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## **SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS OBJECTS WITH REFERENCE TO SOCIAL STRATA IN GUNTER GRASS' CAT AND MOUSE**

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### **Abstract**

The instrumental value of symbols has been attracting many writers since ages to unfold the hidden meaning of a text and to show the other side of a character. This paper focuses on religious objects to highlight their symbolic significance in Mahlke's (the protagonist) life that lived in Post-World War II society. Religious objects are selected to examine his social strata in Grass' *Cat and Mouse* (1963). This paper highlights that symbolic objects aim to remove social complexities of Mahlke's life in order to make him a mature independent man however his death appears a temporary freedom.

### **Keywords**

Religious objects, social strata, symbolic representation.



### **1. Introduction**

Grass is a German novelist and known for representing and depicting history. He draws on symbolic forms of narratives in majority of his works. With symbols, he always focuses on contemporary and realistic issues of his country.

However, he claims that he does not like ideologies and symbols in his work. Apart from this claim, it is notable that his stories always have a face-value and revolve around symbols particularly in *Crabwalk* (2002), *The Tin Drum* (1959) and *Cat and Mouse* (1963).

By presenting symbolized work, he represents the past and rejects the factual over fictional accounts. According to Grass, fiction is a tool in depicting history (cited in Anderson, 24).

### *1.1 Aim and Significance of the Study*

This paper aims to discuss major religious objects to show that how religious objects have symbolic significance in Mahlke's life. This paper is significant as it sheds light on some major religious objects and their particular role in an individual's life. Through these symbolic objects, readers will be able to know how religious objects are dramatized, worked like a symbol and leave an effect on one's life.

## **2. Analysis and Discussion**

*Cat and Mouse* (1963) is built on religious and social significance. It is a symbolic novella and has paradoxical components with reference to social and religious symbols. Apparently, the novella consists of two stories. One story is about teen-age school boys and second is about the narrator Pilenz. The narrator symbolically represents the complex story of cat and mouse to focus on Mahlke's religious and social concerns. Identically, Mahlke is an unattractive person. His disgusting Adam's apple looks comic hence has sexual representation. His unusual physical look psychologically disturbs him as he always becomes prominent among his fellows because of his Adam's apple. This makes him self-conscious and he does everything to get rid of it. Mahlke is a product of internal and external dilemma which pressurizes him and causes existential crisis.

According to Rosenberg (43), 'the Christ like heroes in modern literature certainly reveal what the individual authors imagine the coming of the third Age to be like'. Mahlke's symbolic Christ like representation indicates Grass' imagination of The Age of the Son. Fish is the most important Christ like symbol. Gradually, Mahlke learns how to swim. He learns to swim like a fish with fin and leaving a wake behind him, 'he swam back, and forth between the pier, the big diving tower, and the bathing beach' (12). Further, 'he looks at women like a fish (43) and in front of Virgin Mary; he acts like a fish (58). Swimming like a fish indicates that now he becomes a savior of humanity. It also highlights his freedom. The novella starts with 'and one day after Mahlke had learned to swim' (1); it unfolds the beginning of his independent status.

The second religious symbol associates with the master swimmer, diver and boys with distant naval battles. In this process, the group of boys recites the data of naval history during church services. The recitation portrays the religious indifferences while focusing on social indifferences. It also unfolds that a revolutionary change is going to take place within the Catholic Church. Grass candidly draws readers' attention on the new developed Mass ideas by the group of boys and Mahlke.

Likewise, Grass also conveys the birth of new age by recitation in Catholic Church. Mahlke is not only compared to fish in fact his appearance is identical to Christ's portrait like, 'parted hair in the middle' and 'raised eyebrows'. According

to Benz (12), the similarity is depicted on pre-Gothic crucifixes. Grass did it on purpose in order to represent Mahlke as a savior.

Notably, another symbol with reference to social strata is Mahlke's street address, "Osterzeile" (27) and the contrast between "East Street" with "West Street" (27) enforces the readers' attention on Easter Street and Grass tries to convey that "Osterzeile" refers to Easter Street. John (14) says that it also refers to the Resurrection and Christ's words to the Apostles. Moreover, Benz (45) says that Mahlke's home address and its reference to Easter with regard to geographical position of the sunrise means the rising of the Third New Age of daylight. This symbolic reference means that Mahlke is a new rising man after the World War II who is going to bring a change in society and country.

Comparatively, Mahlke's religious and social significance is evident from the beginning of the story. The story starts with his activities on a ball field. The narrator stresses, "it was a young cat, but not a kitten" (8) likewise taking his Adam's apple as a mouse refers to his boyhood activities to heroic World War II figure. In this context, Grass shares that how a young boy develops to a mature man and represents religion that is also significant to social values. Similarly, Grass portrays that his life is dominated by his abnormal Adam's apple however he has love for Virgin Mary too.

Apart from exterior symbols, there are many interior symbols which represent him Christ like figure. For instance, "stuffed owl" which

signifies the rejection of Christ by Jews. Latinus (18) argues that a model of Hitler in his room symbolizes nation's conversion to Christianity while Ferguson (19) says that the collection of butterfly symbolizes the Resurrection of Christ.

Notably, these religious symbols refer to social strata highlighting Mahlke's freedom (a stuffed owl which refers to his boyhood carefree activities) and Hitler's model refers to Germans' love and hate for Hitler. It has contradictory meaning as some people surrendered to Nazi regime and some adopted it thus the model of Hitler represents love and hate.

Certainly, Mahlke's physical resemblance and address make him Christ like hero and figure but contrary to this, his love for Virgin Mary does not contribute to chaste feelings. In fact, the way he prays in front of Virgin Mary, it shows that he is a lover not child. Likewise, as he prays at her altar; it seems that he wants to become her groom. In chapter IX the Crucified does not attract him and it becomes obvious that he desires Virgin Mary,

...Then he raised his joined hands until they were level with his eyes, with the parting in his hair, and higher still he held them out in supplication and yearning to the over-life size plaster figure which stood childless, a virgin among virgins, on a silver-plated crescent, draped from shoulders to ankles in a Prussian-blue mantle (126).

With reference to Mahlke's social strata, it also becomes obvious that the symbol of fish is jointed with his desire of worldly love and his intentions for the Virgin. Like other religious symbols, the narrator shares that he has passionate love for

Virgin Mary. As he bent on his knees before Virgin for existential equilibrium; here he looks like an actor who is conscious of his role and a lover as well. Grass comes up with psycho-religious stories which are the common aspects of every human life. Chiefly, Mahlke's desire for sex unfolds that he wants to become a normal person. He wants to live a normal life ignoring his unattractive personality.

In the beginning of the story Mahlke wears an amulet which shows that the Virgin suspended from a chain around his neck and on top of it a screw driver covering the amulet, "He wore a little silver chain, from which hung something silver and Catholic: the Blessed Virgin; most likely he had always worn it" (15). The other symbolic representation of phallus i.e. the can opener shows that he has developed from sexual awareness to manhood and shows his increasing desire for Virgin.

Furthermore, as he stares at the belly of Virgin and covers the amulet with phallic objects, it unfolds that he aims his gun at the enemy tanks in World War II. Similarly, he succeeds in destroying the tanks as the Virgin points out to him the spot by offering her abdomen. Mahlke says that he aimed at the picture of locomotive with his erected gun that means he aimed at vagina with the erected gun ultimately refers to his desire for sex.

Moreover, titular symbolic significance also relates to Mahlke's religious and social strata. The cat symbolizes society and mouse (his Adam's apple) symbolizes the oppressed people

also refers to male sexual organ. The narrator documents, "it was a young cat, but not kitten" (8). The emphasis on 'young cat' reveals females' attraction towards men. The title also refers to Mahlke's childlike games and his interest in becoming a clown yet his heroic like activities reveal the cat and mouse game in literal terms.

As a matter of fact, the decisive turn of the story in the short boat ride by the closure of the story collapses Mahlke due to psychological pressures and he becomes sick with fear. He suffered from breakdown due to his complex heroism. The first decisive cause is Klohse's refusal to allow him at his Gymnasium. It limits his desire to show himself as a complete man; also it shatters his psychological and physical orders.

No matter how convincingly and strongly Grass gives Christ like symbols in the novella, significantly Mahlke's desire to relate himself with Christ and to Virgin Mary indicates that he wants to get a dominant status in society. In addition, his love for the Virgin shows that to survive in society, he must acquire some emotions to become a hero. As there are plenty of Christ like symbols, it becomes clear that like Christ, Mahlke suffered a lot in the story.

Mahlke is under self-inflicted burden in order to prove himself exclusive and symbolic. Subiotto (215) says that *Cat and Mouse* (1963) is Grass' an attempt to unravel the sexual implications. Grass is unique in his poetic style. His point of view is symbolic, religious and allegorical. His hero can be seen as a symbol of life in an archetypal reality. *Cat and Mouse* (1963) is about the years

of post-World War II. It is designed on realistic pattern and on realistic contemporary story.

### 3. Summary and Conclusion

This paper highlights that all symbolic objects played a significant role in Mahlke's life. Names and things refer to themselves hence signify certain meanings and contribute to Mahlke's life; also aim to remove complexities of his life. On the other hand, his Adam's apple affected him psychologically and left an effect on his social strata. All his activities meant to play the game of cat and mouse while avoiding cat (symbol of society) in order to become a hero. To greater extent, Mahlke symbolically represents the life of Christ and suffering. His death symbolizes that after second coming Christ will be crucified again. This paper concludes that although Mahlke is a Christ like figure but his death does not free him from his complexities of life as believing in second coming. By all means, religious objects symbolize his desires, social and personal concerns.

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