

# **New Interpretations of Female Self-Mutilation Symbolism in Contemporary German Language Popular Literature**

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**Abstract:** Capturing and decoding literary symbols is a prerequisite for a profound interpretation of literary works. Throughout the history of German literature, a number of literary symbols have already acquired their usual set of meanings and universal, traditional paths of interpretation. Symbols related to women's topics and body writing, due to their close relevance to human bodily consciousness and self-knowledge, have demonstrated a variety of innovative meanings in literary works. Female self-abuse is a common theme in contemporary German-language popular literature, and symbols play an important role in the portrayal of women and the expression of traumatic memories. As typical symbols of the female body, “blood” and “wounds”, in contrast to traditional symbolism, have generated new interpretative possibilities and existential significance in contemporary German-language popular literature.

**Keywords:** Contemporary German Language Literature, Female Self-Mutilation, Symbols.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The understanding and grasping of semantic meaning, as well as the capturing and decoding of symbols, are the prerequisites for an in-depth interpretation of literary works. In the long history of the German literature, many literary symbols have already had their usual set of meanings, and the experience of interpreting these symbols has also formed a common and traditional path of interpretation. Contemporary German popular literature is developing rapidly, and the diversity of themes and writing styles provides the ground for the richness of literary symbols. In this paper, we are going to take the works of German contemporary popular literature with the theme of “female self-mutilation” as the scope of study, select some typical female body symbols, and analyze the interpretation possibilities and existential significance of these symbols by comparing them with the traditional symbolism.

## **2. “SYMBOLS” IN GERMAN LITERATURE**

Etymologically, the concept of “symbol” is derived from the ancient

Greek noun σύμβολον *sýmbolon*, meaning “mark, sign”. This term was later derived from the Latin word *symbolum*, from which the German concept of *Symbol* derives, meaning a pictorial sign with a certain abstract meaning. (Drosdowski, 1989) The definition of the concept of “symbol” has been debated in linguistic and literary studies: Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of *logos* as a branch of semiotics, emphasized the relevance of symbols to rules, arguing that symbols can only be understood by the receiver of the message within certain conventions (Drosdowski, 1989); while German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) argued that symbols in specific texts assume the uniqueness of meaning within a unified spiritual meaning, and that the shaping of their meaning is related to the reader's perception. (Drosdowski, 1989) The meaning to which a symbol refers is seldom unique, and symbols in literature achieve an expression of ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings through a simplified description of something. (Wetzel, 2011) As literary criticism continues to study and explore authorial intent and textual meaning, the interpretation of symbolism in contemporary popular literature needs to take into account the cultural associations and social contexts described in the text as well as the work itself.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the first to mention symbols in German literature. In his *Maximen und Reflexionen* (1833) he pointed out that all literary creations can be interpreted symbolically and that symbols have a “revelatory power” (*aufschließende Kraft*) (Homberger, 2000). The American literary theorist Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) developed Goethe's view that a work and every linguistic expression can be understood as a symbolic episode, which refers to the particular in the universal. (Homberger, 2000) In literary theory, the symbolic can be interpreted in a symbolic way. (Homberger, 2000) In literary theory, the concept of “symbol” is defined as a symbol that is used to refer to something else, but that also demands attention as an expression of itself. (Wellek & Austin, 1985) A symbol describes an individual element of a text (e.g., a fictional object) or a universal fact (e.g., an abstract correlation of meanings), and, as a polysemous signifier, symbols contribute to the poetic creation of inauthenticity through the literary expression of “discovery” rather than “invention”. The result of a poetic creation of inauthenticity. (Farguell & Roger, 2003)

The *Metzler Lexikon literarischer Symbole* (*Metzler Lexicon - Literary Symbols*) is a German-language study of literary symbols. The study regards the “intensity of the influence” of symbols in literary reception (*Wirkungsmächtigkeit in der literarischen Rezeption*) as a basis for judging

their inclusion in the study of literary symbols (Butzer & Jacob, 2008), which is expressed in terms of the frequency of their appearance in the text, their impact on characterization and characterization in the work, and their influence on the literary symbolism of the work. text, its importance for characterization and plot structure in the work, and its attention in literary criticism. The results of this study, which historically compiles and integrates the common symbol ontologies in German literature since the 18th century, show that the main feature of literary symbols is the realization of linguistic multiplicity. In addition, the study's findings on “blood” and “wounds” are regarded as a strong basis for the traditional significance of literary symbolism and provide a reference for the new meaning of symbolism in contemporary popular literature, which is the subject of this paper.

### 3. FEMALE SELF-MUTILATION AND BODY SYMBOLISM IN LITERATURE

The female figure has always been an important object of literary creation and study, and the issue of “trauma and self-abuse” has received much attention in the fields of literature, psychology and sociology since the twentieth century. In addition to observing the religious or aesthetic significance of self-mutilation in certain cultural contexts, more studies have focused on categorizing and classifying the behavior, as well as tracing its psychological motives. Referring to psychological definitions and ways of categorization is necessary when capturing and judging self-abusive behavior in literature, but it should not be used as a shackle on literary studies. Literary depictions undoubtedly present richer possibilities than the collection of self-abuse already categorized by psychology, and the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the Austrian German-language author Elfriede Jelinek (1946-) in 2004 has led to a deepening of the exploration of the elements of self-abuse in his works, especially female self-abuse, which has awakened literary researchers to pay more attention to this topic in literature. in literature. Contemporary German-language popular literature encompasses not only depictions of open, externalized self-mutilation such as cutting, burning, and stabbing, but also covert, internalized self-mutilation such as anorexia and substance abuse. The expression of the topic of self-abuse in German-language literature is characterized by two main features on a macro level: first, on the content level, there is a greater proportion of self-abusive female characters;

second, on the creative level, there is a clear predominance of female authors, and autobiographical or self-virtuoso writing techniques are often seen. Exploring the topic of female self-abuse in literature cannot be separated from paying attention to the characters' early physical experiences, and considering the characters' knowledge of female physical characteristics is a necessary preliminary exploration. In this kind of literature, the root causes of self-abuse behavior and its consequences often become elements of the plot structure; the physical experience, psychological growth, and self-knowledge of the self-abused characters are the basis of characterization and the focus of the textual narrative.

Self-abuse is essentially a kind of behavior in which the person concerned actively acts on his or her own body, and the motivation for the occurrence of self-abuse is closely related to the perpetrator's perception of his or her own body. Robert Gugutzer, a German sociologist, has explained the relationship between the two in this way: "A person can form self-knowledge only when he or she is introspective about his or her personal and social experiences and generalizes them into a subject-affirming whole. Phenomenology suggests that experience here means bodily experience." (Butzer & Jacob, 2008) It is evident that an individual's physical experiences can directly affect the establishment of his or her self-perception. The risk factors that lead to the development of self-abusive tendencies and behaviors are mostly traumatic experiences in the childhood of self-abusers. (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015) Many works in contemporary German-language popular literature start from the perspectives of individual memory and body cognition, and use flashbacks or interludes to incorporate the impact of female childhood trauma on the psychological development of the individual's growth memories into the advancement of the storyline. Trauma narratives are often closely integrated with body writing, and self-mutilation is no longer seen as a mere character behavior, but as a physical as well as psychological memory carrier in the text at the same time. Therefore, the study of female body symbols related to self-abusive behavior should not only peel off their literary representations and delve into the individual's self-cognitive process, but also take the literal meanings of the symbols as the basis for exploring their hidden meanings in the text.

In the ontological study of literary symbols, literary symbols are usually divided into three categories: natural symbols, social symbols and individual symbols. Natural symbols refer to symbols that are found in all natural things that are not artificially created, such as the ocean as a symbol of vastness; social symbols refer to symbols that are universally recognized

and accepted, such as the house as a symbol of security; and individual symbols refer to symbols that are discovered or created by an individual, which often emphasize the special significance of the symbol to the individual. (He, 1986) The two symbolic ontologies chosen for this paper, blood and wounds, if categorized in the way described above, face the problem that they can either be unqualified by any one type or simultaneously encompassed by multiple types. In the context of physical self-abuse, the presence of blood is a natural physiological characteristic of the human body, but the active loss of blood cannot be separated from human intervention; and the scar, although it is a certain artificial consequence, acts on the perpetrator himself and cannot be separated from the special significance it produces for the individual. If the two are taken as social symbols, we can also find from the established scientific research attempts to interpret and summarize their symbolism in a specific historical and cultural context. Therefore, the study of the symbols of blood and wounds in contemporary German literature with the theme of female self-abuse is full of rich possibilities and high research value.

#### 4. THE SYMBOL OF “BLOOD”

The topic of self-mutilation in literature is always accompanied by the depiction of the symbol of blood, and in the narrow definition of the concept of self-mutilation, the bleeding of the muscles is one of the criteria for judging self-mutilation (note 1). (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015) As an important part of the body's circulatory system, blood is also associated with life and vitality in literature. As an important part of the human circulatory system, blood is closely related to life, and thus blood usually symbolizes life and vitality in literature. Conversely, the loss of blood can affect or even threaten life to varying degrees, which is why blood loss is often associated in literature with topics such as violence, war, and death. In fairy tales and legends from German-speaking countries, blood symbolizes strength, as in the German epic novel *Nibelungenlied*, in which Siegfried, the dragon slayer hero, is bathed in dragon's blood and acquires defensive powers, and the only part of his back that he does not bathe in becomes his Achilles' heel. In Romantic literature, the loss of blood is often associated with violence and death. (Ranke et al., 1977) In Romantic literature, blood is often used as a symbol of nobility, selflessness and self-sacrifice. In texts involving religious elements, blood symbols are often associated with rituals. (Butzer & Jacob, 2008) Blood can also be used to

symbolize a person's selflessness and self-sacrifice. Blood can also symbolize a strong bond between people, where the union or commonality of blood implies an inseparable intimacy, such as blood ties. The blood symbol experienced a climax during the period of the German literary revolution and gave rise to the naked "figurative language" (Bildsprache) of modernism. (Butzer & Jacob, 2008) In Schiller's play *Die Räuber*, for example, blood is a symbol of kinship (note 2), and the character Franz defines the relationship between brothers as "blood love" (Blutliebe), even though he loathes his older brother. In Wagner's opera *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) and Thomas Mann's novel *Wälsungenblut* (The Blood of the Walsungs), blood symbolizes incestuous relationships (note 3).

#### 4.1 Voiceless expression

Expression disorders are widespread among self-abusive characters. It is both a direct consequence of their pre-existing physical and psychological traumatic experiences and an important cause of the emergence and development of self-abusive behavior. The contradiction between the female characters' own need for expression and the barriers to expression in contemporary German-language literary fiction is the narrative focus of many works on the theme of self-abuse. The inability to express successfully, or the lack of acceptance and understanding of expression, on the one hand, creates a depression of negative emotions in the characters, causing their desire for expression to grow, and on the other hand, promotes the development of the characters' self-abusive tendencies. Since blood itself is associated with hurt and pain, many characters choose to give their emotions to blood, so that they can gain inner relief from the inside out through self-mutilation and bloodshed. For example, in the novel *Verschlossene Seele* (Blockaded Souls), the protagonist Gabi, after a childhood of repeated abandonment and abuse, loses her trust in others, and she is unable to communicate with others in a normal way, nor is she willing to do so. The psychological burden caused by her childhood shadows stays with her, resulting in a gradual loss of her ability and willingness to express herself, and physical self-mutilation becomes the only way for her to express herself. When she cuts or scratches herself and sees the blood flowing out, she feels the pain inside her flowing out as well. This active loss of blood brings a certain amount of pain, but the release of the pain also brings her comfort: "I want to let my pain flow out and let it be seen. [...] The pain, the pain I feel now, gives me comfort." (Lummas & Verschlossene, 1999) (note 4.)

The reason for expressing the heart through blood is not simply that

blood is a vehicle that exists within the body but is artificially made to flow outward. Some characters see blood as a more compelling form of expression than words because blood is is is a colored, shaped, and figurative symbol. In the novel *Monika B. Ich bin nicht mehr eure Tochter* (Monika B. I am no longer your daughter), the protagonist, Monika, has been subjected to prolonged aggression and abuse from male family members since she was a child, and her complaints and pleas for help have gone unheeded, eventually toward self-abuse. “My words were ignored, misunderstood, misrepresented, and even turned against me-as far as I was concerned, the symbols of blood on my skin made a louder cry.” (Jäckel, 1993) As can be seen, blood loss does not represent pain or misery; rather, in the context of the topic of self-abuse, active blood loss has a positive symbolic meaning of expressing pain and alleviating suffering. With its temperature, color, and fluidity, blood becomes a distinct and indelible external expression instead of words. Compared to verbal expression, its natural subordination to the female body resolves the dilemma of the legitimacy of the source of expression, and it can naturally replace the female subject as a self-expression that breaks out from the body to the outside world. Blood does not have the “sound” of words, but with its unique relevance to the body, it becomes a powerful means of expression for the traumatized protagonist.

#### 4.2 From self- mutilation to self-healing

Self-mutilation is undoubtedly a physically damaging behavior, but as a voluntary, active self-injury, it is not considered to be an unsuccessful suicide or an early stage of suicide. (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015) In contemporary German language literature, many of the characters of self-mutilation have the opposite purpose to the direct result of the act. [In contemporary German-language literature that focuses on female self-mutilation, many of the characters abuse themselves for purposes that are contrary to the direct results of the behavior itself. In the best-selling novel *Feuchtgebiete* (Wetlands), for example, the protagonist Helen repeatedly cuts herself with a knife and feels herself growing more and more tranquil as the blood drains away:

“The wound was covered with blood, [...] One more cut. With each breath my heart returns to serenity once more. [...] More and more serene. My arm bleeds. It's bleeding. [...] So much blood. [...] Blood running down my arm. And it stings and itches and feels so good.” (Roche, 2008)

It is because the active loss of blood in self-mutilation brings about what Helen sees as a positive effect that she repeatedly hurts herself, indulging

in this strange circle of hurting and healing side by side: "The wound bleeds slightly. How beautiful. I love blood. Blood has an incredibly vivid color. [...] I love my blood, [...]. I cut myself a few more times, [...] Now I feel much better than before." (Roche, 2008) As Helen's self-abusive behavior continued to evolve, the physical sensation of pain was gradually ignored, and active blood loss became a form of self-soothing, self-relaxation, and even self-salvation: "It doesn't hurt at all, not for a moment, only the blood flows beautifully. On the contrary, it feels fantastic and I become more relaxed afterwards." (Roche, 2008)

Blood, as the core of the human circulatory system, is closely related to life, and "blood" as a traditional literary symbol usually represents life and vitality. Special blood in literature also symbolizes extraordinary life force, while on the other hand, the loss of blood signifies different degrees of damage or even life threatening. However, in literature on the theme of self-mutilation, the loss of blood increases the confidence of the person in control of his or her body. Self-abusive behaviors with the immediate purpose of "bleeding" are motivated by the traumatic experiences of the protagonists in the literature. The reason why these female characters choose and even indulge in such attempts at self-healing is that they have lost control of their bodies, to varying degrees, as a result of the traumatic experiences they underwent during their childhood. Whether they were hurt, violated, or unable to seek help later in life, they grew up without a full sense of their bodies. The "sense of loss" and "helplessness" rooted in traumatic experiences propel them towards extreme body control, i.e. self-abuse. At the time of self-abuse, their bodies are both the object and the subject of self-abuse. The sense of security and control thus gained, as well as the power of initiative symbolized by blood and wounds, instead bring them proof of regaining the power of bodily initiative. In the novel *Maya mein Mädchen*, for example, the protagonist Maya regains a full sense of self by feeling her own blood flow out of her body through the act of self-mutilation: "Just a few more cuts, a little more blood. I pushed up my sleeve and started cutting, and immediately I was quiet. I was completely myself and forgot everything around me." (Callesen, 2003)

As can be seen from the above textual examples, in the context of self-mutilation, the loss of blood, even active blood loss, does not imply danger. Although from a physiological point of view, bleeding is a manifestation of physical injury, due to the active and voluntary nature of self-mutilation, the loss of blood symbolizes more of a grasping and regulating of oneself, which, instead of causing harm, has positive symbolic significance for the self-mutilator.



### 4.3 Living from the dead

In terms of motivation and immediate outcome, self-mutilation is unquestionably an act of bodily harm. However, by analyzing the significance of the blood symbol in literature, we find that the purpose of self-mutilation does not stop at the superficial result of inflicting harm on the body. For example, in the fictional character mentioned above, Maya very clearly emphasizes that she is not suicidal, so what is the real purpose of her repeated self-mutilation (even repeatedly threatening her life)? "No. When the blood comes out, it's the only chance I can grab. It reminds me that my body is still here. I don't want to kill myself, but no one recognizes that." (Callesen, 2003) One of the major characteristics of self-mutilation is that it is a spontaneous, active behavior. It is evident through Maya's explanation that she self-mutilates in order to achieve control, or regain control, of her body. In the examination of contemporary German literature that focuses on the theme of self-mutilation, the underlying triggers of self-mutilation have been a focus of research. It has been examined that a large number of female characters have had some sort of traumatic experience prior to self-mutilation (mostly in childhood), the most influential of which is the experience of physical or psychological abuse. Many of the characters felt that at the time of the abuse, their ownership and control over their bodies was taken away from them by the abuser/masochist, as these experiences occurred against their personal will. Therefore, in the process of self-abuse, their identity switches from that of a passive victim of abuse to that of an active abuser, at which point they can decide whether or not they want to be harmed, and realizing complete control over their bodies is the ultimate goal of their self-abuse.

As mentioned above, the traditional symbol of blood in literature is relevant to many women's topics, but in works where the theme is self-abuse, we can see a new meaning that goes against the traditional meaning. In the novel *Splitterfasernackt* (Splintered naked), for example, the protagonist Lilly, who was sexually abused by a neighbor at an early age, looks at her body as an adult and says, "I hate my period. If I want to bleed, just buy a razor blade." (Lindner, 2011) This statement contains two meanings, first: Lily hates her period because this biological phenomenon declares and confirms her femininity, and she personally believes that it is because of her being a woman that she was assaulted as a child, and that to be a woman is to be an original sin, that she hates her period; and the second meaning: the loss of blood during her period is not a physiological phenomenon that Lily has control over herself, and she sees herself as a passive party in the menstruation. The second meaning: the loss of blood

during menstruation is not a physiological phenomenon that Lily can control herself, and she sees herself as a passive party during menstruation, and the loss of control over her own body is the most intolerable thing for her, and the purpose of her perennial self-mutilation is to regain the ownership and control over her body. Therefore, here Lily is actually comparing the natural physiological phenomenon of menstruation with the man-made phenomenon of blood loss in self-mutilation, and her aversion to the former stems from her desire for control over her body, which is also the ultimate goal of the latter. Achieving total control over the body through self-mutilation is really about wanting to save the self that failed to save itself at the time the traumatic experience occurred. So seemingly leading to harm, self-abuse can actually be an act that starts with self-control and protection, which is a psychological defense mechanism grounded in self-rescue. By behaving in a way that results in harm as a direct consequence, the self-mutilator actually achieves a form of self-rescuing psychological compensation.

## 5. THE SYMBOL OF “WOUND”

“Wound” is another literary symbol typically associated with self-abuse. Similar to blood, wounds symbolize first and foremost physical damage or threats to life. Self-abuse in the narrow sense of the term is viewed as a necessary condition for judging self-abusive behavior, and as a consequence of the action of open wounds on the surface of the human body, literature generally focuses on the symbolic significance of wounds as a record, imprint, or proclamation. Different wounds also carry different meanings depending on their cause, location and degree. Traditionally, wounds from struggles or wars usually symbolize courage, sacrifice and victory, while some man-made wounds, such as tattoos on prisoners, symbolize culpability and punishment, for example, many cultures had the tradition of tattooing or branding the faces of sinners in the early days (Butzer & Jacob, 2008), and man-made uniform wounds are also used to signify the collective attributes and team cohesion, and so on. So what new kinds of symbolic meanings do wounds caused by self-mutilation, an individual-initiated act, have among the literary narratives of female trauma?

### 5.1 Wound and Memories

In contemporary German-language literature, the wound as a trace of

time or event still continues the traditional symbolism. However, in texts in the context of self-mutilation, the wounds exist more in the form of individual symbols as carriers of personal history or memory. For example, Lily, the protagonist of the novel *Splitterfasernackt*, will carefully observe the wounds on her body after self-abuse, and she thinks, "I'm marked, I think. I was marked, I thought a second time. And then a third time. [...] Used to remember those lost times." (Lindner, 2011) As a result of the multiple assaults, kidnappings, and abuses she suffered during her childhood, Lily viewed her past as "another life." (Lindner, 2011) After she began her self-abusive behavior, she remembered the past by leaving visible and indelible wounds on her body, and through this autonomous behavior, she also told herself that she had regained control over her body. Similarly Monica, the protagonist of the novel *Monika B. Ich bin nicht mehr eure Tochter*, who has covered herself in wounds through self-mutilation, sees it as: "Wounds have a language of their own. They show everyone how hurt I really am." (Jäckel, 1993) In this literary work, the characters see the wounds as a form of expression, which better gives expression to the inner world of the characters by being visible, distinctive and indelible, as opposed to words. This type of symbolic novelty is similar to that of the "blood" symbolism mentioned above, and will not be repeated here. As traces on the human skin, the direct consequences of self-harm assume the role of a writing tool for these female characters affected by traumatic memories. They reintegrate with the body passively victimized by the traumatic experience by using the scar as a way of being, and in the process of making the scar, these female characters regain the initiative and expression of their own bodies. The loss of blood and the presence of wounds no longer symbolize pain or a threat to life, but rather a visible and distinctive expression of the character's inner self than words. Contrary to traditional symbolism, the blood and the wounds, as a consequence of the active mutilation of the body, symbolize the desire for life and the quest for bodily initiative.

## 5.2 Healing by wounding

Wounds are essentially the subsequent manifestation of physical injury, but in the context of self-abuse, scar symbolism exhibits a novelty contrary to tradition. For example, in the novel *Maya mein Mädchen* (Maya My Girl), Maya is completely free of pain as she observes her bruises: "I raised my arms and stared at the bruises, trying to quiet myself through the moment" (Callesen, 2003) In relation to the plot construction of the work as a whole we can see that the wounds here show not so much physical

trauma, but rather a sense of comfort and peace in having control over one's body. The marks left on the body through self-mutilation symbolize, for the characters in the work, the fruits of reclaiming the body and returning to the self. The novel's subsequent depictions attest to this, whether it is the symbolism of blood or wounds, the positive effects of these self-mutilations leave Maya wanting more: "I'm addicted, addicted to blood. Addicted to wounds. The loss of blood calms me. At this moment I can feel that I am still alive." (Callesen, 2003) This textual example is a very clear example of the anti-conformist novelty of blood and wounds, where the loss of blood and the presence of wounds no longer symbolize pain or a threat to life, but instead symbolize the characters' quest for self-control, their desire to be alive, and how it is through the ability to decide on their own whether to have blood and wounds or not that they are able to feel in complete control of their bodies, of their lives, and of their entire selves. The healing significance of wounds is emphasized even more clearly in the novel *Seelenficker* (Soul Fucker): "A cut is wonderful. It is healing, because there is no place in the soul for it but to be spoken of in wounds on the skin." (Tretzschek, 2009)

### 5.3 Reclaiming the self

As mentioned earlier, female self-mutilation cannot be written without the insertion of traumatic memories, the root cause of self-mutilating behavior. Traumatic experiences have a decisive impact on the victim's physical memory at the time and on her psychological development during subsequent growth. The wounds caused by self-abuse, although they cause direct physical injuries just like passive victimization, have the opposite significance to other passive victimization in terms of psychological aspects, and this is the brand new meaning of the symbol of "wounds" in literature. Both the girl Monica in the novel *Monika B. Ich bin nicht mehr eure Tochter* and Lily in *Splitterfasernackt* suffered serious and long-term sexual feelings in childhood.

Such experiences hit their gender consciousness and self-perception hard in a childhood when gender consciousness was not yet mature or even formed. Almost without exception, the protagonists of literary works containing such episodes have doubts about their female identity. They speak of their female bodies as "[...] threatening, hostile, self-strangling female bodies."

This lack of understanding of their own innocent victimization leads them to blame their "born female" gender attributes for their victimization experiences as they grow up without the ability to help themselves. For

example, Monica says, “I hate my gender, my body.” (Jäckel, 1993) Therefore, she adopts many forms of self-abuse against her femininity, including actively mutilating her genitals, which are aimed at “rescuing myself from feminization, I deny them, destroy them. I deny them, destroy them.” (Jäckel, 1993) The wounds that such self-mutilation leaves on the body, especially on gender-specific areas, are perceived by these female characters as a boundary between their own bodies and the outside world.

Externally, it is left by one's own active, conscious self-mutilating behavior, announcing one's redefinition of one's own gender and mastery of one's own body; internally, it is a demonstration of one's own closure and protection in the face of the outside world.

Therefore, if blood is the ink of writing, then wounds are the words written in blood, used to record the inner world that the characters want to express outwardly, to draw the line between self-protection and external harm, and to regain the initiative over their own bodies. Originating from the trauma of passive victimization and realizing from active self-mutilation, both “blood” and “wounds” symbolize the search for self-identity, the redefinition of the female body, and the self-rescue from trauma for these female characters.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the above two examples of literary symbols, it is not difficult to find that literary symbols exist in literary works with the characteristics of multi-meaning, ambiguity and obscurity. The traditional symbols in literary works have formed a system with certain rules, but this does not prevent the same symbols in new literary works from showing openness and innovation, and in certain contexts, many symbols have appeared to be far away from or even deviated from the traditional archetypes of the new meaning.

For example, the appearance of blood does not necessarily imply a threat to vitality, but rather symbolizes a form of expression aimed at self-help. In the context of self-abuse, the loss of autonomous blood instead symbolizes the control of the body and the pursuit of life. Wounds in the same context also possess symbolic meanings that run counter to tradition; they can be a way for characters to express their inner selves and carry memories, as well as a symbol of the pursuit of self and the yearning for life.

Symbol is a carrier of meaning, and the development of symbolism in

the history of literature also reflects the change of human cognition and aesthetics. The emergence of new symbolic meanings plays an important role in enhancing the effect of language expression, enriching the poetic connotation of the text, and increasing the artistic tension of the work. In new literary topics and contexts, the examination and excavation of new symbolic meanings by comparing them with traditional symbolism is also a powerful way to explore the deep structure of the work, reveal the theme and realize the aesthetic value of the work.

## Notes

1. The definition of self-mutilation used in this paper is derived from the German clinical psychologist Franz Petermann (1953-), who defined self-mutilation as “functionally motivated self-injurious behavior that manifests itself in a direct and open-ended form that is socially unacceptable and not suicidal.” Open wounds and blood loss are among the criteria for determining self-abusive behavior.

2. *Die Räuber* (The robbers) is an anti-feudal and anti-authoritarian play written by the German writer Schiller in 1780 and performed on January 13, 1782 in Mannheim. The main character, Karl, is the eldest son of the Count of Mühl, who loves democracy and freedom and has a sense of justice; his second son, Franz, is sinister and vicious, and in order to take over his father's business, he spreads rumors and slander against Karl, and provokes the relationship between his father and his elder brother.

3. *Die Walküre* (The Valkyries) is the second opera of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelungen), with music and libretto by Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813-1883). The character Sigmund has an incestuous relationship with his twin sister Sieglinde. *Wälsungenblut* (The Blood of the Walsungs) is a middle grade novel by Paul Thomas Mann (1875-1955), written in 1906 and published in 1921.

The novel satirizes Wagner's musical *The Valkyries* by describing the incestuous relationship between twin siblings Sigmund and Sieglinde. The title “*Wälsungenblut*” is derived from a passage in *The Valkyries*:

“Braut und Schwester bist du dem Bruder, so blühe denn, *Wälsungenblut*”, meaning “The bride is the sister and you are the brother / Thus *Wälsungen*'s blood blossoms”. *Wälsungen* is a surname of the mythical Germanic peoples, first derived from the English epic poem *Beowulf*.

4. The original citations of the literary works dealt with in this essay were translated from German into English by the author.

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