

Oppression and Emancipation: Symbolism in *The Handmaiden*

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Imagery is the presentation and use of visual images and objects that are perceived through sight. In addition to character portrayal, visual elements, or known as symbols, are employed and emphasized throughout the film, enriching its themes and implications. In his essay “Non-verbal Symbolism in the Feature Film,” Ed Bakony states that “symbolism employed by filmmakers can serve as a bridge between feeling and thought, or between aesthetics and cognitions.” In this light, symbolism is as well a powerful tool to evoke a wide range of emotions and sensations.

With Park Chan-wook’s critically acclaimed masterpiece *The Handmaiden* as focus of discussion, this essay will examine how recurring symbols i.e. snake statue, cherry tree, ocean and land are employed to imbue the film with themes of gender oppression and emancipation of women.

I. Snake Statue: Male Power and Desire

The snake statue, symbolizing male dominance and desire, makes three significant appearances throughout the film. When Sook-hee, for her first time, opens the door to the reading room, Park Chan-wook uses a suffocating tracking shot to navigate through the narrow passageway. The camera eventually settles on Hideko and her uncle Kouzuki. Amidst the camera’s rapid movement, towering bookcases ominously flash by on either side, suffusing the atmosphere with an oppressive weight. Subsequently, the frame centers on Hideko, draped in pristine white and kneeling on

the ground, while her uncle, clad in austere black, regally occupies a chair. The uncle, noticing Sook-hee's approach, vehemently exclaims, "The snake! The snake!" This prompts the shot to reverse back to the door, revealing the black snake statue, its head poised upright as if slithering along on the ground, captured from a commanding top-down perspective. "The snake is the bounds of knowledge." In a swift cut, the frame returns to Hideko, who promptly releases the door's hand brake and shuts it, isolating Sook-hee from the reading room.

The evocative presence of the snake symbol, albeit brief, unleashes a visceral visual and emotional shockwave upon the audience. With the preceding shots effectively setting the stage, the film explores the heightened tensions surrounding class hierarchy, gender dynamics and the distorted nature of (sexual) desire. The snake, synonymous with its cunning and insidious nature, embodies the male indifference and oppression imposed by patriarchy. Through a wide shot that follows the passage through the reading room, the stark contrasts in character attire and poses visually encapsulate the vulnerable passivity of women, juxtaposed against the dominant and judgmental disposition of men. It thus serves as a social and mental reflection of the oppressor and the oppressed. In the following shot, the snake symbol emerges from the depths of the frame. Its form intentionally blurred notwithstanding, its "fleeting phantom" leaves ample room for the audience's imagination, creating an unparalleled sense of fear and suffocation. The cold and resilient material of the statue further symbolizes the relentless and unyielding nature of patriarchal oppression. When the aunt experiences a mental breakdown and tries to escape, the snake statue

acts as a haunting reminder, compelling her to retreat to her figurative cage and abandon any pursuit of freedom. It is only when Sook-hee smashes the snake statue that the collapse of patriarchy becomes symbolized, heralding the genuine awakening and emancipation of women.

II. Cherry Tree: Women and Destiny

The film also incorporates an emblem representing women and their destinies - the ever-blooming cherry tree. It is revealed in varied perspectives. During Sook-hee's first night at the house, Hideko awakens from a dream and tells her the story of her aunt, who hanged herself from a cherry blossom branch, her spirit lingering thereafter. Sook-hee gazes out the window, and the camera skillfully captures the sprawling cherry tree in the distance, casting an eerie and mysterious aura with its cold and subdued hues. Later, when Sook-hee walks under the tree alone in fear, the camera advances from her perspective, gradually ascending, presenting only swaying cherry blossom petals and branches in the frame, evoking the ethereal presence of the aunt's wandering spirit. As the plot continues, the blooming cherry tree reappears in Hideko's memory of witnessing the death of her aunt when she was a child, and her own desperate act of hanging from the same tree. Depicted through an array of distinctive shots, the ever-blooming cherry tree, defying the rules of nature, becomes a poignant symbol of the gradual withering of female characters, personified by Hideko and her aunt. This conflicting description seems to corroborate the uncle's recounted legend: this cherry tree has absorbed the soul of Hideko's aunt, forever rooted in that spot.

Different from the conventional symbolism associated with the cherry tree in East Asia, this cherry tree embodies male desire, death and the perpetuation of power dynamics that subject women to objectification. Originating from Japan, the cherry tree becomes a potent metaphor that intertwines with Hideko's destiny and the insatiable yearning for male dominance. After mother there is aunt, and after aunt there is Hideko. Women succumb to their tragic fates, yet desire persists unabated. Despite the aunt's harrowing demise, men, occupying the central echelons of power within the social fabric, continue to project their sordid sexual desires onto Hideko, ignoring her pain and anger, and transforming her into a "reader" like her aunt. The ever-blooming cherry tree represents a realm of desire conceived by men, simultaneously encompassing a generation of "readers" who find themselves helplessly entangled in their times, unable to break free from the grips of norms.

III. Ocean and Land: Oppression and Emancipation

Water and earth, two basic elements in nature, have long been utilized in East Asian historical works to symbolize femininity and masculinity. In this film, the ocean and the land become embodiments of gender traits, and the opposing forces of emancipation and oppression, freedom and confinement. The interplay of these elements is introduced in the very first shot of the film. In a classic symmetrical composition, the crashing waves dominate the left side of the frame, while the overgrown land occupies the right, separated by the cliffside driveway. In a later scene when Sook-hee first comes to the house, the same juxtaposition reappears on a byobu – a folding screen – displayed in front of Hideko's door. On the right side of the

byobu, a dimly illuminated full moon takes center stage surrounded by birds and branches. The traveling shot traverses Sook-hee's path, panning to the left side of the byobu, revealing the motionless sea. Park Chan-wook then applies a POV shot, which enables the audience to share Sook-hee's line of sight, as she observes the waves decorated on the byobu from a close distance. Suddenly, the waves begin to surge with motion on the byobu. Next the camera cuts back to Sook-hee, visibly stricken with apprehension. This sequence, characterized by fluid perspective changes, establishes a profound sense of audience engagement and heightens the eerie and melancholic atmosphere permeating the house. The transformation of stagnant water into tumultuous waves signifies the impact of Sook-hee's arrival, heralding the ultimate emancipation and freedom for Hideko, the occupant of the room.

Throughout the film, the land serves as a harrowing realm permeated by the condescending gaze and blatant malice of men, while the meaning of the water, representing women's freedom and liberation, gradually unfolds in the later stage of the narrative. A pivotal moment occurs when Hideko and Sook-hee board the count's boat, the camera momentarily captures a close-up of Sook-hee's hand immersed in the lake water. In that fleeting moment, a bird, another typical symbol of freedom, swiftly flies by, its shadow reflected on the lake's surface. At the end of the film, the lovers stand hand in hand by the boat, throwing the black gloves, symbolic of violence and pain, and the ring that represents bondage and exploitation into the water, delightedly move towards a new life. The land, fraught with deception and oppression within the male-dominated power structure, becomes a site where women endure immense

suffering. Conversely, the water becomes a realm of hope and redemption, when all the desperate memories and oppression gradually dissipate as the boat carries them away from the land.

In summary, *The Handmaiden* utilizes cinematic symbols to explore themes of gender oppression and female emancipation. These symbols intertwine throughout the narrative, creating a rich visual tapestry that evokes a range of emotions within the audiences.

Work Cited

Bakony, Ed. "Non-Verbal Symbolism in the Feature Film." *Journal of the University Film Association*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1974, pp. 34–38. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687249>. Accessed 18 July 2023.