

DEFAMILIARIZATION IN TO HIS COY MISTRESS

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ABSTRACT

Andrew Marvell is one of the most distinguished representatives of the Metaphysical School. In his poem *To His Coy Mistress*, Marvell employs the literature skill of Defamiliarization to impress the readers, giving them a new reading experience. In terms of structure, he creates a structure that the time and space are inconsecutive to prolong the reading process of the readers. As for the language, his poems are featured with conceits. He relates two seemingly unrelated things together to present the literariness of the poetic language. He also innovates in the style of the poem by infusing the passion of Romanticism into the logic of Classicism. The essay analyzes the effects of Defamiliarization in structure, language and style, revealing the poet's innovation of creating a poem.

KEYWORDS: Defamiliarization; *To His Coy Mistress*; Andrew Marvell

INTRODUCTION

To His Coy Mistress is one of the most renowned poems of Andrew Marvell. The themes of the poem, courtship and *Carpe diem*, is widely praised in English poetry. *Carpe diem* is a Latin phrase, which means seize the day literally. In the poem, the speaker intends to persuade a young girl to be his love and have a good time with him by demonstrating the transience of time and the preciousness of youth. Marvell employs the literature skill of Defamiliarization in the structure, language and style of the poem, infusing a new life to it. The essay will discuss the aesthetic effects of Defamiliarization in details.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defamiliarization is a concept put forward by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" in 1917. He put forward the definition that "Works of art are works created by special techniques designed to make the works as obviously artistic as possible." (Zhang, 2002) Jacobson also points out that art is not to make unfamiliar things become familiar but to present the phenomenon that are so familiar to and even ignored by people in their daily life with the help of the language of literariness. Literariness appears when the familiar and conventional things are foregrounded, bringing the effect of estrangement to the readers.

Shklovsky holds that "poets are much more concerned with arranging the images than with creating them". (Zhang, 2002) Writers make what is familiar unfamiliar in literature by combining various literature skills in order to arouse in readers vividness and liveliness of their daily life. Literature skills of defamiliarization make the structure more complicated, the language different from normally used one, the objects described harder to recognize, as to prolong the process that people perceive a literary work. It provides the readers with a new perspective to observe their daily life, helping them have new discoveries in it and giving them a sense of beauty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of research has been done on Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* by scholars in western countries. Many scholars analyze the logic in the poem. For example, B.J. Sokol (1990) discusses the interplay of logic and illogic in the poem. Barry Targan (2008) describes his discovery of a logical fallacy in it and discusses the study of hypothetical syllogism in literature. There is also some research that studies the poem combined with other poems. The article written by Matthew Harkins critiques the poems *To His Coy Mistress* by Andrew Marvell and *On the Sight of a Clock* by Thomas Philipot, discussing the poems' similarities and the broader connection between the poetry of Marvell and Philipot (Harkins, 2012).

Research on the poem in China is not so comprehensive, mainly focusing on its theme and artistic value. For instance, Luo Yimin (2000) analyzes the rhetoric devices, metrical features and language styles in the poem, revealing its artistic value. In addition, Cui Weiqiao (2013) explores the relationship between the time view expressed in the poem and eschatology.

The Analysis of Defamiliarization in *To His Coy Mistress*

This part of the essay aims to analyze how Marvell applies the skills of defamiliarization in structure and language form to prolong the readers' process of appreciating the poem, arousing in them a sense of vividness and liveliness.

Defamiliarization of the Structure

The application of Defamiliarization in the structure can be seen in the courtship process described in the poem. The Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky points out the differences between story and plots. The story is a series of events that are listed in sequential order according to causality, while the plot is the artistic arrangement of the events that make up the story. The story is merely the material of constructing plots in essence. What's more, it is the plot rather than the story that makes a literary work appealing to the readers. Only when the writer make up great plots with the help of the Defamiliarization skills can he make a fascinating work.

To His Coy Mistress tells a story that a man intends to persuade a young girl to be his lover and have a good time with him by demonstrating the transience of time and the preciousness of youth. The themes of the poem, courtship and *Carpe diem*, is widely praised in English poetry, while the poet gives a new reading experience to readers by rearranging time and space to design new plots and construct a new structure that has defamiliarization effects.

Time and space are two concepts that people are familiar with and sometimes they cannot even feel the pass of time and change of space because they have already become a part of their unconsciousness. In the first stanza, there are several unexpected switches in time and space, which break down the readers' traditional views, throwing them into a totally different dimension. For example, "We would sit down, and think which way / to walk, and pass our long love's day / Thou by the Indian Ganges' side / should rubies find; I by the tide / Of Humber would complain. I would / Love you ten years before the flood, / and you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews. / My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow; / A hundred years should go to praise / Thin eyes, and on the forehead gaze; / Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest: / An age at least to every part, / And the last age should show your heart / For, lady, you deserve this state, Nor would I love at lower rate." (Marvell, 1996)

The speaker falls in love with his mistress "before the flood", while she may accept his love "till the conversion of the Jews", which means at the end of the world. The time described in these two consecutive lines is not in the normal time sequence and the description jumps from the beginning of the time line to the end of it in a sudden, which gives the readers

a sense of unfamiliarity. Besides, the poet also mentions that his lover can “grow slower than empires” and he can even spend “a hundred”, “two hundred”, “thirty thousand”, “an age” to praise his mistress’ body. The time view displayed in the poem is much more different than common people’s in the real world. It brings the readers to another magical world, making them reconsider the concept of time so that their process of reading the poem will be prolonged.

In terms of the change of space, his mistress can find rubies “by the Indian Ganges’ side”, while he will complain “by the tide of Humber”, which runs past his hometown. The places appeared in the poem are far from each other and it seems that they have no connections with each other. Readers can understand the images the poet creates, but they may feel confused why they are put together because the events in the poem are not arranged according to causality. The unexpected combination and the exaggerated contrast make the reader think twice about the lines in the poem to figure out the intention of the poet. The poet combines the things that are familiar to the readers but have no inner connection to create a grand background and appealing plots, free them from automatic thinking and present a marvelous picture for them.

By employing skills of Defamiliarization, the pursuer’s everlasting love for his lover is expressed. Russian Formalists holds that the language used in people’s daily life has already been automatized because it is used so often. The speakers do not need to make great efforts to say it and in the meanwhile, the hearers do not pay attention to it. Therefore, the daily language does not have artistic appeal. Thus, the literariness of the language in Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress* is emphasized compared with daily language.

Defamiliarization of Language Form

Many figures of speech are employed in *To His Coy Mistress*, such as metaphor, allusion, exaggeration, irony, comparison and conceit. The use of conceit is the most prominent feature of the poem. The use of rhetorical devices makes the common love story become more vivid and intriguing, and the language is endowed with poetic function besides the communicative function because of its literariness.

Poets of metaphysical school are skilled in using conceits in their poems. In virtue of their wits, keen observation and wild imagination; they can always compose beautiful lines with original conceits to increase the tension of feelings and arouse vividness and liveliness in readers. As one of the skills of Defamiliarization employed by Marvell, conceits make the images that are familiar to the readers become unfamiliar and make the language harder to understand. As a result, the process that they perceive the poem is prolonged and a feel of estrangement is brought to readers so that they can observe the world they live from an artistic perspective.

There are many impressive conceits in *To His Coy Mistress*. For instance, when the speaker expresses his love to his mistress in the eleventh and twelfth line of the first stanza, he compares his love to “vegetable love”, which is pure, grows slowly but enduring: “My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow”. The conceit is proper and original because plants and love do have some similarities: both of them can grow and need to be take care of. In addition, they can both make the world a better place to live in. However, people may feel confused about the conceit because plants and love are seldom related to each other in their perceptions. In most cases, love is compared to “roses” in literary works, which is the hyponym of “plants”. For example, “O MY Luve’s like a red, red rose” (Burns, 2013). Both roses and love can bring sweetness as well as pain to lovers, so it is easy to relate them together, but few people make connections between love and plants. Marvell successfully brings the effects of estrangement and Defamiliarization to the readers by using the conceit of vegetable love in a creative way.

In the third stanza, the speaker tries to persuade his lover to seize the day and have fun with him. “Now let us sport us while we may, / and now, like amorous birds of prey, / Rather at once our time devour / than languish in his slow-chapped power. / Let us roll all our strength and all / our sweetness up into one ball, / and tear our pleasures with rough strife / Thorough the iron gates of life: / thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run.” (Marvell, 1996) In this stanza, the poet compares the two lovers as “amorous birds of prey”, showing their desire for love and pursuit of *Carpe diem*. What’s more, he employs the conceits of “languish in his slow-chapped power” “roll all our strength and all” “the iron gates of life” “our sun” to express the desire, passion and pleasure of love. So many conceits are put in just a few lines, which can push the readers to concentrate on the poem to discover its beauty and artistry.

The poet points out that their love is not momentary indulgence but of great significance, because it will make the sun run for them. In this poem, the sun is not regarded as a star but a planet, which revolves around the earth, the center of the universe (Lehman, 2011). It is a typical idea of traditional cosmology rather than the scientific concepts of the seventeenth century when the poem was composed. The sun is familiar to the readers in their daily life, but it becomes much more unfamiliar due to the subversion of the scientific concepts of the universe in this poem. The alternation of day and night caused by sunrise and sunset is considered as the pass of time. The speaker of the poem believes that their love cannot stop the sun from revolving but can make it run for them, which means he treats them as the center of the world. In this way, the tension of the poem and the great power of the two lovers’ love are conveyed to readers. In addition, the effects of Defamiliarization can make them have a second thought on familiar things and make new discoveries in their daily life.

Defamiliarization of Style

As one of the most prominent metaphysical poets, Marvell not only inherited the Romantic tradition of Elizabethan Age, but also opened the door of the Age of Reason in the eighteenth century featured with Classicism. Shklovsky believes that the form of the artwork is decided by its relationship with the style of the former ones. A new kind of art form is created to replace the old form that has already lost its literariness (Zhang, 2002). In *To His Coy Mistress*, the poet creates a new style that combines the styles of Romanticism and Rationalism rather than sticking to the tradition of the former or the principles of the latter. He makes it different to the readers who are used to appreciating romantic poetry or reasoning poetry, helping them view familiar things and appreciate literary works from a new perspective.

The poem is divided into three stanzas, forming a logic form of “if-but-therefore”. Syllogism is a method of traditional logic, widely used in the area of mathematics and law. It has a rigorous process of reasoning and method of argument, rational and convincing. In order to provide the readers a fresh reading experience, Marvell infuses his passion and enthusiasm in the process of logical reasoning. In this way, he not only conveys the love from the two passionate lovers to the readers but also shows his perfect management of the skills of Defamiliarization. Love is not a rational thing in essence but the poet presents it in a logic way, making it harder for the readers to comprehend the lines so that the emotion the poet intends to express is highlighted.

In the first stanza, the speaker sings high praise for his lover’s beauty and the permanence of love: “A hundred years should go to praise / Thin eyes, and on the forehead gaze; / Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest: / an age at least to every part, / and the last age should show your heart / for, lady, you deserve this state, Nor would I love at lower rate.” (Marvell, 1996) When his lover is immersed in the praise, he suddenly shifts the tone to reveal the cruelty of the reality and the transience of life. In the meanwhile, the speaker’s sarcasm to his mistress for keeping chastity

can be seen from the lines: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near; / and yonder all before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity. / Thy beauty shall no more be found, / nor, in the marble vault, shall sound / my echoing song; then worms shall try / that long-preserved virginity, / and your quaint honors turn to dust, / and into ashes all my lust: / the grave’s a fine and private place, / But stone, I think, do there embrace.”(Marvell, 1996) Exaggeration and imagination of the beauty of love makes the lovers fascinated, while the cruel reality depresses them. As time is “hurrying near”, worms will eat up the maiden’s virginity and lovers cannot hug any more when they are in grave. Wonderful things will disappear and nothing will remain in the face of death, which has a great impact on the readers and gives them a feeling of disillusion. Thus, they may rethink their view of life, death and love, which are rooted in their minds and have a reflection on the present life. In the third stanza, the speaker urges his lover to have fun with him because life is transient and keeping chastity is useless. The reasoning process “if-but-therefore” in the poem is persuasive and convincing.

In *To His Coy Mistress*, the combination of logical reasoning and passionate love achieves the effect of estrangement and arouses freshness in readers. The Classical poets put an emphasis on the use of imagery and philosophy, while the Romantic poets prefer to express their feelings in a natural and spontaneous way. Marvell combines the styles of Classicism and Romanticism and presents a new style to replace the old forms that have already lost their literariness, making the readers to rediscover the beauty of poetry.

CONCLUSIONS

In *To His Coy Mistress*, Marvell makes good use of skills of Defamiliarization in the structure, language and style. In terms of structure, he creates a structure that the time and space are inconsecutive to prolong the reading process of the readers. As for the language, his poems are featured with conceits. He relates two seemingly unrelated things together to present the literariness of the poetic language. He also innovates in the style of the poem by infusing the passion of Romanticism into the logic of Classicism.

Furthermore, the title “*To His Coy Mistress*” also gives the readers a feeling of estrangement. The speaker addresses it in the third person, treating himself as a beholder. It is different from common poems that the persons are consistent in the title and content. The readers’ curiosity will be aroused and they may be eager to explore who is “he” in the title and who the speaker is. In many cases, readers will pay little attention to the title of a literary work. With the help of the skills of Defamiliarization, the poet can help people to discover the things that are ignored in their daily life.

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