
Nora's Process of Self-acceptance Through Narrative Technique in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the use of showing and telling narrative techniques in the novel *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig. The researcher focuses on the main character in the novel, especially in describing the psychological changes of Nora Seed's character through the guidance of Mrs. Elm. The main problem in this research is: which narrative technique is more dominantly used between showing and telling in describing the transformation process of Nora's character. The theory used is narrative with a focus on the strategy of suffering in fictional prose. The research method is qualitative with a text analysis approach, where data is collected through close reading and classified based on the category of showing or telling. The results show that the telling technique is more dominant in showing the changes in Nora's characterization through direct interaction with Mrs. Elm and her alternative life experiences. Thus, the telling technique plays a more important role in shaping Nora's characterization in the process of self-acceptance.

INTRODUCTION

In literary works, narrative techniques are an important aspect in determining how readers can understand character development and plot progression. The narrative techniques that used in this study are *showing* and *telling*. According to Noble (2013), the *showing* technique describes details and information in a broader context, where the writer describes an object with a broad description so that readers can feel the situation being described. Meanwhile, the *telling* technique takes details and information in a smaller space on the page, which means that the writer directly shows a particular object without describing it so that readers immediately understand the writer's intention. In his book, Noble (2013) emphasizes that the principle of “show, don’t tell” is a classic rule in creative writing because through *showing*, the writer can describe more clearly what is happening so that it can engage the reader’s emotions more deeply. In literary works, the balance between the use of *showing* and *telling* techniques is very important to make the reader understand the storyline more deeply but not boringly.

The literary work as the main object in this study is Matt Haig’s novel entitled *The Midnight Library*. This novel is very interesting to study, telling the story of Nora Seed who decides to end her life because she feels useless. Between life and death, Nora Seed meets Mrs. Elm, who is the keeper of the library she used to visit often. Mrs. Elm guides Nora to explore various alternative lives. From these various journeys, how does Mrs. Elm’s character play a role in shaping Nora Seed’s characterization for the process of self-acceptance? Nora’s decision to accept herself is made through a series of journeys of other life experiences, interactions, and dialogues that can be narratively examined from the perspective of the dominance of showing or telling. The main issue in this study is which technique, *showing* or *telling*, is more dominant in Matt Haig’s novel *The Midnight Library*. The focus of this study is which technique, *showing* or *telling*, is more dominant in describing the process of Nora Seed's character transformation.

The significance of this study lies in how narrative technique helps readers understand the character of Nora Seed, who is experiencing an existential crisis, and what role it plays in building Nora Seed's characterization in the process of *self-acceptance*. Narrative techniques not only make the storyline more beautiful, but also influence how the moral message in the story is received by readers. With a primary focus on examining whether the author uses more *showing* or *telling* techniques, this study provides a broader

picture of how effective these techniques are in describing the feelings and characterization of the main character in the process of choosing which life she finds most meaningful. This is also important because it relates to the issues of mental health and the search for meaning in life, which are the main themes in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library*.

Previous research on the novel *The Midnight Library* has focused on issues of identity, existentialism, symbolism, and the mental health of the main character. For example, research by Sholikhah & Rahmah Dewi (2025) analyzed Nora Seed's life journey through psychological theory, particularly in terms of *self-discovery* and the process of individuation, which emphasizes the integration of consciousness and unconsciousness to achieve self-wholeness. Another study by Setiawati & Rosnita Hardiany (2023) focused on analyzing the symbols found in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* using Carl Jung's archetypal image theory. The study identified 14 symbols in the novel, with the circle symbol appearing most frequently, emphasizing the existential values in Nora's journey as a reflection on the meaning of life.

The research gap that forms the background to this study is that there has been no previous research examining narrative techniques, particularly the use of *showing* and *telling* techniques in the process of characterizing Nora Seed. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap through a narrative study of the use of *showing* and *telling* techniques and which of the two techniques is more dominant in the process of changing the main character. Thus, this study not only adds to the narrative study but also answers which technique plays a more significant role in building Nora's characterization. Based on the above explanation, this study aims to identify and classify the narratives in the novel that use the *showing* and *telling* techniques and determine which technique is more dominant in the process of characterization and self-acceptance of Nora Seed through alternative life experiences guided by Mrs. Elm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative

According to Scholes et al., (2006), narrative theory developed in four key aspects, narrative as a formal system, an ideological instrument, rhetoric, and also as a cognitive instrument. Here, Phelan emphasizes that since the "Narrative Turn," the focus of narrative theory has expanded beyond the study of pure literature to include various fields, including politics, law, and even medicine. The main approaches in narrative studies are

distinguished according to their respective focuses, such as structuralism, which analyzes the narrative structure of what is being told and how the story is presented; ideological, which considers narrative as a social discourse shaped by politics and ideology; and cognitive, which focuses on the reader's mind in shaping physical experiences in the narrative. Furthermore, according to Phelan and Booth's rhetorical approach, narrative is a communicative act between the author and the reader. Phelan's narrative theory not only examines the form and function of the text, but also examines the structure, ideology, rhetoric, and cognition that shape the reading experience.

Showing vs Telling

In narrative theory, the concepts of *Showing* and *Telling* cannot be summarized simply, but rather as two techniques that have different rhetorical functions. Griffiths (2014) emphasizes that "*show, don't tell*" appears frequently in creative writing, even though the practice of both is very complex depending on the narrative context of each. In context, *showing* describes a situation through actions, communication, and details that can be felt by the reader. Meanwhile, *telling* conveys information directly and purposefully without many details, so that the reader can immediately understand the author's intention. Griffiths also explains that both techniques are equally effective depending on the author's objectives.

Previous Study

Several researchers have conducted studies on Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* with various focuses and theoretical approaches. First, in her study, Salsabilla (2023) analyzed Nora Seed's anxiety and defense mechanisms using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The results of the study found that Nora experienced three types of anxiety: realistic, neurotic, and moral. In addition, the results also showed Nora's defense mechanisms to cope with her anxiety, namely repression, rationalization, and sublimation. This study focused more on the aspect of anxiety, so the development of Nora's characterization received less attention.

Second, a study by Imansari (2023) focuses on Nora Seed's desire to survive using a humanistic psychological perspective with Ben Sherwood's *Survivals Club* theory. The results of this study found that Nora can be categorized as a Fighter, Connector, and Believer, thus having hope and purpose in life. Another study result is an article by Theebiha (2024) that explores the role of memory and nostalgia in influencing Nora's

journey towards *self-acceptance*, comparing this theme with the classic work *A Christmas Carol*. This study focuses only on philosophical aspects, leaving other aspects such as narrative and psychological aspects untouched.

From previous studies, it can be seen that studies of the novel *The Midnight Library* have focused more on psychological aspects, but with different focuses. Although previous studies have made significant contributions, there are still gaps in research, specifically analysis that highlights changes in Nora's characterization through narrative theory using the *Showing* and *Telling* techniques. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine how the character of Nora Seed develops through the guidance of Mrs. Elm, as seen from the narrative in the novel.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, the researcher uses a qualitative method through a text analysis approach. The research design was based on the research objective, which was to analyze the use of the *Showing vs. Telling* technique in Matt Haig's work, *The Midnight Library*, which influenced the characterization of Nora Seed based on her experiences of various possible lives. The subject of the study was the text of the novel, which focused on Nora's interaction with Mrs. Elm. The researcher acted as the main instrument in this study to read and identify texts to strengthen the analysis results. The research procedure was carried out in several stages, by reading the entire novel, close reading related to the main issue, then categorizing the data obtained into showing and telling techniques, which were then analyzed to determine which technique dominated the change in the main character through her interaction with Mrs. Elm on her journey towards *self-acceptance*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library*, researcher found that the use of the *telling* technique more dominant in the characterization of Nora Seed through conversations and guidance from the character Mrs. Elm. The *telling* technique was used extensively when Mrs. Elm explained to Nora how the midnight library worked and taught Nora about alternative life choices and their consequences. Through her conversations with Mrs. Elm, Nora's characterization begins to change slowly, until she is finally able to accept her life. In addition, the *showing* technique is also used as a complement to reinforce Nora's emotional experience as she goes through her alternative

life journey. However, the use of the *showing* technique is less dominant in changing Nora's characterization. Here is some data found by the researcher to reinforce the argument:

'Between life and death there is a library, she said. 'And within that library, the shelves go on forever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be different if you had made other choices... Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regrets?' (Haig, 2020, p. 38)

In this dialogue, Mrs. Elm explains that between life and death there is a library as a symbol of space. Mrs. Elm also explains to Nora the function of the shelves containing books in this library, emphasizing that every decision in life has different consequences and regrets. In this excerpt, Mrs. Elm explains the concept of the midnight library to Nora directly and clearly, which is an example of the use of the telling technique.

'If you don't mind me asking - begin what?'

'Every life contains many millions of decisions. Some big, some small. But every time one decision is taken over another, the outcomes differ. An irreversible variation occurs, which in turn leads to further variations. These books are portals to all the lives you could be living.' (Haig, 2020, p. 40)

The dialogue between Nora and Mrs. Elm in this excerpt is an example of the use of the *telling* technique. Through Mrs. Elm's explanation of life decisions, which leads Nora to understand that every decision has its own consequences, life choices here are a series of variations of choices that have been made. This marks the beginning of a change in Nora's characterization as she begins to realize her responsibility for her life choices. The telling technique in this dialogue serves as the initial means of Nora's psychological transformation in the process of introspection and *self-acceptance*.

'The point is there is a strong possibility that your old life is over. You wanted to die and maybe you will. And you will need somewhere to go to. Somewhere to land. Another life. So, you need to think hard. This library is called the Midnight Library, because every new life on offer here begins now. And now is midnight. It begins now. All these futures. That's what is here. That's what your books represent. Every other immediate present and ongoing future you could have had.' (Haig, 2020, p. 47)

This excerpt is a powerful example of the telling technique, with Mrs. Elm directly and efficiently presenting the midnight library as a place of transition to another life. The statement '*You wanted to die and maybe you will*' emphasizes the serious consequences, while the emphasis on '*it begins now*' places the responsibility on Nora to be more careful in her thoughts and actions. Mrs. Elm's dialogue here serves as a moral guidance tool that

provides understanding, life choices, and awareness for Nora in making decisions that are more oriented towards her life.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with this life, but she felt inside her a craving for other things, other lives, other possibilities. She felt like she was still in the air, not ready to land. Maybe she was more like Hugo Lefevre than she had realized. Maybe she could flick through lives as easily as flicking pages. (Haig, 2020, p. 199)

The trouble was that eventually Nora began to lose any sense of who she was. Like a whispered word passed around from ear to ear, even her name began to sound like just a noise, signifying nothing (Haig, 2020, p. 204)

The following quote describes Nora's feelings when she began to feel confused about the new life she was living, yet she felt that there were still many things, other lives, and many other possibilities. This description illustrates how confused Nora was as she lived the life she was meant to live. Nora was still uncertain whether this life was good, yet she did not want it. The phrase "flicking pages" here refers to easily turning the pages of another life, meaning that Nora still wants to explore other lives. The sentence "Like a whispered word passed around from ear to ear, even her name began to sound like just a noise, signifying nothing" shows how confused Nora is, to the point that she feels like she is nothing. From this, we can see that the use of the showing technique here helps the reader understand Nora's character, who is uncertain about her journey, where the more choices she tries, the more she loses herself.

'Did you know that every time you choose a book it never returns to the shelves?'

'Yes.'

'Which is why you can never go back into a life you have tried. There always needs to be some... variation on a theme. In the Midnight Library, you can't take the same book out twice?' (Haig, 2020, p. 205)

This dialogue uses the *telling* technique because Mrs Elm directly explains to Nora the rules of the midnight library. Mrs Elm explains that every life Nora has tried cannot be repeated. Through the dialogue between Nora and Mrs. Elm, the author uses the technique of *telling* to shape Nora's awareness of the final nature of life choices. Nora begins to accept that no life can be repeated, but every life she chooses provides new lessons.

'It was the perfect life.'

'Did you feel that? All the time?'

'Yes. I mean... I wanted to. I mean, I loved Molly. I might have loved Ash. But I suppose, maybe... it wasn't my life. I hadn't made it by myself. I had walked into this other version of me. I was carbon-copied into the perfect life. But it wasn't me.'

'I don't want to die,' 3×

‘You need to get out of here. Don’t you get it, Nora?’

‘Get what?’

‘It all makes sense. You came back here this time not because you wanted to die, but because you want to live. This library isn’t falling down because it wants to kill you. It’s falling down because it is giving you a chance to return. Something decisive has finally happened. You have decided you want to be alive. Now go on, live, while you still have the chance.’ (Haig, 2020, pp. 248–249)

The dialogue between Nora and Mrs. Elm shows that the author uses the technique of *telling* through the character of Mrs. Elm. It can be seen from the quote ‘*I don’t want to die*’ that Nora has undergone a change within herself from wanting to die to realizing that she wants to live. Mrs. Elm’s statement, ‘*You have decided you want to be alive*,’ shows that she has succeeded in making Nora choose to continue living. This shows that the author’s use of the *telling* technique in the character of Mrs. Elm dominates the characterization of Nora in her process of *self-acceptance*. In the end, Nora chooses to continue her life for the better and accept all the consequences with the many life lessons she has learned from her alternative life journey. Nora realizes that her desire to live is to accept all the shortcomings and regrets in her life and start living a better life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Matt Haig’s novel *The Midnight Library*, it can be concluded that the use of the *telling* technique through the character of Mrs. Elm is more dominant in describing the transformation of Nora Seed’s characterization. Through direct dialogue between the characters Nora and Mrs. Elm, the author uses the technique of *telling* to convey Nora’s process of reflection, awareness, *self-acceptance*, and psychological change. The dominance of the technique of *telling* not only forms an efficient narrative pattern, but also reinforces the moral message through Nora’s alternative life journey under the guidance of Mrs. Elm that the meaning of life is found through awareness, choice, and the courage to accept oneself. This finding opens up opportunities for further research to examine the relationship between the technique of *telling* and the construction of character awareness in other existential-themed literary works, or to compare the effectiveness of the techniques of *showing* and *telling* in depicting the character’s journey in different genres and cultural contexts.

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