

On the Tension of Whitman's "One's Self I Sing"

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"One's Self I Sing" is a free verse poem written by Whitman, an American Romantic poet, at the end of the 19th century. This paper tries to analyze the relationship between image, phonology, rhetoric, tension and theme in the text from the perspective of New Criticism, and further concludes that the formation and breaking of tension can promote the understanding of the meaning of the poem.

Keywords: "One's Self I Sing", New Criticism, tension

In the 19th century, Whitman's spends his life from 1855 to 1891 to create collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. If the United States broke away from British colonial rule in 1783, the birth of this anthology marks the first time that the independent poetry collection of American literature has changed from praising the divine power to praising the ordinary working people. As the title "leaves of grass" implies, the working people are like green grass, small and low, but all over the United States, full of vitality. His poems praise democracy, freedom and equality. In the form of free verse, it breaks through the limitations of traditional poetry and has innovative significance.

New Criticism a school of criticism with great influence in the British and American criticism circles from 1920s to 1950s. In the 1920s, Eliot and Richards established the basic theory of the New Criticism school by means of symbolism and literary analysis respectively, and became its main representatives. There are many members of the New Criticism group, and their common tendency is from the aesthetic point of view of symbolism. They regard the work as an independent and objective symbol, a self-sufficient organism isolated from the outside world, which is called "Organic Formalism"; they think that literature is a special language form in essence, and the task of criticism is to advance the writing of the works, which explores the interaction and secret relationship between various parts, called "semantic analysis". Symbolism provides them with aesthetic theory, and semantic analysis is their specific method of comment. The Romantic view that poetry is the expression of poet's feelings. They think that subjective feelings are just material. If you want to enter the works, you must first go through a process of impersonal, transforming personal emotions into universal and artistic emotions, and transforming experience into art. In his *Hamlet* (1919), Eliot believes that "the only way to express emotions in art form is to find an objective counterpart", that is, "a set of things, a situation, a series of events, which are the formula of the special emotion you want to express". This is the creative method of symbolism to imply feelings with specific things, which has a great influence on the new critics to explore the implied and

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ambiguous things in the text. Richards views that poetic language is a special emotional language which does not reflect the objective reality, and the complex meaning of poetry words due to the influence of context, which prompts the new critics to emphasize the richness and complexity of text analysis and poetic meaning.

The New Criticism school in 1930s and 1940s developed the theory of poetic language and the analysis of specific works. The more ambiguous the meaning of words, the richer the value of poetry. In his *New Criticism*, Ransom thinks that poetic language has the characteristics of conflict between "structure" (referring to the logic of the theme or poem) and "texture" (referring to the artistic treatment from words to punctuation). Brooks called the modification of a narrative by the poetic context as "mockery", and said that it was the main principle of any poetic structure. In his *On the Tension of Poetry* (1938), Tate defined the meaning of a poem as the "tension" formed by the "connotation" (referring to figurative meaning) and "denotation" (referring to logical meaning). Only when the tension is balanced or reconciled can the poem be regarded as a success.

Imagery Tension in "One's Self I Sing"

In the first stanza, Whitman shows the tension between the individual and the whole. He juxtaposes the self with the collective en-masse, showing the first group of tension, and using two adjectives "simple and separate". In the meantime, individualism in Melville's *Moby Dick* has reached the peak. There is a strong conflict between Ahab represented by personal interests and sailors of collective interests. Its Individualism brings the final total destruction, so it is called suicidal individualism. After all, the Romantic period breaks through the shackles of religious theocracy and the limitations of rationality and science, and the material prosperity prompted people to express their desire to enjoy life and spiritual and cultural independence. In pursuit of innovation, Whitman grew up listening to Thomas Paine's speech. The consciousness of freedom and equality is rooted in his heart. However, after showing that she sings about herself, although she is ordinary but independent, Whitman uses the turning word yet. The ego does not forget to say democratic and en-masse. The ego can not leave the collective (the collective of the United States), so the first group of tension is broken.

The second stanza shows the tension between body and soul. The poet points out that I sing about my physiological structure, from head to toe, including every cell. For the Muse, only the combination of physiognomy and mind can unity be of higher value. Before Romanticism, the relationship between body and soul always seemed to be in binary opposition, especially the American Puritanism which imprisoned people's understanding of them in the colonial period. It seems that the pursuit of physical enjoyment, wearing colorful and beautiful clothes, singing and dancing, playing cards are all labeled as secular. On the contrary, it is sacred and pure to pursue the purification of spirit and soul. Let Whitman point out that form complete has higher value in the middle of the second stanza. Influenced by Transcendentalism, Whitman thinks that human beings are a part of nature. Nature and body are like containers and clothes, containing or carrying the soul or super spirit. Supernatural is holy, and every individual is also holy. Therefore, human beings are equal and holy. While praising the soul or mind, Whitman emphasizes the integrity of the body. From head to foot, every part is sacred, and the tension between body and soul is broken here.

In the third stanza, Whitman shows the tension between men and women. In history, there are not only sex differences between men and women, but also gender differences in masculinity and femininity. Men and women have great differences in status, economy, politics, education, culture and ideology. Women always seem to be in

a disadvantaged position, and even do not have the ability to control their own life. Before Romanticism, woman's status was seldom involved in American literature such as poetry. However, after the words "Form Complete", Whitman proposes that female equals with the male I sing. Whitman puts women in the first place. Although women are different from men in physiological structure, they are equal in intelligence, spirit and soul. Since the body carries the soul, everyone's soul is sacred, so people are born equal. As a result, the tension between men and women is broken. It's also about this personal experience. Whitman's father was a poor carpenter and had nine children. Whitman came in second. After six years of school, he worked to support the family. Maybe it's the pressure of family life. His father often drank and didn't care about his family. His mother worked hard to bring up nine children. In his early poems, Whitman's image of his father is consistent with his father's. His childhood made him experience the burden and pressure of women, and he had the voice of equality between men and women.

In the fourth stanza, Whitman shows the tension between freedom and law. In the last verse, Whitman looks forward to the most free behavior of the ideal modern man under the sacred law in the future beautiful society. Law and freedom seem to be a pair of contradictions. The law prescribes the conduct of a person. Under the law, people cannot have absolute freedom. However, Whitman believes that if there is no legal protection and norms, and people can not even guarantee their basic personal safety, let alone free behavior. Therefore, freedom should be the most relaxed state under the protection of law, and the tension between them will be broken in the future. If we can achieve the harmony of body and soul, individual and collective, men and women, freedom and law, we can have a life full of passion and strength, even happiness and joy.

Phonological Tension in "One's Self I Sing"

Whitman created free verse poetry, that is to say, to break the limitations of traditional English poetry. There are no restrictions on ending rhyme, meter, step and length. But this does not mean that Whitman's poems are not musical. The rhythm of poetry is in accordance with the natural rhythm of daily speech, which is changeable and full of personality. How to break the tension between freedom and tradition?

In the aspect of rhyme, "One's Self I Sing" has no rhyme, but it has rich alliteration, such as self, sing, simple, separate; top to toe; immediate, in; passion, pause, power; forest free, form'd; modern, man distributed in all stanzas. It is easy to read, with varied rhythm and without losing the beauty of rhyme.

As for Rhythm, the poem is full of repetition, parallelism and similar grammatical structure, although it has no rhyme and step. For example, repetition of the words "I sing", and similar grammatical structure "of physiology" and "of life", which are rich in the beauty of rhythm.

Free verse breaks through the traditional bondage, echoes and enriches the theme in rhythm and sound, making the theme fuller, and maintaining a certain rhythm and aesthetic feeling of poetry. It's not that Whitman doesn't have the ability to use the traditional form of poetry. His "O Captain! My captain!" uses the traditional iambic lines, eight line syllables and "aabbcded" standard rhyme. The reason is that this poem was written not long after the assassination of President Lincoln, who led the American people to break through racial discrimination and division. Whitman's heart is filled with grief and sorrow. He uses the form of traditional poetry to express his mourning for the president, which is more formal and meets the needs of the scene at this time. "One's Self I Sing" is one of the nine prefaces to *The Leaves of Grass* in 1871.

He made the finishing point to sum up an important theme praised by the city level, and one of the most respected qualities of modern people with complete personality in the emerging immigrant country of the United States is the distinctive personality, which is based on the democratic system and the overall development of individuals, without distinction between the noble and the humble, and between men and women. His ideal is to be full of passion, impulse and passion in his life Strength, optimistic attitude towards life and freedom of action under the restriction of the sacred law. Whitman's poetry is full of this positive spirit. (Tao, 2011, p. 60)

Conclusion

In short, the New Criticism emphasizes the unity of the elements of the text and the independence of the meaning of the text. Each element includes image, rhetoric, tension and so on.

The multi-level and conflicting meanings produced by the paradox, irony, ambiguity and tension of the text must be coordinated with each other, that is to say, they should be integrated harmoniously to deepen the theme together. (Tyson, 2014, p. 31)

On the other hand, the independence of text meaning emphasizes that only from the text itself, regardless of the social background and the author's experience; the text is regarded as an independent artwork to excavate its internal meaning. "Since the new critics believe that their interpretation is based on the context of the text and the language in the text, they call their criticism practice internal criticism. The implication is that the new criticism only focuses on the internal things of the text" (Tyson, 2014, p. 31). "One's Self I Sing" is one of the most important poems in the poetry collection. It is composed of four groups of tension, which are broken one by one to achieve a balance and highlight the theme.

"Whitman at mid-life had plunged himself into the heart of the American experience of new worlds and second chances" (Elliott, 1988, p. 462). As in the poem, the words "Form Complete" dominate the whole poem, which not only respects the ego and maintains the personality of the ego, but also recognizes the greater self, which includes the ego. The body and soul are equally important, indispensable, and the body is the carrier of the soul, and the soul is the sublimation of the body. Men and women have different physiological structures; but because of the same sacred nature of the body, men and women are equal freedom in emotion and thought. Only under the guarantee of law can we have rights. Without law, there is no freedom. Therefore, each pair of seemingly contradictory breaks the tension under "Form Complete", but in fact they are unified and need to be complete. Whitman breaks through the prejudice of cognition, establishes tensions and then breaks them in order to emphasize the theme of democracy and individuality. No wonder he is the most outstanding poet of free verse at that time.

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