

The Imagery of the Piece Knight and Its Philosophical Implications in The Queen's Gambit

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ABSTRACT: In the *Queen's Gambit* of Walter Tevis's novel, the piece knight is one of the six pieces in chess, and it is not only an indispensable character but also a crucial carrier for the growth of the protagonist Beth's thoughts. By analysing the attitudes and opinions of the main character Bess inspired by the knight in the novel, the article reveals the philosophical thoughts behind the imagery of the chess piece knight.

Keywords: Piece knight; Chess game; The Queen's Gambit; philosophy; Imagery

1. INTRODUCTION

Walter Tevis's novel *The Queen's Gambit* narrates the story of an orphan girl Beth Harmon with eight years old comes into contact with the game of chess by the chance, and relying on her own talent, love, and relentless effort, she ascends to the international stage step by step. This work incorporates a great deal of professional chess knowledge, even reproduces numerous authentic classic chess games. Chess is not only the

soul of the story but also the key to interpreting the novel. Generally speaking, the victory or defeat of a chess game depends on the combined effectiveness of the six types of pieces: the king, queen, rook, knight, bishop, and pawn. Each piece is important and has its own distinct function and the inherent value logic. However, within this novel, the piece knight is a unique special significance because it is not only a crucial force in Beth's chess strategies, but also serves as a metaphor for Beth's inner world, growth journey and way of thinking. This article attempts to outline the relationship between Beth and the piece knight and explore the profound philosophical implications behind it.

2. THE METAPHOR OF THE KNIGHT'S RULES AND CULTURAL THINKING

Among the six types of chess, the knight usually belongs to the secondary piece, and its power commonly is inferior to that of the king, queen, rook and bishop, and it is only equal to that the pawn at most. Nevertheless, its movement is distinctive because it moves in an "L"-shaped way and is also the unique piece that can jump over other pieces, except for the king during castling. This non-linearity and jumping features make it have the special tactical significance and valuable cultural thinking, that is mobility and innovation. Although the knight is considered as one secondary piece, it cannot be underestimated if its flexibility is fully used.

A positive cultural mindset derived from the knight's ability to defy convention and jump freely between the squares of the chess board helps to encourage players to break out of their rigid perspectives, forge new connections and open up uncharted frontiers.

3. BETH'S UNDERSTANDING, EXPLORATION AND UTILIZATION OF KNIGHT

In the novel, Beth's attitude toward the piece knight goes through a process from curiosity to mastery, reflecting the growth of her cognition and control of chess.

A. First encounter with the knight: a hazy comprehension and intuitive acceptance

After Beth initially understood the rules of chess, she played a game with Mr. Shaibel in the orphanage's basement. The piece knight in that game left a deep impression on her. That night, after Mr. Shaibel defeated her in just four moves, Beth replayed the lost game in her mind, lying in bed. The novel describes: "She pushed Mr. Shaibel's knight to the third row. In her mind, it stood very clearly on the green-and-white checkerboard of the dormitory ceiling. Because she had gone over this lost game hundreds of times in her mind, by the second game, she had already devised the related strategy. She picked up the knight and moved it as if in a dream... She set the knight down on the square, and the janitor glared

at it." This passage vividly depicts how Beth overcame the frustration of being a beginner, and the breakthrough point precisely lay in her understanding of the knight's move, giving the plot a highly symbolic. Although she did not yet grasp the knight's jumping ability and flexible feature, which held endless possibilities to turn the game around, her hazy comprehension of the knight allowed her to find a way out of her constraints.

B. Utilizing the knight: transcending imitation and seeking victory

Studying chess requires mastering many basic rules. For example, while Mr. Shaibel taught Beth the Sicilian Defense, he told her that the knight should be moved to KB3, and only then did Beth realize that there were established patterns for these moves. These variations, including the Levenfish Variation and the Najdorf Variation, all are sequences that beginners require to memorize. However, Beth did not want to simply follow these fixed patterns. "She decided not to take the obviously vulnerable pawn, keeping the tense standoff on the chess board. She enjoyed this feeling. She loved the power of the pieces, which is the authoritative presence spreading along straight and diagonal lines. When the game entered the middle stage, and the pieces were scattered across the board, the intertwined forces on the board excited her immensely. She brought her kingside knight into the chess game and made its influence radiate outward." Beth consciously tried to enhance the knight's combat strength

and frequently used it for both attack and defense in her games against other players. The knight's jumping move cultivated her ability to seek non-traditional paths in the chess board. She constantly sought victorious strategies within the ever-changing chess game.

In Chapter Four of this novel, Beth takes part in the Kentucky State Chess Championship. During her final championship match against the state's former champion, Harry Beltik, it was found difficult for her to exert her usual clear foresight, but she did not lose her standard of the control for the opening. She moved her knight into the struggle for the control of the centre of the chess board. In uncertain and unclear situations, her first instinct was to activate the pieces offering greater flexibility and initiative. She found that it seemed for her knight to have a good position, she reached out to make the move, and then she paused. This move could lead to the dire consequences. To prevent her opponent from moving his queen to the rook line and launching an immediate attack, Beth had to constitute a threat against his queen. She should balance offense and defence. Here, we can see that the knight is a crucial piece for Beth when she fulfilled both the offensive and defensive purposes. Her proficient mastery of the knight reflects her growth from merely imitating existing rules to deeply understanding the essence of the game itself.

C. Becoming the "dark horse": self-acceptance and a symbol of strength

In Western culture, the term "dark horse" derived from Benjamin

Disraeli's novel *The Young Duke*, which tells the story of an unassuming dark horse that finally wins the race. Since then, "dark horse" has become a metaphor for an unexpected and overnight sensation. In *The Queen's Gambit*, Beth was regarded as the dark horse of the chess world, and she emerged suddenly in a male-dominated intellectual competition, and no one could stop her progress. At the time, it was widely believed that girls should not play chess and could not compete intellectually with men. However, Beth broke such stereotype. After she won the Kentucky State Championship, all media outlets in their headlines without exception highlighted her gender: "Local Girl Shocks the Kentucky Chess Community, and Defeats Strong Opponents to Win the Kentucky State Championship." and "Schoolgirl Fights Hard, Wins the Kentucky Championship and Defeats Master." After that, she continued winning the chess championships in Houston, Atlanta and the U.S. Open, until finally she obtained a hard-fought victory after the final match against Borgov in the World Chess Open. At last, she accepted the black king, turned to face the audience, and let the wave of applause wash over her. Everyone in the audience was standing, and the clapping grew louder and louder. She embraced the applause with her entire being, feeling her cheeks turning red, then hot and moist, as the thunderous sound swept away all her thoughts. Without a doubt, whether in terms of gender and ability, Beth is widely recognized as a dark horse in the chess world.

Throughout the novel, there are other multiple scenes that also foreshadow this symbolic significance. Beth's understanding of chess begins with the piece knight. When she first asks what chess is, she touches precisely the piece knight: "the piece she touched was the knight, which had a horse's head with a small base beneath it." A narrating detail from her first victory is that "She held the small knight's head in her palm, and then placed the knight firmly on the square; this move darkened Mr. Shaibel's expression. Mr. Shaibel introduced Beth to Mr. Ganz, the high school chess team coach. When Mr. Ganz set up the pieces, she reached out and picked up a knight". The aim that the author once again describes this detail of Beth's unconscious hand gesture closing around the knight is to emphasize her affection and deep connection to this piece. It can be said that the knight is not only a tool on the chess board but also a symbol of her inner strength and wisdom. Moreover, as she grows older, obtains more experience in chess competitions, and matures through life's trials, her care for the piece knight reflects her growing recognition of her own abilities. The novel's structure is ingeniously designed, and the final chapter culminates in her legendary match against world champion Borgov, also concluding with the piece knight, and thus, finishing a circular narrative that echoes her initial connection to the knight. The original text states: "She waited only a moment before letting her hand reach for the board. When she picked up the knight, her fingertips could subtly feel its

strength. She did not look at Borgov. As she placed the knight down, the world was completely silent around her. After a moment, she heard a sigh from across the table and looked up. Borgov's hair was dishevelled, but he wore a sombre smile. He said in English: 'You win.'" The knight is the core tool of Beth's offense and defence, symbolizing her control over the game. Beth herself is also the dark horse of her own life, and she found a unique solution to the complex puzzle of her life.

4. THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEPTH OF THE KNIGHT IN THE WORK

This novel is a work with substantial depth. Its success lies not only in captivating readers with ingenious game strategies, the protagonist's fate and glorious achievements, but also in provoking the serious philosophical reflection on the complexity of human's thought and behaviour. The imagery of the knight implies the author Walter Tevis's profound contemplation of philosophical questions such as reason versus intuition, freedom versus constraint, and order versus chaos. Reason and intuition represent modes of thought; freedom and constraint are external conditions; order and chaos are both outcomes and goals. These three issues form a progressive and intertwined logical relationship, and collectively construct a framework of life philosophy using chess as a metaphor.

A. The coexistence of reason and intuition

There is no doubt that Beth is a naturally gifted player, but throughout

the story, the author deliberately avoids overly mystifying her talent. Every step of Beth's growth has been accompanied by arduous effort. She often mentally rehearses chess games, and none of her moves comes easily. For instance, "Beth leaned forward, closer to the table, and clenched her fists against her cheeks, and tried hard to discern the current situation of the game. Someone in the crowd was whispering. She exerted immense effort to shut out the distracting thoughts. Now was time to counterattack. If she moved her knight to the left... no. If she opened a diagonal for her light-squared bishop... that was the correct move.", and "She just sat there, unconcerned with the passage of time, until she had thoroughly deciphered intricacies of the chess game and understood the reason behind it. Then she stood up, washed her face again, and walked back into the venue. She had already figured out how to move pieces." In her self-training, reason and intuition coexist. Here, intuition does not refer to Plato's rational spiritual insight, nor is it a mysterious inner contemplation. Instead, it emphasizes a cognitive process that understands all existing things through the development. This is what Bergson proposed: intuition is a method of cognition, a process of knowing. This inspires readers to understand intuition from a philosophical methodological perspective rather than a psychological capability. It shows that there is no insurmountable gap between ordinary people and geniuses, and that a genius's intuition is not a sudden spark of insight or enlightenment. It

requires gradual thinking unfolded in duration, progressively expanding and deepening to reach the goal. Reason and intuition are core cognitive mode permeating the entire work, and this philosophical question constitutes the foundational layer of the work.

B. The interplay between freedom and constraint

Based on reason and intuition, the work further explores the interplay between freedom and constraint as an external condition, resonating philosopher Deleuze's opinion of "nomadic thought". The formation of the world's appearance depends on the unconventional fluidity and creativity, and similarly, the piece "knight" jumping on the rule-bound board seeks freedom within constraints, and thus, the position of the chess is created. Freedom is not unrestrained indulgence, but autonomous choice within certain rules and frameworks. The knight's free jump should adhere to the rules of the chessboard and the fixed chess piece's movement; otherwise, the game cannot proceed. However, the knight's flexibility provides chess players with innovative space and possibilities, enabling them to devise new tactics to tackle different complex situations.

Beth's life has been filled with numerous hardships and limitations. For example, she loses both her parents and later her adoptive mother who loves her; she is forced to take tranquillizing pills in the orphanage, eventually leading to drug dependency and addiction; in addition, she faces neglect and discrimination as a female player in international competitions.

These are all constraints imposed on her by the external world. Just as the knight can leap over obstacles on the board, Beth, through her wisdom and hard effort, overcomes these limitations and gallops freely in the chess world.

C. The balance between order and chaos

The balance between order and chaos is the ultimate outcome pursued. In complex chess games, the knight often jumps unexpectedly and flexibly, finding the optimal path within seemingly chaotic chess situations, just like the process of human seeking order within chaos. This embodies nicely the opinion of Ramsey theory. Ramsey theory posits that humans need to seek order within chaos, and in sufficiently large systems, even seemingly random configurations can reveal certain underlying patterns, enabling to solve the related problem. Chess is precisely a game that transforms chaotic situations into structured order. Although the knight's jumping movements may appear to create chaos, its each move follows the logic of the game. In Beth's chess games, the knight frequently plays the role of breaking stalemates. Through the knight's movements, she disrupts her opponent's logical order, and ultimately guides the chess game toward victory. This notion of "order within chaos" reflects her mastery of the game and mirrors her understanding of life, that is, even when reality is filled with uncertainty, one can still find solutions through wisdom and effort.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the piece knight in *The Queen's Gambit* has complex and profound meanings. It is not only a key piece through which the protagonist Beth controls the game, but also deeply intertwined with her intellectual and emotional growth. The philosophical thoughts it provokes also encourage readers to reflect on and explore their own paths in life.

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