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DOI: https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.yvw5-r9wh
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A dramatic application of Susanne Langer's aesthetic symbolism

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San Jose State University, 1989

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106

A Dramatic Application of
Susanne Langer's Aesthetic Symbolism

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Drama Department

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Dramatic Literature

by

Gregory Keith Watkins

May 1989

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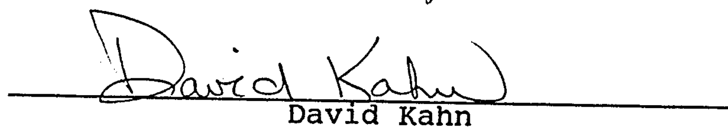

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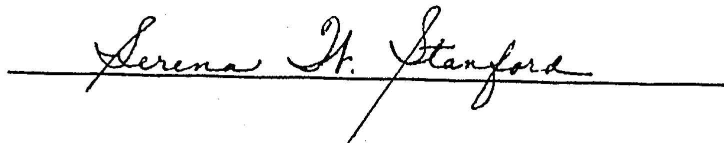

ABSTRACT

A Dramatic Application of

Susanne Langer's Aesthetic Symbolism

Gregory Keith Watkins

In attempting to explain the difference between the symbolism of language versus art, Susanne Langer employs a model which identifies two major types of symbolic expression. Discursive symbols function as elements of a codified language, working together in groups by means of a logical "system." Nondiscursive symbols are stylistic "semblances" which function together "organically."

The major problem addressed in this paper is how Langer's theory may be applied to dramatic art, which is composed primarily of discursive symbols (i.e. language). In an example taken from a dramatic text, nondiscursive information is found to be a major segment of the overall recognized meaning. But Langer's dual model seems to include certain disparate aspects, and it is recommended that two new distinctions be added to it--signification and nondiscursive influences on meaning.

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Chapter 1

The Power of the Symbol

When art and language are considered to function symbolically, the question arises: What is the difference between the two? What does it mean to be a symbol? What is the advantage of symbolic expression? Susanne Langer has dealt with these questions extensively in several books, particularly <u>Philosophy in a New Key</u> and <u>Problems in Art</u>. Her ideas, when contrasted with the thoughts of other philosophers who discuss the concept of the symbol in more general terms, provide a fairly specific framework which explains the role of art, and its creation, in society. Her primary concern is how art and language function to generate meaning. The first part of this essay (chapters 1 through 3) will deal mainly with her ideas, explaining some of her terminology, analyzing the important distinctions she makes, and relating them with comments that other authors have made on the same subject. This part includes a lengthy discussion of discursive versus nondiscursive symbolism, which is a key aspect of her philosophy. The second part of the essay (chapters 4 and 5) will then attempt to apply these ideas to dramatic art, using examples which employ

different types of symbolism and demonstrate how language can express artistic meanings.

Speech as Symbolism

The reason that the symbol is such an important item of philosophical discussion is that it is "powerful." What does this mean? It means that a symbol has the potential for taking on various qualities, storing them, and utilizing them later in ways that can change depending on the circumstance. A symbol can organize experience into accessible increments, allowing learning to take place and behavior to adapt. It can be conjoined with other symbols in order to apply qualities to things, describe relations, and further refine meanings. Language symbols employ these types of operations to generate meanings, and the understanding and communication which results from these processes are the primary reason human capabilities transcend those of animals. Langer calls this ability a "symbolic transformation of experiences."[1] (In the following example she is referring to language, rather than other types of symbols.)

> Not higher sensitivity, not longer memory or even quicker association sets man so far above other animals that he can regard them as denizens of a lower world: no, it is the power of using symbols - the power of speech - that makes him lord of the earth.[2]

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1. Susanne K. Langer, Philosophy in a New "Key": A Study in Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 44.

2. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 26.

In viewing the function of symbolization as being not merely a representative one, but fundamental to all thought processes, its scope and ramifications become semantically far-reaching. Langer argues that the recognition by philosophers of "the use of symbols to attain, as well as to organize, belief" is a fairly recent "epistemological insight."[3]

Scientific Versus Philosophical Meaning

Langer admits that her approach is "philosophical" rather than "scientific." The difference between the approaches, she says, is that philosophical inquiries seek to uncover meanings, whereas scientific approaches assume certain meanings without question.[4] Science seeks to reveal truth through measurement. For example, determining the distance between the earth and the sun is a scientific problem. But attempting to explain what is meant by the concept of "distance," and what a "determination" is, are philosophical problems and cannot be answered simply by taking measurements. Thus there is a difference between the kind of truth in which distance is defined in miles, and the kind in which it is defined by its meaning. Mileage refers to a question of fact, and can be deemed as being true or false: even if a false answer is given, its question conforms to a true-or-false domain.

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3. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 26.

4. Susanne K. Langer, Problems in Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures (New York: Scribner, 1957), 2.

But the meaning of distance is a concept which cannot be applied to such black-and-white judgments. In approaching a definition, one might compare it with similar meanings and give an approximation as to its resemblance of them; for example, distance versus weight, or length. It might also be distinguished by its elements. For example, the distance of concern is between the earth and the sun, and not between two other entities.

By this process, the meaning is refined and clarified, but it is never found to be completely "true." This basic idea underlies Langer's mode of analysis. She seeks to approach the meaning of different types of symbols by analyzing and describing various classes of them, distinguishing them from each other, and providing fairly comprehensive--though sometimes metaphorical-- descriptions.

Signs Versus Symbols

Langer, along with others, assumes that "the use of signs is the very first manifestation of mind."[5] This simple process by which items are labeled is a basic mental activity, leading to other important abilities like categorizing and remembering. "As a matter of fact, it is not the essential act of thought that is symbolization, but an act essential to thought."[6] The ability to have certain things stand for or represent other things allows other

5. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 29.

6. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 41.

mental processes to take place. This is so basic to all living intelligence that "even animal mentality... is built up on a primitive semantic; it is the power of learning, by trial and error."[7]

However, there is a difference between the way humans and animals use signs. "Man, unlike all other animals, uses 'signs' not only to indicate things, but also to represent them."[8] Animal use of signs is limited to instinctual, pragmatic functions. To a dog, "water" means "you may drink." The sight of a bear means "danger." Each symbolic message is limited to one meaning, and that meaning is usually some sort of command. Calling a dog by its name means "give me your attention," whereas another dog's name means absolutely nothing to him. The idea that a name can simply "stand" for something, without having an immediate necessity, does not exist for animals.

To humans, however, "water" may have many meanings. To a dehydrated man in the desert, it may mean that he will survive; to someone in a submarine, it could mean there is a leak in the walls; to a family heading for the beach, it could mean that the day will be one of recreation; to a flood-prone city it may mean that all residents must leave immediately. These examples illustrate the difference between the "denotation" and the "connotation" of a meaning. In all cases, the denotation is the same; water refers

7. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 41.

8. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 30.

specifically to the clear liquid H2O. But the connotation varies depending on the circumstances, as illustrated above.

A symbol generally has a single denotation, but it can have many connotations. Connotation is a function of creative perception, and no matter how many are identified, another one can usually be found if a person is creative enough.

Connotations carry the most important meanings. The symbol "water" by itself is fairly useless. It is valueless and objective. It can only represent something, but it cannot offer any information or advice. But when it connotes, it takes on qualities. It becomes good or bad, important or useless, pleasing or painful. It becomes valuable. It takes on a significance, and the significance contains dimensions of meaning not found in the denotation.

For most animals (according to Langer), a symbol has a single connotation, and the denotative function does not occur at all. The connotation is generally related to survival: it has a pragmatic, rather than an aesthetic, purpose. The ability of a symbol to exist generically, and have different meanings in different situations, is almost exclusively a human phenomenon. For example, a dog's food dish is always associated (by the dog) with the act of eating. One cannot refer to it in another context without the animal's salivary glands activating. The dish is not an item which can be utilized in creating various meanings. It has one preassigned meaning: "it is time to eat." For the

dog, the dish is not a symbol but a sign, and it cannot be used to indicate more than its one meaning.

Abstraction

Another important idea with respect to meaning is the phenomenon of "abstraction." This is a process by which a receiver formulates sense-data into a pattern, thereby creating a concept. For example, one can look at a lens and declare that it is convex. However, "convexity" is not a quality that is inherently in the lens; it is an idea that humans apply by relating (in this case) a visual quality of the object to a pattern in their memory. When the two have enough similarity, the object is labeled as having that quality. The quality is isolated. Langer describes this phenomenon as "regarding everything about a sense-datum as irrelevant except a certain form that it embodies."[9]

This is how certain living things are sometimes distinguished by only a single attribute, such as: the ears of a rabbit, the dorsal fin of a shark, or a kangaroo's pouch. The entire animal can usually be identified by a single characteristic because this aspect of their description has become a cliche. One's reliance on such stereotypes may even become so extensive that the effort is not made to look any further, whereas a closer scrutiny would reveal subtle distinctions.

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9. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 72.

> Abstraction is the recognition of a relational structure, or form, apart from the specific thing (or event, fact, image, etc.) in which it is exemplified.[10]

Unfortunately, the word "abstract" implies, to some, that which has a certain vagueness, or abstruse quality.

> There is a widespread belief--sometimes regarded as a very truism--that abstract thought is essentially artificial and difficult, and that all untutored or `natural' thought is bound to concrete experiences, in fact to physical things.[11]

Langer refutes this idea simply by asking "If the untutored mind could not perform it [abstraction], how did we ever learn it?"[12] Langer's view of abstraction, then, is not of some inscrutable process for generating abstruse concepts of art. Abstraction is so widespread and seemingly automatic that it is hardly noticed. "This instinctive mental activity is the process of symbol-making, of which the most amazing result is language."[13]

Precisely how or why the abstraction is taking place is not always apparent. Langer uses the example of comparing the outlines of a right and left hand to illustrate this point. Although the two forms are different--one is backwards to the other, the thumbs are on opposite sides--the logical similarity between them is immediately recognizable by most people. The two outlines are inversely

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10. Langer, Problems in Art, 163.

11. Langer, Problems in Art, 167.

12. Langer, Problems in Art, 167.

13. Langer, Problems in Art, 167.

proportional, and this is their "rule of translation." This is a "rule for matching up the relevant factors of one with the relevant factors of the other."[14]

Although the relationship is readily apparent, the rule is not. Therefore, similarities may be felt prior to understanding the reasons why they exist. For example, the two outlines might seem similar before the reasons for their similarity are understood.

A rule of translation is itself an "abstractable concept." It is capable of being identified as an operating principle. But this identification is not necessary for it to function, i.e. for abstraction to take place.

When abstraction occurs, a quality may be viewed as an independent operative element, even though, in the object's natural state, the quality does not function, or present itself, separately. Abstraction occurs when a perceived quality is actively related to a pattern in the mind. The pattern can be newly recognized or, more commonly, pre-existing. For example, if the word "computer" is mentioned, the concept of "modern" will accompany its meaning for many people. This quality is abstracted from the concept "computer" because of a pre-existing pattern--an opinion that computers are modern. But the connection exists in the mind, not the symbol.

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14. Langer, <u>Problems in Art</u>, 19.

Discursive Versus Nondiscursive Abstractions

Langer calls certain symbols "expressive forms."

> An expressive form is any perceptible or imaginable whole that exhibits relationships of parts, or points, or even qualities or aspects within the whole, so that it may be taken to represent some other whole whose elements have analogous relations.[15]

An example of this type of symbol is a map. A map contains analogous relations with the physical territory it describes. However, it does not resemble the real territory. It can only be understood by someone who knows its rule of translation. In translating it, a person allows the symbol to take the place of the real territory. For example, a driver who is trying to get a sense of how long his trip is going to take and what the roads will be like may look at a map and imagine driving along one of its "roads," i.e. the lines on the map that designate roads. He translates the map characteristics into his imagination of the actual territory. "The symbol seems to be the thing itself, or contain it, or be contained in it."[16]

Words do not normally have this characteristic of resembling the real item of their meaning. They do not present analogous relations, individually. In contrast to expressive forms, they operate under an entirely different set of logical conditions and relations. "The use of

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15. Langer, Problems in Art, 20.

16. Langer, Problems in Art, 22.

language is discourse; and the pattern of discourse is know as discursive form."[17]

It is this distinction to which the rest of this essay will be directed. Langer divides symbols into two types: discursive and nondiscursive. The following chapter analyzes discursive symbolism--language--by identifying those attributes that distinguish it from nondiscursive symbolism.

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17. Langer, Problems in Art, 21.

Chapter 2

Discursive Symbolism

Langerian Terminology

It is slightly ironic that Langer uses discursiveness to describe what is a major distinction in her philosophy. She actually spends much more time analyzing nondiscursiveness--the symbolic quality of art symbols--and is obviously more interested in that domain of expression. Thus, she tends to explain discursiveness by contrasting it with nondiscursiveness.

She also describes other symbolic situations, which seem very similar to this same model, without making the connection. For example, what she says about the scientific process (that its truth is specific, measurable, and proceeds from general to specific)[18] would make it seem that science must therefore operate solely in the discursive realm; but she does not explicitly state whether this is the case. Another example is with "expressive forms"--she does not say if they are exclusively nondiscursive, though this would seem to be true by her description of them.

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18. Langer, Problems in Art, 2.

Consequently, it is not always clear just how far she takes the discursive/nondiscursive distinction, and what the relationship is between these two symbolic realms and other aspects of her theory. However, an attempt will be made here to bridge some of these gaps. Since the term under consideration is "discursiveness," it seems more efficient to start with a discussion of that aspect and deal with "nondiscursiveness" later on.

All Word-meanings are Things

Language is composed of discursive symbols. Their discursiveness implies that meanings have been arbitrarily assigned to them and they function within a system of artificial rules. The logical correlation between words and their meanings has little to do with resemblance, and one does not figure out linguistic meanings by intuition. Also, words do not combine aesthetically to form sentence-meanings the way that lines and colors on a canvas compose a picture.

Langer notes that when language "renders" facts into propositions, "the relations in them are turned into something like objects."[19] Perhaps it is most clear in the case of nouns. When someone says "chair" it is not the same as if he actually presents a real chair. What the verbal symbol refers to is something which can be sat in, which has

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19. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 80.

a structure and a color, and is made from certain materials and has a design; i.e. "chair" is a concept.

Even abstract nouns function this way. One can "possess a chair" or "possess an idea." Since the act of speaking reduces the thing to a concept, it does not matter linguistically or semantically whether the thing is tangible or abstract. Even a word like "run" denotes a concept. A verb represents an action--which is also a thing. Therefore, it ends up being conceptually translated as if it were a noun.

The same is true for adjectives: "green" is a concept. Instead of being an action it is a quality, but it is still a thing.

Thus, one's semantic conceptualization of language always reduces each meaning as if it were a noun. It becomes a specific entity, a concept, and these concepts are the elements of discursive thought. Langer says that the "motive" of language is "the transformation of experience into concepts." Language is not simply an "elaboration of signals and symptoms."[20]

This phenomenon is an aspect, perhaps the primary aspect, of the "logical projection" of language. Language functions to re-create an event by breaking it into specific elements and then assembling linguistic symbols for those elements in a sequential manner.

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20. Langer, Problems in Art, 21.

The Sequential Organization of Experience

A linguistic description of an experience often consumes more time than the event it describes. It places a chronological order on one's apprehension of the elements by introducing word-symbols one at a time. Even when the actual event is instantaneous, language extends the reproduction of the incident and thereby loses much of the effect. On the other hand, language can describe events that took hours, weeks, years, even centuries, in the same amount of time as it would take to describe a momentary event. The distortion of time may be understood by the receiver, and even implied by the sender; but the effect still exists. A person must learn to imagine the real temporal dimensions of a description. If an "hour" is referred to, he must summon his own experience of an hour, because that experience is not contained in the experience of the word itself.

Structural Distortion

Language is analytical, because it identifies smaller elements of the experience. In most cases it must be analytical. It cannot capture a complete experience (an important Langerian idea). Language only has access to certain elements of a meaning, and it must first break down an experience into these elements before it can simulate it. It begins with smaller "pieces" and builds them together;

and during this process certain judgments adhere to and subtly taint its descriptive reproduction. Words have their own connotations, which may or may not be directly relevant to the immediate attempt at meaning. Language must perform by using words capable of being used in many contexts, words that have histories and are generally associated with certain ideas in a receiver's mind. Words don't have "pure meanings," and like all symbols, are always somewhat imprecise.

Structural Influences

Discursiveness employs a grammar, which operates by a consistent set of rules. This grammar is not impassive and uninvolved, nor does it function strictly as a catalyst. It actively contributes to discursive meaning. A change of word order, for example, often changes the meaning (although more so in English than, say, Latin). "A killed B" has a drastically different meaning than "B killed A." And these grammatical rules, like discursive meanings, are arbitrary. They are empowered by an agreement existing within a participating community, rather than any inherent qualities or apparent relations of their own. They cannot be understood or "seen" physically or logically. In fact, rules of grammar have nothing to do with the meanings to which they contribute. For example, a certain grammatical principle behind "A killed B" has as much to do with that sentence's meaning as it does with the sentence: "the dog

chased the cat." In both cases the first item is the subject and the active party.

Verbal language is not the only form of discursive symbolism. Sign language and the Morse code are examples which also fit this category. These languages employ symbols with arbitrary meanings (some symbols of sign language have physical and motion-like similarities to their meanings, but they still function overall within a discursive system). They have a grammar, they break down experience sequentially, and their elements can be added to generate new meanings.[21]

Sometimes language expresses without being representative. A word like "oh" seems to have an emotional--but not a literal--meaning. Langer seems to place these sorts of meanings closer to those of nondiscursive symbols, because they connote feelings more than concepts.

This example identifies another aspect of discursiveness--representation. All discursive symbols represent their objects of meaning; they "stand for" them, which implies that their meanings are arbitrary. This type of representation does not require any particular qualifications for the job; it simply means that the task is being performed. It also implies a certain distance, or separation, from the symbol and its meaning. Once the meaning of a sentence is comprehended, the sentence itself

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21. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 82.

is no longer of any discursive value. The purpose of a sentence is to be a "path" to the meaning, and when that goal is reached, the path is no longer useful.

Constructions Versus Creations

Langer points out that the very fact a dictionary is possible indicates that discursive symbols can be defined by other discursive symbols. Discursive meanings that are represented by a single symbol can also be generated by groups of other discursive symbols. This ability is due to their working together in a "system." Words can also be added together in sentences to form new meanings--meanings which cannot be represented by a single word. This process is said to operate within a system because its elements are, and remain, discrete. Words do not fuse together into sentences; and sentences are not independent entities which transcend their word-elements. The meaning of the sentence is an apparent function of its elements. The way that words combine to form sentence-meanings is consistent and clear. And the grammatical principles by which this is done actually are part of the meaning.

This is not meant to imply that the way elements of nondiscursive meanings combine must therefore be abstruse and vague; the point being made here is that complex discursive meanings occur by combining--not transcending--their elements.

Langer discusses this aspect of transcending versus combining in relation to the concept of "creation." She says that creation occurs when the final product transcends the elements from which it was constructed.[22] A painting generates a virtual image which she calls an "apparition." When one sees the apparition, he no longer sees pigments on canvas. The virtual image is distinct from, and of a different substantial nature than, its elements. This does not occur when a cobbler constructs a shoe. The shoe is a structure whose character and value is determined by its elements--the various sections of leather and lengths of twine from which it is built. Whether or not the product transcends its elements is the acid test of creation. Creation does not imply a value judgment. It is possible to "create" a bad work of art. But the value of a creation is not measured by its elements; it is judged independently, as a unique entity. It is possible that a high quality creation may be produced from poor quality elements. This is not true of constructions. The quality of a crafted product, whether it is a house or a pair of shoes, is a result of the quality of its elements.

Relating this idea back to language, Langer seems to imply that because discursive symbols operate within a system, their meanings are constructed rather than created. However, she does not say this, and the problem is not that simple. There are some examples where groups of words seem

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22. Langer, Problems in Art, 28.

to have fused into single units, as with cliches, and highly used two-word (or more) phrases. Are their meanings created or constructed? Do they function discursively or nondiscursively?

Cliches and Metaphors

The phrase "all's well that ends well" seems to refer to a single meaning, as if the phrase were just one word. This is because it has become a cliche and is not generally translated word-for-word like a normal sentence. It is taken as a unit.

But before it was a cliche, it must have been read or heard like any other sentence. At that point it could be said to have had two meanings. The discursive meaning was generated grammatically from the elements (reverted here for clarity): "all that does end well, is well." Though the subject and object are general and abstract, still they are discrete elements with independent qualities being attributed to them. The sentence's grammar is being used as a tool to decipher its intention, and the meaning functions within a discursive process.

The second meaning was generated by the phrase in its function as a metaphor, having many connotations, and an ambiguous meaning. As a statement, it is a moral; i.e. it has an imperative tone. Yet it is equivocally optimistic. It implies, perhaps sardonically, that before things "end" they may not be so "well." Perhaps it is saying that the

end justifies the means. The significance of this aspect of its message, and the images it conjures, are different for different people.

Now that it has become a cliche, its discursive function has practically disappeared. The individual words seemed to have lost their status as independent elements, and the entire phrase now functions as a single entity, as if it were one word. Its meaning does not exist as one word (at least, not in English) and there is no synonym for it. But there are perhaps other phrases which generate similar effects. The phrase seems to function emotionally, like a word such as "oh." It is a response that expresses a general feeling about life rather than a specific idea. Instead of saying "all's well that ends well" one might say "that's the way things go" or "I'm sure it will turn out all right in the end." The literal meaning of these phrases is different, but their general affirmation is approximately the same.

Phrases like these seem to illustrate two principles: that language is not composed exclusively of discursive meanings, and that an evolution seems to be going on whereby meanings may cross over from one realm to the other. It is clear that even though the phrase being discussed functions as a unit, it is nevertheless dependent upon its discursive elements, and its meaning is accessible from them. It therefore functions, at least partially, within the discursive realm. And in its new role as a single unit,

even though much of the process of discursive translation is bypassed, its meaning has not changed from the original sense. A shortcut has simply been achieved due to its being used repeatedly. In fact, the meaning has become more blase' because less is demanded of the imagination. The meaning has been truncated to its least common denominator, and many of the original connotations have been lost.

Langer discusses this evolution of metaphors and explains why and how they seem to lose their "freshness" over time.

> In a genuine metaphor, an image of the literal meaning is our symbol for the figurative meaning, the thing that has no name of its own. If we say that a brook is laughing in the sunlight, an idea of laughter intervenes to symbolize the spontaneous, vivid activity of the brook.[23]

It seems that she purposely picked an example here which is strange and rare. It is not a cliche; it is not a phrase for which a meaning already exists, one that has been generated by popular media or everyday expression. This forces one to take the two concepts "brook" and "laughing" at their original, pure meaning. And since a brook cannot literally laugh, the metaphor forces one to imagine what it would be like if that could happen. The fact that no one has ever seen this happen, and that few have probably even thought about it, produces a freshness to the concept. Its meaning is ambiguous, and most people will get a different

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23. Langer, <u>Philosophy in a New Key</u>, 139.

image from the phrase. Most importantly, the phrase cannot be stated in any more explicit terms. No word exists which describes the concept of a brook laughing. Thus, this symbol has no denotation. Its meaning cannot be expressed in discursive terms. One cannot merely associate the symbol to an agreed upon concept; one must "figure it out," and in a sense invent the meaning, by actually imagining the situation that is described. This makes the metaphor conceptually vivid, and demanding of the imagination.

However, after metaphors have been used frequently over a period of time, they lose this freshness. In the form of a cliche, their meaning is conventional, relying primarily upon agreement in order to be understood, obviating the need to be newly imagined. This phenomenon is known as the "faded metaphor." "If a metaphor is used very often, we learn to accept the word in its metaphorical context as though it had a literal meaning there."[24]

Langer gives an example of how simple one-word metaphors pervade everyday language and eventually lose their metaphorical quality.

> If we say `The brook runs swiftly', the word `runs' does not connote any leg-action, but a shallow rippling flow. If we say that a rumor runs through the town, we think neither of leg-action nor of ripples; or if a fence is said to run around the barnyard there is not even a connotation of changing place. Originally these were probably all metaphors but one (although it is hard to say which was the primitive literal sense).[25]

24. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 140.

25. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 140.

Summary

Langer admits that discursive symbolization cannot be completely, exclusively distinguished from nondiscursive symbolization. This is especially true in areas where metaphors seem to become gradually codified.

But this does not detract from the main thrust of her argument, which is that two different types of symbolization exist and operate along separate principles. Discursive symbols are able to express meanings because their specific referents and grammar have been preassigned, and their rules of translation are based on logic rather than resemblance. In contrast to this, nondiscursive symbols express meaning in an entirely different way. This second mode of expression will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Nondiscursive Symbolism

Thought Versus Symbolism

Nondiscursive symbolism, as the name implies, does not conform to most of the discursive traits that have been discussed. These symbols have not been given preassigned meanings. Like a work of graphic or performed art, including gestures and facial expressions, they attempt to resemble in some way the feelings they express. Their meanings are not as precise as those of linguistic symbols, and therefore not as useful, pragmatically, for conveying specific information. But (Langer argues) they are capable of expressing certain kinds of meanings which language can only approximate.

She defends this idea by first presenting two common assumptions concerning thought and language (which she intends to refute):

> (1) That language is the only means of articulating thought, and (2) That everything which is not speakable thought, is feeling.[26]

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26. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 87.

Langer takes issue with the definition of thought as being limited to language. Though it is sometimes presumed that "human thought is but a tiny, grammar-bound island, in the midst of a sea of feeling,"[27] the creation and abstraction of nondiscursive symbols she believes is also a form of thought. It is an intellectual process which involves the mind. Analyzing the principles by which this sort of ordering and associating occurs is more problematical than analyzing the grammatical principles which govern discursive symbolization.

Her analysis presumes that nondiscursive symbols are incapable of expressing thought and can only express feeling. On the other hand, discursive symbols must express thought yet may also express feeling (like "oh").

Later, she expands on this distinction and allows for a certain amount of overlapping.

> There are two fundamental types of symbolism, discursive and presentational; but the types of meaning are far more numerous, and do not necessarily correspond to one or the other symbolic type, though in a general way literal meaning belongs to words and artistic meaning to images invoked by words and to presentational symbols.[28]

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27. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 87.

28. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 281.

Uniqueness

Nondiscursive symbols cannot be defined in terms of other nondiscursive symbols. One painting cannot "mean" the same as another, and two lesser paintings cannot be combined to achieve the same expressive sense of a greater one. Also, the elements of a nondiscursive symbol, for example the lines and colors of a painting, "are not units with independent meanings."[29] They mean nothing by themselves. Even if a horizontal line is identified as being the top of a hat, it could just as easily be the bottom of a box in another picture. Its functions depends on the specific picture, and it does not keep the same meaning outside of that visual context. Perhaps a better example would be where a horizontal line emphasizes the hopelessness of a barrier in one picture, but generates a feeling of tranquility and stability in another. Nondiscursive elements generate different feelings in different contexts.

But language operates on the assumption that word-meanings don't change with each different sentence. Athough sometimes this does happen, when it does it is the exception. If it happened too often, language would lose its effectiveness. This relationship regarding consistency of meaning is a major difference between discursive and nondiscursive symbolization.

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29. Langer, Problems in Art, 94.

Non-linearity

There is a difference between the way in which the two types of symbols present information temporally.

> Visual forms--lines, colors, proportions, etc.--are just as capable of articulation . . . as words. . . . (The) difference is that visual forms . . . do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously. . . . Their complexity . . . is not limited . . . by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an apperceptive act to the end of it.[30]

In other words, nondiscursive symbols present all of their information at once, and not sequentially like language.

Ineffability

Nondiscursive symbols are said to express "ineffable" meanings that fall "between words", or require capabilities beyond those of grammar, or are of a substantial nature that is not compatible with discursive form. Langer gives a description of what those types of meanings may be like:

> The actual felt process of life, the tensions interwoven and shifting from moment to moment, the flowing and slowing, the drive and directedness of desires, and above all the rhythmic continuity of our selfhood, defies the expressive power of discursive symbolism. [31]

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30. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 93.

31. Langer, Problems in Art, 94.

This is an attempt at describing directly, with words, what has already been said to be linguistically indescribable. In many ways it is similar to poetry, whose meaning often cannot be precisely measured. And yet the historical persistence of this type of expression provides at least a level of inductive proof of the existence of such meanings.

Langer goes on to identify various characteristics of nondiscursive symbols.

Proper Names

Another difference between the two types of symbols has to do with their specificity. Most words represent classes of things, and no matter how subtle or specific a verbal description is, it always contains some ambiguity as to what exact place, idea, or experience is being denoted. Proper names at first seem to be an exception, because they are capable of a degree of specificity not found in other words. However, they rely upon "convention" (says Langer) which implies that these names can be changed or given to other individuals.

But Langer, I think, does not go far enough in making these distinctions, and her argument that proper names rely on convention could be made stronger. Proper names are actually a separate category of words, and this can be demonstrated in two ways: first, by their forms alone--in the fact that they are capitalized.

Secondly, one does not need to memorize specific proper names in order to know if they should be capitalized or not. It is inherently clear by their nature that proper names are a separate category of symbol. When one says "dog" it is understood that this type of "naming" is general, and universal to English-speaking culture. There may have been a time when a child first began to speak that the idea of a dog having such a "name" was intriguing, like learning the rules to a new game. But after the novelty wears off, a person becomes unconscious of the idea that "dog" is a name which was once "invented" by someone for the purpose of symbolic communication. (Perhaps when one is in a foreign country and meets another person who speaks the same language, a conscious appreciation of mutual symbolic understanding may be temporarily rejuvenated. But ordinarily, improper nouns are not consciously viewed as being names.)

Proper names, however, do have this quality. They are also seen as less permanent because names of people, cities, even countries, can change. If a particular dog is named "Bowser," this means that for the present, according to a limited number of people, this specific name shall hold true. Implicit in the proper name is the idea that someone named it. If the dog was lost and someone else became its owner, that person could give the dog a new name.

Presentational Symbolism

A nondiscursive symbol is like a "name" for the feeling it symbolizes. But the name is unique. It cannot signify the meaning of another nondiscursive symbol. And since no other symbol can convey its meaning, it is a one-time occurrence of expression. The action of its expression is a unique event, and it means what is being expressed, or "imported," at that moment. In contrast to words, which are universals, a nondiscursive symbol is a particular--a specific entity whose full meaning extends no further than its immediate existence. In fact, according to Langer, not only are discursive symbols more general, they are incapable of ever being truly specific. It is only when they rely on nondiscursive symbols that specificity is ever actually achieved.Language's "connotations are general, so that it requires non-verbal acts, like pointing, looking, or emphatic voice-inflections, to assign specific denotations to its terms."[32]

Langer refers to this characteristic of nondiscursive symbols as "presentational symbolism," and she contrasts it with "discursive symbolism." But perhaps a better contrast would be with "representational symbolism." Words represent classes of things; nondiscursive symbols present themselves, and their meaning is their presentation.

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32. Langer, Problems in Art, 95.

Not all presentational symbols are art. Some "are merely proxy for discourse."[33] Maps and graphs, for example, are not discursive symbols; but "they express facts for discursive thinking, and their content can be verbalized."[34] They can be used pragmatically as tools to abstract literal meaning, and their elements--which are often discursive--usually express independent ideas. But those presentational symbols classed as art are "untranslatable; their sense is bound to the particular form which [they have] taken."[35] Even in poetry, which is composed of discursive symbols, the aesthetic value is found "in the way the assertion is made"[36] (for example, the alliteration, the sequence of images, the rhythm, etc.).

What does it mean to say that art is "untranslatable" and its sense is "bound" to its form? "A work of art does not point us to a meaning beyond its own presence."[37] In contrast, discursive symbols do point to meanings beyond their own presence or form.

> The word is just an instrument ... once we have grasped its connotation or identified something as its denotation we do not need the word any more.[38]

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33. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 260.

34. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 260.

35. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 260.

36. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 260.

37. Langer, Problems in Art, 133-134.

38. Langer, Problems in Art, 133.

Art cannot be separated from its meaning because its meaning is valuable and the work itself is valuable. When the meaning of a work is apprehended, the work is not then discarded; it is continually appreciated. "In a work of art we have the direct presentation of a feeling, not a sign that points to it."[39] Thus a work of art is a "single, indivisible symbol."[40]

This idea seems more apparent when it concerns only that art which does not employ discursive symbols, such as painting and sculpture. If one compares the process of aesthetic appreciation of a painting with, for example, a great quotation, it is clear that once the idea behind a profound sentence is grasped, the sentence itself can be discarded; but a painting continues to be valuable.

Organic Versus Systemic Forms

Artistic symbols have a characteristic that has been referred to as "organic." There are certain relationships between a work of art and its elements which function like those between a living organism and its "organs." An organ cannot exist alone. It has a limited function which can only operate with the mutual assistance of the other elements in the organism. The organ is dependent upon this system of consensus in order to survive and function. Similarly, a single line is dependent upon the rest of the

39. Langer, Problems in Art, 134.

40. Langer, Problem in Art, 135.

elements in a picture in order to carry out its aesthetic function. Both types of elements are designed to operate only within the context of a larger organization. There is a symbiotic relationship between the elements and the whole, because they are dependent upon each other. An organ performs a "vital" task, which means that if it were to cease functioning the entire organism would die. Artistically, every element of a work of art should be vital, i.e. absolutely necessary. Works which include redundant or unnecessary parts are of a lesser value.

Thus, an organic condition may be contrasted with a systemic one. Systems contain independent, substitutable units and are generally structured on a hierarchy rather than a consensus. Scientific procedures, which rely on formal logic and discursive language, operate within systems. Art symbols function in organic environments.

The principles which have been considered so far illustrate the basic characteristics of this dual model of symbolic expression. The next chapter shall attempt to clarify and further develop these concepts by applying them specifically to the artistic genre of drama.

Chapter 4

Symbolism in Dramatic Art

A dramatic text presents a unique problem in relation to the two types of symbolization being discussed. As a work of art, it is a nondiscursive symbol according to Langer's criteria. And yet, unlike most paintings and sculptures, a text is composed of words--discursive symbols. Somehow, both types of symbolization are operating to produce a creative expression. Yet it is not immediately apparent just how this is taking place. Specific examples of each type of symbol need to be identified, as they are found in a dramatic context, so that the ways in which they produce meaning can be analyzed.

Langer discusses drama as an individual genre in a chapter called "The Dramatic Illusion" (in _Feeling and Form_). Without distinguishing between performance and text, she says that drama is "a special poetic mode" whose primary illusion is that of a "virtual history." Her main argument is that a drama creates a feeling of destiny, a sense of the future encapsulated in the present. She says this is what distinguishes it from other arts and creates a high level of

interest in the viewer. But she does not apply very much of her theory to the dramatic genre.

Terminology

There is some ambiguity in the terms of this discussion which is partly intentional and partly due to the limitations of the language. For example, "expression" is an intentionally general concept applied to both signs and symbols. It roughly refers to their communicative ability, without precisely defining the process. How this phenomenon takes place, and how it differs in various circumstances, is a broad issue which this entire paper only partially addresses.

"Signification," on the other hand, implies a sign as its source. When a symbol "signifies," it does so by way of its secondary role as a sign. For example, Cyrano's nose is a dramatic symbol that also signifies the use of a large amount of stage makeup by an actor. It cannot, however, express many of its fuller meanings by signification alone.

The meaning of "dramatic symbol" is also an important issue. If this refers to a particular class of symbol, then what is meant by "dramatic?" This, again, goes far beyond the scope of this paper; but it may be valuable to clarify some basic assumptions which form part of the groundwork for the analysis that follows.

It is often assumed that drama, whether is occurs in fiction, on the stage, or in real life, contains some sort of conflict that is not immediately resolved. Genuine conflict involves at least two opposing purposes, or points-of-view, which appear to be equally valid.

Since there is a natural tendency, in many realms of life, to seek equilibrium and resolution, the open-endedness of a dramatic situation makes people more alert and piques their senses to gain the fullest possible control of their faculties, in order to "solve" this problem. The fact that a dramatic symbol or moment is unsolved and ambiguous makes it intriguing. And a closer analysis of it becomes an examination of a <u>question</u>, rather than of an answer. Therefore, in this sense of the term, physical works of art which seem ambiguous and paradoxical, and even mind-teasing mathematical problems dealing with the seemingly fantastic properties of infinity, are "dramatic."

However, for many the term implies some sort of gesture and/or exaggeration. As a symbol, a gesture is less precise than an individual word, but it has the dual nature of communicating information about the expressor's character and feelings as well as the content of the message. Often the two types of knowledge are merged in a way that is ambiguous, yet fascinating.

But not all gestures are dramatic. Usually there needs to be some sort of exaggeration. Comic gestures are often based on a seemingly rational idea which "logically" leads to one that is crazy. When simple gestures like pointing and waving are done on a stage, they are usually enlarged and overemphasized in order to be clearly understood from the back row of the theatre. Again, these expressions pique the senses by being extreme, and in this way become dramatic.

When a symbol is dramatic, there seems to be an urgency in its communication. There is something about the symbol which makes it stand out from the context or environment in which it occurs. This environment could be called a "status quo."

The status quo is composed of tradition and stability. It has been generated over a period of time by the experiences of a community, and is a criterion for distinguishing between what is normal and abnormal, or what is mundane and dramatic. It views life skeptically, providing rational explanations for most symbols and experiences. Therefore, in order for a symbol to be dramatic it must somehow challenge the status quo by offering a creatively new insight on an old situation, or distinguishing an entirely new one. It is a product of the relationship, and that relationship is a function of the symbol <u>and</u> its environment.

Every environment or status quo, in spite of its appearance of stability, is incomplete. There are needs not being satisfied. They may be feelings which have no expression, assumptions which are untrue, or important features that are continuing to be unrecognized. When a symbol points this out, it poses a serious challenge to the status quo. Einstein's theory of relativity was dramatic. The discovery at the end of World War II of the Nazi massacres was also dramatic. Events like these alter one's perception of reality, creating a new status quo which is closer to the truth. They make people realize that their assumptions--which were considered to be stable--are now unstable.

There are, of course, various manifestations of dramatic symbols, and they need to be analyzed on a specific basis in order to identify some of their more subtle characteristics.

Gesture

Let us begin distinguishing the two types of symbols, as they pertain to drama, by comparing the expressive nature of a simple gesture with that of a written word. Suppose a foreigner who did not know the native language was trying to tell a police officer that "a tall man hit a short woman." With several gestures he could probably indicate the concepts "man," "tall," "hit," "short," and "woman" by illustrating them physically. For example, "tallness" could

be indicated by reaching over his head and holding his palm horizontally. "Hitting" could be communicated by punching one fist into the other hand. Or he could "hit" his own face and recoil from the blow, visually accentuating the action's expressiveness.

These symbols, which are nondiscursive (if they are not an accepted vocabulary of sign language), present their meanings by enacting attributes. They "look like," i.e. are semblances of, their meanings. As communicative tools, they have certain drawbacks in comparison to normal words. They are ambiguous and therefore less reliable. Also, they may be more time-consuming if a series of movements is required to symbolize the meaning of a single word. Perhaps the most serious problem is that their effectiveness is a function of the skill of the expressor. The speaking of words does not require any special skill, and even if one pronounces a word perfectly its meaning is not enhanced beyond that of a merely adequate pronunciation. But when trying to communicate with gestures or other nondiscursive symbols, the ability of the signifier (person) has a lot to do with how close the symbol comes to expressing the particular meaning intended.

On the other hand, nondiscursive symbols have certain capabilities which are beyond those of words. They express subtle aspects of meaning, such as (from the previous example): where on the face she was hit, how hard the blow was, and what was her reaction. A talented mime artist

could probably portray the feeling of the incident with greater expressiveness, and also more efficiently, than a detailed report. If the event happened quickly, the mime's simple gesture would be a closer representation than a lengthy explanation. Just as a picture says a thousand words, a nondiscursive symbol has the ability to express certain elements of meaning much faster, and with greater detail.

Gesture is a primary signal of a dramatic performance. In an unperformed text, it is implied. The text carries the seed, but not the manifestation, of this type of nondiscursive symbol. The text, then, is primarily a set of discursive symbols which work together to create discursive and nondiscursive meanings.

Isolating discursiveness

When one tries to isolate either one of these functions, certain problems occur. It may seem that the way in which words express literal meanings in a dramatic text is not fundamentally different from how they express meanings in any other context. Is there a difference between the literal function of words in a drama, and words in a newspaper, or on a bulletin board, or heard on the radio?

Certainly there is a difference, because words are not accidents of nature. They are the product of some source of intelligence. One is aware of a difference between information received through a newspaper, or heard from an acquaintance. In fact, one is usually aware of which newspaper or acquaintance is disseminating the information, and this knowledge influences the apprehension of meaning. Even if one discovers written material out in some desert with no idea as to the source, certain assumptions will automatically exert influence. One wonders, for example, what was the source of the writings, and if that source could be useful or dangerous. It is not possible to experience language as being merely words, without having some notion as to its origination. The source produces implications of its own.

And yet, this influence on meaning is not discursive; It is not included in the standardized principles of grammatical and semantic agreement. Furthermore, this influence cannot be entirely separated from meanings which are being translated discursively. Even though it seems likely that, in their literal function, words mean the same thing in every context--i.e. in newspapers, bulletin boards, everyday conversation, plays, etc.--there is no way to know for sure, because the discursive function cannot be completely isolated from nondiscursive influences.

The Signs of a Rose

Before dealing with specific dramatic symbols, the distinction between signs and symbols needs to be clarified. To do this, an example will be used which is neither discursive nor artistic, but rather occurs in nature and is expressive: a rose.

One could say that a rose is a sign of life; in other words, it is evidence of a living thing. A second example of it functioning as a sign could occur if it was seen being carried by tourists leaving a park: it would be a sign that they visited the rose garden. In a third example, a secret agent could instruct another agent to wear a rose in his lapel as a sign of who he is.

All of these cases are a code of some sort. They rely on previous knowledge to have meaning. Hence Langer would agree that all signs are, like discursiveness, a function of a code.

The code of signs is not always as literal as it is for language. It is not necessarily pre-agreed upon. But the code utilizes bits of information, and logic, to generate assumptions or conclusions. If one sees a tourist carrying a rose, and logically relates that perceived fact with other known facts-- that the park contains a rose garden with the same type of roses, and that there are few other sources of fresh roses in the vicinity--then it can be logically deduced that the tourist probably visited the garden. This

new meaning could not have been reached if the component bits of information did not exist, or if there was no way to logically relate them. This illustrates the "code" of signs. When a thing is defined as a sign, this is a description of a function it has. But nothing is only a sign; a thing has physical properties and purposes that have nothing to do with its being a sign. Also, it cannot signify only one meaning. One cannot say that something is a sign, and that is all; like the rose, it can be many signs, depending on the context. So a sign is a particular function, and it is not exclusive to an individual item.

But symbols, on the other hand, can signify more than one meaning. They do so and still remain being the same symbol. This is a major difference between the two.

If a rose is a sign of life, this means that its existence indicates that life was present. It is like proof, in the form of a fact which has just been divulged. It says "life was here, because if it weren't I couldn't exist."

But when a rose is a symbol of life, it stands as a manifestation or representation. It says "for this moment let us imagine that I am life, all of life." Whereas in its function as a sign it gives specific information, in its function as a symbol it "symbolizes." Symbolization is a general, rather than a specific, way of expression. And though a rose may have a sign as a function, when it symbolizes, the rose itself is the symbol.

As with all symbols, discursive symbols can also be signs. The words in a book are all signs that printing has been invented. They are signs that the writer spoke English, and that his work was published. But in addition to these significations, the words are also symbols. "Deer" stands for, or symbolizes, a certain four-legged animal. It does so in a very general way, without imparting any specific information about the animal. It gives us no facts. It presents itself like a mathematical variable which has no value, but has the capability to be given one in a specific context.

From signs, to discursive symbols, the next step is to nondiscursive symbols.

Signs rely on a code of commonly held information and logic. Discursive symbols rely on a pre-agreed upon code of rules and meanings. If nondiscursive symbols rely on any code, it is unlike either of these two codes. Codes produce meanings which can be specified. Signs give specific information, and discursive symbols stand for specific things. But nondiscursive symbols express feelings. Once a feeling is described, linguistically or in reference to its significations, it has been reduced to a code of signs or discursive symbols. But the meaning of a nondiscursive symbol cannot be disassembled without it being altered. It is a unique, inviolable entity. Although it may contain parts, those parts are related organically, not systemically, to the whole. In this sense, perhaps they

cannot be classified as actually being "parts," because if they are separated from the whole their function ceases to exist, and the whole becomes something different as well.

Langer would agree that any analysis of a work of art is a separation of a part, and any meanings which ensue fall into an entirely different domain of expression. This is not to say that analyzing art is not valuable. But it does mean that a work of art can never be truly, fully analyzed. The meaning of art transcends analytical meanings. The only complete definition of a nondiscursive symbol is itself.

The Glass Menagerie

In Williams' play of the same name, the glass menagerie itself provides a series of signs that express information about Laura, who she is and how she feels.

It could be said that glass is a sign of fragility because it breaks so easily; and Laura, of course, is fragile socially and physically because of her handicap. It is logical that she would take up a hobby which does not demand physical or social activity. The collection is a sign of what she has been doing with her life.

Since the collection is situated in a public area, it is a sign that the entire household is aware of her hobby and at least tacitly supports it. The collection limits the kind of activity which can take place in the room; too much horseplay could cause an accident.

One assumes that each item costs enough that it indicates what Laura chooses to spend her limited allowance on. Rather than shop at a bustling department store for popular, fashionable items, she peruses slowly down the aisles of a quiet glass store, next to old women who have similar collections. The collection is as much a sign of what Laura does not do, as what she does. It makes other possible activities unlikely. It is essentially a passive, adult hobby, usually considered boring by young people, indicating that a part of Laura has grown up too soon.

In addition to being a series of signs, the glass menagerie is a symbol. This fact is apparent, first of all, by its being the play's title, which places it at the forefront of the audience's attention and begs the question "how does a glass menagerie reflect the themes of this drama"? Yet even if it were not the title, its symbolic function would soon be identified by the similarity in its fragile nature and the emotional condition of Laura. In this capacity, the glass collection stands for a feeling or situation, rather than gives specific information.

For example, on one level it stands for Laura. The collection must be cared for and protected. Once a piece in the collection is broken it cannot be fully repaired; so there is a brittle, ephemeral nature of each piece which generates an overall insecurity. Similarly, Laura is being sequestered at home with the same unchanging set of thoughts and hopes to protect. In getting through life, she

metaphorically dusts herself off and waits for her value to increase.

On another level, it stands for the condition of the whole household. It is a group whose members are each frozen in their single, characteristic stance. Their value and identity is defined by their limitations. No matter what precious substance they may aspire to, they will always be mere glass. These elemental facts seem to obliquely reflect the condition of the characters' lives, too.

There is a duality about the symbol in that it seems so harmless, even something to be mildly proud of, and yet it is also insidious, and perhaps most of all, very, very sad. It is this sadness, which cannot be precisely located, that the glass menagerie seems to symbolize most. As animals they are more endearing than, say, crystal glass, or prisms. Yet they are hardly valuable. Instead, they are items treated as if they were valuable. There is a superficial nature to them, like fake jewels. By requiring a lot of maintenance, they have the negative traits of expensive, ornate items. But unlike them, they are not an appreciating investment. When valued by market forces, they are barely worth saving. Laura, too, is not highly valued by society. And yet she cares for her little animals and treats them how she wishes that she would be treated and valued.

So in its function as a symbol, the meanings generated by the glass menagerie are more subjective and varied than those of signs. Signs express specific bits of information based on circumstances and, often, common sense. But symbols try to empathize and take on the characteristics of what they are representing. Through signs, the glass menagerie gives information about Laura and the play. But as a symbol, it tells who she is by "being" her.

Cyrano's Nose

One outstanding example of a dramatic symbol is Cyrano's long nose. It is not discursive, since it is not an element of some pre-defined code. Its meaning cannot be determined precisely--it has a subjective effect on the audience. But its symbolic power is far-reaching, evidenced by the play's ability to continue eliciting strong empathic feelings from modern audiences.

Cyrano's nose is his Achilles heel. On a character with such a magnificent set of honorable qualities, it is the one flaw which has made him so vulnerable that his whole life seems to be run by his feelings about his nose. The most prominent of features, it cannot be hidden from others. It seems to be in the one place which hurts his pride the most.

As a dramatic symbol, it stands for all fatal flaws. It reminds the viewer of his own greatest obstacle to self pride, whether for him it is a different physical blemish, a debilitating attitude, or the memory of a tragic experience. It demonstrates the irony of how seemingly minor things can take on great importance, while a host of strengths can be debilitated by a single, strategically-placed vulnerability. This general form is often the basis for tragedy.

The nose by itself does not make up the complete symbol. It is the nose and Cyrano himself, the symbol and its context, which work together to generate the full meaning. The symbol functions within a particular set of circumstances. Under those circumstances (for example, Cyrano's other qualities, how he feels about his nose, what it eventually does to him, etc.) the nose has ramifications and produces consequences. The symbol is fused with the character and the events of the play, and only in this context is it empowered to produce its full dramatic meaning. Langer would say that this symbol is organically related to the play as a whole. Its meaning would be diminished and truncated if it tried to operate by itself, outside the particular dramatic context. The two are intertwined, and both must exist to create the complete semantic effect.

The symbol is not powerful, as are discursive symbols, because of its ability to identify a particular feeling. The feeling it alludes to is subjective, and its representation of that feeling is admittedly vague. But it is a powerful symbol, and its power stems from its ability to allow a feeling to be recognized. Langer would say that its "rule of translation" makes the feeling apparent. Most people are able to translate the significant relationship of this symbol's elements into the content of their own lives. They empathize--not with Cyrano himself, because he is not entirely aware of how his life is being controlled--but with his situation, with the struggle of his life within its circumstances. Just as his effectiveness was limited, most viewers have seen their own effectiveness minimized by seemingly minor vulnerabilities. Cyrano's nose is an apt, and thus powerful, symbol of this particular life phenomenon for many reasons: it is physical, permanent, located on the face (which is the focalization of beauty, expression, and thus pride), un-hideable, and on Cyrano it undermines the nobility of his other fine qualities. Most people recognize the effect of these particular circumstances existing in the same place, and are able to see a parallel to their own lives. This is why the symbol has endured as a powerful vehicle for dramatic expression.

Ultimately, Cyrano's nose (Langer would argue) is a symbol of itself. Although people in the audience may generate feelings in accordance with what is being portrayed by the play, these feelings are personal and unique. Everyone is going to have his own slightly different meaning. This is why all works of art are, to a certain extent, ambiguous.

Therefore Cyrano's nose does not stand for the audience's feeling. It stands for itself. The play is not saying to the audience "you have this feeling, and this is what it is like." Instead, it is saying "here is a symbol of a feeling. The symbol is available for you to compare and contrast, empathize, sympathize, or even ignore." Cyrano's nose is not anyone's problem except Cyrano's. It may be similar to other people's problems, and experiencing it may be somewhat edifying and enlightening for them. But it does not exist for those purposes. It does not, first and foremost, express how other people feel. It expresses how Cyrano feels, and that is all.

This chapter has attempted to develop certain concepts by relating them to several famous dramatic symbols. In the next chapter, a specific passage from Hamlet will be analyzed in depth, in order to test how well Langer's model covers a range of meanings which can be abstracted from Shakespeare's text.

Chapter 5

A Specific Analysis

In the following quotation, Hamlet addresses Horatio with four lines of poetry. It is a key point in the play. The king has just finished watching Hamlet's play-within-a-play, and he then incriminates himself by rushing off while remarking: "Give me some light. Away!" This quotation is Hamlet's next statement.

> Why, let the strucken deer go weep,
> The hart ungalled play:
> For some must watch while some must sleep;
> Thus runs the world away.[41]

This quote shall be analyzed from four points of view corresponding to four different ways of expressing meaning: discursive symbolism, signification, nondiscursive symbolism, and nondiscursive influences on meaning. Under each category, the words in the stanza will be dealt with in their original order.

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41. William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Thirteen Plays, eds. Otto Reinert and Peter Arnott, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978), act 3, sc. 2, lines 240-243.

Discursive Symbolism

The first word, "why," is almost nondiscursive in its use here. Like exclamatory expressions such as "oh!," it indicates a feeling or orientation of the speaker, rather than refers to a specific entity. In this grammatical construction it is a cliche, a lead-in to the rest of the sentence. Its primary meaning is more properly discussed under the category of nondiscursive symbolism.

The main part of the first phrase, "let the strucken deer go weep," is a command meant to be understood metaphorically. Discursively, it is imploring the listener to allow a singular deer which has been (assumedly recently) wounded to go off by itself (or at least leave present company) to cry, most likely as a result of its wound. The word "the" singularizes "deer"; without that article, its number would be ambiguous.

The explicit meaning of this phrase makes little rational sense given the present context, which is nowhere near a place where any deer would be found. But it is fairly clear that the deer is a metaphor for the king. The translation from metaphor to reality is a rich source of meaning, but not discursive meaning. However, the actual point of the statement still seems to be clear enough to be discursive: Hamlet is telling Horatio not to stop the king, to let him go away. Hamlet could have directly said: "let the crestfallen king go and have his cry." This would have

been an adequate substitute, discursively; but the metaphor adds a nondiscursive element which develops the idea further.

The next part of the statement assumes the same verb: (let) "the hart ungalled play." It is a continuation of the previous metaphor. A hart is a young male deer, a reference to Hamlet, as opposed to the "strucken" king. "Ungalled" means (to be) "without exasperation." In contrast to the previous deer, this one is without anxiety, playing rather than weeping, and young, as Hamlet is younger than the king.

The first word of the next sentence, "for", often indicates equivalence, conjoining a reason or cost to an event or item. Here it connects the two main statements of the entire phrase, offering the second one as a reason for, or at least a parallel phenomenon with, the first. The sentence is "some must watch while some must sleep." This again creates two contrasting metaphorical images. Instead of two deer, it identifies those who watch and those who sleep. The description of these two types of people is minimal, and their relation to the current context is not obvious.

The two entities are not opposites, though the sentence's structure seems to imply that they are. For example, Hamlet could have said "those who watch and those who look away"; or "those who stay awake and those who sleep." But he did not, and the oblique contrast obscures the image.

Because of what has preceded this statement, one assumes this new idea is related to the previous one. Perhaps the strucken deer cries itself to sleep, while the playing hart, which is more active, watches. This metaphor will be further discussed later on.

The final phrase completes the second sentence: "thus runs the world away." This is the most ambiguous phrase out of the four. The image itself does not make discursive sense because a world does not ordinarily "run"; at least, not the way a deer runs. When one speaks of the world running, it usually either concerns rulership ("money runs the world"), or something between rulership and time ("it would be nice to sleep in every morning without going to work, but that's not how the world runs"). This second sense has to do with operational procedures and hierarchies. For example, one may speak of running a country or an organization. In this context, "the world" is considered abstractly, referring to society or nature as a system. It conjures an image of the mechanics of life processes, rather than one of the actual, physical planet itself.

However, "runs... away" seems to indicate a physical action. Animals and people run away. The inclusion of "away" creates the image of a planet on all four legs dashing across space.

Any further discussion of this meaning, like the others, must go beyond the discursive level. The literal meaning of "thus runs the world away" is vague, and so is its connection with the other meanings currently being expressed.

Signs

Although most of the signs of this stanza provide information about the speaker, Hamlet, one could back up and analyze more fundamental signification; But this type of information conveys assumptions that have little to do with the artistic meanings being considered here. For example, it could be said this phrase is a sign that Shakespeare knew English. The physical appearance of the writing signifies that printing has been invented. We know that Hamlet was familiar with deer and presumably understood the meaning of each word he uttered (if a particular word was misused, it could also be a sign that he did not understand its meaning).

There is probably a lot of basic information being signified, but the more pertinent question is "what does this stanza signify about the play, its characters, and the intent of the author?"

Starting again with the first word, the use of "why" signifies that Hamlet was speaking informally, which in turn signifies he was on friendly terms with Horatio and was feeling no immediate threat from the king. Shakespeare

could have omitted this almost superfluous word without much change to the meaning. The fact that he did not could be said to indicate he explicitly meant to create an air of informality. But another possible reason is that he primarily needed an unaccented syllable to start the phrase (meter will be discussed later).

The reference to "strucken deer" seems to be a hunting image, which is a sign that Hamlet had experience as a hunter, and he assumes that his listener, Horatio, did too. This is likely because it was common for young princes to be hunters. It also clarifies the image, because Hamlet is recalling a memory, one hunter to another, with Horatio, rather than inventing a metaphor from nothing.

The words "hart" and "ungalled" are signs of a fairly academic, yet medieval, vocabulary. The words are arcane, yet apt. A lesser mind might have simply repeated the word "deer." The appropriate timing of this remark is also a sign that Hamlet was an intelligent character.

The fact that Hamlet is comparing the king with a strucken deer--a wounded, passive vegetarian--is a sign that Hamlet does not fear the king. He is, in fact, feeling cocky. This is reinforced by the informality of his phrasing, and also the context of the situation: the king has just been caught off guard.

The use of the words "for" and "thus" seem to put the remark's form into that of a proverb, an imparting of wisdom, or a foretelling of the future. This is a sign that Hamlet has a high opinion of himself at the moment. He speaks as if he is a knower of the truth and others should listen respectfully. Yet, the ambiguity of this sentence is also an indication of a lack of clarity in Hamlet's mind. It reveals him as a dark philosopher; one who is only half able to articulate his thoughts. This subtle sign foreshadows what later becomes a major characteristic of his personality--his madness.

Nondiscursive Symbolism

When Hamlet tells Horatio to "let the strucken deer go weep," he is creating an image that has elements which correspond to elements of the immediate situation. Both contain a character who has been smitten (either emotionally or physically) and is running off. It is therefore clear that the deer stands for the king. According to Langerian analysis, this correspondence must be "abstracted" along the lines of a particular "rule of translation." There is a similarity between metaphor and reality which is recognized by the listener.

Once the similar elements are noticed, then the metaphor no longer needs to be abstracted; instead, it starts determining on its own how the situation shall be defined. For example, it is not necessary to try to

abstract certain deer-like qualities which the king may or may not possess. Hamlet, by the very act of expression, is applying these qualities. Instead of merely pointing out similar attributes, Hamlet is calling the king a deer as an insult.

Therefore, there are two forces by which the metaphor is related to reality. The force of abstraction originates in the listener, affecting how he will actively perceive a symbol. The second force originates from the symbol's creator. It continues the work of the first force, further defining subtle characteristics which by themselves would be vague. Once it is understood (by abstraction) that the deer represents the king, the listener then understands that Hamlet is calling the king meek, harmless, afraid of small noises and strange smells, as one who survives mainly on his ability to run quickly away from danger. There does not need to be any evidence of similarity in order for these aspects of expression to be recognized.

The king, in a sense, was defeated by Hamlet when he revealed his guilty feelings after seeing the play. To say that the deer should go and "weep" finalizes the defeat, making it clear that the animal was "struck" by something nefarious--not awe, or love.

"Let the hart ungalled play" completes this image by adding another character. There are now two deer, one young an insouciant, the other strucken and weeping. It seems there has been some sort of competition between the two

animals, and the victor continues playing while the loser runs off to lick its wounds. Again, the initial similarity is clear: the two deer are Hamlet and the king. The situation is then further defined with a winner as well as a loser, thus sharpening Hamlet's insult to the king. He has subtly made reference to his youth, calling the king not just a loser but an old loser, past his prime. The next generation, that of the hart, is taking over the reigns of leadership from its aging predecessors.

The image of the next line seems to be of a platoon on bivouac, with guards watching while the rest of the soldiers sleep ("some must watch while some must sleep"). It is not clear how this image relates to the situation. But its dual structure, like the previous metaphor, implies that a reference is again being made to the two characters, Hamlet and the king.

If Hamlet is the one who sleeps, then perhaps it is assumed that sleeping is the luxury of the ruling class, whereas the servant-guards must perform the unpleasant task of watching for the benefit of those who sleep.

On the other hand, Hamlet may be saying that he is the one who is awake, who has the presence of mind to defeat the king, who is aware of the truth about his father's murder; and, conversely, the king is deluding himself that he can beat Hamlet and also survive the pangs of his own conscience; hence he is asleep.

The main difference seems to be in the interpretation of the word "must." If watching is simply a task that a servant "must" do, then Hamlet is comparing the king to a servant, which is another insult. However, ambiguity then comes about in the second "must"--why must those of the leisure class sleep? If he had said "some must watch while others sleep," this first interpretation would be the most likely. The inclusion of the second "must" obfuscates the intended meaning. It is possible that the word was included mainly to provide an unaccented syllable, thereby completing the line's metrical rhythm.

Another interpretation of "must" is that Hamlet is speaking rhetorically, proverbially, making a sagacious declaration. He could be foretelling the future, applying duties on two types of people. A concrete example of this would be if an officer was giving orders to his men, saying, that "some must watch while some must sleep." Hamlet could be speaking similarly, but philosophically, as if saying "some must live while some must die" to an army as it goes off to battle. By this interpretation, both "musts" are equal. They stand for the will of destiny, as if what he describes is somehow ordained by life or God.

Although both interpretations are valid, the first is perhaps more likely because Shakespeare seemed to be inclined toward the use of concrete references of images which were in vogue during his time period. However, if

this is assumed, then the second "must" is primarily for the purpose of fulfilling the meter.

The last line is the most ambiguous ("thus runs the world away"). As mentioned earlier, it could allude to the way the world runs operationally, or to an image of the planet scampering away like an animal. Structurally, the line is organized to be a conclusion to the previous one. Because some must watch while others are allowed to sleep, the world therefore "runs away." Certainly the meaning is extremely vague, and perhaps is meant primarily to be an indication of Hamlet's oncoming madness. It is possible that a correlation is being made between the world and the king, both of whom are running away. But this seems unlikely because there is no apparent point to that idea. It is also possible that the world represents those who are mentally "sleeping" and not facing the awful truth which Hamlet alone must bear. In this sense, Hamlet is saying that most of the world is avoiding the truth, running away, while "some must watch" (meaning himself).

In suggesting that the king is like a deer and a servant, Hamlet is not only insulting him but is invalidating a deeply entrenched status quo. The Elizabethans lived in a society based on a hierarchy that reached far into life's economic and cultural realms. The king was at the top of the physical plane of this great system. To challenge him was to challenge the system itself. Perhaps Hamlet was saying that, since the king must

fall, the entire world must "run away," leaving its present condition of security and order. If this is true, he is foreshadowing the chaos that ultimately takes place by the end of the play.

In analyzing nondiscursive symbolism, one must often consider more than the symbol itself. Calling the king a deer is only an insult because of certain conventions that exist in society. The metaphor assumes that Horatio and the real audience understand these conventions. As the most powerful citizen in a community, a king commands a great deal of respect. He is sometimes arrogant and often feared. Therefore, it is insulting to compare him with an animal that is harmless and skittish. If the conventions were different, and a deer was considered fearless like a lion, or a king was someone who was alert and listened well, then the metaphor would have a different meaning and not be insulting. Conventions like this are critical to the semantic functioning of most nondiscursive symbols.

Some conventions only clarify meaning. An example of this is the hunter's image of a "strucken deer." A non-hunter could probably figure out the metaphor's meaning. But to someone who has actually experienced a wounded deer in retreat, the meaning is understood sooner and is more vivid.

Nondiscursive Influences on Meaning

There are certain characteristics of this passage which are nondiscursive but not complete images by themselves. They include formal aspects such as the structure, punctuation, meter, alliteration, and rhyming scheme. Also, the uniqueness (or arcane-ness) of the language, such as Hamlet's use of the word "hart," also falls into this category.

A major structural characteristic of this stanza is that it can be divided into two lines of perfect iambic heptameter which rhyme. Just as the major idea being expressed has two elements (Hamlet and the king), and just as each sentence has two elements (the first describes two deer, the second discusses two ideas), the entire stanza can be divided into two metaphors. The first metaphor is of the deer. The second metaphor is an abstract, philosophical declaration which is being proffered as being a consequence of the first. This bifurcated structure reinforces the tendency to perceive and analyze the stanza's meaning in a dual way. The structure's effect is subtle, but it influences word meanings and the way the metaphors are related to one another.

Rhythmically, the two lines match perfectly. They both start on weak syllables. The first and third lines are four complete iambs, and the second and fourth lines are three. Both of the respective pairs rhyme: "weep" with "sleep," and "play" with "away."

Iambic heptameter presents a more even rhythm, with a stronger sense of finality at the end of a line, then does, for example, iambic pentameter. The latter is usually used with longer, more serious, poetic forms.

There is a natural tendency to hear musical and poetic rhythms in groups of eight beats (a standard musical piece in 4/4 time is composed of eight-measure lines built from eight-beat phrases). Iambic pentameter stops in the first beat past the middle (beat five), leaving a three beat rest that makes the entire rhythm more vague, but also more thought provoking. Iambic heptameter allows the phrase to continue right up to the next-to-the-last beat before the cadence, with only a one-beat rest. This makes each line's rhythm seem especially even and therefore easy to recognize.

The simplicity of the cadence is emphasized by using four beats plus three, rather than three plus four.

////		///(rest)
///(rest)	not	////

The most even-numbered phrases, those based on four or eight beats, are usually found in simple poems like limericks and nursery rhymes. Iambic septameter approaches this simplicity of rhythm. It gives the stanza a puerile

quality. Rather than attempting to be profound poetry, the passage is a simple, taunting rhyme, like what a belligerent young person might use to rile a competitor.

The nature of the specific words which rhyme seems to be mainly an indication of Shakespeare's talent as a writer. The first rhyme ends with a consonant ("weep" and "sleep"). The abruptness of words like these makes them poor candidates for finishing a stanza. They are better used internally, whereas the openness of vowel sounds as in "play" and "away" seems to make them more aesthetically appropriate for completing a rhythmic sequence. To end the stanza with "...eep" would seem less flowing.

What alliteration exists is not enough to call attention to itself. The 's' in "some must watch, while some must sleep" and the 'w' in "world," "away," and "weep" provide some degree of dramatic percussion in the stanza's enunciation. But there is probably not much more of these repetitive consonants than would occur naturally.

It is difficult to attribute specific meanings to many nondiscursive influences. Often they exist by chance or necessity, and may reflect the limitations of their medium more than specific ideas. They tend to operate in conjunction with the other modes of symbolism, either pushing the listener further toward the meanings already being expressed, or pulling him away from them.

Conclusion

By dividing the previous analysis into four categories, rather than Langer's two, certain characteristics become more apparent. For example, Langer speaks of nondiscursive symbols as individual entities, and yet at times seems to be describing nondiscursive influences on meaning. She does not make a clear distinction between the two, and this can make her language confusing. Although the two are aspects of the same phenomenon, they should be described separately. As an individual entity, a nondiscursive symbol, like a painting, can be compared to a discursive symbol, like a word. But once one begins to analyze the effect of these symbols, two different modes of description are required. There is no such thing as discursive influences on meaning, because discursive meaning is in a sense "digital" rather than "analog." The meanings click into place. One either knows what the word "sky" refers to, or does not. This is its denotation, and it does not concern facts about the sky or how it makes us feel.

But nondiscursive meanings are reached by various "influences." Like an analog signal these symbols attempt to mirror the reality of their referent--to give an impression of it--and their formal characteristics must work together. Since these characteristics are not symbols themselves, they should be discussed separately.

Langer does discuss signs as a separate category, but mainly to distinguish them from symbols. She almost leaves the impression that signs only apply to animal communication, and in humans are superseded by symbols. But signs, of course, function alongside symbols as a constant source of meaning. The information they provide is not the same as that of symbols or influences, and therefore they should always maintain a separate category.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this analysis, however, is that even though discursiveness plays a critical role in the expression of meaning, sometimes it plays a minority role. The strictly literal meaning of Shakespeare's stanza was, by itself, nonsensical. Only by relying on various conventions, cliches, other referential information, and the translation of metaphors, was its meaning able to be understood.

Normally, words are not utilized according to their literal meanings alone. The use of metaphors is almost unavoidable. Notice how many uses there are of words like "run" and "play." As language keeps developing and new meanings are needed (like to "run" a computer), an existing word may have its meaning expanded further. This tends to happen when a parallel exists between the new meaning and the original usage. For example, the idea of physically running came to be related to the idea of a machine running, which was then related to the general idea of a person making any machine run, including a computer.

This may seem ironic because language relies primarily on its preassigned meanings, while nondiscursive meanings are often considered as "icing." But the two modes must work together. They are both critical to the overall function of symbolic expression.

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