeping Beauty* not only constructs a fantasy but also represents cultural values that have developed within the Western fairy tale tradition. Overall, the research findings confirm that the symbolic language in *Sleeping Beauty* functions as a system of signs that constructs fantasy through literal, connotative, and mythological meanings. The signs in *Sleeping Beauty* operate not only at the literal level but also at the mythical level, reinforcing a narrative of cultural values that reflect medieval values and fairy tale ideology.

4. Conclusion

Providing a statement that is expected and stated in the "Introduction" may eventually result in "Results and This study analyzes symbolic language in the construction of fantasy in Lily Murray's novel *Sleeping Beauty* using Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics. The results show that elements such as curses, magic, spinning wheels, thorns, shadows, dragon fire, and enchanted sleep function as literal signs through a primary modeling system. These signs construct a fantasy world through objects, actions, and supernatural events described in the narrative. Furthermore, the symbolic language in *Sleeping Beauty* also operates through a secondary modeling system, where denotative signs evolve into connotative meanings and myths. Curses symbolize fate and punishment, while fire and dragons symbolize danger and destruction. These symbolic meanings indicate that the fantasy construction in the novel is rooted in the imagination and cultural values of medieval Europe, including beliefs in magic, morality, fate, and the conflict between good and evil. Thus, the symbolic language in *Sleeping Beauty* not only constructs a fantasy world but also represents the cultural values embedded within the narrative.

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