

Symbolic significance to Crosswords in ‘The Only Story’

A symbol is anything that hints at something else, usually something abstract, such as an idea or belief. A literary symbol is an object, a person, a situation, or an action that has a literal meaning in a story but suggests or represents other meanings.

In ‘The Only Story’ Julian Barnes has captured the nuances of social life lived in 20th century England. The crosswords were something so significant an aspect of this traditional British activity that several characters of this novel are found meaningfully engaged with it.

It is said that Crossword puzzles have several benefits¹ like:

- They can strengthen social bonds. Completing a crossword puzzle on your own is impressive, but you should never feel bad if you need to ask for help. ...
- They improve your vocabulary. ...
- They increase your knowledge base. ...
- They can relieve stress. ...
- They boost your mood.

However, the postmodernist novelist Julian Barnes is not interested in this traditional meaning involved in crosswords.

See, how Paul Roberts, the narrator of the story, explains the hidden aspects of this British pass-time activity:

“Everyone in the Village, every grown-up – or rather, every middle-aged person – seemed to do crosswords: my parents, their friends, Joan, Gordon Macleod. Everyone apart from Susan. They did either The Times or the Telegraph; though Joan had those books of hers to fall back on while waiting for the next newspaper.

I regarded this traditional British activity with some snootiness.

I was keen in those days to find hidden motives – preferably involving hypocrisy – behind the obvious ones.

¹ <https://www.theshoresoflakephalen.com/benefits-of-crossword-puzzles/>

Clearly, this supposedly harmless pastime was about more than solving cryptic clues and filling in the answers.

My analysis identified the following elements:

- 1) the desire to reduce the chaos of the universe to a small, comprehensible grid of black-and-white squares;
 - a. Further addition: 1a) a successful means of taking your mind off the question of love, which is all that counts in the world.
- 2) the underlying belief that everything in life could, in the end, be solved;
 - a. 2b) the further belief that once you have solved something in life, you will be able to solve it again, and the solution will be exactly the same the second time around, thus offering assurance that you have reached a pitch of maturity and wisdom.
- 3) the confirmation that existence was essentially a ludic activity;
 - a. 3b) false confirmation that you are more intelligent than some give you credit for. and
- 4) the hope that this activity would keep at bay the existential pain of our brief sublunary transit from birth to death. That seemed to cover it! Correction to 4). To begin: 'the hope that this arse-bendingly boring activity would keep ...'."

Apart from these critical interpretations of the crossword puzzle, it quite often recurs in the novel. For instance, it is referred to with Joan's habit of '*cheating at crossword*'.

Paul Roberts has observed during visits to her home that she cheats while doing crossword puzzles. He is quite surprised at this habit of hers. Once he directly asks it to her. Here is her reply:

"'Why do you cheat at crosswords?'

Joan laughed loudly.

'You cheeky bugger. I suppose Susan told you. Well, it's a fair question, and one I can answer.' She took another pull of her gin. 'You see – I hope you never get there yourself – but some of us get to the point in life where we realize that nothing matters. Nothing fucking matters. And one of the few side-benefits of that is you know you're not going to go to hell for filling in the wrong answers in the crossword. Because you've been to hell and back already and you know all too well what it's like.'

'But the answers are in the back of the book.'

‘Ah, but you see, to me that would be cheating.’”

It is in the character study of Joan that we realize how symbolically important is the reference to crosswords in this novel. The cynical observations made by Paul in earlier instances are useful keys to study her character. If we take Joan as counterfoil to the character of Susan then we can find that she has no urge to feel the Laconian ‘gap’ or give outlet to her ‘repressed desire’ in looking for humans to be her ‘love-objects’. While Susan, perhaps, looks towards nineteen years Paul Roberts who is 30 years younger to her to fill the gap or give an outlet to her repressed desire, Joan, found her love-object in crosswords. And hence, all these inferences drawn by Paul seems to be true for Joan:

- 1) the desire to reduce the chaos of the universe to a small, comprehensible grid of black-and-white squares;
- 2) the underlying belief that everything in life could, in the end, be solved;
- 3) the confirmation that existence was essentially a ludic activity; and
- 4) the hope that this activity would keep at bay the existential pain of our brief sublunary transit from birth to death.

Apart from Joan, it is Gordon Macleod who is found doing crosswords in the novel. On two occasions, he is found solving the crosswords with Paul Roberts. The answers to the puzzle are ‘Taunton’ – a name of a town – meaning continue mocking at – and - ‘TREFOIL, REF – arbiter – in the middle of TOIL – work.’ If we read these words in context of the relations between Paul and Gordon we may find it symbolically significant. Taunton – making mockery of something/somebody and Trefoil – a popular warning symbol signifies triangular relation among Paul – Susan – Gordon. Both these words in the crossword puzzle seem to signify a taunt on Paul’s middling in between Susan and Gordon’s not-so-happy married life.

To conclude, we can say that the reference to ‘Crossword’ is spread across the novel. It is referred to critically as a British time-pass activity. It also makes the snootiest critique of this habit. Apart from these socio-cultural references, the crossword puzzle has symbolic significance to study the character of Joan as a counterfoil to Susan. It is also useful to study the strained triangular relationship between Paul Roberts, Susan and Gordon Macleod.