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Symbols Employment In J. Albert Mann's Novel The Degenerates

ABSTRACT

The present study deals with some symbols that portray the disability of some disabled teenagers in Jennifer Albert Mann's novel The Degenerates according to the psychoanalytic theory and critical disability theory. Dealing with symbolism in this situation is of great importance because it helps to understand important issues related to some incarcerated girls providing some important factors about their psychological concerns. Hence symbols are secret messages the author chooses to send to her readers by which lesser expressions are used to reveal more meanings.

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توظيف الرموز في رواية ج. ألبرت مان المنحطون

سلوان عبد الرضا ضمد / جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية
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الخلاصة:

تتناول الدراسة الحالية بعض الرموز التي تصور الاعاقة لدى بعض المراهقات المعاقات في رواية جنيفر البرت مان "المنحطون" طبقاً لنظرية التحليل النفسي و نظرية الاعاقة. ان لتناول الرموز بالبحث في هذه الحالة اهمية قصوى كونه يساعد في فهم مسائل كثيرة مهمة تتعلق بالفنيات المحجورات بتوفيره بعض الحقائق المهمة التي تعكس اهتماماتهن النفسية. هنا تعتبر الرموز رسائل سرية تنتقيها الكاتبة لارسالها لقراءتها باستعمال كلمات قليلة تكشف عن معانٍ غزيرة.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الرموز، الرمزية، التمثيل الرمزي

The concept of the symbol is of great importance because it appears in fields like the philosophy of mind and philosophy of knowledge which study human products of symbolization. The application of symbolic representation of psychoanalytic conceptualization to these fields enriches these fields through the interpretation of symbolic representation. In this context, interpretation refers to rules of understanding the way by which emotional meaning is derived from the manifest symbolic product. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, 258)

A symbol refers to anything that provides a hint of something else that is usually abstract like a belief or an abstract idea while a literary symbol signifies a person, an object, a situation, or a literary meaning of action found in a story that represents other meaning. Symbolism has two general meanings; general and specific. General symbols have a universal meaning whether inside the literary work or outside it. Specific symbolism has no universal meaning because its meaning is based on its relation to the content of the literary work in which it is found and it acquires its significance from its context. For example, the hunting cup has no universal meaning but in *The Catcher in the Rye*, it symbolizes a looking back at childhood. (Symbolism, 2022)

Though symbols are not always obvious, a symbol must undergo certain conditions to be called a symbol. For example, there must be a clue within the text that signals its existence by position, emphasis, or repetition; The entire context must support this symbol and gives it the intended meaning, and the created symbol must suggest a new meaning that differs in kind and class from its literal meaning; It can have more than one meaning. (Symbolism, 2022)

Among the wide variety of literary devices, symbols have been the most preferable device. It has been found in the earliest form of storytelling recorded in human heritage; cave scriptures and hieroglyphics which represent more complex beliefs and narratives. As a basis of much of modern narratives, the theatre of Ancient Greek has symbolic props including references to the god of fertility “Dionysus”. Symbolism (mainly with religious connotations) has kept its wide usage through the Middle Ages while from the Renaissance onwards, symbolism represents human desires forcefully. William Shakespeare, for example, uses symbols to represent inner conscience in the scene of blood in *Macbeth*. In *The Raven*, Edgar Allan Poe uses a bird to convey mortality and dread. William Blake utilizes religious symbols including Jesus Christ to represent human desires and motions like *The Everlasting Gospel*. (MasterClass, 2021)

Three types of symbols are used mainly in literary works they are religious symbols, romantic symbols, and emotional symbols. Religious symbols are the most acceptable type throughout history because religious authorities have sanctioned them. They trace back to ancient civilizations, for example, John Milton's *Paradise lost* is a retelling of the Genesis story while Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is a physical symbol representing the Holy Spirit. Romantic symbolism comes next in the usage. It has pervaded wide swaths of world literature. For example, Shakespeare's sonnets and modernist stanzas of Edna St. Vincent Millay have been fertile means for romantic symbolism. Emotional symbolism is the third type that is used mainly by poets and authors. They use physical symbolism to represent metaphysical emotions. Poets like Seamus Heaney and William Butler Yeats give good English examples of this type of symbolism. (MasterClass, 2021)

Symbolism gives words literal as well as figurative meaning so authors can say more with less. It is a kind of secret language set between the author of a text and its reader. It is used specifically to add an emotional response to the text creating a lasting impression on the reader. For example, the blood spot on the hands of Lady Macbeth, In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, stands for the guilt that tortures her after killing King Duncan. Furthermore, symbols have an imaginary effect by adding a visual element to complex themes. For example Heaney's poem *Crying Dog* in which he describes how the dead individuals are drifting out of people's consciousness through the image of a burning wood that is disappearing in smoke. Symbols are also used to connect themes. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the green color to stand for money and materiality on the North Shore of Long Island. (MasterClass, 2021)

In Gilbert Sorrentino's novel *Under the Shadow*, a physician who is also an amateur astronomer looks at the moon with a telescope and sees a young couple- a man and woman. Other times he sees them as two women. Startled by the image, he finds out that he is looking at the image of his parents. Accordingly, he gets access to his repressed childhood memory. Thus, readers know, next time, that the moon symbolizes some hidden layer in the makeup of the character's psychology. (Elbom, 2020) This exposes the instability in the interpretation of the meaning of a literary symbol which is determined by its context and that the meaning of symbols varies from text to text.

Unconscious or psychoanalytic symbols are firstly recognized as ubiquitous and universal expressions of the unconscious mind's dynamic. For example, a flag in ordinary linguistic usage represents a country while a cross has a Christian religious reference. In such cases, the relationship between the referent and its signifier is both within the sociocultural convention and conscious awareness. Individuals usually understand symbols consciously within the social environment they are created and used; they are obvious and serve conscious communication. A psychoanalytic symbol contradicts the usual concept of symbol in that it proposes that symbols are usually disguised forms as well as by the individual who utilizes them; therefore, they may not implement any conscious or deliberate external or internal communication. Generally, psychoanalysis symbols are independent of historical, social, and cultural setting and it is not produced or acquired through teaching or learning rather it evolves spontaneously through the individuals' development and experience. They reveal a universal individual as well as cross-cultural innate capacity. (*Symbolism*, 2019)

Psychoanalytic symbols emerge due to the ego functions like instinctual drives and defenses with the development experience from the individual's early childhood onwards. They are linked to external perceptual reality apparent in the closeness between the symbolic perception towards what is signified. Ernest Jones (1916, as cited in *Symbolism*, 2019), states that unconscious or psychoanalytic symbols stand only for what is repressed. He adds that symbols condense unconscious defense and wishes. (*Symbolism*, 2019)

Taking metaphorical meaning or acquiring religious or cultural significance does not alter the primary or original meaning of the symbol. For example, using a cave to represent a grave does not alter its primary meaning of a womb. Symbolism compared to ancient language may be appropriate in linguistic communication outside and inside psychoanalysis. (*Symbolism*, 2019)

Symbolization is the process of representing something for someone, replacing one object for another. Primarily, it is a mechanism that enables a subject to resist depression linked with object loss and limiting effects flow. It designates the meaning back and forth between external reality and mental reality, between past and present, and between subject and object. This effect of the symbolization process makes it a possible system of inter and intra-subjective exchanges. (*Symbolization*, 2022)

Symbolic representation is a universal capacity or process of the individual's mind in which one thing is used to represent another. It appears in art, literature, dreams, psychological symptom formation, as well as in cultural objects. A signal is the simplest form of a symbol which is usually consciously chosen according to rules of logic. According to psychological perspectives, a symbol is a complex representation referring potentially to an infinite class of referents united and chosen by theme or emotional meaning. The emerging symbol is composed of the primary process of displacement and condensation. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, p.p. 255-256)

Harold Blum (1978, as cited in Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, p. 256) states that psychoanalytic representation usually refers to the experienced intrapsychic symbolization of self and/ or others that are often interacting with each other. This sort of symbolic representation is known as object representation and self-representation. Representation encompasses both reality experience as well as emotional one in variable proportion. Its content includes a layering of present or past experiences. It can be experienced unconsciously, preconsciously, or consciously. Reality details of self in relation to another individual or self-experience are encompassed in a representation. This symbolizes, evokes, and refers to complex emotional responses.

Representation is a basic concept not only for psychoanalysis but approximately all theories of mind and philosophy. It organizes human experience; therefore all theories describe representation whether implicitly or explicitly in their behavioral or intrapsychic manifestations. Focusing on affective, unconscious, and development aspects of representation is a unique aspect of psychoanalysis. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012)

Freud's early theories onward encompass a description of representation as an inner experience. He describes the representational process in relation to artistic expression, literature, dreams, and neurotic and psychotic symptomatology. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, as cited in Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012), Freud describes symbolization as a way of disguise that is used to transform the original unconscious thoughts, dreams, and wishes into a dream manifestation. The mental processes of condensation and displacement organize the formation of symbols. A symbol means signal as it refers to a dream image that despite the dreamer's identity has the same unconscious referent. Many of Freud's discussions related to the constituents of mental life inherent in the concept of representation include references to reality,

memories, and emotional experiences like traumatic experiences in particular where they comprise the experience of self to others' relationship. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012)

According to Freud, the unconscious is organized in thing presentations because objects- whether inanimate or animate which are found in imaginary or external reality implemented for the symbolic presentation of the unconscious mind- are based on qualities of representability. He calls the mental storage of language found in the unconscious mind "word presentation". Psychoanalytic symbols for Ernest Jones represent unconscious ideas linked to effective experience while for George Stuart Klein, symbolic representation (connected to drives, especially the aggressive) stands for the relations of unconscious objects. Symbols, for Klein, are representations of unconscious phantasy taking the form of unconscious derivatives. Klein states that an important step for the development of the ego is the ability to symbolize sadistic aggressive feelings as well as unconscious frightening. Though later objective theorists ascribe the process of symbol formation to the ego, their primary concentration goes on to be on content rather than processes and forms. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, p.257)

It is worth mentioning that Freud focuses on ego defenses while Kleinian theorists focus on the representation of compromise entities like unconscious object relations. Thus, they focus on defensive processes based on repression as well as on preconscious compromises of conflict. The major focus of modern ego psychology is on symbols, particularly the process of symbol formation, structures, their dynamic contents, and the capacities of the ego which are essential to the symbolic representation process. Related to effects, symbolic representation and symbols are essential to human information processing and mental experience. While Freud regards the presentation of things as present only in unconscious thoughts, E. Marcus argues that they are present ubiquitously in conscious thoughts. Thing presentation is part of the human emotional experience that is presented symbolically. (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012, p.257) The novel of the present study encompasses many symbols that stand mainly for the disabled girls' psychosocial issues besides their disability.

1-2 Rose's Stick

Tiara Dennis expresses the importance of plants' branches because they symbolize family and home. Many birds make their nests on the high branches so birds will be saved from

predators. Branches of trees also stand for the family since people draw out their family tree in a similar way to the physical trees (Dennis, 2021).

According to some beliefs, a branch of a tree symbolizes something that needs to be unified rather than a symbol of unity. Some documents use branches to refer to the one origin of all human beings. Accordingly, the branching analogy is a way to stop racism as well as political prejudices since all human beings belong to the same branch. So, prejudices like national and racial ones, that separate humankind have an unjustifiable and false justification since all human beings are the descendents of Adam and eventually belong to one family; they have no recognition nor significance in the estimation of God (Black, 2017).

The eugenicist process is like removing some unhealthy branches. Some people are considered to be unhealthy whether physically or mentally; therefore, they must be removed. So, cutting a branch is to stop breeding and generations from going on.

Accordingly, Rose's firm connection with her stick (a branch of a tree) stands for her repressed wish to go back to her family, and rejoin her origin as well as breed. Incarcerating the inmates in an attempt to prevent them from breeding is like cutting off a branch. She keeps the branch tight to her chest and cannot sleep without it like the relationship between a mother and her dear baby. This also exposes her repressed wishes of having her family and consequently, love and warmth. Keeping the stick is also against the rules of the institution and Rose's keeping it is a kind of rebellion against it even if it is secretly.

Maxine keeps Rose's stick with her when Rose sleeps in the Sick Ward and hesitates to hand it to London who wants to give it back to Rose, "Maxine hesitated to let go of the only piece she had left of her sister" (Mann, 2020b, p. 103) because Rose is the only piece Maxine has from her family. Stick is a piece of a tree that stands for man's origin but their mother cuts it and disposes of it lifelong. Society also cuts off part of it (the so-called degenerates) and even sterilizes it.

As Rose shows affection towards the branch, she also uses it to express love. Using her stick Rose, "tapped Maxine four times on her chest where her heart was. Understanding what this meant, Maxine replied 'I love you too, Rosy'" (Mann, 2020b, p. 7). Unlike sticks used to crucify Jesus Christ, her stick saves the lives of 26 babies beside hers and London's. When the cribs' room burns and is full of smoke and noise and no one can hear London's screams to save

them, Rose screams at London “throw my stick” (Mann, 2020b, p. 134). London does and people save them. The branch which is cut to death gives life. As much as the branch is meaningful and dear to her, Rose sacrifices it to save the lives of the babies, hers, and London`s. It is like Moses` stick which saves the Israelites from death. Rose`s maple branch also stands for the feeling of diaspora she and many other inmates have as they live in the institution towards their homes.

1-3 Apple

There are many interpretations of the symbol apple tree. For example, “the apple tree is said to be related to the female form and everything feminine. Because of this fact, the apple tree is excellent at symbolizing motherhood, fertility, romance, and beauty” (Dennis, 2021). However, the inmates at the institution are deprived of all these things which are not essential for the living of every female being but also males` existence because males come from females. This symbol stands for all the repressed instincts within every girl in the institution. It is a reminder of the girls` rights to motherhood and fertility from which they are deprived for life long.

Apple is the only fruit that is served to the (so-called) degenerates in the institution. As generations inherit physical and mental illnesses, according to Christian belief it is Adam`s apple that caused our sufferings, so suffering is also inherited. It also symbolizes guilt according to Greek beliefs which state that human beings can get cursed due to their own or even their parent`s sins. The curse appears in forms like disability and impairments. It can stand as a source of relief and solace; Rose always steals apples to give Lizzie because Lizzie has water in her head and eating apples reduces her pains. It is nearly the only gift the girls can offer each other.

1-4 The Book (a Story within a story)

It is a novel that Mrs. Vetter gives London to read. London reads it to Rose while Maxine and Alice listen to some chapters from time to time, “it seemed to be all about escape and revenge—a little strange of Mrs. Vetter to give this story to a girl who seemed overly obsessed with both these things. Maybe the nurse had never read it.” This means that she just has it for decoration on her shelf just like other books. Not only books but so much about the institution is a matter of displaying (Mann, 2020b, p. 66). Such things expose the hypocrisy and irony of the institution; they show off things that they prevent the inmates from using.

The book also symbolizes sacrifice and love. When London decides to elope for the second time, “she slipped the book under Rose’s pillow. A gift, she guessed. Or maybe an apology. She didn’t know. She’d never offered either one before” (Mann, 2020b, p. 76). As much as the book is dear to London’s heart, she gives it to her best friend, Rose. Here, it also symbolizes rebellion and elopement because the protagonist in the book rebels and so does London through elopements. She also motivates the desire for elopement in the three girls; Rose Maxine, and Alice.

The book is a source of comfort for London just like the stick for Rose because it depicts London’s repressed wishes of elopement and freedom. It is about a man, “who was wronged by his friends and sent to prison for life, and when in prison he makes a new friend, then breaks out, finds a treasure, and exacts slow and painful revenge on those who wronged him.” A happy ending story, “even though it had the old lady’s name on it, Thelma would have said it was a piece of crap. Because there never is any escape. Definitely never a treasure. But... there can be revenge” (Mann, 2020b, p.79). The book touches on the consciousness of London who is dreaming of elopement and freedom and these are major themes of the book. However, Lady Dumas’s expected view of it is more realistic. The book also represents the American dream of getting freedom and wealth which is almost difficult or impossible to exist in real life. Only revenge can happen in real life. It also touches on the girl’s American dream of getting wealth and freedom.

It is also about friendship where the hero’s friend helps him much, “but he saves Dantès and gives him a great new life” (Mann, 2020b, p. 107). The man escapes the prison cell which is surrounded by a sea full of sharks like the incarcerated inmates of the institution who are surrounded by human sharks. According to the listening girl’s wish, London changes the end of the story. She does not let Edward de Villafort die and keeps him alive. They do not like him to die which exposes their unconscious wish to keep generations alive and breeding. This also “gave her a thrill to keep him alive. Also, it made Rose happy” (Mann, 2020b, p. 120). The girls want things to go on according to their wishes not like what others enforce things to be. Their desires for change and rebellion took many forms that change and direct the events of the novel in the same way they do in the story they read.

London read a very important sentence from the book, “people that the count didn’t kill or make kill themselves all find love and money and happiness together” (Mann, 2020b, pp. 120-

121). So why they do not let the so-called degenerates live freely to find their happiness together? This is the point Mann wants to highlight throughout her novel. Another important phrase Mann highlights is, “the count just told us that all human wisdom is summed up in two words? ‘Wait’ and ‘hope.’ This is just like the ending of this novel. What the girls do. They wait and hope to get the chance for achieving their dreams. So, as the book reads most of the girls’ repressed wishes, it symbolizes them.

1-5 Walnuts

A walnut represents strength and masculine energy due to its hard outer shell while the inner part stands for inner softness, inner emotions, and the hidden part of one’s persona. (Christopher, 2022) Consequently, walnuts stood for the inmates’ psychological struggles. Alice, “told Rose to feel her feelings. But only on the inside. Never on the outside. She explained that Rose was like a walnut. Her feelings were the soft, tasty meat nestled inside her.” And that, “it was dark and warm and safe in there for the feelings. A place where the feelings were kept fresh and alive.” The body, Alice stated, “was the wrinkly shell. Hard. Sealed at the seams. It kept the meat safe. Rose had to be like the walnut” (Mann, 2020b, p. 83). Alice describes Rose’s emotions positively; they are warm, fresh, and safe since they are inside her. Alice also teaches Rose how to repress her emotions inside her, deep in the unconscious because it is better and safer for her. She wanted her to show the hard shell to others. It is better to hide their pains in their unconsciousness.

Rose does her best to be like Alice despite the memories which ignite her desire for crying. The memories, “filled up Rose’s stomach, those tears, and when she couldn’t hold them inside her wrinkly shell anymore, she threw them up into the toilet, into the dirty laundry pile, anywhere that no one would notice ” (Mann, 2020b, p. 83). So it is difficult to repress and hide these emotions like the walnut. She needs to release these repressed tears inside her. She wants to let them out so that she can feel better. It is a matter of catharsis by which she purifies her depressed soul from sorrowful memories. She releases the dark memories above the dirty laundry where no one can see her. Thus, she needs to cry and relieve herself, “It was Alice’s words“ walnuts didn’t cry” (Mann, 2020b, p.84). Rose represses her emotions and her need for crying. Not only Alice and Rose are walnuts but nearly all the inmates are. Alice teaches Rose to

be like them so that she will not show weakness. That is how they keep going in the middle of the hardships they are facing in the institution caused by their supposed disabilities.

Walnuts also stand for the girls' supposed disabilities where they are repressed forever. Their souls and tears have to remain oppressed within the limitations of their disabled bodies. The hard shell also stands for the institution with all its hardships while its fresh bottom stands for the inmates. These raw girls have to endure countless kinds of hardships only because they are ranked as disabled.

Walnuts are also signs of pregnancy and fertility (Christopher, 2022) from which all the inmates are deprived. Unfair rules stigmatizing them as disabled stood behind that judgment and act. They are deemed as degenerates for life long despite symptoms of intelligence they show on several occasions which walnuts also represent. Breaking nuts stand for getting out of someone's shell through speaking (Christopher, 2022). This happens at the end of the novel when Alice breaks her nutshell and gets out her repressed words and self.

1-6 Conclusion

The Degenerates was a historical novel flavored with psychological issues related to an important hidden part of American history. They wanted not to improve the inmates but to get rid of them. They subjected the inmates to cruel circumstances like hard labor, miserable weather, poor nourishment, meals containing radioactive materials, and a filthy environment. In addition to that, inmates were not allowed to use the baths when they needed to dispose of their bodily wastes except for three times a day. Moreover, inmates were subjected to several kinds of offenses, including bullying, enforced silence, depriving them of family life, and more. All the inmates were stigmatized as feeble-minded no matter how smart they were.

Four incarcerated girls could overcome these conditions through friendship. They were London, Rose, Maxine, and Alice. Even the things which worried them once, had no concern in times when they sympathize. They also protected each other. It is the kind of friendship that enabled them to overcome difficulties, enhance themselves, rebel, and have a positive impression of each other as well as other girls. It made hope blossom in their innermost when it was dying at the hands of the staff of the institution.

Using symbols, Mann highlighted important issues for humanity in general and the incarcerated girls as well. She wanted to destroy artificially created boundaries that distinguish, rank, and stigmatize people as degenerates like disability and racism. Creating these symbols also revealed the kind of friendship the four girls had which impacted other girls in the institution to the extent many of them learned to cooperate. So even the darkest moments could fade. It was important for the girls not to give up and to keep dreaming while going forward together with friendship and sympathy.

If disability means the inability to get used to the provided things the majority of people can. Accordingly, at least those four girls can though they are prohibited most of the time. Hence the disabled ones are the officials in the institution. They were unable to see the intelligence of those girls nor their enhancement though it was obvious. Instead, officials were walking blindly after theories that are completely wrong, wild, and inapplicable.

Mann's novel is a historical cautionary tale for the future because it had not eliminated certain points in the past only, but also in the present where certain conditions, which Mann pointed out, parallel treatment today. The same people who were marginalized in the past are still marginalized today. So this was a message Mann wanted to pass. It is necessary to respect other people and to be careful about their feelings. The girls who are prevented from speaking publically passed their messages through symbols they used. Symbols are also so genuine to reveal the girls' rights and needs as human beings.

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