

## IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THROUGH THE SYMBOLS AND ALLEGORY IN DAVID SHANNON'S *A BAD CASE OF STRIPES* (1998)

Dzikrika Rahmatu Hayati and Nurrahmawati

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta

dzikrika.r@mail.ugm.ac.id; nurrahmawati1999@mail.ugm.ac.id

**Abstract:** This study explores the symbols in *A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon as representations of identity negotiation and self-acceptance. This research utilizes Ferdinand de Saussure's (1988) semiotics and Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of identity negotiation as the theoretical frameworks. This research examines how Camilla's constantly changing stripes on her skin represent metaphors for societal pressures and struggles to maintain one's authentic self. By analyzing these transformations, the study highlights the complex dynamics between external expectations and personal identity. The findings reveal how these transformations reflect the tension between societal expectations and self-acceptance, which is a process of identity negotiation. It also highlights the consequences of suppressing one's true identity to meet societal norms. This research illustrates how picture books use symbolism to navigate complex issues of identity within the context of children's literature.

**Keywords:** identity negotiation, symbolism, semiotics, allegory, children's literature

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood has long been considered a critical time where children build up the formation of self-identity, self-concept, and self-esteem (Sunal, 1990, in Ahn, 2011). In this period, children might face a condition where their physical and mental conditions do not match the situation that is considered normal in their environment. Therefore, they usually have to adapt to their environment to avoid marginalization (Valentine, 2000, in Ahn, 2011).

While trying to find their self-identity, children will learn what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in their social interaction. Sometimes, when they realize that their self-identity does not match the social standard as normal, they tend to feel afraid of being socially excluded from their society. Thus, they will try to find a way to fit in with the social standard (Valentine, 2000, in Ahn, 2011). For example, in *The Bad Case of Stripes*, Camilla can identify that her environment hates lima beans. So even though she likes lima beans, she pretends to hate lima beans in order to be accepted by her social friends. Here, when Camilla wants to adapt to society, she has to abandon a part of her identity. According to Ahn (2011), what they choose in this particular dilemma and decision-making process is influenced by who they are, which is shaped by the social relationships around them, and this may or may not be consistent with their identity.

These topics about the process of developing identity and how to deal with it may not be easy for children to understand. Therefore, symbols are usually used in children's literature to represent abstract concepts or ideas, such as identity, kindness, or justice. Similarly, allegory—a narrative technique where characters and events symbolize broader truths—helps convey moral and social lessons in a subtle, yet impactful, manner. In this case, David Shannon's *A Bad Case of Stripes* is an example of literature that uses symbolism and allegory to illustrate one's struggle with social pressures and journey toward self-acceptance.

*A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon is a picture book that gives profound insights into themes about the negotiation of identity in society and the journey of self-acceptance. This book, published in 1998, is supposed to be read for 5-9 years old, or as known as early

childhood. Now it has become one of the *1001 Children’s Books You Must Read Before You Grow Up*.

In the story, Camilla’s “stripes” become a metaphor to show the conflict between individual identity and social conformity. Camilla’s rejection of her favorite food, lima beans— in order to meet her friends’ expectations, as well as her healing through acceptance of her true identity—contains symbolic and allegorical meaning that can be analyzed in depth.

The semiotic approach by Saussure (1988) is used to analyze the relationship between the signifier (such as the stripes on Camilla’s body) and the signified (such as social pressures and identity struggles). This approach is used to reveal how meaning is constructed, and also to understand the sign system used by Shannon to convey a moral message to young readers. The theory of identity by Hall (1990) is also applied to help analyze how Camilla’s identity was formed and negotiated through the culture and social interaction. Therefore, in this paper, the writers try to answer two research questions: (1) “How do the symbols represent Camilla’s identity negotiation and self-acceptance?” and (2) “How does the allegory in *A Bad Case of Stripes* represent the effect of social pressure in shaping identity and self-acceptance?”.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to collect and analyze the data. The data collected for this study are divided into two types: primary data and secondary data. The primary data are the symbols and allegories found in the children's picture book *A Bad Case of Stripes*, written by David Shannon. The secondary data includes books and references relevant to the theoretical frameworks employed in the study. For this purpose, this research uses Hall’s (1990) theory of identity negotiation and Saussure’s (1988) semiotics theory. These resources complement each other to answer the research questions of this study.

This research uses a qualitative approach to collect data, which involves close reading and note-taking. The researcher focuses on the symbols with identity-related themes that appear in the picture book. After gathering the necessary data, the researcher identifies the symbolic elements, including the stripes, colors, and transformations, and interprets the meanings using Saussure’s semiotics. Then Hall’s identity negotiation theory is used to analyze how Camilla’s transformations reflect on her struggles with identity, societal expectations, and self-acceptance. Then the allegory of the picture book is analyzed according to the main symbols found in the narrative. Lastly, the researcher concludes the results and findings in the conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Symbolism in *A Bad Case of Stripes*

*A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon represents the conflict of identity through the various forms of symbolism. In this story, stripes and lima beans become symbols to represent the social pressure and self-acceptance. In this article, Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic approach is used to analyze the relationship between the signifier and signified, and how these elements contribute to the themes of self-acceptance and critique of social conformity.

**Table 1. The signifier and signified in *A Bad Case of Stripes***

The signifier	The signified
Stripes	The conflict and negotiation of individual identity to conform to collective identity and cultural expectations
Lima beans	Camilla’s authenticity and true identity, a symbol of self-acceptance

### **The symbolism of “stripes” as a representation of conflict and negotiation of individual identity**

The story started with Camilla having trouble choosing the best outfit for her first day of school. Since the beginning of the story, we already know how Camilla, as a child, tried to fit in with her social environment and ignore anything that could make her marked as a weird child. As Valentina (2000, in Ahn 2011) mentions, while trying to find their self-identity, children will learn what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in their social interaction. Because of the fear of being excluded, they tend to try to conform to social standards.

Because of Camilla’s obsession with conforming to society, her stripes keep changing as her identity keeps negotiating with society’s expectations. There are seven kinds of stripes in total that are presented in the book: the rainbow color stripe, American flag stripe, random colors and shapes stripe, multi-colored pill stripe, virus, bacteria, and fungus stripe, specialists stripe, and lastly, when she and her stripes finally blend in with her room. Each stripe has its own significance as being analyzed with Saussure’s semiotics and Hall’s identity negotiation.

#### **1) Rainbow color stripe**

The first stripe that Camilla has is a color strip. It consists of rainbow color stripes of orange, yellow, green, and blue, which makes her ‘look like a rainbow’ (p. 3-4). This stripe appeared when she was confused about what to wear on her first day. The colorful stripes on Camilla’s body signified the social pressure that Camilla experiences to fit in and please others. It is a universal symbol of diversity, which symbolizes Camilla’s conflicting identities (Hall, 1990; Wolowic et al., 2017). Her inability to be her authentic self through the wearing of the red dress that she actually feels ‘pretty’ makes her skin transform into stripes, which is also her subconscious feeling of losing her authentic self in the pursuit of acceptance by others.

#### **2) American flag stripe**

The second stripe that appeared is the American flag stripe of red, white, and blue with white stars that appeared when Camilla was saying the Pledge of Allegiance in class with her classmates. The Pledge of Allegiance is a form of patriotism to the United States that is usually said by American children at school at the start of each day. To Bellamy, a Baptist minister, the pledge also provides a patriotic emblem to school children, particularly the immigrant children who might have mixed national allegiances (Smith, 2016). The American flag stripe that appeared in Camilla signified the dominant societal structure that she is trying to conform to, reflecting Hall’s (1990) view that identity is produced within cultural contexts shaped by history and power. Turner (1969) also adds that public symbols serve to express and reinforce this social order.

#### **3) Random colors and shapes stripes**

Knowing that Camilla was able to transform into different kinds of stripes, her friends started to tease her. They start asking her to transform into different shapes and colors. These random patterns that show according to her friends, signified the external pressures that shape her identity. She transforms *faster than you can change channels on a TV* (p. 9-10) signifies her lack of agency in defining herself. Her transformation into different patterns also represents how her identity is constantly redefined through societal expectations. This aligns with Hall’s (1990) theory that identity is fluid and constantly negotiates between the individual and society. Her ability to change her stripes signified her constant navigation and negotiation of her identity in response to the expectations of other people around her.

#### **4) Multi-colored pill stripe**

Due to her “distracting” stripes, Camilla is asked not to go to school until her stripe is “cured”. The multi-colored pill stripe signifies how Camilla's identity is treated as a problem to be fixed or neutralized rather than to be understood as a reflection of her true self. Pill is also a sign of external force trying to “cure” or conform Camilla’s identity. Her transformation into a pill reflects the symbolic process of her identity being reshaped into the society’s standard. It is also a form of identity negotiation that tries to disregard her unique identity to become a more controlled and socially approved version of selfhood. It is related to Foucault’s (1977) idea of disciplined bodies and Hall’s (1990) notion of identity being formed within social constraints.

### **5) The various experts’ stripes that label her stripe as a virus, bacteria, or fungus**

When Dr. Bumble returned with other experts, they suggested that Camilla’s stripes could be a virus, a type of bacteria, or a fungus. However, in the end, they actually still do not have a clue. The remedies and diagnoses provided by various experts signified society’s desperate attempts to “fix” individuality through external, predefined lenses and oversimplified categories without understanding the true nature of their identity, which often leads to further distortion. This tendency of society’s attempt at rigid social categories is also criticized by Butler (1990). Hall (1990) also added that identity is always more complex than external definitions can capture.

### **7) Camilla melted into the walls of her room**

Lastly, the environment expert asked Camilla to calm down by breathing deeply and “become one of her rooms”, which only made her actually transform into one. This final transformation signified Camilla’s identity loss, in which the boundaries between herself and her environment had become blurred. This also signifies a failure of identity negotiation, where the individual is no longer an agent in the construction of their identity but is instead consumed by external definitions and expectations. This reflected Foucault’s (1977) view that disciplinary power can strip individuals of autonomy.

### **The symbolism of “lima beans” as Camilla’s true identity**

As Hall (1990) explained, “interaction” between self and society can form one’s identity. It means that identity is influenced by the social context. In this story, “lima beans” is the food that everybody hates except for Camilla. That is actually Camilla’s favorite food. But when she tries to fit in with her social circle of friends, she refuses to admit that she likes lima beans because it would be contrary to the standards existing in her society. This represents how society can influence someone’s identity. After Camilla admits that she likes lima beans, her stripes disappear, and she becomes herself again. Therefore, lime beans become the signifier of Camilla’s true self.

### **A Bad Case of Stripes as an Allegory of the Social Pressure and Self-Acceptance**

*A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon is an allegory to illustrate the negotiation of one’s identity in the middle of social and cultural pressure. Through Camilla's character and other symbolic elements, such as stripes and lima beans, this story not only presents the moral value for children but also social criticism of the culture of conformity.

### **Allegory of social pressure**

According to Hall (1990), the search for the identity of a person is also always associated with how the person is positioning themselves and being positioned. Identity is also formed in the “interaction” between self and society (Hall, 1990). In this story, “stripes” in Camilla’s body

is an allegory for social pressure that forces someone to leave their true identity to conform to society.

When the stripes appeared at the beginning of the story, it happened when Camilla was thinking so hard about what to wear that she could meet the social expectations of her. This shows how Camilla believes that her true self does not match her society. The stripes appear to be the impact of her incredible effort to fit into society. Stripes can be seen as a metaphor for the burden of expectation of social culture, where Camilla is expected to give up their uniqueness in order to fit in.

Besides that, the changing of stripes according to what people around her said illustrates Camilla's identity that is no longer under her control. Instead, it is controlled by the external influences of herself, such as people's opinions or statements about her. This is pointing out how social pressure can erase someone's true identity. Camilla's journey is an allegory of how individuals are often forced to "change" to fit society's expectations, which often causes conflict between the desire to be unique and the need to be accepted.

### **Allegory of self-acceptance**

At the end of the story, Camilla decided to accept her true self, which symbolized her eating lima beans. This journey illustrated how self-acceptance allows someone to reconstruct their identity after experiencing a crisis because of social pressure.

"Lima beans" are Camilla's favorite food. But in order to fit into society, she continuously refuses to admit it. Therefore, eating the lima beans again shows that Camilla symbolically accepts her true self and does not care anymore about the social expectations of her. After Camilla recovered from stripes, she no longer pretended to hate lima beans. This shows that healing can occur when someone chooses to return to their true identities, rather than continuing to try to meet social expectations.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

*A Bad Case of Stripes* by David Shannon contains symbols and allegory of the negotiation of one's identity and the process of self-acceptance. Stripes that appear in Camilla's body symbolize the social pressure that tends to force her to leave her own identity in order to conform to society. The changing of stripes represents the process of Camilla's identity that keeps negotiating with social expectations. On the other hand, Camilla's self-acceptance is symbolized by her favorite food, lima beans. Through the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure, the signifiers such as stripes and lima beans represented the conflict of one's true identity and social expectation. How Camilla's identity formed and was negotiated through her interaction with society reflects that identity is fluid and constantly negotiates between the individual and society, especially when someone faces social expectations and judgment.

The allegory in this story represents the struggle of social pressure and self-acceptance. It also critiques social conformity by representing how social judgment of someone's identity can alienate someone who is different. Camilla's recovery after eating lima beans symbolized the importance of self-acceptance in order to reconstruct a more stable identity.

Thus, *A Bad Case of Stripes* delivers a powerful moral message that someone's uniqueness should be celebrated, not suppressed, and self-acceptance is more important than sticking to social expectations. This story not only provides insight for young readers but also a reflection for wider readers about the danger of social conformity that sacrifices individual identity.

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