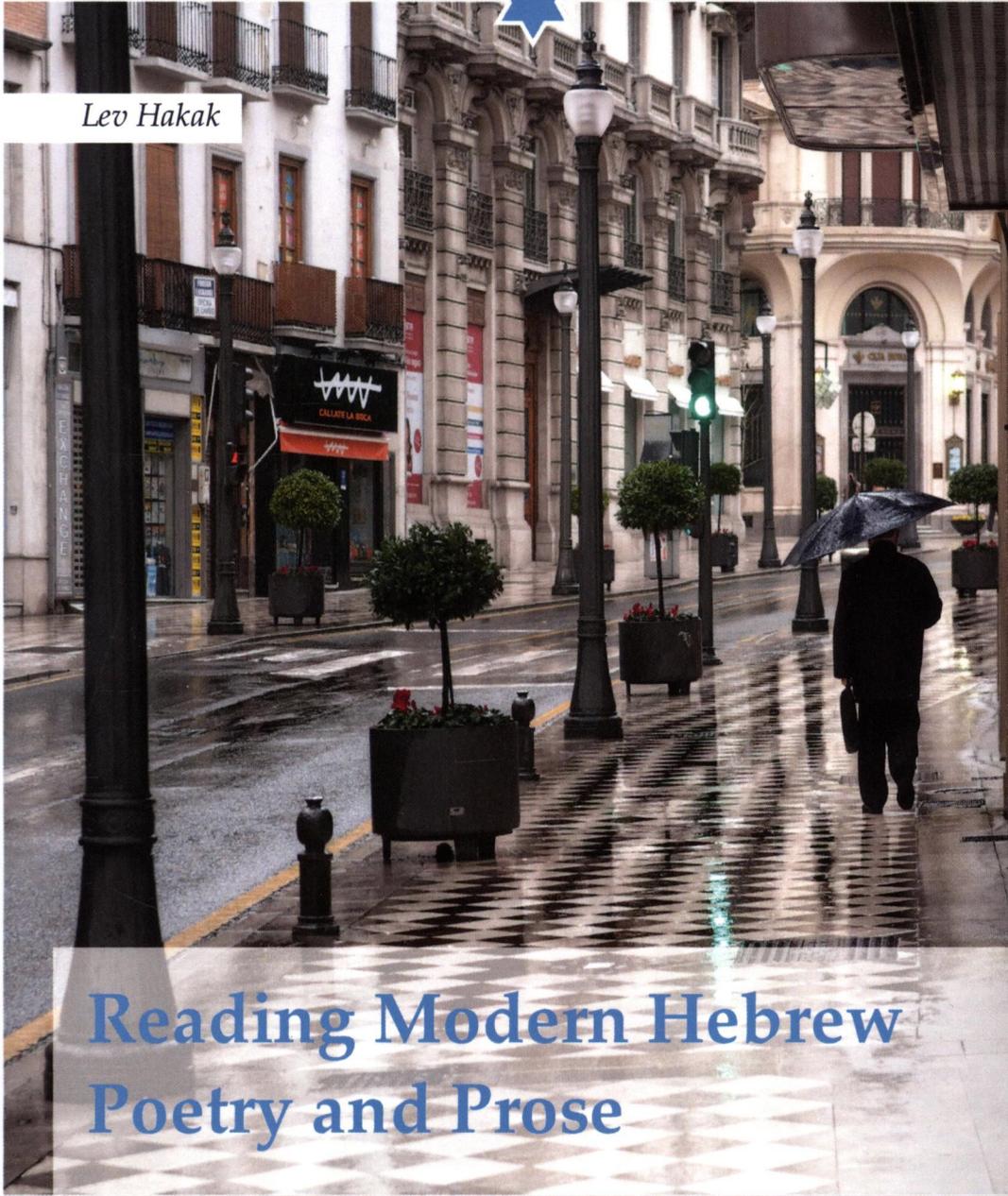




*Lev Hakak*



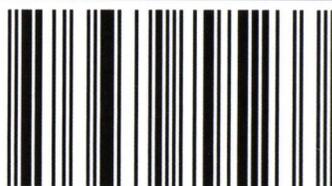
# Reading Modern Hebrew Poetry and Prose

## *Reading Modern Hebrew Poetry and Prose*

This is a collection of articles surrounding Modern Hebrew Literature. It includes articles about the prose fiction of S.Y. Agnon, who is Modern Hebrew Literature's only Nobel Laureate, as well as a piece discussing the work of the internationally acclaimed Hebrew writer A.B. Yehoshua. Most of the articles were published in various academic periodicals. Lev Hakak guides us with passion and depth on a rich and exciting journey into worlds created by prominent Hebrew authors. These worlds depict Jewish life in Europe, Near Eastern countries and Israel. It begins in medieval times in Spain and ends in contemporary Israel. We meet a medieval Hebrew poet whose love for Israel was the leading spark in his life, and a Rabbi who strove to touch the souls of his readers through sharing folktales. We meet a man and a woman undergoing a marriage crisis, a young man who gives up love because of the dominating older generation, a criminal who turns to faith on his way to execution, and more. The book also provides a little glimpse into Israeli movies and is also a literary voyage into the wounded souls of Holocaust survivors and others who converged to form the new nation-state on ancient soil.



Lev Hakak is a Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. He published many books and research articles in the field of Modern Hebrew Literature. As well, he writes Hebrew poetry and prose, and he is the editor of the only Hebrew periodical in the US, *Hador: The Hebrew Annual of America*.



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**Lev Hakak**

**Reading Modern Hebrew Poetry and Prose**



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# SEXUAL SYMBOLS IN "ANOTHER FACE" BY S.Y. AGNON

*Michael was grateful to her for her not interpreting his dream according to Freud and his School.*

S. Y. Agnon, "Another Face,"  
*Davar*, Dec. 12, 1932 edition

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual Symbols play an important role in S. Y. Agnon's short story "Another Face"<sup>1</sup> (1976, 3, pp. 449-68). These symbols accompany the progress in communication between Toni and Michael and thereby enrich the reader's aesthetic experience of the short story. The author dramatizes the couple's emotional world by projecting it upon concrete objects, which function equally as symbols and as objects.<sup>2</sup>

Sigmund Freud views many parts of the physical world as symbols of sexual activity or desire. A brief glance at the things and settings emphasized in "Another Face" reveal many objects to which Freud has assigned sexual significance: a parasol, hat, flowers, and a garden, to name some of the more prominent. It may be argued that different readers may relate in different ways to Freudian symbolism in the story. The reader may interpret the attitude of the narrator to these symbols as complex and ambivalent and as one, which goes beyond the Freudian symbolism; the reader may even argue that the narrator employs these symbols as virtual parody; or he may argue that the narrator employs Freudian symbols as defined by Freud. While different readers may view the effect of these symbols in different ways, ignoring the existence of these symbols may lead to erroneous interpretation because it is one of the means of characterization in the story. The existence of the phenomena is objective; the effect is subjective. Pointing to Freudian symbolism will lay the foundations for various approaches as to the effects of these symbols. I agree with Barzel (1975, p. 61), who thinks, "Undoubtedly, Agnon was well-versed in Freudian symbolism and knew how key symbols of his story would be interpreted."

The presence of many of the sexually charged objects in "Another Face" indicates the presence of symbols. According to the Freudian approach, objects belong to one of two groups, the masculine and the feminine. This strict duality seems to some to be imposed by a mind psychologically predisposed to find and to unveil universal sexuality. Symbolic interpretation confined to sexuality may, in fact, be a degenerate form of symbolism. Nevertheless, "Another Face" demands that the reader consider these symbols in interpreting the story and its central relationship. Various elements make it necessary to understand the sexual symbols in the story: the context of marital tension and sexual attraction; the frequent usage of explicitly Freudian objects; the encouragement of the reader in the story to see these objects as being more than simple objects; and the fact that some ideas in the story which seem flat or difficult become emotionally loaded and intelligible only when these objects are read as sexual symbols. These elements and others - such as the associative power and the centrality of these objects in the story and the sexual tension evoked by the interrelations of these symbolic objects - all support my contention as to the necessity of understanding the sexual symbols in this story. Other symbolic meanings for these objects are possible. My focus, however, is to read the text in the heretofore ignored light of Freudian sexual symbolism.

Between 1913 and 1924 Agnon lived in Germany; there he had close access to the ideas of Freud, already well known in intellectual circles. As Barzel (1975, p. 64) points out,

Certainly one should not relate to Agnon the exclusive following of one psychological approach or another, out of an attempt to imitate it. On the other hand, Agnon knew well the spirit of Vienna and was influenced by the modes of thinking, and by the ways of symbolism of Freud and his followers.

Several of his short stories ("The Doctor's Divorce" and "Fernheim", as well as "Another Face") are set in German-speaking countries and concern themselves with crises within marriage. Agnon originally dedicated the story of "Another Tallit" to Max Eitington, who was a loyal disciple of Freud, and who organized in 1933 a Palestinian Psychoanalytic Society.

Freudian interpretation has been successfully applied to Agnon's work by scholars such as Aberbach (1984) and Shryboim (1977). Feldman refers to the "sexual" connotations of the key-motif in Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*, and she thinks that Agnon is quite explicit in his use of dream symbolism, to the point that "he almost challenges the reader to go beyond the obvious in his search for an integrating reading" (1985, pp. 266, 267).

It is noteworthy that when "Another Face" first appeared in 1932, it included the following passage, which Agnon later omitted: "after (Michael) finished telling her his dream ... (Toni's) ... eyes became somewhat wet. Michael was grateful to her for her not interpreting his dream according to Freud and his School." By telling us why Michael was grateful, the narrator simultaneously reminds us of Freudian symbolism, with which he is obviously acquainted. Toni's eyes becoming wet is a statement to which Freud himself (1953, 5, pp. 358, 359) would give a Freudian significance.

Some critics hinted in passing at the possibility of giving a sexual interpretation to some objects in Agnon's "Another Face." I intend to demonstrate that this possibility is much more substantial than Agnon criticism has considered it to be. Freudian symbols become a device to portray characters and their inner life and relations through an interplay between the conscious reader and the narrator on the one hand and, on the other, the characters who are (in the final version of the story) unconscious of the implications of some of their actions and objects.

This essay does not, however, claim to be conclusive regarding all the objects and situations that may be interpreted sexually in "Another Face." My larger intent is to offer an interpretation of this story, which may enrich the reader's experience of other Agnon's short stories and novels as well.

### **THE CHARACTERS' PERSONAL EFFECTS AND THEIR BODIES**

Agnon emphasizes various personal effects that Toni and Hartmann carry with them. Toni's dress, parasol, handbag, and bottle of scent, and Michael's hat, cigarettes, cigars, and cigar-knife, for example, become prominent in the short story. Freud deals in his work with some of these objects. It is noteworthy that, according to Freud himself (1953, 5, p. 685), these symbols are not confined to dreams; objects such as umbrellas ("the opening of this last being comparable to an erection" [5, p. 354]) and knives may stand for the male organ (5, pp. 358-59; also p. 380 and pp. 683-84).

One of the objects that is mentioned in Agnon's "Another Face" is the parasol. The reader first notices the parasol when Dr. Tanzer and Svirsh,<sup>3</sup> the two single bachelors who lust for Toni, welcome her as she leaves the judge's house: "Svirsh took the parasol, hung it from her belt and, taking both her hands in his, swung them affectionately back and forth" (1967, p. 4). Svirsh's swinging back and forth of Toni's hands and his hanging her parasol from her belt denote sexual feelings.

In other of Agnon's love stories, there are substantial obstacles to fulfilling love; but Tanzer and Svirsh do not constitute such an obstacle at all. The narrator with Free Indirect Speech<sup>4</sup> and the symbolic use of Toni's parasol explicitly depicts Svirsh's lust.

Later (p. 11), in a moment of mutual attraction between Toni and Michael, Michael was busy dealing with his hat while Toni was busy fussing with the parasol. In addition, Michael, desiring his ex-wife, makes gestures in the air as Toni, desiring her ex-husband, pokes the ground with her parasol (p. 17). Barzel (1975, pp. 63-64) correctly finds the parasol to be a male object while the ground is a female one. Toni's act with the parasol moves Hartmann because it reflects his own erotic excitement. Toni and Michael then arrive at an inn where they decide to dine. Michael is worried that his wife is aware of his sexual thoughts. He "took her parasol, laid it on a chair, placed his hat on top of it ..." (p. 23). Hartmann's unconscious wish is that he will be able to accomplish his desires as simply as he was able to put his hat on Toni's parasol. At dinner, Toni's appetite (p. 24) represents her love for Michael and her frustrated desire for him. However, Hartmann rejects her again: he "got up, took his hat and said: 'Let's go'" (p. 32). This time Hartmann does not deal with the parasol himself: "The waiter came up and handed Toni her parasol ..." (p. 32). One concludes that Tanzer, Svirsh, Hartmann and Toni express hidden desire as they handle the parasol, and it indeed plays the same role as Freud's umbrella.

The appearance of a parasol in the story is often coupled with the appearance of the hat. Freud states that "a woman's hat can very often be interpreted with certainty as a genital organ, and moreover, as a man's" (1953, 5, pp. 355-56; see also pp. 360-62). The reader first notices the hat in "Another Face" when Michael defeats Svirsh and Tanzer. "Waving his hat, [Tanzer] walked off ..." The word in Hebrew is "henif", which can be translated as "waving" or "lifting" the hat. Tanzer doffs his hat and admits the loss of the sexual object. Now Toni and Michael are left alone. Michael is attracted to his ex-wife, and he is embarrassed: "He crumpled his hat and waved it about, smoothed its creases, crumpled it again, put it back on his head, and passed his hands over his temples down to his chin" (Agnon, 1967, p. 6). These helpless gestures with the hat, coupled with Michael's self-conscious avoidance of her eyes, indicate Michael's strong longing and sexual desire for his ex-wife. In another moment of confusion, when Hartmann is thinking about his separation and divorce, the narrator describes his feelings and his gestures: "... he removed his hat, mopped his brow, wiped the leather band inside his hat and put it back on his head" (p. 10). The hat serves as a refuge for Michael, who has a hard time facing his new