

Symbolism and Allegory in Hannibal Lecter Novels

Sojida Samandarova¹

¹PhD, Associate Professor of English education department
Kimyo International university in Tashkent
Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Corresponding Author : Sojida Samandarova, s.samandarova@kiut.uz



Abstract—Four novels by Thomas Harris about Hannibal Lecter (“Red Dragon”, “The Silence of the Lambs”, “Hannibal” and “Hannibal Rising” can easily be considered as works of fiction which reflects genre characteristics of thriller or a crime novel. However, if analyzed deeply, it is revealed that these novels are complex texts saturated with deep symbolic layers, literary and religious allegories, and allusions to cultural history. In depicting his characters and events, Harris actively draws on imagery from the animal world, references from religion and art history, and the idea of transformation and metamorphosis. This article examines the main symbolic motifs in each novel separately, then analyzes the general allegorical threads connecting all four works: animal symbols, the idea of metamorphosis, the motif of home, the conflict between civilization and savagery, and how cannibalism itself becomes not merely physical horror but a social and philosophical allegory.

Keywords—symbol; allegory; allusion; silence; metamorphosis; motif

1. INTRODUCTION

Symbolism is not merely decorative; it functions as an interpretive key to a novel’s central concern, in our case, it is the unstable boundary between civilization and savagery, and between the human and the animal, within a single individual. Across the four novels under analysis, images of predatory animals, ritual transformation, mirrored identities, and consumption itself return again and again, each time reframed to serve a different stage of Hannibal Lecter’s development and the moral universe surrounding him. The following analysis proceeds novel by novel, tracing how each installment builds its own distinct symbolic system — from William Blake’s dragon in *Red Dragon*, to the death’s-head moth of *The Silence of the Lambs*, to the Dantean allegory of *Hannibal*, and finally to the ruined family castle of *Hannibal Rising*. After this individual treatment, the discussion turns to the allegorical threads that bind all four novels together: animal symbolism, the mirror and doubling motif, the conflict between civilization and savagery, and the way cannibalism itself evolves from physical horror into a social and philosophical allegory. Taken as a whole, this progression demonstrates that the novels’ deepest subject is not violence for its own sake, but the fragile, permeable line between refinement and savagery that runs through human nature itself.

2. “RED DRAGON”: THE BLAKE ALLEGORY AND TRANSFORMATION

The killer at the center of the first novel, Francis Dolarhyde, calls himself “the Great Red Dragon”. He says it to one of his victims Freddy Lounds: “*I am the Dragon. And you call me insane. You are privy to a great becoming, but you recognize nothing. To me, you are a slug in the sun. You are an ant in the afterbirth. It is your nature to do one thing correctly. Before me, you rightly tremble. But, fear is not what you owe me. YOU OWE ME AWE.*”[1;225] This name and image are taken from the

famous watercolor painted by the English poet and artist William Blake, “The Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Red Dragon” to illustrate the biblical *Book of Revelation*. Dolarhyde has the dragon image from that very painting tattooed onto his body, and, importantly, he eats the original painting. This act is not simple vandalism, but a symbolic act of “appropriation”: by physically consuming the work of art, he seeks to absorb the dragon’s power into himself.

Here, the theme of cannibalism takes on allegorical meaning for the first time. It is not merely a means of killing, but is interpreted as a powerless man’s desperate attempt to transform into a powerful, divine image. Dolarhyde was a child humiliated for his physical disability (a congenital cleft palate) and demeaned in his childhood; the idea of becoming a dragon expresses his desire to escape his weak “old self” and metamorphose into a mighty being. Like a butterfly emerging from its larval cocoon, he too tries to shed his “shell” and take on a new form, but this transformation is carried out through a corrupt and destructive path.

The character of the investigator Will Graham, meanwhile, carries a different kind of allegory. Because of his ability to enter the minds of killers, he himself appears as a figure balanced between light and darkness: “...To begin to understand the dragon, to hear the cold drips in his darkness, to watch the world through his red haze, Graham would have had to see things he could never see, and he would have had to fly through time”. [1;253] His psychological “mirror” relationship with Lecter and Dolarhyde lies on the fear of equating himself with evil and it shapes the novel’s central philosophical question: *how close can one get to evil in order to understand it, without losing oneself?* Graham is a man who understands monsters because some part of him recognizes their logic from within.

3. VOICE, SILENCE AND METAMORPHOSIS IN “THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS”

The central image in the second novel is the screaming of lambs at the moment of spring slaughter. It expresses the childhood trauma of the protagonist, Clarice Starling. As a child on a farm, Clarice heard the lambs being slaughtered and tried to save them, but failed. This memory defines her entire future professional life which demonstrates the desire to rescue weak and defenseless victims. In this way, the symbol of *the lamb* becomes an allegory not just for one specific event, but for innocence, powerlessness, and the feeling of being unable to save something, in general. “*Over this odd world, this half the world that’s dark now, I have to hunt a thing that lives on tears.*” [2;56] In this quote, Clarice describes the strange isolation of her gift, that is, to track a killer who feeds on others’ suffering, she must spend her waking hours immersed in a darkened version of the world, hunting something that survives on grief.

The second killer at the center of the novel, Jame Gumb (nicknamed “Buffalo Bill”), sews himself a “suit” from his victims’ skin, intending to transform himself into a woman. The “death’s-head” moth (the Death’s-head hawkmoth) kept in his house is the most famous visual symbol of the novel and film. It represents emergence from the cocoon, that is, the idea of metamorphosis. But here too, just as with Dolarhyde, the idea of transformation appears in a corrupted form: although true change should be an inner, spiritual process, Gumb tries to achieve it only in an external, physical form by “wearing” the skin of others. The moth thus becomes the tragic symbol of a false metamorphosis achieved through violence. Gumb inserts a Death’s head moth into the victim’s throat because he is fascinated by the insect’s metamorphosis, a process that he wants to undergo by becoming a woman.

Hannibal Lecter himself becomes a central figure in this novel for the first time, and his image is constructed in an interesting allegorical way: he is a being who stands behind iron bars, yet fully controls the outside world through his intellect. His cell is portrayed at times as a fragment of a modern “hell”, and at other times as an oracle’s dwelling. This oracular quality is reinforced by the manner of his speech: Lecter rarely answers Clarice’s questions directly, instead trading information for personal revelations, needling her about her class background and childhood wounds, and framing his own insight as a kind of gift that must be earned rather than simply given. He treats their sessions less like an interrogation than a ritual exchange — his famous quid-pro-quo arrangement functions almost as a sacred bargain, in which knowledge is dispensed only in proportion to

what Clarice is willing to expose of herself: *"It's strictly quid pro quo from here on out. I have to be careful doing business with you. Tell me, Clarice."* [2;116] Clarice goes to him on a kind of "pilgrimage" for information, which recalls the ancient myth and legend plot of a hero making a bargain with a wise-yet-evil power — a figure who sees further than ordinary people precisely because he stands outside the moral order that constrains them.

4. DANTE, ART AND THE MASK OF CIVILIZATION IN "HANNIBAL"

In the third novel, Harris makes the allegorical layer much more open and complex. Lecter, hiding in Florence, is depicted in close connection with the city's history, Renaissance painters (Botticelli), and, most importantly, Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy". The Italian detective Rinaldo Pazzi, who pursues Lecter, dies at his hands, and his body is hung from a window of the Palazzo Vecchio. This scene directly alludes to the depiction in Dante's "Inferno", of the punishment of a member of the traitorous Pazzi family. In this way, Lecter becomes linked to the city's historical allegory of punishment and justice: he feels himself to be an ancient "judgment-passing" force, even an intermediary of the divine justice depicted by Dante himself.

One of the novel's central allegories is the concept of "*manners*". The term itself is repeated frequently throughout the book. For Lecter, taste, art, music, and high culture are not merely an aesthetic preference, but a criterion for dividing people into the "worthy" and the "unworthy". He "eats" crude, rude, greedy people which, in his view, is presented as natural selection, even an act of moral cleansing. Barney describes it in the following way: *"Dr. Lecter had perfect manners, not stiff, but easy and elegant"*. [3;103] From this perspective, cannibalism takes on an allegorical meaning as an expression of social stratification and the theme of *"savagery beneath the mask of civilization"*: the most "cultured" person may in fact be the one who has retained the most ancient, animalistic instinct". In order to find him, Clarice Starling uses that characteristic of Lecter: *"Taste. The wine, the truffles. Taste in all things was a constant between Dr. Lecter's lives in America and Europe, between his life as a successful medical practitioner and fugitive monster. His face may have changed but his tastes did not, and he was not a man who denied himself."* [3;251]

The fate of Mason Verger is one of the novel's most brutal, yet most symbolic scenes. He was eaten by specially raised pigs. Here, the pigs serve as a symbol of greed, wasteful wealth, and immorality: Verger himself was shown, in an earlier chapter, to be an animalistically cruel man who tormented children, and now that very same "animalistic" force — a herd of starving pigs becomes his punishment. This recalls the ancient allegorical structure of justice along the lines of "what goes around comes around." The pigs were originally Verger's own instrument, which makes the irony even sharper, since Verger is ultimately destroyed by a weapon of his own making.

5. "HANNIBAL RISING": THE LECTER CASTLE, WW2 AND A LOST CHILDHOOD

In "Hannibal Rising" Thomas Harris goes back to Lecter's childhood, attempting to explain the origin of his cruelty. Here, the central symbol is the Lecter family castle, an ancient fortress in Lithuania. Before the Second world war, this castle was a symbol of safety, lineage, and order. During the war, it is destroyed, and then seized by local looters and Nazi soldiers. The castle's destruction becomes an allegory expressing the complete loss of Lecter's world and of his childhood innocence: a child who was once protected behind sturdy walls now has no protection whatsoever.

The novel's most horrifying event is Lecter's sister Mischa being eaten by feral soldiers in hopes of escaping starvation, some of her remains being fed to Hannibal. This event would be the catalyst into Hannibal's descent into serial murder and cannibalism. Here, cannibalism is shown as neither an aesthetic choice (as in the novel "Hannibal") nor a corrupted desire for metamorphosis (as in "Red Dragon" and "The Silence of the Lambs"), but as the horrifying result of the degradation and complete loss of humanity brought on by war itself. In this way, the cannibalism theme of the entire novel series takes on a

circular structure: the adult Lecter's "refined" cannibalism can, in fact, be interpreted as an aesthetic, controlled response to the crudest, most savage form of cannibalism he experienced in childhood.[7;271]

This novel also introduces another cultural allegory through the character of Lady Murasaki, the Japanese wife of Lecter's uncle. Ideas connected to the samurai code of conduct (bushido), ancestral masks, and ceremonial blades teach Lecter a lesson about "disciplined cruelty", that is, the possibility of turning rage into ritual and order. This later helps him shape, in his adult life, his method of concealing his savagery beneath the mask of "art" and "manners": *"This is where I pray for you, and I strongly recommend you pray for yourself, that you consult the spirits of your family for wisdom and strength."* [4;58]

6. GENERAL MOTIFS CONNECTING ALL FOUR NOVELS

6.1 Color and sensory symbolism

Another feature characteristic of Harris's style is the symbolic weight carried by colors and details aimed at the senses. Even in the title of "Red Dragon", the color red derives from the Blake painting, signifying blood, the sun, and divine wrath; throughout the novel, red recurs to express powerful, uncontrolled emotions like a fire within Dolarhyde's inner world. In "Hannibal", meanwhile, the contrast between Florence's rich, golden-brown Renaissance colors and America's cold, clinical, gray-white institutions (prisons, hospitals) underscores the conflict between the Old World and the New World, between art and bureaucracy. The senses of smell and taste also hold a special place: Lecter can detect people's perfumes, even the sweat of fear. This extremely refined sense of smell reveals his nature, akin to a "hunting dog", while at the same time connecting to his passion for the culinary arts, once again emphasizing the union of animal instinct and high culture within a single being. This dual sensory language — savagery on one hand, aesthetic refinement on the other manifests, to varying degrees, throughout all four novels.[9;245]

6.2 Religion and the Allegory of Sin

Beyond the direct allusions to Dante's "Inferno", the concepts of sin, punishment, and "justice" are continually revisited throughout the tetralogy. Lecter sees himself as neither an ordinary killer nor a fully demonic being, but as a kind of "judge" in his own right — and this brings his image closer to the "fallen angel" archetype found in religious allegory: a being possessed of intellect and refinement, yet entirely removed from moral norms.

6.3 Hunter and Hunted

A recurring structure across all four novels is the constant shifting of roles between hunter and prey. Will Graham hunts Dolarhyde, yet he himself has also been "hunted" by Lecter; Clarice Starling hunts Buffalo Bill, yet at the same time draws Lecter's attention to herself and eventually becomes his "prey". This constant role reversal symbolically expresses the philosophical idea that a person can be both predator and victim.

6.4 Names as Allegory

Harris also chooses his characters' names and nicknames for allegorical purposes. The nickname "Buffalo Bill" is connected to the historical figure Buffalo Bill Cody, a mass hunter of wild animals, and ironically underscores how the killer turns his victims into "hide" just like hunted game. The surname "Mason Verger" is close to the Latin word "vergere" — "to bend, to turn" — hinting at his moral degeneration and his eventual punishment "turning back" upon him. Even the name "Hannibal" itself is associated with the ancient Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, a figure who invaded Europe from the outside, yet possessed the greatest strategic mind of his era which symbolically reflects Lecter's nature as someone who "comes from outside, yet is intellectually superior." [8;700]

6.5 The Motif of Home

In each novel, the concept of “home” appears either corrupted or reinterpreted. Dolarhyde’s house is dark, filled with mirrors, transformed into a space specially adapted for watching his own reflection. Gumb’s house ends in an underground dungeon, a “well” where victims are stripped of any real sense of home. Lecter’s various “homes” (the apartment in Baltimore, the apartment in Florence, the residence in Buenos Aires at the novel’s end) are always decorated with high taste and order, expressing the illusion of “order” in his inner world — an attempt to hide inner disorder behind outer order. Only the ruined Lecter castle in “Hannibal Rising” represents, in this series, a genuine, irrecoverable loss.

6.6 Time

If the tetralogy is read from beginning to end in chronological order rather than publication order, it becomes clear that it has a circular structure. “Hannibal Rising” begins with the devastation and loss of wartime, while “Hannibal” concludes with Lecter’s relatively “peaceful”, luxurious life — as though the circle closes completely, with the loss the child experienced being “covered over” in adulthood by luxury and control. The symbolism of the seasons also plays an important role: the slaughter of the lambs in spring in “The Silence of the Lambs” links death to spring, a season traditionally symbolizing renewal and life, further intensifying the novel’s theme of “the loss of innocence.” Thus, time in the novels appears not as a linear, but as a cyclical force: trauma does not remain only in the past, but passes on as a recurring pattern to later generations, to later events.[6;102] Lecter himself, in fact, can be seen as a being who creates various forms of repeating his own trauma: he “eats” others because once, someone close to him was taken from him in that very same way.

7. CONCLUSION

Thomas Harris’s novels about Hannibal Lecter are works that rise far above the ordinary horror genre. Through symbols drawn from the animal world (the dragon, the moth, the lamb, the pig), religious and literary allegories (Dante, Blake), and recurring motifs such as metamorphosis, the mirror, and the hunt, they offer a profound analysis of humanity’s dual nature — both refined and savage. Although each novel has its own distinct symbolic system, together they form a single allegorical pattern, a story about an ancient, animalistic nature hidden beneath the mask of civilization. It is precisely this multilayered symbolism that sets Harris’s works apart from ordinary thrillers, lending them a depth worthy of serious literary analysis. In closing, it is worth emphasizing that this is precisely where the novels’ strength lies: it compels the reader not merely to watch evil, but to understand it and, to some degree, even to sympathize with it. Through this symbolic strategy, Harris fuses the traditions of classic Gothic literature with the scientific-analytical style of the modern psychological thriller. The resulting text not only inspires fear, but also leaves behind lasting questions about human nature and the boundaries of culture and savagery, which is, in fact, the essential task of any serious allegorical literature.

References

- [1] T.Harris, Red Dragon. London: Arrow, 1993, pp.225-253.
- [2] T.Harris, The Silence of the Lambs. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988, pp.56-116.
- [3] T.Harris, Hannibal. New York: Dell, 2000, pp. 103-251.
- [4] T.Harris, Hannibal Rising. New York: Dell, 2007, pp.58-60.
- [5] S.Samandarova. (2025). *Artistic psychologism in Thomas Harris's Works (Tomas Harris asarlarida qahramon badiiy psixologizmi)* (UDC: 821.111 (73).09-32) [Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, Uzbekistan State World Languages University] pp.143 <https://library.ziynet.uz/ru/book/136631>

-
- [6] S. Samandarova, and D.Ruzmatova. "Time and Space as Compositional Elements in Thomas Harris's Psychological Thrillers." *Philology Matters*, vol. 47, no. 4, 25 Dec. 2023, pp. 100–117. <https://philmatt.uzswlu.uz/article/263>
- [7] S.Samandarova, (2025) Archetypal Duality of the Psychiatrist-Destroyer in Psychological Thrillers: Hermeneutic Inquiry Into the Silent Patient and the Silence of the Lambs. ISSN: 2187-4751 – The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2025: Official Conference Proceedings (pp. 269-274) <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2187-4751.2025.22>
- [8] S.Samandarova. From Text to Context: Analyzing Idiomatic Expressions in Psychological Thrillers Through Corpus-Based Study Among Law Students in Uzbekistan Higher Education. ISSN: 2188-1162 The European Conference on Education 2024: Official Conference Proceedings (pp. 699-704) <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-1162.2024.55>
- [9] Samandarova, S. F. (2024). *Psychological thriller genre and its major characteristics*. International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies (IJPSAT), 43(2), pp.244–248. <http://dx.doi.org/10.52155/ijpsat.v43.2.6107>