A Brief Analysis of Symbolism in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

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**Abstract.** In Kingston’s novel *TM*, the development of the plot or the thematic development is not explicit but implicit, which is tinted with unique postmodern colors. Readers can’t directly find out the answers that what they want to know, since these messages are not simply printed on the pages but hidden behind the author’s deliberate design, special layout, and unique stylistic skills, etc. The utilization of figures of speech also conceals Kingston’s unique stylistic writing specialty. In next part, through the shallow analysis of her choices of symbolism, we can partially touch on their functions in revealing the process of the developmental plot and the thematic development of the novel.

**Introduction**

By figures of speech we refer here to those rhetorical devices termed tropes in classical rhetoric. Tropes have to do with the way words are made to mean other than what they would normally imply, and therefore involve deviation from the ordinary and literal meaning of words; they are ways of making our language figurative. How figures of speech are best used will be of help to us not only in deepening our understanding of what we read, but also in appreciating more fully the finer points of a writer’s style. In the process, we might even learn to write better ourselves. Next let’s have a brief analysis of its figurative language in symbolism in order to catch a glimpse of its stylistic effect on the plot in the novel *TM* [2].

**Symbols of “Garden” and “Cigarette”**

The appearances of these two symbols of “garden” and “cigarette” run through the novel, which have close connections with the protagonist Wittman. To some extent, “garden” locates in an outstanding position to Wittman. At the beginning, he has survived in the real garden, in the climax of the novel; he has found out his artistic garden and in the end, he is going to establish his ideal garden. In his “garden”, he pursues his self-identity and realizes his self-identity. The stuff “cigarette” can be even viewed as his carry-on stuff and necessity. No matter where he is or what he does, it is always around him. The appearances of “cigarette” at different times reflect Wittman’s different inner-minds. Therefore, it also can be regarded as the mark, which can indicate Wittman’s changing-minds and his matured process. In a word, these two symbols serve the process of the plot development and convey the clue of the thematic development.

First, let’s have a look at the place of “garden”. At the beginning of the novel, in the first chapter, Wittman walks in the “Golden Gate Park” [1]. There, he meets with a lot of different people and see a plenty of different things. They include “an old white shopping woman”, “a pigeon and a squatting man, both puking”, “a man, continuously scolding a dog”, “an uncool family of F.O.B.”, etc [1]. In this garden, many unpleasant people and things appear in front of them. This means that this garden is his “real garden” at this moment and these sights also reflect Wittman’s immediate unpleasant minds in his heart upon this real world. Here, the “Golden Gate Park” is just like the real world around him. But later, we are lucky to see that our protagonist has gone out of the “Golden Gate Park”. “Golden Gate Park was wild today. I fought my way out. Lucky.” [1]

It’s lucky for our protagonist to find his way out of the wild park. It also marks that our protagonist begins to walk out of the perplexity and bewilderment in social reality at that time. It
also implies that a new gate of a garden is going to be opened for him. Here, along with being out of
the Golden Gate Park for Wittman, the plot of the novel has developed a little further, from the
phase of the cause of the plot into next phase. From now on, the plot has entered into its
developmental stage. “In all cultures, both in Eastern and Western, the garden is symbolically linked
with the idea of paradise.” [5] In Chapter Seven “A Pear Garden in the West”, our protagonist has
found out his artistic garden. In this chapter, our protagonist has created his own theater after his
enlightenment from the “Golden Gate Park” and he has done preparations for the performance on
the stage. He has communicated with Lance, Tana, Ruby, his aunts, Po Po and her husband, Nanci
and the Yale poet, etc. in order to invite them as actors in his theater. And in the climax of the novel,
his theater is showed on the stage; his artistic garden meets with the public. Then, his dream in
theaters has come true in such a paradise. In this paradise and in his “Pear Garden”, an
encompassing community has been shaped in which there are not only few chosen whites, but all
colors of people; not only western works, but Chinese classics; not only classic culture, but popular
culture; not only a great number of actors, but a lot of audiences and not only performances by
actors, but entertainments with audiences. All in all, his paradise is such a community, in which
there is filled with pleasure, freedom, equality, peace and harmony. Through the description of
Wittman’s “artistic Pear Garden”, Kingston expresses her hope again about getting rid of
discrimination and marginalization and finally setting up an ideal garden, which exists deeply in his
heart. From this moment on, an open ending of the novel is put before readers and an ideal garden
has been shaped in Wittman’s heart. Moreover, he must take his dream of the ideal garden into
practice. He should turn out the imaginary paradise into the real entity on the earth. What will
Wittman do next? What will all other people do? What will happen next?... These uncertain answers
are left for readers designed by Kingston.

Next, let’s take a look at the other important stuff for our protagonist Wittman. Cigarette and fire
signify the birth of life. Thus “cigarette” has significant meaning to Wittman, which can bring him
inspiration, courage, and hope in his life. Also because of this, “cigarette” has become Wittman’s
carry-on stuff and it has also become the clue of exploring Wittman’s inner-minds and moreover, it
has even become the proof of analyzing the process of the developmental plot of the novel. In
Chapter One, after watching a likely breathtaking cinema scene of suicide, readers can eventually
have a sigh of relief. Since the protagonist has returned to the earth, “he stepped over to a tree and
knock-knock on it, struck a match on it. Lit a cigarette” [1]. And when he “fought his way out of the
Golden Gate Park”, “he blew smoke hard between clenched teeth”. [1] At this moment, a puff of
smoking can function in soothing his nerves and tranquilizing his minds. Thus, the “cigarette”, here,
is the symbol, which means that Wittman has revived from this moment on. Here, this also indicates
that this part has pointed out the cause of the novel for readers. From Chapter Two “Linguists and
Contenders” to Chapter Seven “A Pear Garden in the West”, these parts are the developmental parts
of the whole novel. In the description of these parts, it is also clearly to see that Wittman always
keeps the “cigarette”. In each chapter of the novel, the traces of the “cigarette” can be discovered.
Throughout the whole party hold by his friend Lanci and his wife, Wittman keeps a “cigarette” on
his hand which can make him feel ease and cool. In his trip with Tana, he always keeps a “cigarette”,
which can help him overcome bewilderment and loss. When he is in the Unemployment Office, he
keeps his “cigarette” again to help him sense courage and power. When he prepares for his theater,
he also uses his money given by Po Po to buy “cigarettes”, which can provide him with confidence
and strength. All the symbols of the “cigarette” here are just Wittman’s megaphones of his inner
voices. Wittman is accompanied by the “cigarette” and by the vigor brought out of it. He advances
to his ideal step by step by keeping the “cigarette”. In the climax of the novel, through the entwined
“cigarette” smoke, Wittman seems to catch the thoughts and hopes of life. Just like stated before, he
has shaped his spiritual garden through his theater; however, he has to try harder to set up a realistic
garden which can stand steadily in the mainstream society of America. But this is such an arduous
task for himself, thus he has to rely on all the people who have the same feelings and experiences
with him. He has to convey this message to his fellows. Therefore, at the end of the novel, in
Chapter Nine “One-Man Show”, before his long monologue, he “lit a cigarette, smoked, and
straddled the chair” [1]. He absorbs the energy from the “cigarette” and after smoking the
“cigarette”, an open ending with uncertainty unfolds before him. Meanwhile, the open ending of the
novel also shows before the readers.

Symbolic Images of Movies and Theaters

Through the application of symbolic images of movies and theaters in *TM*, it’s possible for
readers to grasp the significance of this unique stylistic skill which functions in revealing the
process of the developmental plot and conveying the clue of the thematic development.

The movie industry, as a strong and powerful propaganda medium, is the dominating channel for
the public. Through this channel, the public can get to learn about different cultures, customs or
nations, etc. It expresses that Wittman is just in such a period, in which the movie industry has
appeared and it has begun to develop. Therefore, we can see a lot of movie names which come from
Wittman’s mouth. The frequent appearances of these movie names in the novel also reflect the
influence of them in Wittman’s minds and life. In the first chapter, Wittman invites his beloved girl
Nanci to have an appointment with him. When they are dating, Wittman has firstly introduced
himself in detail, even from his origin, etc. then; Nanci also speaks out one of her important
experiences related with movies. She has once taken an interview for competing for a show of a
movie. She has many advantages, such as perfect appearance and authentic English. Such being the
case, it’s only right and proper to select Nanci as an actress in that movie. While, the odd and
miserable fact is that she is eliminated. The reason is much weirder, just owing to her perfect
appearance and authentic English. To others, these two points are certainly real priority, however,
for an Asian American girl, they suddenly become her inferiority. Thus, at this moment, every Asian
American and every Chinese American with conscience must feel indignant and furious. Of course,
Wittman is just one of them. Therefore, when he hears Nanci’s situation, he has no hesitation to tell
her that he is going to create a theater for her. In the eye of western people, the images of Chinese
Americans are like this: no matter males or females, they all have ugly appearances and broken
English, even morally, they are cunning and crafty. Here, the movie symbolizes the western’s
prejudice towards Chinese Americans. They have firmly recognized them as the stereotyped images.
While, in Wittman’s belief, the theater created by him is the proper and practicable channel for the
western people to learn about Chinese Americans. Through this channel, their stereotyped opinions
on Chinese Americans will alter and convert. By this way, Chinese Americans can realize their
identity. In a word, movie is a channel against prejudice and theater is a community with
self-identity. With the development of the plot, Wittman’s belief on this is more and more strong. In
Chapter Six “A Song of Occupations”, after watching the movie *Cartoon*, Wittman deeply realizes
that it’s so difficult for him to enter into the mainstream society of America, because the society
operates just as the way which is identified by the whites. The mainstream of American society is
ripe with the whites’ social standards, principles and norms. In the movie of *Cartoon*, the image of
cartoon always and completely indoctrinates and persuades the job-seekers to behave as an
appropriate person, according to the whites’ recognized and accepted norms. While, for himself,
Wittman just discovers his inappropriateness and improperness. This also reminds him that he must
do something to deconstruct the stereotyped image of Chinese Americans in the eye of the white
people of America. Thus, in the climax, he puts his own “pear garden” in America to show before
the whites. Moreover, his theater not only disrupts the conventional norms by the performing of
actors on the stage, but subverts the conventional modes of appreciating movies by audiences which
has kept for such a long time. Wittman’s theater is a multi-national and multi-cultural community, in
which there is full of equality, harmony and peace. More significantly, his theater is not only the
stage for actors, but a carnival for actors together with audiences. In his one-man show, he calls
upon all the people with the same ideal to set up a harmonious, peaceful and diversified community,
in which there is the stage for them to find out their self-identity and realize their self-identity.
Conclusion

In this part, through a brief analysis of symbolism, it is a little bit easier for us to have a deeper understanding about Kingston’s first true novel *TM*. No matter what kind of stylistic skills Kingston selects, her final intention is to help her readers find out a clue to trace the process of the developmental plot and the thematic development of her novel. Kingston’s delicate commanding of her unique figures of speech better serves for reading and interpreting the novel by readers.

References


