

Female Self-Injury and Self-Healing in Contemporary German Literature

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Abstract: Self-injury is often regarded as an abnormal or even morbid behavior. Relevant literary works are always classified as non-mainstream categories. However, in recent years, with the increasing popularity of this topic, many German literature works have stepped into the ranks of best-selling novels, and even been included in reading materials in German primary and secondary schools. It is thus clear that while attracting widespread attention, such works also have certain educational significance. This article is oriented by the self-abuser's development of self-identification, takes the theme of female self-injury in the contemporary German novels as the research category, analyzes the expression from the aspects of narrative structure and characterization, and explores the positive value of this topic embodied in literature.

Keywords: Contemporary German Literature; Female Self-Injury; Trauma Narrative; Self-Identification

1. INTRODUCTION

Voluntarily and actively inflicting harm on the body goes against human survival instincts, so self-mutilation is often viewed as abnormal, wrong or even pathological behavior. Psychological statistics show that self-abusive behaviors occur more often in females than in males at all ages (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015), and some studies have attributed this unilaterally to the fact that females are more emotional, less psychologically tolerant, or more prone to impulsive behaviors than males, but this is not the case. In order to better study the root causes of self-abusive behaviors, as well as to solve the current situation of a messy definition of “self-abuse”, German clinical psychologist Franz Petermann proposed the conceptual definition of “self-abuse” in 2005, which is now widely recognized by academics, i.e., “self-abuse” is the concept of “self-abuse”. The conceptual definition of self-mutilation is “functionally motivated self-injurious behavior that manifests itself in a direct and open form and is socially unacceptable and not suicidal” (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015). Recent medical and psychological research has also distinguished and separately categorized self-abuse without suicidal tendencies from suicidal and other self-abusive behaviors.^①Although there is an undeniable correlation between self-mutilation and suicidal behavior,^② the two are fundamentally different in

terms of purpose. Psychiatrist Michael A. Simpson has argued that self-mutilation is based on attempts to resolve threatening or unbearable life situations, with the aim of achieving autonomy over one's life through control of the body (Simpson, 1980). Psychologist Jennifer Muehlenkamp has also suggested that while suicide is negative and extreme, self-mutilation, as an expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo and self-struggle, can embody a purpose supported by a positive attitude towards life, and that the person concerned can even alleviate a psychological crisis through self-mutilation, thus achieving a certain healing effect (Muehlenkamp, 2005). It can be seen that the biggest difference between self-abuse and suicidal behavior lies in the underlying motivation of the person concerned and his/her attitude towards life in the course of the behavior, and the expression of this positive value in literature is the focus of this paper.

2. TRAUMATIC MEMORY

When capturing and judging self-mutilation in literature, it is necessary to refer to psychological definitions and ways of categorization³, but they should not be used as a shackle for literary studies. Literary depictions undoubtedly present a richer range of possibilities than the collection of self-abuse already categorized by psychology. Contemporary German popular literature covers not only the depiction of open self-abuse such as cuts, burns, and stabbings, but also covert self-abuse such as anorexia and substance abuse. In addition, the last decade has seen a proliferation of works in German language literature depicting women selling their bodies and other forms of self-abuse. The expression of the topic of self-abuse in literature is characterized by two main features: firstly, from the content level, there is a greater proportion of self-abusive female characters; secondly, from the creative level, there is a clear predominance of female authors, and most of them are autobiographies or self-virtualization writing techniques. 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 (Blobel,

2014). 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." (Gugutzer, 2013), it can be seen that an individual's bodily experiences can directly affect the establishment of his/her self-knowledge. The risk factors that lead to the emergence of self-abusive tendencies and behaviors are mostly traumatic experiences in the childhood of self-abusers (Petermann & Nitkowski, 2015), and in order to emphasize the impact of these experiences and achieve better literary effects, literary works usually depict them in a non-calendrical order of reminiscent narrative techniques. The novel *Splitterfasernackt* (Splintered naked), for example, employs the 'reconstructive regression technique' (Eberhard, 1955): the novel opens with a very detailed description of the scene of a young girl's childhood sexual abuse, but does not give any other indication of the characters' relationships or the cause and effect of the event. There is no other description of the relationship between the characters or the cause and effect of the events. During this period, the novel is dominated by the protagonist Lilly's struggle with self-abuse and self-rejection, and it is only later, when Lilly talks to her childhood self, that the reader is able to explicitly match the character of the little girl at the beginning of the work with the protagonist's identity as a victim in her childhood. The novel *Maya mein Mädchen* (Maya My Girl) utilizes a 'discrete regression' (Eberhard, 1955): the work does not begin with an introduction to the childhood of the main character Maya, nor does it portray any other character that alludes to the protagonist, but begins directly with the story of Maya's adult life. Maya's adult life. Although her self-abusive behavior, social activities, and self-assessment reveal that Maya's current situation is inextricably linked to her childhood experiences, the novel does not depict this, and the protagonist resists and deliberately ignores her childhood memories. It is not until Maya finally finds the courage to return to the scene of her childhood sexual abuse by her grandfather after many psychotherapy sessions that the text retraces her traumatic experience. In terms of plot arrangement, childhood trauma is undoubtedly the main and direct cause of self-abusive behavior, and it is also the starting point for the characters to form their self-consciousness, especially their awareness of

their own gender identity; at the narrative level, the recollection of traumatic experiences in childhood is the logical line for constructing the plot of the work, and although the story may not always be told in chronological order, the causal connection during the period has always been the core of the article's narrative. Whether the conflict is not explained at the beginning of the work, or the base point of the conflict is retraced in the later part of the narrative, the traumatic experience and the psychological changes of the characters are carried on the narrative vein of the whole work on the theme of self-abuse (Lummas, 1999).

3. TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY FROM VICTIM TO VICTIMIZER

Empirical studies have shown that traumatic experiences in childhood directly affect the development of emotional control and social skills, laying the foundation for self-abusive behaviors (Yates, 2004). One of the major reasons why many literary works with the theme of female self-abuse have been bestsellers and even included in textbooks is that these works tell the experiences of the characters about the dilemmas and dangers that females, especially girls and adolescent females, may face, and thus serve as a warning and education for the readers. For example, bullying in schools is an important topic in contemporary German-language young adult literature, and in the novels *Rote Linien: Ritzen bis aufs Blut* (The Red Line: Row to the Blood) and *Schnittstellen* (The Scar), the pressure and bullying originating in school is a major factor driving the protagonist's self-abuse. In contrast, more serious traumas stem from experiences of abuse and violation. In the novels "Not a stitch in time" and "Abgehauen" (Escape), the kidnapping, abuse and sexual assault suffered during childhood are the main reasons for the protagonist's motivation for self-mutilation. In addition, the words and behavior of family members (mainly parents) will also have a significant impact on the victim's psychological growth and physical cognition. Lack of understanding, lack of help, and even deliberate disregard or concealment of the victimization by the family can lead to a loss of trust, which can exacerbate the level of trauma and lead to worsening of the self-abusive behavior, and can be the most important external environmental trigger other than the traumatic experience itself. In order to emphasize the importance of such causes, a number of novel narrative approaches and modes of writing have emerged in contemporary German-language popular literature. For example, the novel *Schmerzverliebt*

(Love of Pain) adopts the method of repeatedly switching narrative perspectives, narrating the same story in both directions through the perspectives of the heroine, Pia, and the hero, Sebastian, showing Pia's ambivalence about choosing between her boyfriend and her family, thus highlighting her gradual progression towards self-mutilation under the pressure of her family. The novel "The Cut" is even more direct. The novel *Schnittstellen* (The Cut) is even more directly autobiographical, written by both mother and daughter, changing narrative perspectives back and forth in chapters, so that the differences between the two characters form a strong contrast, highlighting the important role of family conflicts in promoting self-abusive behaviors. As an external factor in the emergence of self-abuse, the influence of life circumstances and family attitudes also acts on the psychological growth of the person concerned, providing the ground for the spawning of self-abusive tendencies in terms of self-perception. According to Freud, the state of a person's psyche, especially the state of his or her sexual psyche, reflects the degree of his or her psychosocial development (Bohleber, 1992). Erik Erikson, a psychologist famous for his theory of psychosocial development, inherited this view and related the concept of Identität to the psychoanalytic "Life Cycle of Development" (Lebenszyklus) in psychoanalysis, he argues that the development of identity perception is a lifelong process of interaction between the individual and society (Erikson, 2017). For example, traumatic experiences and secondary victimization by family members can have a strong negative impact on the victim's psychological growth and self-perception, which can lead to biased judgments and orientations of the person, resulting in self-abusive motives (Rohr, 2004), and these factors stemming from the person's own psychological changes are referred to as internal factors. Literature on the theme of self-abuse usually focuses heavily on tracking the psychological growth of the characters. Under the combined influence of the internal and external reasons mentioned above, the victims will have doubts about themselves, especially their own bodies. Since most of the traumas occur in childhood or adolescence, and the victims have not yet formed a more mature self-knowledge and gender awareness, the occurrence of the victimization incident, in addition to directly causing physical and psychological harm to the victim, will also trigger the victim's doubts and reflections on themselves. Victims will constantly think about the reasons why they have been victimized. Not only do they have doubts about the occurrence of the incident, but if they do not receive any understanding or help from their family members, their self-reflection may develop into aversion or even hostility towards

themselves. In the absence of a rational explanation, female victims are prone to attribute their victimization to the gender characteristics of their bodies, which is also reflected in literature in a number of ways. For example, in the novel *Monika B. Ich bin nicht mehr eure Tochter* (Monika B. I am no longer your daughter), the protagonist, Monika, who has suffered years of abuse and sexual assault from her grandfather, father, and older brother, is unable to explain why she suffers from all of this out of a natural affinity for her family members. Since the abusers are all older male family members, Monika naturally recognizes and judges her own body in terms of gender differences, so she believes that gender identity is the original sin, forcing a causal link between femininity and the experience of victimization. As a result, Monika's inner monologue and diary entries in the text are filled with numerous expressions of doubt, disgust, and even hostility toward her own body. Emotions of that type are the sensual underpinnings of the self-mutilating behavior, in which she seeks to combat the possibility of being violated again by destroying her female body through a form of self-mutilation. Thus, many of Monika's open-ended acts of self-mutilation are directed at explicitly gendered body parts, with the ultimate goal of destroying the logical associations that she perceives herself to have with being a woman and thus a victim. Similarly to Monika, Lilly was subjected to multiple instances of abuse and sexual assault as a minor. The reality of victimization is obviously difficult to accept, and Lilly was faced with perpetrators who were adult males who were physically unable to fight back at the time, so without being able to rationally explain why she became a victim, Lilly also blamed everything on her female identity and gender identity. Monika chose to self-mutilate in order to not be victimized again; Lilly, after years of open-ended self-mutilation, chose a more complete form of self-mutilation that destroyed her victim identity by actively selling her body as a way to get out of her own way. years of open-ended self-abuse, chooses a more radical form of self-abuse that destroys her victimhood by actively selling her body as a job and becoming a prostitute. On the surface, this appears to be an act of self-abuse and abandonment of self; however, analyzing the true purpose of this choice requires taking into account Lilly's previous traumatic experiences and her perceptions of her female identity. First, the female body is the necessary condition and direct cause of the traumas that Lilly experienced, and after being violated, out of the difficulty of accepting the fact, she could only transform her pain into the denial and rejection of her female body; second, during the process of being violated, Lilly was the victim identity that was powerless to fight, and she did not get the trust and

support from her family afterward, and could not get the perpetrator to receive the punishment he deserved; third, Lilly believed that when experiencing those traumas, the murderer took over her body in defiance of the victim identity. due punishment, all the resentment and anger were transformed into Lilly's hatred of her victimhood; third, Lilly believed that in experiencing those traumas, the murderer seized her body, and since those violations were forced to happen against the victim's will, the seizure was actually a deprivation of bodily autonomy and control, and the victim lost her autonomy and control over her body. control. In light of these three points, Lilly's choice of self-mutilation by actively selling her body is not a submission to the traumatic experience or a renunciation of herself, but rather a way of subverting the gender relations of the traumatized time by choosing the profession of prostitution. **Victimization Scene** In a situation where Lilly had no choice Lilly had the initiative of her body taken away from her by another person, whereas now her career gives her the possibility to regain the initiative. This is also clearly explained in the text, "If I had the autonomy to choose whether or not to have sex with another person, I would never be raped again." (Lindner, 2011). Although the profession is not glamorous, for the traumatized Lilly, it helps her reclaim her autonomy and shed her victimhood. As a direct result, self-mutilation is at risk of being a physically damaging behavior, but self-mutilation for the purpose of escaping victimhood can have a positive effect on the person's ability to cope with the traumatic experience. Maya, who was also sexually abused as a child, explains the positive effect of reconnecting with one's body and confirming one's sense of being in the midst of self-abuse in this way: "No, the blood coming out is the only chance I can grab. It reminds me that my body is still here. I didn't want to kill myself, but no one recognized that." Spontaneity and initiative are important characteristics of self-abusive behavior. It can be seen through Maya's explanation that she self-mutilates in order to achieve control, or regain control, over her body. Many of the female characters in literature with the theme of self-abuse have had some sort of traumatic experience prior to their self-abuse, with the most prominent influence being the physical and psychological abuse suffered. Many of the characters believe that their ownership and control over their bodies were taken away by the abuser at the time of the abuse, so in the process of self-mutilation, their identities are reversed from passive abused to active abuser, and at this time, they can decide whether or not they want to be harmed, and the ultimate goal of self-mutilation is to achieve complete control over their bodies.

4. SELF-ABUSE OR SELF-HEALING?

When looking at other open or covert self-abuse in literature, the motivation for the behavior is inseparable from the claim of control over one's own body, regardless of whether or not the perpetrator has suffered physical or psychological trauma. By grasping the choice of whether or not to harm themselves, self-mutilators are able to gain a sense of security that they are in control of themselves, which is precisely the positive effect that self-mutilating behaviors bring to them (Niekrenz & Witte, 2011). This healing positive effect is evident in some literary symbols that are closely related to the topic of self-abuse. Referring to the traditional symbols that have formed an established field of meaning in the history of literature, the symbols in the context of self-abuse show a number of unconventional metaphors and new meanings. This paper chooses to study the two most common symbolic ontologies in trauma writing: blood and wounds. In the context of physical self-abuse, the existence of blood is a natural physiological characteristic of the human body, but the active loss of blood cannot be separated from human intervention; although the scar is a certain human-made consequence, it works with 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. The symbol of blood is a typical example, for example, in the best-selling novel *Feuchtgebiete* (Wetlands), the main character Helen repeatedly cuts herself with a knife and gets pleasure from the process of blood loss: "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. It stung and itched and felt so good" (Charlotte, 2008). Similar feelings can be traced in Maya: "Only a few more cuts, a little bit of blood. I push up my sleeve and start cutting, and immediately I'm quiet. I was completely myself, forgetting everything around me". It is because the active blood loss in self-mutilation can have a positive effect on the person involved that self-mutilating behaviors recur and the self-mutilator becomes progressively addicted to this cycle of co-existence of self-mutilation and self-healing, as Helen puts it, "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” (Charlotte, 2008). Blood, as the core of the human circulatory system, is closely related to life, and “blood” as a traditional literary symbol often represents life and vitality. Special blood has also been used to symbolize extraordinary life-giving powers in literature, as in the case of Siegfried, the dragon slayer hero of the German epic novel *Nibelungenlied*, who bathes in dragon's blood and acquires defensive powers, with the only spot on his back that he does not bathe in becoming his Achilles' heel. Conversely, the loss of blood signals varying degrees of injury and even life-threatening situations, so the loss of blood is often associated in literature with topics such as violence and death. In Romantic literature, blood is often used as a symbol of noble selflessness and self-sacrifice. In texts involving religious elements, blood symbols are mostly associated with sacrifice. Blood can also symbolize the close bond between people, where the union or commonality of blood implies an inseparable intimacy, such as blood ties. In addition, blood symbols are also associated with femininity, and female physiological stages such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth are often depicted in literature with blood symbols. However, in literature on the theme of self-abuse, the loss of blood increases the confidence of the person in control of the body, and the loss of blood has a positive effect (for the person), just as the character of Helen's self-abusive behavior develops, and the physiological sensation of pain is gradually ignored, so that the active loss of blood becomes a form of self-soothing, relaxation, and even self-salvation: “It doesn't hurt at all, not in this moment, only the blood flows beautifully. On the contrary, it felt fantastic and I became more relaxed afterward” (Charlotte, 2008). The anti-conventional symbolism of blood is also linked to the self-abuser's perception of female identity. In the case of Lilly, for example, she was sexually abused by a neighbor at an early age, and as she grew up she looked at her body and said, “I hate my period. If I want to bleed, just buy a razor blade.” (Lindner, 2011). This statement contains two meanings, firstly: Lilly's rejection of her period stems from the fact that this biological phenomenon declares and confirms her femininity, whereas she personally believes that being female is the original sin and that it is because of her femininity that she suffered from childhood aggression; and secondly: that the loss of blood during her period is a natural physiological phenomenon, over which she has no control, and that she sees herself as a passive party in her period. The second implication is that she is not in control of this, and that she sees herself as a passive party during her period, and that the purpose of her years of self-mutilation is to take back ownership and

control of her body. Thus, Lilly is comparing the physiological phenomenon of menstruation with the human intervention of blood loss through self-abuse, and her disgust for the former is rooted in her desire for control over her body, which is the ultimate goal of the latter. By harming themselves to achieve absolute control over their bodies, self-abusers actually want to save themselves from the failure to save themselves at the time of the traumatic experience. Therefore, self-abuse seems to lead to harm, but in fact it is the behavior of self-control and protection as the fundamental starting point, but also a psychological defense mechanism based on self-rescue, the person through self-abuse actually achieve a self-healing psychological compensation. "Wound" is another typical literary symbol associated with self-abuse. Like blood, wounds symbolize first and foremost physical damage or threats to life. Traditionally, wounds from struggle or war usually symbolize victory, while man-made wounds, such as a prisoner's tattoo, symbolize culpability and punishment. In the context of self-mutilation, scars then exist more as carriers of personal history or memory. Lilly, for example, would look critically at the scars on her body after self-mutilation, observing, "I'm marked, I think. I was marked, I thought a second time. And then a third time. [...] Used to remember all that lost time." (Lindner, 2011). Having suffered multiple assaults, kidnappings and abuses during her childhood, after starting her self-abusive behavior, she remembers the past by leaving visible and indelible scars on her body, but also through this autonomous behavior, she reminds herself that she has regained control over her body. Monika's self-abuse has left her body covered in scars, which, in her opinion, "The scars have a language of their own. They show everyone how hurt I really am." (Jäckel, 1993). In this literary work, the characters see the scars as a form of expression, which better gives expression to the inner world of the characters with visible, distinctive, and indelible characteristics as opposed to words. Maya is completely painless as she observes her wounds: "I hold my arms up high and stare at the wounds, trying to quieten myself through the moment.". In relation to the plot structure of the work as a whole we can see that the wounds here show not so much physical damage, but rather a sense of comfort and peace in having control over one's own body. Whether it is the blood or the symbolism of the scars, the positive effects of these self-mutilations are what keep Maya hooked: "I'm addicted, addicted to blood. Addicted to the wounds. The loss of blood calms me. At the moment I can feel that I am still alive.". This textual example is a very clear example of the antithetical symbolism 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 character's quest for self-control and his desire to live. As marks on the human skin, the immediate consequences of these actions assume the role of a writing instrument in such female characters affected by traumatic memories. They take the scar as a way of being, reintegrating with the body that has been passively victimized by the traumatic experience, and in the process of creating the scar, these female characters regain the initiative and the right to express themselves over their own bodies. The loss of blood and the presence of scars 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 scars, as a consequence of the active mutilation of the body, symbolize the desire for life and the quest for bodily initiative. For the characters in these literary works, the traces of self-abuse symbolize the results of their recovery of their bodies and their return to themselves. It is by being able to decide on the presence or absence of blood and wounds that they 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*: "A cut is beautiful. It is healing because there is no place left in the soul for it but to be spoken of in scars on the skin". Therefore, if blood is the ink of writing, then scars 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 "scars" symbolize the search for self-identity, the redefinition of the female body, and the self-rescue from trauma for these female characters.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the topic of female self-abuse is reflected in many ways in contemporary German-language literature. Among them, the main external and internal factors that give rise to self-abusive behavior, namely the traumatic experiences and negative self-consciousness of the abusers, are the narrative focus of many works, and the perception of the female bodily characteristics of the persons concerned guides their own psychological changes. Under the influence of traumatic memories, they subvert the passive role of being a woman in their memories by grasping the autonomy

over their bodies, rejecting and denying their own victimhood through self-abusive behaviors, thus realizing the reversal from self-abuse to self-healing, and achieving the self-realization of “I am wounded” to “I exist.”. As traditional literary symbols, “blood” and “wound” no longer mean harm or danger in such literary works. On the contrary, as a means for self-abusers to actively seek self-healing and a proof of their autonomy over their bodies, they show a new meaning of anti-traditional symbols, which is also the basis of the literature on self-abuse. Instead, as the means by which the self-abuser actively seeks to heal himself and as proof of his autonomy over his body, they display a new and anti-conventional symbolic meaning, which is also an expression of the positive significance of self-abusive behaviors (for the person concerned) in literature.

5.1 Note

1. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) classified “non-suicidal self-abusive behavior” separately in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders).
2. Both are behaviors that go against survival instincts and voluntarily cause damage to the body, and American psychologists Jessica D. Ribeiro and Thomas E. Joiner have shown in their research that repeated self-abusive behaviors increase the body's tolerance to pain, which enhances suicidal ideation and raises the risk of suicide (Ribeiro & Joiner, 2009).
3. In traditional psychological studies, self-abusive behaviors are categorized into open and hidden self-abuse according to the presence or absence of visible wounds to the body.

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