

Defamiliarization in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is one of the important poems in his early writing life, but this is not a traditional love song as expected. The paper tries to use metaphor, contrast, and allusion to analyze this poem from the perspective of defamiliarization to reveal its defamiliarization effect, aiming to disclose modern people's blank spirit and drying emotion.

Keywords: metaphor, contrast, allusion, defamiliarization

Introduction

T. S. Eliot is one of the most important poets and critics in the history of English and American literature in 20th century. The poems of Eliot mostly reflect decadency of modern western civilization. His poems have been widely discussed in the academic circles, among which *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* gets such a high credit. This poem totally overturns people's traditional idea about love song. The form of the poem is not restricted by its old traditions and formal rules. Its metaphor is so unique that it turns out to be preposterous, which is the most original feature of this poem (Liu, 2001, p. 69). The concept of defamiliarization is firstly brought up by Victor Shklovsky who is the founder of Russian formalism. When talking about problem of defamiliarization, he stresses that the existence of art is to let people reinstate their feeling toward life. The aim of art is to feel things instead of only knowing them. The skill of art is defamiliarizing the object and making the form difficult and thus increasing the difficulty of feelings. The sensory process itself is an aesthetic purpose and should be extended. In literary creation, this technique is usually used to create surprising and strange language to liberate people from the shackle of automation and unconscious and reexperience the feeling of facing things for the first time so as to obtain aesthetic pleasure. In order to feel poetically, we must break the automaticity of perception and adopt the method of defamiliarization. The method creates fresh and alienated language forms in order to increase the difficulty of perception and prolong the sense of perception. Defamiliarization is the creative method that moves the objects from normal feeling area and reconstructs the feelings towards the object by performing creative means. In this way, it can make this poem seem more difficult to read, thus bringing a fresher reading experience (Ma, 2003, p. 384). In light of the concept, this paper tries to use metaphor, contrast, and allusion to analyze this poem from the perspective of defamiliarization of the image, defamiliarization of the theme, and defamiliarization of the meaning to reveal its defamiliarization effect, aiming to disclose modern people's blank spirit and drying emotion.

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Use of Metaphor to Reveal Defamiliarization of the Image

In this poem, Eliot uses many images and defamiliarizes them. These images surpass their original meaning and depict Prufrock's mental state and the social state at that time. For example, in the lines to the poem:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table. (Zhu, 2005, p. 46)

First is the image of dusk. Here, the poet compares dusk to an anesthesia patient on the operating table. This is out of reader's expectation and breaks people's usual aesthetic feeling of dusk. To the lover, dusk is a moment with romantic color. But here in Prufrock, the world is enveloped in dark, and everything is slur and out of place, which is just authentic depiction of Prufrock's spiritual world at that moment. He loves a woman and hopes to express his love but is trapped in endless hesitation. He is in the demarcation of rationality and irrationality and does not know how to act. The "dusk" is like "an etherized patient upon a table", who is paralytic, unable, and losing of consciousness and individuality. This metaphor very vividly shows the spiritual numb of the modern people. The losing of thinking and belief is like the dead night fall to indicate that not only Prufrock but also the total society is in sick. The using of defamiliarization gives us a sense of freshness and leaves us a deeper impression towards the meaning of the poem. Another example:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimney,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (Zhu, 2005, p. 46)

In this verse, the fog is compared to the image of a cat. The fog is just like a cat wiping its back and mouth on the glass of the windows. It licks its tongue into the corner of the dusk and lingers on the blink of the drying water pot. It leaps from the stage and sleeps beside the house. Here, Eliot observes the natural phenomenon of the fog with the perspective of defamiliarization and so that an objective thing without life can be defamiliarized into a yellow lazy cat. The most important achievement of Eliot is that he uses images to vividly show the characteristics of modern city and the spiritual state of modern people. The metaphor of the cat shows us that the city is poetic and dynamic. If depicting the yellow fog of the city directly, the poet will focus on writing the air pollution in London. But here fog changes into a lazy cat. From the means of defamiliarization, we can get a deeper and more vivid aesthetic experience.

Use of Contrast to Disclose Defamiliarization of the Theme

This poem is a man professing his love to a woman. When we mention love songs, most people will think of romantic and cozy love. But the love song under the Eliot's pen is not the usual love song, which is not as warm as shepherd of Christopher or has some romantic things. The information we can catch is that Prufrock loves a woman and wants to profess his love to her. But when he is confronted with the distorted modern society and frustrated modern women, he is afraid to express his emotions. He does not know how and whom

he should sing a song to (Hugh, 1985, p. 108). And he is afraid of being refused, so he chooses to give up. Some individual images come into sight: the anesthesia patient on the table, half-deserted street, cheap hotel, and dirty restaurant. At first, it may seem so strange and makes us confused, but when we connect these image fragments and put them together, we can get a painting of bland and desperate background. Prufrock has his strong desire for love in his inner heart. But his hesitation leads his pursuit of love to the persuasion of himself. This interior monologue totally changes the theme of this poem and makes the poem a love song without love.

Besides the unusual way of expressing the theme, Eliot usually puts two inharmonic images together to make a strong contrast. In the poem, Prufrock is familiar with all the arms of the woman. But when these arms are put under the light, they will turn out brown and hairy. Firstly, the poet portrays a beautiful woman with beautiful arms. But the sweat and the hair of these arms turn out so ugly under the lamplight. The contrary of beauty and ugliness produces a great conflict which gives us a strong strike. Maybe it is the reason why Prufrock becomes so hesitate. Besides, in the end of this poem, Prufrock confesses with self-knowledge that he is not Prince Hamlet and he cannot compare himself with Hamlet. This kind of declaration not only makes his image minuter but also makes him funnier and more hilarious. After all, as a hero, what Hamlet has done is closely related to the survival of a country. But what Prufrock plays in modern life is only the role of a clown. This strong contrast reveals the Prufrock's inner world and the theme of the poem more deeply.

Use of Allusion to Reveal Defamiliarization of Its Real Meaning

Besides the defamiliarization of the image and the theme, there is also the defamiliarization of the allusion. The combination of the traditional allusion and modern life puts the allusion in a new context which gives it a new meaning.

First is the allusion of Guido Da Montefeltro. In the opening inscription of the poem, Eliot cites a word of Guido Da Montefeltro in *Divine Comedy* of Dante. It says that if he can answer the question of people alive and the flame will not flicker then; if what he hears is true, no one can leave the abyss alive then; and when he answers others' questions, he will not be afraid of the gossip. Guido thinks that Dante is the ghost from the hell and he will always be in the hell and there is no way for him to carry words to the living world, which implies that there is no necessity for him to be worried about him talking about his past and his shameless business. Here, Eliot defamiliarizes the allusion which distracts from its original meaning but refers to circumstance of Prufrock. Through the use of this allusion image, Eliot unites the experience and the thought and expresses common morbid spiritual state of modern people.

The second allusion is the Baptist John. In the poem, he sees his head is being cut. But he does not know his miserable result because he is not a prophet. The New Testament recorded that Herod prisons John because of John stopping him from having a marriage with his sister-in-law Herodias. But Herod does not dare to kill John because everyone regards John as prophet. Later Herodias's daughter Salome is loved by Herod and she requests Herod to kill John and puts John's head on a dish because John refuses her proposal of love. Herod does what she says. When there mentions the Baptist John, there is a clue of love stories. John and Prufrock have nothing in common. John dies of refusing love and devotional preaching. Prufrock has no love, not to mention refusing love. Here, by contrasting the two persons and the means of defamiliarization, we can see the blank and withered spiritual world of Prufrock. His life is none of meanings.

Conclusion

The essence of defamiliarization is adding the difficulty for us to appreciate the art form. As a result, the aesthetic process is being extended. Solitude and alienation are the themes of Eliot's poems. With a love song without love, T. S. Eliot reveals us modern people's blank spirit and drying emotion. Eliot thinks that modern civilization includes many changing and complex things. In order to adapt to the complex and multiple society, modern poets have to use comprehensive, dark, and indirect language to express their meaning. Sometimes, they even have to distort language to achieve their purpose. Eliot transfers his emotion to specific objective things and uses the means of defamiliarization to change one familiar thing into one strange thing. In this way, it achieves a satisfying distance between readers and the protagonist and also makes readers delighted about the strange new things.

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