

Survival Symbols of Disabilities in Global Era as Reflected in “*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*” by Robert Dugoni

Cynthia Dyah Rahmwati^{1*}, Rahayu Puji Haryanti²
¹² English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

cynthiadrr@students.unnes.ac.id^{1*}, rahayu_ph@mail.unnes.ac.id²

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ABSTRACT

*This research discusses the survival symbols of disabilities in the global era as reflected in the novel *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell* by Robert Dugoni. The main character, Samuel Hill, is portrayed as a disabled individual who has experienced various forms of social discrimination since childhood. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, this study reveals how the symbols in the novel represent the struggles of individuals with disabilities in facing stigma and social challenges. The analysis shows that disability is not only presented as a physical limitation but also as an identity that shapes resilience, courage, and determination to survive. Samuel's life journey reflects the transformation from marginalization to self-acceptance and achievement, which gives new meaning to the condition of disability in the context of a global society. Moreover, this research highlights that literature is a powerful medium to articulate the voices of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, whose narratives are often silenced in mainstream discourse. By interpreting symbols such as vision, faith, and perseverance, this study demonstrates that disability can be seen as a source of empowerment rather than limitation. The findings enrich readers' understanding of the realities faced by individuals with disabilities while encouraging inclusive values that uphold dignity and diversity. Ultimately, the novel delivers a universal message that survival is deeply connected with empathy, acceptance, and recognition of every individual's worth in a global society.*

Keywords: disabilities; global era; survival symbols; semiotic

INTRODUCTION

A symbol is something that has more meaning than just a literal word. A symbol can be an object, letter, color, or even a shape that represents an abstract concept (Seymour, 2023). Symbols or signs can be considered a way for humans to give special meaning to something, based on logical analysis or associations that arise in thoughts or facts (Hendro, 2020). Humans are *homo symbolicum* or human symbol users whose lives express their creativity through various forms of art, by utilizing symbols as a means of communication to convey ideas, values, and interpretations of the world around them (Siswadi, 2024). It can be said that humans consistently rely on symbols during interaction and communication, as they cannot comprehend one another without them. In daily life, symbols appear in multiple forms, including words, pictures, actions, colors, and even traditions and rituals that have been inherited over time. As a result, symbols are frequently derived from a situation, item, or person that signifies a specific meaning. An example is the Gawai Traditional Ceremony in the Dayak

community as a form of gratitude for the rice that has been harvested or a rice party (Astuti & Beding, 2021). As for the other examples, the white color in a wedding dress depicts happiness and purity, and reflects hope and sacredness (Aziz, 2021) Symbols can be interpreted by examining the significance embedded within them. The author's intent for incorporating symbols in their work is to convey an underlying message to the audience.

Symbols in literature are often used to represent abstract concepts, including the theme of survival. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, survival refers to the ability of individuals to successfully maintain their lives or overcome various difficulties and threats that cannot be overcome by others. Every individual must strive to achieve their desired goals, but not all individuals can overcome the challenges they face. Individuals who are unable to deal with pressure tend to give up, while individuals who have resilience and mental strength will be able to survive and overcome various challenges (Hayati, 2021) In literary works, the process of survival is often depicted through the journey of characters who face social pressures, inner conflicts, and situational limitations that shape and create their characters. For example, the novel with the title *Zezyazeoviennazabrizkie "White Wedding"*, was published in 2015 and has 252 pages. This book narrates the experiences and challenges faced by a child born an albino named Elphira, who is completely white in appearance. She could not accept her physical condition and always hated the color white. However, Elphira did not give up easily even though she often received taunts from her friends. Elphira lived her life at home with knitting lessons and private lessons in biology, physics, and astronomy. This process is not just a physical struggle but also reflects the deep psychological and emotional dynamics of maintaining her existence and identity. The theme of survival ultimately symbolizes resistance to adversity and illustrates the human ability to rise, endure, and move on amidst the harshness of life.

Survival is an important aspect in understanding individuals with disabilities who are often faced with physical, social, and psychological challenges. Persons with disabilities who have limitations or inability in carrying out certain as commonly carried out by humans in general (Pramashela & Rachim, 2021) This limitation is caused by a temporary or permanent impairment or decline in physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory function. In the social context, people with disabilities are often positioned in a very weak and marginalized position (Allo, 2022) Therefore, people with disabilities often experience emotional instability caused by difficulties in social adaptation to their environment (Marpaung & Sahrani, 2025) In social life, people with disabilities often face various barriers to accessing basic rights such as education, employment, health services, and legal protection (Ningsih, 2022) People with disabilities are often treated differently and unequally by society. They often experience forms of discrimination, both directly and indirectly. One example is an athlete from North Sumatera, Evi Yunita Pohan, who revealed that disabled athletes often receive lower salaries than non-disabled athletes, even though they are in the same category (Wijaya, 2024) Therefore, serious and special attention is needed from the government and the entire community to create an inclusive, disability-friendly, equitable environment, as well as changes in the way people view disability (Sari, 2024)

The challenges faced by people with disabilities are increasingly complex often with the entry of society into the global era. The global era is a time when technological development, communication, and human mobility have caused geographical boundaries and cultural differences to become increasingly invisible or fused (Hermawanto & Anggriani, 2020). This condition creates a closer connection between countries and communities, so interactions occur more intensely and quickly. According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), the global era can be defined as a process in which various activities, relationships, and interactions expand to cover the entire scope of the world as a whole. The global era has affected various aspects of human life, including the economic, political, social, cultural, scientific,

technological, legal, and other sectors (Fattahillah et al., 2023). The influence of this global era has brought significant changes that are felt throughout the world. Despite the global era's numerous significant advancements across various domains, individuals with disabilities continue to experience discrimination that obstructs equal involvement in society.

In various literary, whether in the form of novels, short stories, or films, the theme of the struggle and survival of people with disabilities to obtain equality in society is often raised. This phenomenon illustrates the fact that people with disabilities still often experience various forms of discrimination, both verbally through inappropriate words and physically through unfair and unequal treatment in various aspects of daily life. One example of a literary work with a disability theme is the famous novel *"Of Mice and Man"* by Steinbeck, which was published in 1937 and has 128 pages. The novel tells the story of two migrant workers, named George Milton and Lennie Small, who move around in search of work. Lennie is an intellectually disabled person who relies heavily on George. He often experienced discrimination and unfair treatment because of his mental limitations. He is regarded as foolish, odd, and even dangerous. However, Lennie never intends to harm anyone and has a compassionate heart. Another literary work that tells the story of people with disabilities is a novel entitled *"Golden Boy"* by Tara Sullivan which was published in 2014 and has 384 pages. The novel portrays the story of an albino boy named Habo who is discriminated against in Africa, and his father cannot accept his physical condition. But at the time, during that period in Mwanza, people hunted albinos as it was thought that their body parts would bring good fortune. From that point forward, Habo realized that he was valuable and he also found a way to love himself. I also found an update on the novel *"The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* by Robert Dugoni. According to Amazon, the novel was published in 2018 in the United States and is a Wall Street and New York Times bestseller. The novel is about the struggle and survival of an albino child to maintain an equal life in society, despite the many obstacles he has to face.

Research on the novel *"The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* has been conducted by several researchers. The first research was conducted by Ruslan (2024) entitled *"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of the Main Character in the Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* using a psychoanalytic approach. The research concentrated on the psychological trauma experienced by the main character as a consequence of discrimination and bullying he faced as a child because of his rare red eye condition, also known as ocular albinism. Using the DSM-5 theory from the American Psychiatric Association, this research identifies the causes of PTSD, the symptoms experienced by the main character, and her recovery strategies through social support, internal efforts, and therapy. PTSD is more common in those who have experienced trauma, especially if the experience has resulted in a decreasing psychological state (Azizah et al., 2024). The second research was conducted by Aulia (2022) entitled *"Self-acceptance in The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* with a developmental psychological approach based on Elizabeth Hurlock's theory. The focus of this research is the process of self-acceptance experienced by the main character as a form of resistance to social pressure. This research shows how the main character can finally accept his physical condition, develop self-confidence, and form the meaning of life through painful life experiences. Previous studies have discussed the psychological aspects of Samuel Hill's character through psychoanalytical and developmental psychology approaches, especially related to trauma and the process of self-acceptance. However, no study that specifically examines the symbols of resilience in the novel *"The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* which illustrate the struggles of individuals with disabilities in facing challenges and stigma in a global society. Through this study, it is hoped that it can provide a new perspective for readers to understand the dynamics that exist in the story.

Previous studies have focused more on the psychological aspects of the character in the novel, such as the trauma experienced as a result of discrimination and the process of self-acceptance. However, studies that specifically examine symbols of resilience among people with disabilities in the context of the global era are still rare. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how the symbol in Robert Dugoni's novel "*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*" represent the struggles of individuals with disabilities in facing life's challenges. The analysis is conducted in these symbols. In line with this, the objectives of this study are to describe how the position of people with disabilities is projected in the global era through the characters in the novel, explain how the symbols that appear represent the theme of resilience, and elaborate on the relationship between the social position of people with disabilities and their ability to survive as reflected in the story. Through this approach, the study is expected to enrich understanding, while opening up new discussion about the importance of inclusive attitude and social awareness of human diversity.

The intention of this research is to examine how individuals with disabilities are represented in the global context, as shown in the novel entitled "*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*". Besides from that, the purpose of this research is to examine the role of symbols in presenting the concept of enduring life as shown in the novel. Furthermore, the research aims to reveal the relationship between the social position of disabled people and challenges of living as depicted in the novel, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between disability, symbolism, and the concept of survival in a novel. Through this analysis, the study contributes to literary and disability studies by offering critical insight into how narratives shape societal perceptions of disability and resilience.

METHODOLOGY

This research was applied using a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of describing and analyzing the survival symbols of individuals with disabilities in the novel "*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*". Qualitative research method is one of the approaches used to describe, explore, and understand the meaning constructed by individuals or groups in response to social or human personalities (Creswell, 2013) According to (Waruwu, 2024) the qualitative approach aims to describe phenomena, perceptions, and behavior by presenting factually based on field findings. This method enables researchers to investigate the symbolic significance in the text thoroughly and within context. The theory used as the basis of this research is the semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes. This theory is used to analyze the meaning and symbols contained in the novel. The word semiotic comes from Greek which means sign. So, it can be concluded that semiotics is an approach used to study and understand the meaning of a sign (Fitriah et al., 2023) In semiotic studies, there are several important concepts, such as denotation which refers to the literal meaning of a sign, and connotation which refers to conceptual meaning or interpretation based on personal views (Antonia, 2023) While at the myth stage, a sign that initially carries connotative meaning is reinterpreted as a new sign, and over time, its connotation becomes accepted as denotation, thus creating a myth (Rais & Fadillah, 2025) This research aims to analyze the symbols of survival of disabilities in the novel "*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*" by Robert Dugoni.

The data source in this study is the novel "*The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*", which is analyzed through dialogue and narrative excerpts relevant to the issue of disability, discrimination, and the main character's life struggle and survival. Data collection techniques are carried out through intensive reading of the text to identify the symbols that appear, followed by recording and classification based on the context behind it. Furthermore, the symbols were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to reveal denotation,

connotation, and myth. the analysis is done by identifying signs that represent the struggle and survival of a person with a disability, then interpreting the meaning to reveal the ideology and values contained in the novel.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

POSITION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE GLOBAL ERA AS REFLECTED IN THE NOVEL

The findings of this study were obtained through an analysis of the dialog and narrative contained in the novel *"The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell"* by Robert Dugoni. Through the depiction of the main character, Samuel Hill, who was born with ocular albinism. This novel presents a variety of social responses to disability. The narrative and dialogue between characters reflect how disability in society in the global era.

Previous studies, such as Ruslan (2024), focused on the psychological trauma of Samuel Hill, particularly the symptoms of PTSD caused by discrimination and bullying, while Aulia (2022) examined the process of self-acceptance of the main character through a developmental psychology lens. Both studies emphasized the psychological impact and coping mechanism of the protagonist but did not address how symbolic representations in the novel construct meaning around disability. In contrast, this study highlights how social discrimination, stigma, and empowerment are reflected through symbolic elements that go beyond psychological interpretation. This study extends the analysis to how those struggles are externalized and symbolized in the narrative as part of broader social discourse.

First, the condition of disability in the novel depicts a social identity that is discriminated or marginalized. Samuel, who faces different treatment and stigma from his surroundings, reflects how society views and treats people with disabilities as a marginalized group

"I believe it will be difficult for your son to fit in, to make friends." My mother started to speak, and Sister Beatrice added, "The children refer to him as 'Sam Hell'." (p.23)

The quote above describes how Sister Beatrice revealed to Samuel's mother that it was difficult for Samuel to make a new friend because of his physical differences. Samuel's red eyes made him the target of ridicule and stigma from his friends who called him *"Sam Hell"* while his real name was Samuel Hill. The word *"hell"* can be interpreted as a red color like his eyes. This statement proves that the social discrimination Samuel has experienced since childhood due to his physical condition causes fear of being alienated or marginalized. This attitude shows how physical differences are often used as an excuse to exclude and discriminate against people with disabilities.

Secondly, disability is portrayed through society's view of Samuel's condition as a curse. This is a negative reaction that Samuel has received since childhood, which illustrates how disability is still perceived as a burden or bad luck.

Bateman's eyes widened, then the corners of his mouth slanted upward. "Well, well. What do we have here, Devil Boy?" He approached. "You taking a shit with your pants on?" (p.65)

The excerpt above is David Bateman's dialogue where he says *"Devil Boy"* to Samuel as a form of mockery of Samuel's red eye condition due to ocular albinism. This remark reflects the perception that disability is a curse or a bad luck charm. The nickname is not only personally demeaning but also shows how society associates physical differences with mystical or negative things. This view reinforces social stigma and creates distance between people with disabilities and their surroundings.

Third, disability is positioned as a hidden gift. Samuel's life experiences shaped his survival and strong self-confidence. His physical differences became a source of strength that shaped his character and direction in life.

"I introduced myself and said I was the ophthalmologist to whom she had referred Trina Crouch and that I had seen Daniela that afternoon."

The quote above occurs when Samuel introduces himself as an ophthalmologist to his patient's mother. This moment shows how Samuel's disability experience does not prevent him from playing an active role and contributing to his profession. Instead, his ocular albinism condition has shaped his deep sensitivity and perseverance in understanding patients and the world around him. Disability, which may initially be seen as a limitation, in Samuel's life journey has developed into a hidden gift that strengthens his character and makes him an inspiring and dedicated person.

Therefore, compared to previous studies that mainly emphasized trauma and self-acceptance, this study contributes by examining the symbolic dimension of survival and resilience in the novel. This approach reveals how disability is represented as both a marginalized identity and a source of empowerment, which provides new insight into the portrayal of individuals with disabilities in the global era.

ALBINO AS A SURVIVAL SYMBOL OF DISABILITIES IN THE NOVEL

Albino is portrayed as a survival symbol of disabilities in the novel. Through the figure of Samuel Hill, the novel shows determination and hope to achieve recognition and equality. The novel is analyzed using the semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes. This theory includes three levels of meaning, such as denotation, connotation, and myth. This approach is used to reveal the hidden meanings behind the symbol in the novel.

RED EYES

"You denied Samuel admission because he was born with red eyes, a condition over which he has no control." (p.23)

At the denotation, the term "*red eyes*" in the phrase above refers towards the medical condition faced by individuals with ocular albinism. In connotation, "*red eyes*" represent physical distinctions that lead to social shame, rejection, and discrimination. While myths, "*red eyes*" build on the idea that disability is perceived as separate from social norms. This notion is supported by societal institutions like schools, which reject Samuel's presence because he is perceived as different.

BLACK CROW

"That night I dreamed of a black crow with a sharp beak pecking at my eyes." (p.34)

"Sister Beatrice peered down at me with the same black-eyes, menacing glare of the crow in my nightmare just before its sharp beak pecked at me." (p.43)

At the denotation, the first dialogue portrays Samuel's dream of a black crow pecking his eyes, while the following dialogue describes the figure of Sister Beatrice who seems at the crow in his dream. In connotation, the black crow and its sharp beak represent a threat, danger, or a bad omen. While Sister Beatrice is directly identified with the symbol due to her stare. This indicates that Sister Beatrice is the true representation of fear in dreams. In the myth, black crows are frequently associated with death, witchcraft, or dark powers in popular culture and

tradition. As a result, these associations build a subliminal narrative in which Sister Beatrice is not just an ordinary character, but a representation of dark power, oppression, or a psychological threat that intimidates Samuel.

CONTACT LENSES

"I'm the kid with the red eyes. I wear brown contact lenses." (p.106)

The denotation of contact lenses is an optical device worn on the eyes to improve vision or change eye color. In connotation, the use of contact lenses is Samuel's attempt to hide his inherent differences to gain social acceptance. Contact lenses are not simply a visual assistance, but an identity simulacrum camouflaged as an act of compromise against the expectations of societal normality. In myth, Samuel's act of using contact lenses reflects the modern myth of normality instilled by global society that differences must be disguised to be accepted.

BOOK "THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO"

"I picked up The Count of Monte Cristo from my nightstand. Reading it had been tough going, the words harder to pronounce than those in my schoolbooks, but I had gotten the hang of it about halfway through. I aside my ice cream, thinking about Edmond Dantes and the sufferings he'd endured," (p.92)

At the denotation, "*The Count of Monte Cristo*" is a classic novel about revenge and justice. However, the connotation of the book is more than just a story as it motivates Samuel to see himself as Edmond Dantes, a fellow victim of injustice. The book can also be interpreted as a symbol of the struggle and survival of someone who is learning and struggling to get through the challenges of his life. Meanwhile, the myth, "*The Count of Monte Cristo*" is proof that suffering is the path to redemption and justice.

PURPLE

"My favorite color is purple." (p.107)

The denotation of the color purple is nobility, strength, luxury, and uniqueness. In connotation, Samuel likes purple because he wants a life that reflects the color, which is strong and valuable. Meanwhile, the myth, purple is a symbol of struggle and identity resilience for marginalized groups, including people with disabilities. This color represents hope, courage, and endeavours to obtain respect and dignity in the face of social pressures that emphasize uniformity.

OPHTHALMOLOGIST

"I introduced myself and said I was the ophthalmologist to whom she had referred Trina Crouch and that I had seen Daniela that afternoon." (p.110)

At the denotation level, an eye doctor is a profession that treats and cures visual impairment. At the connotation level, the ophthalmologist depicts the struggle of Samuel, who has been discrimination against since childhood because of his red eyes which are considered different from the norms of society. Despite social rejection, he is determined to become an ophthalmologist and turn the stigma of being ostracized into a symbol of strength and hope that turns the stigma of disability into a story of success and self-acceptance so that this profession is not just a job but a representation of the struggle against discrimination and physical

limitations. Therefore, the myth of the ophthalmologist is a representation of transcending limitations and serves as a sign of hope for people who have been excluded.

HIS FATHER'S PHARMACY SHOP

"You did it, Hill. You saved your father's store." (p.279)

The denotation of a pharmacy shop is a place of business that sells medicines. In the connotation, the pharmacy shop symbolizes a very valuable family legacy as well as a big responsibility for Samuel. The shop also illustrates Samuel's personal struggle to maintain something important and meaningful in his life. While at the myth, the pharmacy shop symbolizes the struggle and success of a disabled character like Samuel who managed to face various obstacles and challenges while being able to maintain and continue his family legacy with full determination.

The analysis reveals that several key symbols such as red eyes, the black crow, contact lenses, *The Count of Monte Cristo* book, purple color, the profession of ophthalmologist illustrate how disability, often perceived negatively by society, is transformed into sources of strength, identity, and survivals. While previous studies analyzed the novel from a psychoanalytic perspective and focused on the psychological trauma of the main character, emphasizing how discrimination and bullying caused symptoms of PTSD and how recovery occurred through social support and therapy Ruslan (2024). Meanwhile, Aulia (2022) highlighted the process of self-acceptance using developmental psychology, explaining how Samuel eventually accepted his condition and gained confidence. Both studies emphasized the psychological dimension of Samuel' life journey.

Thus, the novelty of this research lies in its symbolic analysis that complements and extends previous psychological interpretations. By revealing the semiotic layers of resilience in the novel, this study not only enriches literary understanding but also emphasize how literature can reframe disability from marginalization into empowerment, especially in the context of a global society that often imposes uniformity.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE POSITION OF DISABILITY AND THEIR SURVIVAL AS DEPICTED IN THE NOVEL

In the novel, the position of disability, especially ocular albinism experienced by the main character Samuel Hill, is described as the center of social and spiritual conflicts that shape his entire life journey. Disability not only appears as a physical condition but also as a survival symbol of struggle amidst social pressure and environmental rejection.

"They call him 'the devil boy.'" (p.23)

"We are sorry to advise that your application for enrolment in the first grade at Our Lady of Mercy has been denied." Unfortunately, Our Lady of Mercy did not have enough spots for every applicant." (p.19)

Since childhood, Samuel was discriminated against because of his red eyes. He became a victim of bullying by being nicknamed "*Devil Boy*" and was denied admission to a Catholic school this shows that disability in this novel is placed in a marginal position, as an identity that is different and considered abnormal by society. However, this marginal position becomes the starting point of Samuel's struggle to find his self-esteem, identity, and meaning in life.

"After I opened Burlingame Ophthalmology and Vision Center, Broadway Pharmacy's prescriptions doubled in a month, and it sold more reading glasses and eye-care product than any

drugstore in the area, once again proving that old real estate adage—location, location, location.”
(p.58)

However, through his life journey, the disability did not only become a burden but also a starting point for the struggle to survive and build an identity. Samuel slowly turned the stigma attached to him into a source of strength. He decides to become an ophthalmologist, a profession that symbolically reclaims control over something that was once his weakness. Thus, the position of disability in this novel does not only indicate suffering, but also reflects the power to survive, make peace with oneself, and transcend the limits set by society. Disability becomes a symbol of survival, struggle, and courage in facing life's challenges in a world that often judges people only by their outward appearance.

Compared with previous studies, such as Ruslan (2024) who emphasized Samuel's psychological trauma using a psychoanalytic perspective, and Aulia (2022) who highlighted the process of self-acceptance with a developmental psychology approach, this study offers a different lens. Instead of focusing only on the psychological aspects of the character, this research examines the symbolic dimension of disability and survival by employing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This perspective shows that disability in the novel functions not only as an individual's personal struggle but also as a cultural symbol that challenges dominant narratives of abnormality in a global society. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in revealing how survival symbols embedded in the narrative provide broader insight into resilience, inclusivity, and the redefinition of disability in literature.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis of the novel *“The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell”* by Robert Dugoni, it can be concluded that disability, especially the condition of ocular albinism experienced by Samuel Hill as the main character, is described as an identity that experiences various forms of social discrimination. Since childhood, Samuel experienced rejection from the school environment, verbal abuse, and exclusion from his peers. Society's view that associates physical differences with negative things causes Samuel to grow up in a hostile environment, which shows that people with disabilities are still often positioned unfairly. However, the novel also presents Samuel's life journey as a strong form of self-transformation. He is able to face various forms of rejection and social pressure with determination. His difficult life experiences have shaped him into an empathetic, resilient, and dedicated person. Samuel's decision to become an ophthalmologist reflects an achievement that is not only professional but also emotional and symbolic because he chose to master a field that is directly related to the conditions that have made him considered different.

In addition, the novel presents several symbols that reinforce Samuel's struggle for survival, such as the red eyes, the black crow, and the book *“The Count of Monte Cristo”*. These symbols represent Samuel's life journey in facing stigma and fighting for self-recognition. Through the various challenges he faces, Samuel manages to prove that his disability is not an absolute obstacle, but rather part of the process of building a stronger character and self-identity. Overall, the novel conveys the message that people with disability deserve an equal place in society. Disability in the story is not only portrayed as suffering but also as a strength that can change the way people view differences.

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