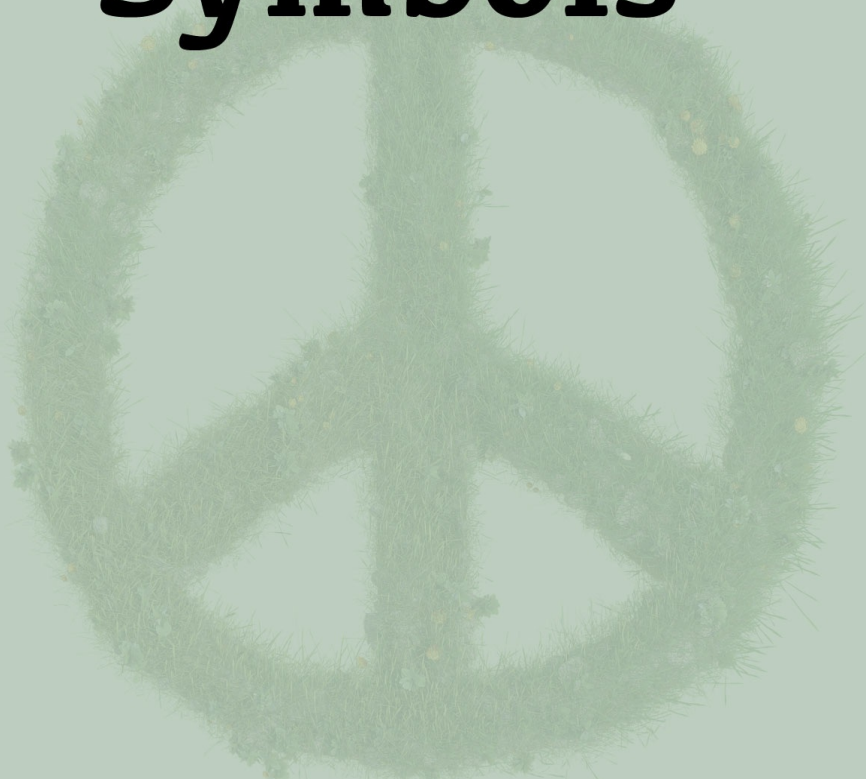


THEORIES OF SYMBOLISM

**Simple  
(Generic)  
Symbols**



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# **SIMPLE (GENERIC) SYMBOLS**

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## SIMPLE (GENERIC) SYMBOLS

In modern usage, "The word, symbol . . . has become synonymous with the representation of a concept by a conventional sign." (P. 49) This is the basic definition of a simple symbol (see De Lubicz (1978).

Simple manifest symbolic forms have many sources. Most traditional symbols represent an heritage of word roots with culturally transmitted connotations. Those of more recent origin are established by convention to serve as representations of something new. The latter have often become representations by convention as a result of their emergence as poetic symbols, which open new possibilities of meaning for once bland words.

The existence of simple symbols implies the presence of conscious and readily available meanings shared by a thought with the signs or words, which have come to represent it. Assignment of meaning to words is the product of an ancient and ongoing cultural process by which words gain meaning through usage or convention to represent a concept or a thing. Often they appear to be fused. Beneath the surface, simple symbols hold hidden internal structures, and phylogenetic and ontogenetic histories, which are so complex that defects and failings during the course of their formation can result in pathological forms.

### WERNER AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SIMPLE SYMBOLS

The outstanding scientist in the realm of exploring such complexity in simple symbols is the psychologist Heinz Werner. He comes to the study of symbols from a background in the phylogenetic study of mental development as presented in his book "Comparative Psychology of Mental Development". (1940) As such his understanding of symbolism is influenced by its role in evolution. In addition he provides a fundamental description of the phenomenology of symbolism.

Werner (1963) viewed a symbol as a memory moiety. He saw it as an evolutionary factor, used for structuring the world and codifying its image in memory to create a map to guide one in the interpretation and explanation of new experiences. Symbols for Werner (1963) were needed ". . . in order to build up a truly human universe, that is, a world that is known rather than merely reacted to, (For this) . . . man require(d) a new tool—an instrumentality that is suited for, and enables the

realization of those operations constituting the activity of knowing. This is the symbol." (P. 13) The tools of simple symbol formation were acquired during the early development of mankind's knowing and remembering. In modern man, they have evolved into carriers of previously experienced phenomena to be used in the interpretation of newly acquired perceptions.

Compare! Werner sees the symbol as a means for interpreting the present and organizing the future in terms of past experience. The psychoanalyst sees the role of the symbol as an outlet for the pressures of the unconscious. The poet sees the symbol as a tool of expression for his insights. The acolyte of deity sees the symbol as a channel of communication from god to man.

Werner (1963) presented a sophisticated phenomenology for the simple symbol. (P 49) His vocabulary simplifies communication about symbols for those who follow his system. He analyses the simple symbol into the following "four principle (generic) components". (p. 40)

"Referent" or "Significate" describes "the entity which is represented". (p 15) (i.e. the poetic insight, the psychoanalytic latent content, the transcendent numinous)

"Symbol" and "symbolic vehicle" refers to the conscious representation of a referent, (p 15) (i.e. the manifest symbol").

"Addressor" is used for the person who creates or uses the symbol in communication.

"Addressee" refers to the person who receives or interprets the symbol. (p 14)

Werner recognizes ontogenetic growth in symbols. This permits the creation of a developmental line for simple symbols. Psychoanalytic symbols are similar in this regard. Theorists who deal with poetic and transcendent symbols do not reconstruct developmental aspects. According to Werner (1963), as the symbolizing function of the child grows, maturation and development of simple symbols is manifested, in increasing "complexity and abstract(ness)" for the referents (ideas or things represented) and ". . . increasingly conventional and communal nature" (p 40) for the symbolic vehicle. (the manifest symbol).

Maturation in symbol formation is manifested in "distancing or polarization" (p 42) of the principle (generic) components. This is an observation shared by psychoanalytic symbol theorists in whose works

it can be detected in self object differentiation, the development of object ground differentiation, and the shift from the evocative to the communicative pole in the symbol formation of the late latency early adolescent.

## WERNER AND PSYCHOANALITIC SYMBOLS

The similarities described in the last paragraph are not accidental. Werner's simple symbols and psychoanalytic symbols share in common their origin in discoveries by theorists schooled in the scientific method. They are both derived from the study of many cases. The difference between the two theories lies in Werner's decision not to pursue a study of the role of repression and the unconscious in the formation of symbols. Werner (1963) has stated ". . . since symbolization, in its more characteristic manifestations (e.g., in speech) entails an awareness of duality between vehicle and referent, it will be obvious that our conception of symbol formation differs from that propounded by many

psychoanalysts (cf E. Jones [1916], 121)" (p 467 fn). Since repression of the conscious link between the symbol referent and the symbolic representation is the defining characteristic of the Psychoanalytic symbol, Werner's contributions are here included in the description of simple symbols. Conversely if the definition of a symbol were dependent upon conscious awareness of the connection between its referent and its representation (symbolic vehicle), the psychoanalytic symbol would have to be excluded from the ranks of symbolic forms as defined by Werner.

There are other areas worth comparing in a comparison of the symbol theory of Werner and that of Jones. Psychoanalytic symbols have five principle components. Three of these components are also found in Werner's symbols. Two of the components are present in Psychoanalytic symbols alone.

The components of similarity are:

1. The latent symbol, which is the source of the meaning expressed in the manifest symbol. Werner calls this the referent.
2. The manifest symbol, which is a representation of the referent. This is called by Werner, the "symbolic vehicle".
3. A polarity in the choices of manifest symbols influences the objects available for use in the

selection of the manifest symbol. This polarity reflects a choice between evocative and communicative factors in the selection of the manifest symbol. The content of an evocative manifest symbol is selected in the service of evocation of inner needs. The content of a communicative manifest symbol is selected in the service of the communication of content and the establishment of object relationships. The latter includes fulfillment of the need to communicate in terms of concepts and contexts that are known to the person addressed. A shift to the selection of a communicative form of representation, which generates distancing from evocative private meanings is the same process that Werner describes as the increasing "communal nature" (p 40) of the ">"symbolic vehicle" (p 40). This process will be described in detail below in Unit I, Chapt. 7 "Latency On". See also "The Shifting Symbolic Forms of Late Latency—Early Adolescence." (Sarnoff (1987B)

The two components present in Psychoanalytic symbol formation alone consist of:

1. The shift from symbolic forms with open high valence for attracting affect to symbols and forms with minimal valence for attracting affect. This phenomenon is the result of displacements during symbol formation, which create and support repression.
2. Description of a "march of manifest symbolic forms" in childhood fantasy, from concrete representations through abstractions to real objects. This is expressed in a progression through symbols in the form of animals, amorphous forms, humanoids, human forms, which ends with a move toward using real people and situations as symbols in realistic future planning.

There are also characteristics of symbolic forms in Werner's theory which are understood to be present in psychoanalytic symbol theory, but which are not specifically named or given priority.

These include: increasingly "complex and abstract character of referents", and the change in "addressees from parents to peers to generalized others" (p 40).

## WERNER AND FREUD

Both Werner and Freud do not use "symbol" to refer to Jones' referent/representation dualities in which repression has resulted in a loss of awareness of the link between referent and representation. Each reserves "symbol" for another type of symbolic form. Werner reserves "symbol" for simple conscious symbolism. Freud reserves "symbol" for inherited symbolic forms with universal meanings. Freud



understands Jones' psychoanalytic symbol to be part of that group of compromise formations which are called the dream work or are the products of the ego functions which produce neurotic symptoms, fantasies, delusions, play, and wit.

The process of developing a personal verbal visual image of the world that can be used as reference when orienting oneself to new experiences begins in early childhood. The complex psychoanalytic symbol is an adaptation of this skill, It develops at 26 months in association with the maturation of repression. With the introduction of repression into the process of symbolic interpretation of new experiences a buffering mechanism is provided to divert attention from high levels of affect recalled from past traumatic experiences whose "simple symbol" encoding in memory is evoked during recognition and interpretation of new experiences. Manifest substitute formations (symbols) are produced as the result of repression of the link between referent and symbolic vehicle. Displacement to more benign affect representations neutralize situations, which could evoke memories of past situations associated with high levels of affect.

A cruel world as viewed and codified and remembered through symbols (substitute concepts) can leave a strong trace of fear. When these symbols are applied to the interpretation of new situations, affects invoking phobic avoidance are generated from manifest symbolic forms that are non-threatening and have less valence for attracting affect. Thus is created a world view in which one need not deal with affects. This can either generate a form of impaired reality testing that creates the frightening world of mental illness or can serve as a technique for setting aside intruding distortions from the past which have been the source of a false psychic reality. When the latter is chosen, reality is given a chance to prove itself. The more conscious the link between the representation and what is represented, the better able is the individual to differentiate the reality of the present from reality colored intrusions from the past.

Symbols can represent points of focus in the development of concepts. Their existence may be transient and primarily evocative. An example of a brief concept symbol would be the short-lived personal symbols that occur in dreams. They may influence symbolization over extended periods of time, and contribute to sustained communicative symbols, which inform the content of institutional transcendent symbols and those symbols, which come to be shared as group identifying elements within a culture.

Whether long-lived or short-lived, symbols and their referent contents are interpreted by researchers to represent multiple sources, forces and mental operations. The specific source elements depend upon the orientation, which a researcher brings to the study of symbols,

The source elements are:

the sociocultural past,

the past of personal experience,

the transcendent spiritual realm with deep religious and spiritual

impact,

projections of past history in the form of traces of ancient usage

and remnant manifest symbols.

### **SIMPLE SYMBOLS PRECEDE COMPLEX SYMBOLS DURING ONTOGENESIS**

Complex symbols (poetic and psychoanalytic) have simple symbols as their supporting infrastructure. Transcendent symbols (religious and mythic) when explained by theories of western scientific monism also have simple symbols as their base.

Complex symbols cannot be understood without knowledge of the intrinsic nature of simpler symbolic forms and the mental processes that create them. Simple symbols are at the core of all complex symbolic forms. Simple symbols are the first symbols to be formed ontogenetically, although simple symbols are preceded by poetic symbols during phylogenesis.

The cognitive maturational skills that accompany the acquisition of the capacity to develop simple symbols are all present in the first year of life. Increasing strength mark their ascent to the functional level at which they can actually produce simple symbols. Skills required for the formation of symbols must be considered when a clinician is asked to diagnose inability to create or utilize symbols, as occurs when there is an impaired ability to develop speech. One such basic skill that underlies simple symbol formation is the ability to differentiate sensations and associated perceptions and objects into discrete

remembered units, and to create a branching mental armature, each of whose tines hold a differentiated concept-sensation unit, which can be used in categorizing new perceptions. In the case of simple symbols, the mechanisms of displacement and condensation shift attention cathexes from an initial concept-sensation tine in the armature toward substitute representations to be used as the basis for recognition. In the case of later (24 months) developing psychoanalytic symbols, a beholding of substitutes that exclude awareness of less comfortable latent content concept-sensations occurs. The result of this process is a truncation and alteration of potential to interpret perceptions.

Based upon this ability to reinterpret sensations, one part of the body can be interpreted to represent another. This process underlies the somatic symbolization, which supports psychosomatic symptom formation and the mechanism of incorporation. (Incorporation refers to reawakening of memory for lost love objects that occurs through recathexing of physical sensations that were associated with these objects. The physical sensations referred to include skin contact sensations, respiratory experiences, cleansing experiences and nursing.) These sensations become the point of experience to which the symbolizing function regresses during the formation of psychosomatic symptoms. (see protosymbols in Unit 1 section B. Chapter 5.) Displacement can permit one organ to substitute for another, as occurs in cases of clinical impotence when impaired use of the arm is the presenting symptom. There are implications that the ancient Greeks were aware of this process. They attributed some symptoms in distant parts of the body in women to a wandering of the uterus. These conditions were called hysteria after the Greek word for uterus, Hysteron. In modern parlance, we refer to displacement upward when one part of the body is used to represent another. A literary example of this would be Oedipus blinding himself with his wife/mother's broaches as a substitute for auto castration

The next important step in the maturation of the cognitive skills underlying the capacity to form simple symbols is the development of self-object boundaries, which permit a differentiation between inside and outside the self. Boundaries strengthen the ability to use similarities between elements (organs, concepts or words) within the self and elements (images and words) beyond the boundary of the self in symbol formation. These similarities become symbolic linkages. These are links of affinity, which guide internal memory concept representations to the venue of the manifest symbol. In order for such linkages to be formed there must be a strengthening in the ability to recognize similarities. These may be based upon idiosyncratic insight into similar characteristics as occurs in autistic thinking and

similarities that can be consensually validated because they relate to intrinsic characteristics in common between the elements that are joined in the symbolic linkage. The latter is an ability (abstract thinking) that contributes to reality testing.

In the acquisition of speech, imitative behavior in which the child picks up sounds without meaning is the first step. Defining parental response to these sounds makes it possible for the child to attach meaning to the sounds. As a result, shared vocabulary made up of simple symbols is acquired, which conforms to the conventions of the child's society. The child gathers a vocabulary of concepts that create within his memory a mirror of the world he has seen and experienced. In the future, he will be able to use this knowledge in evaluating the familiarity and reality of interpreted perceptions.

The skills required for simple symbol formation combine with repression to form psychoanalytic symbols at 26 months. Such symbols free social speech from anxiety. They open the way for conventions for nonconflictual communicative expression of insights and feelings, and the creation of poetic symbols shortly after puberty.

## METAPHOR

Sharpe's (1940) attention to metaphors offers insight into simple symbols. She defines metaphor as "a transference of a word to a sense different from its signification" (from Aristotle's "Poetics".) She holds that, "In metaphor that is the expression of vital emotion the repressed psycho-physical experiences have found the verbal images in the preconscious that express them." (p 155) Metaphors are channels of discharge for emotions, which originally accompanied bodily functions. Her definition of metaphor recognizes that ideas, some of which can be directly grasped and some of which are "too subtle" for reduction to a simple formula are beyond the boundaries of verbal memory. They are codified through the establishment of references to related contexts. Representations (pictures, words music.) become the means by which that which lies beyond the grasp of the mind, can be held in memory or transmitted to others as a means of sharing the experience or laying the groundwork for future resolution and perhaps the advancement of knowledge and culture.

## SUMMARY

The study of the emergence of psychoanalytic, poetic, and mythic symbols from the simple symbolic form aids in the understanding of the development and use of symbols in general. This study opens the door to an understanding of the role of pathological symbol formation in the creation of aberrant mental functioning. This is a point of departure from previous work on symbolism and is the *raison d'être* for this book. Simple symbols are not simple at all when one looks more deeply into them than their simple surface appearance.