



Representations of Autistic Characters in Art and Literature: An Analysis of Amber L. Johnson's Puddle Jumping

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Abstract

Art has long been recognized as a significant form of expression, painting in specific has been a long used as an expressionist language as much as spoken and body languages. Few academic studies explore the use of art as a reflective language in literature in general and Puddle Jumping by Johnson Amber L in specific. As thus, this research aims to examine how the famous masterpiece "Starry Night" by Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890) is utilized as a language to reflect autism in Puddle Jumping. Specifically, this study explores the ways in which the novel employs various forms of language, including art, to portray the autistic disorder of the main character. By analyzing the connection between art and language in the context of autism, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's unique narrative style and its representation of neurodiversity.

Keywords: Asperger's syndrome, Van Cough, "Starry Night", Puddle Jumping, Johnson Amber.

تجسيد التوحد عند الشخصيات في الفن والأدب: تحليل لعمل أمبر ل. جونسون "الوثب في البركة"

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الخلاصة

يعتبر الفن شكلاً هاماً من أشكال التعبير. والرسم على وجه الخصوص عرف منذ فترات طويلة على أنه لغة تعبيرية مثل أي نوع من اللغات الأخرى كاللغة المنطوقة والمكتوبة ولغة الجسد. هناك دراسات أكاديمية قليلة تستكشف استخدام الفن كلغة انعكاسية في الأدب بشكل عام وفي رواية "الوثب في البركة" للكاتبة امبر جونسون بشكل خاص. لذا، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص كيفية استخدام التحفة الفنية الشهيرة "ليلة النجوم" للفنان فينسنت فان جوخ (1853 – 1890) كلغة تعبر عن التوحد في رواية "الوثب في البركة". وتحديداً، تستكشف هذه الدراسة الطرق التي تستخدم بها الرواية أشكالاً متنوعة من اللغة، بما في ذلك الرسم، لتصوير اضطراب التوحد لدى الشخصية الرئيسية كولتن. من خلال تحليل العلاقة بين الفن واللغة في سياق التوحد، تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم أعمق لأسلوب السرد الفريد في الرواية وتمثيلها لمرض التوحد عن طريق اللغات التعبيرية والانعكاسية المختلفة بما فيها الرسم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: متلازمة التوحد، فينسنت فان جوخ، "ليلة النجوم"، "الوثب في البركة"، امبر جونسون.

Chapter One

1.1. Statement of Problem

Most of the academic papers were devoted to study Puddle Jumping by Johnson Amber from different perspective including; psychological, structural and observational point of view, yet few of them examine how Amber linguistically and



artistically reflect serious medical condition such autistic disorder in her novel Puddle Jumping. As thus, this study is going to show how different languages will interact with each other to reflect the mentality of the main character and reveal his autism.

Thus, to make this study possible we have to first show how Hans Asperger define autism along with introducing the most common symptoms of autistic disorder according to Peter Szatmari and Christopher Gillberg. Second, we will observe how different languages such as; verbal, body, and sign languages are working with each other to express the main character, Colton, autistic disorder with the help of different critical point of view of Michael Fitzgerald and Nicole Martin. Furthermore, this study will show especial interest on Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Starry night" and it relation to autism in Puddle Jumping which has great role of this paper analysis regarding sign language.

1.2. Questions of the Study

- 1- What are the most common symptoms of autism?
- 2- How Johnson Amber reflect autism in her novel Puddle Jumping?
- 3- Why Amber implied Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night" among many of her other masterpieces in her novel Puddle Jumping?

1.3. Significance of the Study

The finding of this study will be beneficial for the literary psychological studies which are concerned with medical and mental condition such as autism. The greater demand for modern literary observation justify the need for new effective and analytical approaches. Thus, the scholars who apply the recommended approach of how different languages will come along with each other to communicate medical conditions in literary text, will be able further to train literary researchers better.

Further, this approach will examine the autistic character in Puddle Jumping from artistic perspective as no one ever regarded in a fiction through observing the relation between the famous artist Vincent Van Gogh and Colton in their artistic expression and autistic symptoms.

1.4. Aim of the Study

The aim of our research topic is to answer the mentioned questions and to shed light on the importance of this topic in literary studies. Also to reveal, how different languages will come along with each other to communicate psychological and medical condition such as autism in a literary text. On that account, the present study also aims to show the common point between art and language in the spot of analyzing the character of Colton in Puddle Jumping.

1.5. Limitations

Our study has some limitations within which our finding need to be interpreted carefully. Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, the research is limited to Asperger's syndrome medically and linguistically speaking, more



specifically in literary text like Puddle Jumping by Johnson Amber. Second, this research paper is limited to Hans Asperger, Peter Szatmari, Christopher Gillberg, Michael Fitzgerald and Nicole Martin definition of autism from different perspective. Last but not least, this study limited to show especial interest on Vincent Van Gogh's painting "Starry night" and it relation to autism in Puddle Jumping.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents facts about the theoretical framework of this paper regarding AS. including its historical background, language and communication and the main features of the syndrome. More specifically, it goes on with those features such as body language, sensitivity toward loudness and materials, shortened speech, pedantic language, and special language. Furthermore, this chapter clarifies those features by applying them on central character of Amber's fiction Puddle Jumping to show that the central character is suffering from AS according to medical assessment.

2.1. Asperger's Syndrome Main Characteristics and Definitions

Asperger child has a lack of understanding symbolic speech. Also the being in sort of different from their peers in some behavior such as solitude, stubbornness, and special interests. Hans Asperger, who was a Viennese pediatrician make his studies in physical neurology on children, he is a namesake of Autism spectrum disorder and Asperger syndrome, has noticed that a few of the children alluded to his clinic had exceptionally comparable identity characteristics and behavior. He watched that the children's social development and social reasoning were postponed and a few viewpoints of their social capacities were very unordinary at any organize of development. (Attwood.T,2007, P. 59).

There were impedances in verbal and nonverbal communication, especially the conversational viewpoints of language. The children utilize of language was pedantic, and a few children had an abnormal prosody that influenced the tone, pitch and rhythm of discourse. He described prominent clumsiness in terms of walk and coordination. He also noted that a few children were amazingly delicate to specific sounds, aromas, surfaces and touch. He composed that the condition was likely due to genetic or neurological, rather than mental or environmental. According to the diagnosis of the syndrome autistics are unable to make an eye – contact and have difficulty to enrich their relations circle, they sort of imprisoned themselves in a kind of locked world. A world where they can be active and comfortable. Imaginable world where they could be understood (Attwood.T,2007, P. 122).

2.2. Autistic Individuals' Language and Communication



Impedances in verbal and nonverbal communication shape an important portion of the demonstrative criteria for autism. Hans Asperger smoothly portrayed an bizarre profile of language capacities that included issues with discussion aptitudes, the melody or stream of discourse, and an unusual formative history for language such as early or late advancement of speech. He moreover described an inclination for a few youthful children to talk like a grown – up with a progressed lexicon and utilize very complex sentences. The diagnostic criteria of Christopher Gillberg who is a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the university of Gothenburg in Sweden, recognized an unusual profile of language skills being required for a determination of Asperger's syndrome: delayed speech development, superficially perfect expressive language, formal pedantic language, odd prosody, peculiar voice characteristics, and impairments of comprehension including misinterpretations of literal/implicit meanings. (Attwood T. 2007, P. 202).

But Peter Szatmari, who is a Canadian researcher of autism and Asperger's syndrome, and colleagues also recognized an odd language skills being required for Asperger's syndrome: abnormalities in inflection, talking too much, talking too little, lack of cohesion to conversation, idiosyncratic use of words, and repetitive patterns of speech. the development of language shows up to depend less on conversation with family and peers and more on what is retained from television programs and movies (Attwood T, 2007, P. 202)

In fact, People with Asperger have delay in verbal language as well as they have no ability to justify symbolic talk or body language. They cannot figure out whether the person in front of them sad or upset from their facial expression or body language. Also, they cannot establish symbolic reference throughout conversation, for example when a person says: I've changed my mind, they obliged that a person has changed his material mind. One child created the word 'snook' to describe a flake of chocolate in an ice block, and the word 'clink' for a magnet (Attwood T, 2007, P. 203).

Another child was asked why he was not interested in his baby brother and replied, 'He can't walk, he can't talk – he's broken.' When making his bedroom untidy, with toys strewn all over the floor, another child explained he was 'tidying down' (the opposite of tidying up). My sister – in – law described her ankle as the 'wrist of my foot', and ice cubes as 'water bones'(Attwood T. 2007, P. 205). higher functioning people with autism or AS might engage in social behavior but it might not be as reciprocal as one sees in normally developing people, or their ability to make friends might be more limited. Language skills can be well developed but there might be a problem with turn – taking in conversations. Also, people with AS/HFA often have pedantic speech, using awkward phrases and big words (Gary B. Mesibov, Victoria Shea, and Lynn W. Adams, 2001, P. 26)

2.3. Brief Summary of the Novel



It is a portrayal of a young girl who fall in love with an autistic boy. The story starts since their childhood, when Lilly was ten and Colton was nine years old. Lilly was a beautiful, smart, and bright girl worked for one day as a babysitter for Colton who was with AS, intelligent, and quiet passionate with art and painting. Then their love story begins when they reunited in their senior year of high school after years of separation. She took in her shoulder that she will introduce Colton to the social life and make him over through his difficulties of communication skills. She expresses her love by taking care of him, and Colton expresses his love for Lilly through art, when he paints a panel of admitting his true feelings and send it as a present for Lilly with his mom. we read the story from Lilly's perspective along with the whole novel (Amber, L. Puddle Jumping).

2.4. Applying the Symptoms of AS on Puddle Jumping

Returning to the essential point of this chapter, this part is going to apply the main symptoms of AS on certain extract and lines are chosen in this part of analyzing to show what extent they can be detected in the central character of the novel.

2.4.1. loudness and Material Sensitivity

The behaviors may be seen as challenging behaviors, self-treatment procedures, autonomic fear responses, or passionate administrative procedures. Such as behaviors incorporate covering ears, crying, escaping the range where the sound happens. (Understanding Sound Sensitivity in Individuals with ASD. 2010. P. 2).

Providing in the following few lines of Colton's description by Lilly. How his sensitivity for the surroundings, which representing by the train noise. She describes how he covers ears avoiding the sound terrifyingly. Furthermore, in another situation she describes how he shocked with the glitter on his hand. His touch sensitivity for materials as it seen below:

2.4.2. Pedantic Language

According to Christopher Gillburg a person with AS may have a formal pedantic language. Person with AS do exactly what they told, and committed to it like when Colton has been asked by Lilly about his paintings and he said that he is only allowed to talk about painting three times which is exactly what he did during that day.

2.4.3. Shortened Speech

We previously mentioned that a person with AS delayed in developing speech. Besides that, Peter Szatmari says that they tend to talk too much or talk to little even lack of cohesion to conversation. They have difficult continuing the speech. In fact, Person with Asperger tend to speak endlessly when it related to a matter of their interests, except that you will get one – word answer. Exactly Colton answers to lily questions in their first meeting where he uses "Paint?" and "yes".



2.4.4. Body Language

Sometimes autistics people in general might have simple body expression according to Hans Asperger they have postponed in their social development and social reasoning. we see Colton as person with Asperger's syndrome try to convey his feelings as hard as he can by squeezing his hands hardly.

2.4.5. Special Language

As Asperger person keen to speak bigger than their age using difficult phrases. As we indicated it in previous section of this chapter. Hans Asperger noticed that they have abnormal prosody and utilize a pedantic language. For Peter Szatmari says that they gained their vocabulary from TV programs or movies. Christopher Gillburg also agree with them and he says that people with AS use a very complex sentence. As when Lilly described Colton words as "using words I'd never heard someone my age use before".

Chapter Three

Autism Expressed Through Art

Language has been defined as a way of communication, but the question is how that communication is being represented. Words are not the only linguistic material for communication. People use different linguistic sign and signifiers to communicate a certain message for the receiver. It has been medically shown that people with autistic disorder, tend to express their inner thought and feelings through verity of linguistic sign rather than words or speeches, for instance studying the system of sign and symbols more specifically; paintings, colors, shapes and pigments make it more easy to communicate with people of such mental condition.

As though, this chapter deals with artistic stylistic analyzing and common points shares between Colton and the famous artist Vincent Van Gogh. And also there is certain art stylistic elements applied on their artistic style. This chapter will include Vincent's life from psychological and art perspective. This chapter will exemplify "Starry Night" panel as self – expression reflected inside both of Colton and Van Gogh. Then will start analyze all which mentioned obviously in spot of Colton character in novel of Puddle Jumping.

3. 1. Vincent Van Cough and his Masterpiece "Starry Night"

Vincent Van Cough (1853 – 1890) in Grout Zundert, in the Brabant region of the Netherlands (Barbar,T. 2005, P. 7). Vincent got through a lot difficulties during his life, and he had a depression, loneliness, communication problems and some other mental illnesses, so he suffered from Asperger's syndrome (Charles, V. 2004. P. 98)



According to Michael Fitzgerald (The Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts, 2005) that Asperger's syndrome is characterized by ineptness, narrow interests, repetitive, routines, speech and language problems, non-verbal communication problems, and motor clumsiness. All of these characteristics we found in Vincent's behavior as it explained above. And all his paintings reflect his inside feelings and his mind condition. Van Gogh was limited to the subjects was surrounded him.

3. 2. Autism Through Art

According to Nicole Martin in her book (Martin, N. 2009, PP. 49 – 55)she implied the artistic style regarded to the symptoms for the autistic child. Here will applying some which fit with Colton and Van Gogh's style of paintings as much as them represents of autism in it.

1. A typical artistic development: Atypical advancement implies that a child's development isn't taking after the normal direction and might have unusual or out – of – order highlights.
2. High details: The inclination to incorporate an abnormally tall sum of detail in his or her drawings is regularly to begin with taken note once a child is drawing at the preschematic level.
3. Graphic perseveration: Realistic perseveration alludes to a determined theme or topic within the child's work of art.
4. Self – portrait features imposed in others: drawing others agreeing to self – picture. Nicole Martin said that she had drawn with two pimples, and she swear that she didn't have any pimples, but the the person who draw it was right then distracted with her possess pimples.

3. 3. “Starry Night” as Self –expressive Painting

The “Starry Night” isn't as it were one of Van Gogh's most moving and wonderful pictures. It has also a specific intrigued, for it was painted amid a basic turning point in his craftsmanship and in his life. Actually, its fashion is the result not so much of mental crisis as of a long-deferred rise of the artist's capacity to specific his most grounded and most profound emotions through painting (B. 2015, Van Gogh's starry night)

Cypresses trees in mandarin culture are symbolize for death, as we see the tree interference between heaven and earth. The crescent a representation of Mary's marvelous conception and birth. Venus represents love and beauty. Using colors also indicate a condition of emotions. Blue may related to the open spaces, creative ability, freedom. Blue also means depths, wisdom and intelligence. Mixing yellow, which refers to warmth and happiness, into the dark blue sky would give a speak of feelings and symptoms of autism as intelligence and creativity. Adding a line of black color to embody mystery, his sophistication, It's a crying of himself for his



needs and to speak up his evoke emotions of sadness and anger(artcontext.org.).
(See figure 1)

3.4. Autism throughout “Starry Night” in Puddle Jumping

In "Puddle Jumping," the connection between Vincent van Gogh's "Starry Night" and the characters Colton highlights how art can serve as a powerful means of communication, especially for individuals with Asperger's syndrome. Both artists use their work to express their shared search for hope and love, demonstrating that artistic expression can bridge gaps in time and place. Although love is symbolized by the star Venus in Van Gogh's painting, its lack of color represents the absence of love in his life, emphasizing the shared struggles and emotions conveyed by both artists through their works.

In both "Starry Night" by Van Gogh and the character Colton's artwork in "Puddle Jumping," art serves as a powerful tool for self-expression, particularly for individuals who face challenges in verbal communication due to conditions like Asperger's syndrome. Van Gogh's masterpiece uses vivid imagery and symbolic elements to convey his emotions and experiences, such as the cypress tree representing his childhood and the chaotic sky reflecting his mental state. Similarly, Colton's interpretation of "Starry Night" in relation to his own life showcases his deep connection to the painting and the shared themes of loneliness, hope, and love.

Both artists demonstrate how one's inner world can be communicated through art, blending reality with imagination and allowing viewers a glimpse into their experiences. Despite their difficulties with traditional forms of expression, Van Gogh and Colton use their artwork to bridge the gap, effectively conveying emotions and connecting with others on a profound level. Their artistic expressions ultimately enhance their quality of life and provide valuable insights into the power of art as a means of communication for those who face challenges in verbal expression.

Art serves as a powerful tool for self-expression and communication for individuals with autism, as seen in both Van Gogh's "Starry Night" and Colton's artwork in "Puddle Jumping." Their attention to detail and unique artistic development highlight the role art plays in their lives, allowing them to break free from the constraints of their condition and communicate their experiences and emotions.

Although individuals with autism may struggle with verbal and nonverbal communication, art enables them to express themselves without words, fostering a sense of involvement and understanding with their surroundings. Through self-portraits and symbolic elements, both Van Gogh and Colton utilize art as a



language to convey their love, hope, and hardships, demonstrating the transformative power of art as a means of communication for those facing challenges in traditional forms of expression.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Although it is known that art is used as a therapy for autism. and it can have applied as a language and effective way of communication, the present study has used this concept on dramatic text which is Puddle Jumping, a novel by Amber L. Johnson. Studying art from linguistic perspective. As the focal point of this study is discovering how language may be expressed by art also in this fiction Puddle Jumping. And the way the symptoms of AS can be linked with the style of painting. Moreover, how this also applied on the famous artist Vincent Van Gogh and his masterpiece “Starry Night” how reflected the childhood of Colton. It seems that the touchable way of proving the mentality of the autistic character in this particularly fiction, is by following the description of narrator which is embodied in Colton’s girlfriend Lilly. As there an expression of love, sent by Colton to Lilly, it was presented through a piece of art when he drew himself surrounded by the phrase “I love you”.

In addition to figuring out the way that autistic could applied emotions through art, the present study has tried to show the way the autistic nature of the central character has been encoded in the artistic structure of the fiction by the author. Moreover, this study presents certain autistics elements such as body language, special language, pedantic language, and applies them on the behavior of Colton, to show how autism reflected in his personality and language.

The first chapter has shown a brief summary of the collection points which are to discuss I the next chapters. The significance of this study as no critic has involve with it, the purpose and the statement of the problem have been also mentioned.

Regarding chapter two, it concerned with the symptoms of AS, language problems, earlier discoveries about autism according to Hans Asperger. Furthermore, it has presented the features of this disease which are presented by Hans Asperger, Peter Szatmari and Christopher Gillberg. And applies it on Colton, like special language, body language, shortened speech.

Chapter three is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with the psychological life and art perspective of Vincent Van Gogh, as much as his masterpiece “Starry Night”, the symptoms of the artist with autism according to Nicole Martin.

The second part is concerned with discussion and analyzing the artistic and autistic sides of Colton personality linked to Vincent Van Gogh, and how art was as language for them.



List of Figures

Figure 1: “Starry Night” Diamond Painting Vincent van Gogh, 1889. diamondpaintingsaga.com

This sense the “Starry Night” could take its place among the few incredible religious canvases of the past hundred a long time. Van Gogh might denied this for the passionate Christianity of the youth had turned to bitter disillusionment (clearing out intaglio as it were the figure of Christ himself whom he called “the most prominent artist”). But to the subject of the “Starry Night” which he wrote had “haunted” him continuously, Van Gogh connected an extraordinary importance. (B. Van Gogh’s Starry Night. 2015).



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