

**Article**

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**“Denmark as A Prison of Life” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*  
(A Semiotic Approach in Literature)**

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**Abstract**

*Hamlet* is one of the well-known Shakespeare’s drama highlighting betrayal, murder, and revenge. This paper discusses Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by studying signs in the text with a semiotic approach in literature. “*Denmark is prison*” is chosen to be the primary signifier in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that can represent all the main characters’ feeling and perspective in the text such as Hamlet, Claudius, Getrude, Hamlet’s ghostly father, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Horatio, Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. They feel Denmark is a prison for their heart. Prison is a symbol of an unpleasant place where the dwellers do not feel happy since they cannot live freely. The characters’ own feeling leads them to live in Denmark unhappily. The story climax is that all of the main characters at the end of the story suffer or die tragically.

**Key words:** Hamlet, signifier, prison, betrayal, murder

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**1. Introduction**

Murder committed in varied motifs and ways, for instance, murdering with a reason for possessing and mastering others’ belongings normally leads to a flaming grudge of family deserted. Compensation of taking revenge against the murderer is believed to give satisfaction and pleasure to the doer. Nonetheless, the matter will be more complex if the murderer is one of the betrayed family members with a hidden intention to be willing having one of the other family members and grabbing a symbol of family gold and glory. Any kinds of feelings, for instance, hatred, annoyance, anger, fear, pity, and hesitation, surely emerge

altogether in one of the family members who wants to take revenge. Such a description also occurs in the character of Hamlet in Shakespeare's phenomenal drama entitled *Hamlet*.

Even though there are some research journals discussing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from various perspectives of literary research approaches, such as psychology of literature, marxim hermeneutics, historicism, structuralism, deconstruction, etc, this research paper really has a newly striking difference compared to the previous research journals. It is because the writer uses semiotics approach in analyzing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the literary research approach which has not been applied in studying *Hamlet* text before. The significance of this research paper is to intensively explore a lot of characters in the text rather than the main character Hamlet himself and to complete research studies from another viewpoint on Shakespeare's Hamlet. This study focusses on the signs as the core of semiotics approach by detailing the primary signifier, signified, icon, symbol, and index within the text.

*Hamlet*, one of the most profound plays written by Shakespeare, is a landmark in the poet's greatest work. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* tells how the prince of Denmark returns to Denmark and a court that he hardly recognizes, to a mother newly wed to his uncle and in many crimes against him are avenged. In the course of having his ghostly father, Hamlet is always in hesitation to take revenge with Claudius, his father's murderer. As a result of this, Hamlet faces either internal or external problems that make him restless. There are many major characters appearing in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, yet nearly all of them do not get rid of the feeling of unhappiness due to their own mistakes and eventually die tragically at the end of the story. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by explaining primary signifier, signified, icon, symbol, and index in the text.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Research Approach*

Since there are many kinds of signs dominantly emerging in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, analyzing the text of the play, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, by using semiotic approach will be greatly interesting. Semiotics, the approach which is used by the writer, is the study of sign in understanding all life phenomena (Semi, 1993:86)<sup>[1]</sup>. This kind of approach is also made good use to analyze all signs in literary texts. To identify signs building in literature, a researcher should fully comprehend the concept of sign covering *signifier* and *signified* as well as the kinds of signs for instances *icon*, *symbol* and *index* in the

text, and then this analysis is continued by making a basic narrative scheme and configuration of binary opposition in syntagmatic and paradigmatic axis (Wardoyo, 2005:11)<sup>[2]</sup>. Binary opposition is very accurate to be used in tracing the narrative structure in the texts. Any literary texts are usually established with two contradictory oppositions, such as good and bad, bravery and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, and so on. Through these semiotic steps, literary texts framework, at this point, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be clearly understood.

### *2.2. Method of Data Collection*

The writer, in writing this essay, uses library research on the research object of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to acquire data and information in connection with the subject matter of this essay. According to Semi (1993), library research is implemented by the researchers in their working rooms or in a library where they can obtain data and information concerning the object of research through reference books, visual auditory equipments, and other sources.

The usage of library research is needed since all data used in this research are based on the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, whereas written sources such as; reference books, encyclopaedias, related research papers, and so on are functioned as supporting references.

## **3. Discussions**

### *3.1. Basic Narrative Scheme in Shakespeare's Hamlet*

First of all, to analyze literary text by semiotics approach, basic narrative scheme is the very first thing to do. Having read the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, It can be inferred that the play actually focuses on two opposite main characters namely; Hamlet and Claudius. Those two characters are the essence of binary opposition of *Hamlet* narrative. Hamlet represents loyalty, Claudius represents betrayal. Therefore, the basic narrative scheme of the *Hamlet* text is as following below:

1. Hamlet is sad and angry, Claudius is happy and joyful.
2. Hamlet is suspicious of Claudius, Claudius is suspicious of Hamlet.
3. Hamlet tries to prove the truth about Claudius; Claudius tries to prove the truth about Hamlet.
4. Hamlet plans to kill Claudius and Claudius plans to kill Hamlet, but both of them fail.
5. Hamlet succeeds to kill Claudius, but Claudius doesn't.

The basic narrative scheme of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins with

Hamlet's sadness, gloominess, and anger, since his father --the former king of Denmark-- dies tragically and his uncle Claudius replaces his father's position as well as marries his mother, Getrude. Hence, Claudius is very happy and joyful being able to realize his ambition. Hamlet in this case does not know what happens behind the death of his father and who the murderer really is. His sadness and anger gets more and more because his mother, Getrude, is willing to accept Claudius love, so that they are becoming a newlywed. The sequence of the story goes on with Hamlet's suspiciousness of Claudius; Hamlet feels that Claudius is the mastermind of his father's death, moreover after the presence of his father's ghost. Hamlet's suspiciousness gets deeper and deeper from that night on. Conversely, Claudius also feels suspicious of Hamlet's behaviour, attitude, and talk; Hamlet looks mad and strange day by day.

Then, the sequence goes on with Hamlet's effort to prove the truth of the story told by his ghostly father about who the murderer is. At this point, Hamlet proves whether the murderer is Claudius or not by means of playing the drama entitled "the murder of Gonzago" in front of the public. Though the drama, Hamlet hopes everything will be revealed as he plans before. Meanwhile, Claudius also tries to prove what is going on with Hamlet and why he is in madness by way of setting a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. The story goes on with Hamlet's intention to kill Claudius after knowing the convincing proof about Claudius attitude while watching drama. Vice versa, Claudius also plans to kill Hamlet by making political intrigue to send Hamlet to England. Through this plan, Claudius hopes Hamlet is killed by the English government officer. Nevertheless, the two of them fail to kill each other. The climax of the story ends with the death of Claudius in the hands of Hamlet as a result of Claudius' wicked manner. Claudius pretends to be good to Hamlet by giving poisonous drink, but unluckily Getrude, Hamlet's mother, who takes the drink, so it leads her to die. Hamlet's revenge and anger result in Claudius' death tragically.

### *3.2. Primary Signifier Analysis in Shakespeare's Hamlet*

The second step to do in terms of semiotics approach is determining which sign is very dominant to appear in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. At this point, the narrative element which is regarded as a primary signifier and represents the whole text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is analyzed. The primary signifier can be icon, symbol, or index which is interrelated to other elements in the text of *Hamlet*.

The writer prefers choosing Hamlet's words while he was talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "*Denmark is prison*" (Shakespeare, 1989:80)<sup>[3]</sup> as

the primary signifier that can represent all the main characters' perspective in the text such as Hamlet, Claudius, Getrude, Hamlet's ghostly father, Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Horatio, Fortinbras, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The statement "*Denmark is prison*" is the description of all the main characters' feeling blanketing their life in Denmark. They feel Denmark is prison for their heart. Prison is a symbol of an unpleasant place where the dwellers do not feel happy since they cannot live freely. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, what makes the main characters feel imprisoned is, as a matter of fact, their own feeling. Their own feeling leads them to live in Denmark unhappily. This can be seen in the story climax in which all of the main characters at the end of the story suffer or tragically die.

Hamlet's speech that "*Denmark is prison*" is a symbol of unpleasant life in Denmark. Hamlet does not feel happy to be there because he is imprisoned by his own feeling. From the beginning to the end of the story, Hamlet's life in Denmark tends to be restless, disappointed, and sad, even his life has to end in horrible death finally. What makes Hamlet unhappy primarily is caused by his sudden father's death, his madness in loving his girl, Ophelia, and his doubt about something to do. Those three reasons are the underlying reasons why Hamlet cannot live happily. Since his father's death, Hamlet is always moody, melancholic, restless, and temperamental. His sadness is rising to the turning point after seeing his mother's marriage with Claudius in a relatively short time after his father's death.

The second reason that makes Hamlet feel unhappy is due to his mad love with Ophelia, Polonius' daughter. Because of loving her so deeply, he cannot accept the reality to see his sweetheart die to be drown in the river. Emotionally, Hamlet expresses his deep feeling in the day of Ophelia's funeral and quarrels with Laertes, Ophelia's brother. If Hamlet is not chained with such a deep feeling, of course, he can live happily in Denmark.

The third reason why Hamlet feels unhappy is because Hamlet is always in doubt with everything he has to do. He lives with excessive hesitation, so thoughtful, and too much consideration even though his own father who assigns him to uphold justice in Denmark. Each command for revenge he gets from his ghostly father cannot be implemented immediately. Hamlet always asks himself whether his ghostly father's story and the order to kill his uncle, Claudius, are convincingly true or it is just evil's persuasion to lead him into hell. He cannot do anything reactively as Laertes does when hearing his father, Polonius, dies in the hand of Hamlet. Hamlet hesitation makes him delay again and again over his father's command. Hamlet words before the mirror "*To be or not to be, that is the question*" is the proof that he is a man of real hesitation. Based on the reasons

above, Hamlet feels imprisoned in his own Denmark, so he lives in no happiness.

Hamlet's father ghost is also the description of an imprisoned man who is unhappy because of his feeling of guilty. "*Denmark is prison*" for him because he feels guilty for not asking for forgiveness to God over the sins he has already committed during his life in the world before the day of his death, so his spirit now cannot go to the heaven. As a result of this, he is always restless waiting for Hamlet's help to make him free. Another reason that makes Hamlet's father ghost uneasy is his extraordinary revenge to kill Claudius with the help of Hamlet's hands. He will never get into heaven and stay there peacefully before Hamlet does kill Claudius immediately; his own brother who has poisons his ears until death. Hamlet's father ghost revenge gets deeper and deeper when Hamlet does not do his command to kill Claudius as soon as possible; in fact Hamlet has many chances to do it. Hamlet's father ghost oftentimes emerges for his restlessness in front of Hamlet to remind him of not delaying to get revenge to kill Claudius. This fact shows that Hamlet's father ghost is imprisoned by his own feeling in his own country, Denmark.

Claudius is also the man who is imprisoned by his own feeling so that he lives unhappily in Denmark in the course of the story, even in the end he has to die horribly killed by Hamlet. "*Denmark is prison*" for Claudius since he is imprisoned by his own feeling of madness in power, wealth, and woman. Those three things make Claudius "really mad" in Denmark. Power leads him ambitious to be the king either by hook or by crook, even though he has to have the heart to kill his own brother, the previous king of Denmark. Wealth makes Claudius obsessive to grab all of his brother's treasure including the castle of Denmark illegally. Woman is the cause of Claudius' evil to kill Hamlet's father sadistically, the former king of Denmark. Woman, in this case, Getrude, makes Claudius so blind, neglecting the truth and goodness. He is crazy about Getrude; no matter she is his own brother's wife. Those three things cause him to go astray in life and his wrong life leads him to be in terrible death killed by Hamlet.

Getrude is also one of the main characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* whose life is not happy. "*Denmark is prison*" for her because she is imprisoned by her own feeling to be madly in love with Claudius. For the sake of living together with Claudius, she is not faithful anymore with her died husband. Getrude becomes a woman figure who is not loyal to the king and different from any other queens. Her disloyalty and crazy love with Claudius make her live in pseudo happiness. Deep inside the heart, actually Getrude feels unhappy since she is the cause of Hamlet's disappointment and anger, and Hamlet's anger is the cause of all unpleasantness in Denmark. As Claudius' wife as well as Hamlet's mother, Getrude faces inner conflict against two opposite sides, whether she has

to be in Claudius side or Hamlet side. Getrude wants both of them to be with her, but in fact they are enemies to each other. Such internal conflict makes Getrude live unhappily, even at the end of the story she has to pay with high price due to her fault to get married with her husband's brother, Claudius, unpurposely she drinks poisoned wine which is actually prepared by Claudius to kill Hamlet. Consequently, Getrude dies right after dinking it.

Polonius, king Denmark's staff, is also one of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who feels that "*Denmark is prison*" for him. His life is not happy because he is imprisoned by his own feeling. Polonius is too mad with his position and Claudius. Polonius is crazy about his job position as Claudius' subordinate in Denmark, whether what Claudius does is good or not, right or wrong, it does not matter to him. Consequently, he is too loyal to glorify Claudius as his king. Polonius' loyalty makes him blind with his own conscience, the fact can be seen when he forbids her daughter, Ophelia, to be visited by Hamlet, although they love each other. The reason is that it is not proper to a subordinate's daughter to fall in love with ordinate's family. Ophelia and Hamlet are not equal enough to be a matched couple. Polonius' loyalty to Claudius ends in his bad luck; he tragically dies of being killed by Hamlet in Getrude's room when he has done Claudius' command to meet Getrude. This shows that he is not happy to live in Denmark. Just suppose, he is not that way to love his position as well as Claudius, his life is certainly happy there.

Ophelia, Polonius' daughter, is the girl in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* whose life is also unhappy. It can be analyzed that her bitter feeling of unhappiness shows "*Denmark is prison*" for her. Ophelia is imprisoned by her own feeling; she is madly in love with Hamlet and too much loves her father, Polonius. Her excessive love to Hamlet makes her shocked even really mad after hearing Hamlet speeches that he just pretends to love her so far, his love is just a game. Ophelia feels that her love is rejected by Hamlet; in addition to that, she is restless seeing Hamlet looks and behaves as an insane man. What makes her more shocked psychologically is seeing the fact that his father dies to be killed by Hamlet. Ophelia loses two things: Hamlet's love and her father's love. From then on, Ophelia is psychologically unstable. This psychological instability leads her to end her life by drowning in the river. Such a thing is a factual indication that she is imprisoned by her own feeling in Denmark psychologically, so that she is not happy.

Laertes, Polonius' son as well as Ophelia's brother, is the one who can be categorized as an unhappy person in Denmark. Seemingly, he also feels that "*Denmark is prison*", prison for his life. He is imprisoned by his own feeling of anger and revenge with the root of all evil that has taken his father's life. Laertes

finds no happiness in Denmark since the day he hears his father murder. His anger and revenge are, before he knows, aimed at Claudius at first, and after finding out the murderer, Laertes bursts into fury with Hamlet, his friend. From day to day, his anger and revenge are getting uncontrolled more and more, being impatient to meet and kill Hamlet immediately, moreover after hearing his sister, Ophelia, dies to be drown in the river due to shock losing his father. Laertes' revenge and restlessness are made good use by Claudius to kill Hamlet with a professional strategy. Claudius offers Laertes "the soft, gentle way" to kill Hamlet in a fencing match through whom Claudius makes a very cunning plan by means of giving a poisonous sword to Laertes, if it fails; it goes to second plan by giving poisonous victory wine to Hamlet. Nevertheless, everything goes wrong; none of the plans are working well. Laertes knows who the root of evil in Denmark actually is, although everything is too late. Claudius is the only source of his restlessness. Laertes has been severely wounded with a very poisonous sharp sword in the fencing match with Hamlet, so eventually he dies in the matched. Just suppose, Laertes can get rid of his emotion and use his common sense, of course, he will feel happy in Denmark and will not die tragically.

Horatio, a close friend of Hamlet, is actually a very good friend through the course of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* story. Unluckily, he is too faithful with his principle in friendship; he is willing to sacrifice himself to die stupidly for Hamlet. This can be analyzed that "*Denmark is prison*" for Horatio as well, because he does not feel happy in Denmark at the end of the story. Horatio cannot accept the fact of losing his close friend, Hamlet. He looks very sad and hopeless to live without Hamlet who has died of being wounded by poisonous sword in the fencing match against Alerts. It shows that Horatio is really imprisoned by his own feeling, so he cannot be happy in Denmark. His excessive love for friendship does not make him able to stand on his own foot like a real gentleman. His feeling really imprisons him as a man in Denmark. Just suppose, he is not the kind of man, surely he will think about friendship proportionally and think that everything belongs to God and will return to Him. That kind of principle certainly will make him happy to be in Denmark.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also the men who are not happy at the end of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. "*Denmark is prison*" is for them both. They have to die by their own choice of life because they prefer position rather than friendship. As Claudius' subordinate, they are willing to be ordered to kill Hamlet in the voyage of sending him to England. Unfortunately, Hamlet knows their wicked intention, so Hamlet can save his life from the threatening ship. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finally die in the hands of pirates before arriving in England. As a matter of fact, the two of them is good friends to Hamlet, yet they

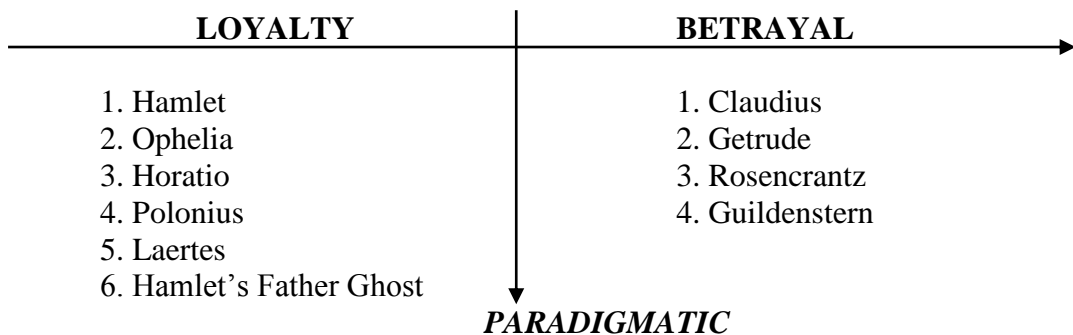


like betraying friendship. Consequently, they have to pay with high price by harvesting their evil intention. If their loyalty to friendship is consistent, the bad luck to go to England probably will not come up to them, so they can live happily in Denmark.

### 3.3. *Sintagmatic and Paradigmatic Analysis in Shakespeare's Hamlet*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is composed of a lot of signs which eventually build up structure of meaning. To complete the analysis as Wardoyo (2005:12) stated, semiotics approach applied in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be continued to sintagmatic and paradigmatic analysis by making binary opposition as follows:

#### **SINTAGMATIC**



Based on the sintagmatic and paradigmatic axis above, it can be explained that in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet is contradicted with Claudius as his uncle who is becoming the highest ruler of Denmark. Hamlet is the figure of a faithful man, whereas Claudius is the description of a disloyal man. Hamlet is really loyal to his deserted father, his mother, as well as his friends. Because of his loyalty to his late father, Hamlet is willing getting revenge with Claudius, the man who has cruelly killed Hamlet's father and married Hamlet's mother. Meanwhile, Claudius has the heart to betray his own brother, Hamlet's father, by poisoning him in order to be a newly Getrude's husband and grab the crown of king Denmark. Claudius betrayal results in incredible excess in Denmark, that is, the death in horror of the other main characters such as Polonius, Ophelia, Getrude, Laertes, Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Disloyalty actually makes Claudius' life unhappy, because from day to day he is haunted by suspicious feeling as well as threatening danger, and finally disloyalty kills Claudius himself in the hands of Hamlet.

Loyalty also belongs to Ophelia, Polonius' daughter; she is so loyal to his father and Hamlet that she is to be an ideal girl in Denmark. For the sake of

her love and respect to his father, Ophelia obeys his father advice and command not any longer to meet Hamlet, her husband to-be. Deep inside the heart, Ophelia loves Hamlet very much and will always love him, even though she has been rejected and left away by Hamlet to England. Her loyalty as a woman is also shown after knowing his father's death; she is following his father by drowning in the river, taking along with her love to die. It is very contrast with Getrude, Hamlet's mother; she is easily betraying her late husband's love by getting married with Claudius not more than two months after her husband died. Disloyalty leads Getrude to unhappiness reflected when she watches the murder of Gonzago play. Betrayal eventually causes Getrude to die tragically of poisonous wine.

A loyal figure also appears in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Horatio is a loyal friend to Hamlet at the University of Wittenberg. Even though Horatio is not royal family circle in Denmark, he has enormous sense of belonging to Hamlet compared to her mother. Horatio's loyalty is proven while Hamlet is dying after playing in a fencing match with Laertes, Horatio wants to die along with Hamlet as well. His great loyalty makes his life in emptiness after Hamlet's death. On the contrary, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the betrayers to their own friend, Hamlet. For the sake of position in Denmark, they have the heart to do something harmful as what Claudius plans to kick Hamlet away from Denmark. In Denmark, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are good friends, yet behind the kindness they both want to stab Hamlet in the voyage to England. Their disloyalty also results in destruction for themselves.

Besides the main characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* above, there are still characters categorized as loyal figures namely; Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet's father ghost. Polonius is so loyal to Claudius as subordinate that Polonius is willing to do anything for Claudius interests and he keeps away what Claudius dislikes. Polonius' death is also caused by his loyalty in doing Claudius' command. Laertes, Polonius's son, is also a loyal man. He is very loyal to his father and family. Laertes proves to be a good son by angrily getting revenge with Claudius who has been regarded to kill his father and the cause of his sister's death, being alright to be made good use by Claudius to kill Hamlet in cunning ways for the sake of his family. Hamlet's father ghost is also a loyal figure to his wife, Getrude. He assigns Hamlet not to kill his mother, although she has already betrayed his love. Instead, he wants Hamlet to let his mother punished by her own conscience and heaven. This indicates that Hamlet's father ghost is still loyal loving his betrayed wife so far.

#### *3.4. Other Signifiers Analysis in Shakespeare's Hamlet*

### 3.4.1. Icon

There are two icons emerging in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* namely; Hamlet's father picture and Claudius' picture. Those pictures are the resembling signs with the signified persons and are attached in a little case within the bedroom of Getrude. Hamlet shows the pictures to his mother in order that she compares whose picture is more dignified and glorified to be a gentleman, her husband, as well as king of Denmark.

### 3.4.2. Index

Many indexes appears in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of which is such as Hamlet likes talking philosophically to himself due to inner conflict he faces whether he has to do what his ghostly father says or not. Hamlet's attitude indicates indexical relationship, Hamlet is in great hesitation whether his late father is murdered by Claudius, so Claudius must be immediately killed, or the message is wrong.

### 3.4.3. Symbol

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has a lot of symbols to build up the structure of meaning, among other things are:

1. Sword symbolizes fight or war.
2. Court symbolizes justice or law enforcement.
3. Black dress symbolizes grieve and condolence.
4. Grave symbolizes the end of one's life in the world.
5. Horn symbolizes victory.
6. Blood symbolizes horrible death.
7. Upside-down sword which forms cross symbolizes Christ sacrifice.
8. Flower symbolizes loveliness.
9. Ghost symbolizes something frightening.
10. Wine symbolizes fun and joyfulness.

## 4. Conclusion

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is very interesting to be analyzed by using semiotic approach with which the structure of meaning of the whole text can be understood. Basic narrative scheme, primary signifier, and sintagmatic-paradigmatic analysis are part of semiotic approach steps to get the structure of meaning in the text. In *Hamlet*, the primary signifier that represents the whole characters perspective is "*Denmark is prison*", it is a symbol of unpleasant place that makes the dwellers restless and unhappy there. What makes the main characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* feel Denmark is like a prison, is because of their own feeling. Sintagmatic and paradigmatic axis analysis in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is based on binary opposition which covers loyalty and betrayal. Some

characters are including loyal persons and others are betrayers' figures in Denmark.

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