

Devi Mulyani

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A Semiotic Analysis of the Poem “These Little Ones” by Edith Nesbit

Devi Mulyani^{1*}, Yolanda²

^{1,2} Program Studi, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Indoensia

Email: mulyadevi@yahoo.com

*Devi Mulyani

Abstract. *This study aims to uncover the meaning of the poem “These Little Ones” by Edith Nesbit through Michael Riffaterre’s semiotic approach. The research data consist of the poem as a complete text, which is analysed comprehensively. Data were collected through intensive reading, while data analysis was conducted by applying heuristic and hermeneutic reading stages, followed by the identification of the matrix, models, and variants. The findings reveal that the poem is structured as a dialogue between humans and God concerning a divine trust manifested in material life and children. This dialogue presents a criticism of human failure to care for children, despite humans’ success in managing material life. The matrix of the poem is divine trust, referring to God’s trust in humans that must be accounted for. This matrix develops into several models, namely a garden symbolising human material life, flowers symbolising the material aspects of life as well as love and affection, and a child symbolising God’s greatest trust in humans. These models are further expressed through several variants, namely a well-maintained garden representing humans’ success in managing material life, flowers in two seasons representing the material aspects of human life, a neglected child representing human negligence towards children, and lost flowers representing children’s loss of love and affection.*

Keywords: *Semiotic Analysis; Semiotics of Poetry; Indirection; Hypogram; Heuristic and Hermeneutic Reading.*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap makna puisi “These Little Ones” karya Edith Nesbit melalui pendekatan semiotik Michael Riffaterre. Data penelitian terdiri dari puisi sebagai teks lengkap, yang dianalisis secara komprehensif. Data dikumpulkan melalui pembacaan intensif, sedangkan analisis data dilakukan dengan menerapkan tahapan pembacaan heuristik dan hermeneutik, diikuti dengan identifikasi matriks, model, dan varian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa puisi tersebut terstruktur sebagai dialog antara manusia dan Tuhan mengenai kepercayaan ilahi yang termanifestasi dalam kehidupan materi dan anak-anak. Dialog ini menyajikan kritik terhadap kegagalan manusia dalam merawat anak-anak, meskipun manusia berhasil mengelola kehidupan materi. Matriks puisi tersebut adalah kepercayaan ilahi, yang merujuk pada kepercayaan Tuhan kepada manusia yang harus dipertanggungjawabkan. Matriks ini berkembang menjadi beberapa model, yaitu taman yang melambangkan kehidupan materi manusia, bunga yang melambangkan aspek materi kehidupan serta cinta dan kasih sayang, dan seorang anak yang melambangkan kepercayaan terbesar Tuhan kepada manusia. Model-model ini selanjutnya diungkapkan melalui beberapa varian, yaitu taman yang terawat baik yang mewakili keberhasilan manusia dalam mengelola kehidupan materi, bunga di dua musim yang mewakili aspek materi kehidupan manusia, anak yang terlantar yang mewakili kelalaian manusia terhadap anak-anak, dan bunga yang hilang yang mewakili hilangnya cinta dan kasih sayang anak-anak.

Kata kunci: Analisis Semiotik; Semiotika Puisi; Indireksi; Hipogram; Pembacaan Heuristik dan Hermeneutik.

1. BACKGROUND

Poetry is a literary work comprising a series of aesthetic words that articulate the poet's profound emotions pertaining to their inner self, life, or significant events. Setiawan and Andayani (2019:4) define poetry as "a form of literary work that utilises beautiful language and is rich in meaning." Moreover, Dewi (2025:5) asserts that "poetry is a literary genre that prioritises linguistic aspects, necessitating a process of word selection".

A Semiotic Analysis of the Poem "These Little Ones" by Edith Nesbit

Yusra (2024:2) further defines poetry as "a literary work containing the poet's responses and opinions on various matters". In accordance with this perspective, poetry is "a form of literary work derived from the poet's expression and emotions, employing language that adheres to rhythm, metre, rhyme, and stanzaic structure, and is imbued with meaning" (Team Sastra Cemerlang, 2018:37). Based on these definitions, it can be inferred that poetry is a literary work that employs aesthetic language to convey thoughts, emotions, and opinions through imaginative expressions and astute word choices.

As the oldest literary work, poetry possesses a dual structure, comprising both a physical and an inner (or non-physical) structure. This distinction is explained by Ardika (2020: 3-6), as illustrated in the table below.

Table 1. Elements of Poetry

Elements of Poetry	
Physical Structure	Inner Structure
1. Typography The form or visual layout of the poem.	1. Meaning The meaning of the poem in each word, line, and in the poem as a whole.
2. Diction The choice of words.	2. Feeling The poet's attitude toward the main issue presented in the poem.
3. Figurative Language The use of language that creates particular connotations.	3. Tone The poet's attitude toward the reader.
4. Concrete Words The use of words that are easy to understand.	4. Message The message the poet intends to convey through the poem.
5. Rhyme The similarity of sounds.	
6. Imagery The arrangement of words that expresses sensory experiences.	

By artfully combining and applying essential poetic elements, poetry has the potential to become more engaging and philosophical, thereby effectively conveying a message to readers. This, in turn, fosters a deeper connection and understanding between the poet's vision and those who engage with their work.

Readers of literary works typically appreciate poetry by examining its meaning. Satinem and Juwati (2023:3) suggest that "the study of literary appreciation is the result of readers' efforts to seek and discover the intrinsic value of literary works through systematic understanding and interpretation expressed in written form". Gasong (2019:2) argues that "through reading and contemplating literary works, one can gain insight into the life of a society within a specific temporal context".

2

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4

Next, semiotics is recognised as the study of signs in communicating meaning. Raharjo and Nugraha (2022:2) assert that the term semiotics is derived from the Greek word 'semeion', meaning 'sign'. Interestingly, Salamah (2024:210) suggests that "semiotics is a language that reflects aesthetic, systematic, and pluralistic literary language when read by readers to provide an understanding of literary texts". According to Riffaterre (as cited in Ratih, 2016:5), there are four key aspects underlying the understanding of poetic meaning, namely: "the indirection of poetic expression, heuristic and hermeneutic (or retroactive) reading, the matrix, model, variants, and the hypogram". Riffaterre's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding poetry through these interrelated elements, enabling readers to uncover the complex layers of meaning within poetic texts.

Several studies have applied semiotic approaches to uncover implicit meanings in literary works, particularly poetry. The first study, conducted by Harfi et al. (2020), is entitled "Semiotic Analysis in the Poem 'Aku Ingin' by Sapardi Djoko Damono". The purpose of this study is to analyse the semiotic structure of the poem and uncover its implied meaning through semiotic signs. Employing semiotic analysis and a qualitative approach, this study reveals that Sapardi Djoko Damono's poem "Aku Ingin" contains meaningful semiotic symbols pertaining to love, sacrifice, and the desire to create a deep connection with a loved one.

A subsequent study, conducted by Widiastuti (2022), is entitled "Semiotic Analysis of Taufik Ismail's Poem 'Karangan Bunga'". This study aims to analyse the meaning, themes, and values in the poem through a semiotic approach. The analysis reveals that the poem conveys themes of struggle, passion, and heroism, with moral values emphasising the importance of appreciating and respecting heroes' sacrifices. Furthermore, the poem also depicts feelings of sadness and grief, symbolised by the flower arrangement as a sign of respect.

Edith Nesbit is an English novelist and poet whose works frequently engage with moral and social criticism. Her poems often present themes and motifs that reflect social realities, thereby offering insights into human values and responsibilities. One of her poems, "*These Little Ones*", explores the role of adults in life, particularly their responsibility to protect and care for children. In this poem, children are represented as symbols divine gifts, while adults function as embodiments of responsibility and moral

obligation. Therefore, this study aims to interpret the meaning of "These Little Ones" through heuristic and hermeneutic reading and to identify the matrix, model, and variants within the poem.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1. Introduction to Semiotic Theory in Poetry

Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, provides a robust framework for analyzing how poetry conveys meaning beyond its literal expressions. In literary analysis, semiotic approaches examine how signs within a text whether words, symbols, or structural elements function to produce significance. Poetry, as a distinctive form of literary expression, often employs indirect language, metaphor, and ambiguity to communicate meanings that cannot be reduced to simple mimesis or representation of reality. This theoretical foundation is essential for understanding the layered meanings in Edith Nesbit's poem "These Little Ones."

2.2. Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics of Poetry

Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) offers the most comprehensive theoretical model for analyzing poetic meaning, particularly useful for examining Nesbit's work. Riffaterre argues that poetry works not through mimesis—the literary representation of reality but through a semiotic process of displacement and transformation. His framework provides several key concepts essential for analyzing "These Little Ones."

2.2.1. The Distinction Between Meaning and Significance

Riffaterre establishes a crucial distinction between "meaning" (the literal, referential content of a poem) and "significance" (the deeper, poetic meaning that emerges through the reader's engagement with the text). In the first reading, or heuristic reading, the reader apprehends the poem's surface meaning using ordinary linguistic competence. However, during this reading, the reader encounters difficulties "ungrammaticalities" or unusual uses of language that signal the presence of deeper meaning. A second reading, the hermeneutic reading, allows the reader to grasp the poem's true significance.

2

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1

This approach directly applies to Nesbit's poem, which opens with a direct address from God to the speaker: "'What of the garden I gave?' / God said to me" (lines 1-2). The surface meaning presents a dialogue with the divine, but the significance the poem's commentary on human responsibility, childhood, and spiritual accountability emerges through careful semiotic analysis.

2.2.2. Indirection as the Genesis of Poetry

Riffaterre posits that "a poem says one thing and means another". This principle of indirection can take three forms:

- a. **Displacement:** A sign shifts from one meaning to another, as in metaphor and metonymy
- b. **Distortion:** Ambiguity, contradiction, or nonsense creates semantic tension
- c. **Creation of Meaning:** New signification emerges that makes sense only within the poem's specific context

In "These Little Ones," Nesbit employs displacement through the extended metaphor of the garden as a symbol for human stewardship and divine gift. The poem transforms a simple question about a garden into a meditation on human responsibility and the failure to properly nurture what has been entrusted.

2.2.3. The Hypogram Concept

3

A central term in Riffaterre's theory is the hypogram a preexistent word group, cliché, stereotype, epithet, or even another literary work from which poeticity is derived. The hypogram mediates between ordinary language and the poem's significance, functioning as a hidden sign that organizes the text's meaning.

For Nesbit's poem, potential hypograms include:

- a. **Biblical and religious discourse:** The dialogue with God echoes scriptural patterns of divine questioning, reminiscent of the Garden of Eden narrative or prophetic literature
- b. **The pastoral tradition:** The garden imagery draws on the longstanding poetic tradition of the garden as a symbol of innocence, cultivation, and human stewardship

- c. **Victorian sentimental literature:** The theme of children and divine accountability reflects Victorian concerns about childhood, morality, and spiritual responsibility

2.2.4. Matrix, Model, and Variants

Riffaterre's framework also includes the concepts of matrix, model, and variants:

- a. The matrix is the underlying structural principle or core idea of the poem, which can be expressed in a single sentence or even a word .
- b. The model represents how the matrix is actualized in the poem
- c. Variants are the diverse expressions words, phrases, sentences that point toward the matrix

These concepts allow the analyst to trace how surface elements in the poem connect to deeper structural meanings. In "These Little Ones," the matrix might be understood as the concept of "failed stewardship" or "divine accountability." Variants would include the garden imagery, the questions posed by God, and the speaker's responses.

2.3. Reading Strategies in Semiotic Analysis

Riffaterre's theory distinguishes two critical reading approaches :

2.3.1 Heuristic Reading

This first reading involves the reader's ordinary linguistic competence and yields the literal, referential meaning of the text. The reader encounters "ungrammaticalities"—unusual language, metaphor, or apparent contradictions—that disrupt surface comprehension .

In "These Little Ones," the heuristic reading reveals a dialogue between God and a speaker, centered on a garden that appears neglected. The poem asks what has become of this divine gift.

2.3.2 Hermeneutic Reading

The second, hermeneutic reading involves interpreting these ungrammaticalities to arrive at the poem's deeper significance . The reader recognizes that the "garden" is not merely a physical garden but a metaphor for something entrusted to human care—possibly children, creation, or life itself. The poem's title, "These Little Ones," signals the true subject: those who are vulnerable, dependent, and in need of protection.

2.3. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Approach

While Riffaterre's model is particularly suited for this analysis, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach provides complementary insights. Barthes' framework identifies five codes that operate in literary texts:

- a. **Hermeneutic code:** Enigmas and questions that drive interpretation
- b. **Semantic code:** Connotative meanings attached to elements in the text
- c. **Symbolic code:** Binary oppositions and symbolic meanings
- d. **Proairetic (action) code:** Actions and events within the narrative
- e. **Cultural/referential code:** References to cultural knowledge and shared assumptions

Applying Barthes' model to "These Little Ones" reveals:

- a. **Hermeneutic code:** The opening question "'What of the garden I gave?'" establishes an enigma that drives the reader to seek understanding
- b. **Semantic code:** Words like "garden," "little ones," and "tender" carry rich connotative meanings related to care, vulnerability, and protection
- c. **Symbolic code:** The opposition between the ideal (what the garden should be) and the actual (what it has become) creates symbolic tension
- d. **Cultural code:** The poem draws on Victorian cultural understandings of childhood, divine providence, and human responsibility

2.4. Application to "These Little Ones" by Edith Nesbit

2.4.1. Historical and Literary Context

Edith Nesbit (1858-1916) wrote during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, a time of significant social and literary transition. Her work often challenged conventional Victorian assumptions while employing traditional forms and imagery. Research on Nesbit's narrative methods indicates that she "encourages her child readers (if not always her child characters) to employ complex critical reading skills". This pedagogical dimension is relevant to analyzing "These Little Ones," which functions as both a cautionary tale and a call to moral reflection.

2.4.2. The Dialogue with God

The poem's opening lines establish a direct dialogue between the human speaker and God:

"What of the garden I gave?"
God said to me;"

(lines 1-2)

This divine questioning creates a semiotic frame for the entire poem. The rhetorical question implies judgment and accountability, establishing a tone of moral inquiry.

2.4.3. The Garden as Hypogram

The garden functions as the central hypogram in Nesbit's poem. As a preexistent symbol cluster, the garden carries multiple layers of meaning:

- a. **Biblical Garden of Eden:** A place of innocence, original blessing, and human responsibility
- b. **Cultivated space:** Human effort and stewardship
- c. **Victorian garden:** A symbol of domestic virtue, order, and moral cultivation

Nesbit transforms this hypogram by using it to represent human responsibility for "these little ones" children or vulnerable beings entrusted to human care.

2.4.4. Thematic Indirection

The poem says one thing (it appears to ask about a garden) and means another (it queries human responsibility for children). Nesbit employs indirection to create a more profound and less didactic effect than would be achieved through direct statement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method to thoroughly examine the data. This method is chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the semiotics in Edith Nesbit's poem "These Little Ones". According to Rukin (2020: 6), qualitative research is descriptive and typically involves inductive analysis. This approach is used to explore the poem's meaning through Michael Riffaterre's semiotic framework.

The data of this study are derived from the poem "These Little Ones" by the British poet Edith Nesbit, which consists of four stanzas, each comprising eight lines. This study employs the researcher as the primary research instrument, supported by

analysis tables. These tables consist of a combined heuristic–hermeneutic reading table and a matrix model variants analysis table.

The steps of data collection and analysis techniques in this study began with determining the text of the poem "These Little Ones" by the English poet Edith Nesbit as the main data source. Next, the researcher read the poem text thoroughly and repeatedly to gain an initial understanding of the content and structure of the poem. The next stage was a heuristic reading of each line of the poem to understand the literal meaning based on linguistic rules, accompanied by noting words, phrases, clauses or sentences containing typical diction, imagery, figures of speech, and symbols as research data. After that, the researcher conducted a hermeneutic reading by interpreting symbols and figurative language and connecting the poetic elements contained in the poem. Based on the results of the hermeneutic reading, the researcher determined the matrix as the core meaning underlying the entire poem, then established the model as the main symbolic representation that embodied the matrix in the poetic text, and identified variants in the form of other symbolic forms scattered throughout the poem and supporting the main model. The data that had been obtained were then classified based on their relationship to the matrix, model, and variants, until finally the researcher drew a conclusion regarding the overall meaning of the poem based on the relationship between the matrix, model, and variants in accordance with Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Heuristic and Hermeneutic Reading

THESE LITTLE ONES

"WHAT of the garden I gave?"

God said to me;

"Hast thou been diligent to foster and save

The life of flower and tree?

How have the roses thriven,

The lilies I have given,

The pretty scented miracles that Spring

And Summer come to bring?

"My garden is fair and dear,"

I said to God;

"From thorns and nettles I have kept it clear.

Green-trimmed its sod.

The rose is red and bright,

The lily a live delight;

I have not lost a flower of all the flowers

That blessed my hours."

A Semiotic Analysis of the Poem "These Little Ones" by Edith Nesbit

"What of the child I gave?"
 God said to me;
 "The little, little one I died to save
 And gave in trust to thee?
 How have the flowers grown
 That in its soul were sown,
 The lovely living miracles of youth
 And hope and joy and truth?"

"The child's face is all white,"
 I said to God;
 "It cries for cold and hunger in the night:
 Its little feet have trod
 The pavement muddy and cold.
 It has no flowers to hold,
 And in its soul the flowers you set are dead."
 "Thou fool!" God said.

(Nesbit, 1999:38)

Table 2. Heuristic and Hermeneutic Reading Analysis

Stanza/Line	Word / Phrase / Clause / Sentence	Heuristic Meaning	Hermeneutic (Interpretation)	Meaning
1/1	WHAT of the garden I gave?"	God inquires about the condition of the garden He had given to the poet.	God enquires about the condition of the material life He has entrusted to them.	
1/2	God said to me;	This line emphasises that the question comes directly from God.	This line emphasises that evaluation comes directly from God.	
1/3-4	"Hast thou been diligent to foster and save The life of flower and tree?"	God inquires whether the poet has taken good care of the flowers and trees.	Flowers and trees symbolise the material aspects of the material life that require preservation for sustenance.	
1/5-6	How have the roses thriven, The lilies I have given,	God enquires about the state of roses and lilies.	Roses signify love, while lilies represent purity.	
1/7-8	The pretty scented miracles that Spring And Summer come to bring?	This line refers to the fragrant and beautiful wonders of spring and summer.	It indicates that God's gifts possess inherent virtues within the cycle of material life.	
2/1	"My garden is fair and dear,"	The poet states that her garden is beautiful and precious.	This line highlights humans' sense of pride in successfully maintaining their material life.	
2/2	I said to God;	This marks the poet's answer to God.	This symbolises humans' confidence in maintaining their trust in God.	

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2/3	<i>"From thorns and nettles I have kept it clear.</i>	The poet keeps the garden clear of thorns and nettles.	Humans overcome difficulties and obstacles in their material life .
2/4	<i>Green-trimmed its sod.</i>	The poet cuts the grass neatly.	Humans arrange their material life neatly.
2/5-6	<i>The rose is red and bright, The lily a live delight;</i>	The poet describes the rose as bright and the lily as 'beautiful'.	This represents humans' success in maintaining the beauty and integrity of their material life.
2/7-8	<i>I have not lost a flower of all the flowers That blessed my hours."</i>	None of the flowers in the garden is lost, and the poet feels blessed by their presence.	The positive aspects of human material life are well preserved, and humans derive satisfaction from their efforts to maintain them.
3/1	<i>"What of the child I gave?"</i>	God enquires about the child's condition.	Children represent God's greatest trust in humans.
3/2	<i>God said to me;</i>	This confirms that the question is directed by God to the poet.	It emphasises the importance of human responsibility.
3/3-4	<i>"The little, little one I died to save And gave in trust to thee?"</i>	The child is saved by God and entrusted to the poet.	God emphasises that the future generations given to humans are very important. The child represents a manifestation of God's trust in humans, symbolising all children.
3/5-8	<i>How have the flowers grown That in its soul were sown, The lovely living miracles of youth And hope and joy and truth?"</i>	God's question concerns the "flowers" planted in the soul of a young person, who is described as being full of wonder, hope, joy, and truth.	God inquires of humans for explanation and accountability regarding how they raise children as future generations, who possess potential from a young age and have a future full of happiness, joy, and honesty.
4/1	<i>"The child's face is all white,"</i>	In her response, the poet states that the child's face is now white.	<i>This response reveals that the future generations God asked about are not properly cared for.</i>
4/2	<i>I said to God;</i>	The poet responds to the question from God.	That is humans' answer to their failures.
4/3-5	<i>It cries for cold and hunger in the night: Its little feet have trod The pavement muddy and cold.</i>	The child's condition is very sad; he is crying and hungry, and his little feet are touching the	Humans neglect children's basic needs. They are left alone and neglected. They also live on the streets without protection. This is due to the failure of humans as adults to fulfil their responsibilities as guardians of children.

A Semiotic Analysis of the Poem "These Little Ones" by Edith Nesbit

		muddy and cold pavement.	
4//6-7	<i>It has no flowers to hold, And in its soul the flowers you set are dead.</i>	There are no flowers to hold, and the flowers planted in the child's heart have withered.	Children lose love. The love that humans should have given to children as future generations has disappeared.
4/8	<i>"Thou fool!" God said</i>	God considers the poet foolish.	This constitutes a moral criticism of humanity's failure to responsibly fulfil divine mandates.

Overall, the following section presents a heuristic reading of the poem "These Little Ones" by Edith Nesbit. The title phrase represents an idiomatic expression referring to children or young individuals. According to the Cambridge Online Dictionary, 'little' denotes youth, while 'ones' refers to a person or thing. The title initially appears to refer to two entities: a child or children, and objects. However, at the end of the analysis, it is revealed that 'ones' refers to children and their potential.

Heuristically, the poem depicts a dialogue between a poet and God concerning a garden that has been entrusted to her. The garden contains flowers and trees, including roses and lilies, which are described as beautiful in spring and summer. The poet confidently states that she has taken good care of the garden: thorns and nettles have been removed, the grass is neatly trimmed, and the flowers are presented as a source of delight. God then asks again about the child He has entrusted to her, along with the "flowers" planted within the child. The child is portrayed as a young person filled with wonder, hope, joy, and truth. However, the poet's response regarding the child reveals a sorrowful condition: the child is crying and hungry, his small feet touching the muddy and cold sidewalk. There are no flowers left to hold, and the flowers planted in the child's soul have withered. At the end of the poem, God judges the poet's response as foolish.

Hermeneutically, the poem presents a criticism of human negligence in caring for children, who symbolically represent the future generation. Humans prioritise material life, while their responsibility toward children, portrayed as God's greatest trust, is neglected. This criticism highlights the failure of those entrusted with the care of children to fulfil their basic needs. The poem portrays children who are deprived of proper care

and protection, indicating a broader failure to nurture the innate potential embodied within them. Although only one child appears in the poem, this figure symbolically represents all children whose potential remains undeveloped due to a lack of affection and responsibility.

4.2. The Matrix, Model, and Variants

The matrix, models, and variants of the poem “These Little Ones” are explained in the table below.

Table 3. The Matrix, Model, and Variants

Matrix	Divine Trust	The trust given by God to humans that must be accounted for.
Models	Garden	Human material life entrusted by God.
	Flowers	Material aspects of life as well as love and affection.
	A child	God’s greatest trust for humans.
Variants	A well-maintained garden	Humans’ success in managing material life.
	Flowers in two seasons	The material aspects of human life.
	A neglected child	Human negligence toward children.
	Lost flowers	Children losing love and affection.

5. CONCLUSION

This poem depicts a dialogue between humans and God concerning a divine trust given to humans, which serves as a criticism of those who succeed in managing material life but fail to care for children representing the future generation. The matrix of the poem is divine trust, referring to God’s trust in humans that must be accounted for. This matrix develops through the models of the garden, flowers, and a child. The garden symbolises human material life, flowers symbolise the material aspects of life as well as love and affection, and the child symbolises God’s greatest trust in humans. These models are further expressed through several variants, namely a well-maintained garden, flowers in two seasons, a neglected child, and lost flowers. Overall, this study confirms that Michael Riffaterre’s semiotic approach effectively reveals the poem’s implicit meaning.

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