

Comparison of “Song to the Men of England” With “Large Rat” of *Book of Songs* From the Approach of New Criticism

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New Criticism is an important theory in deciphering poetry. With the help of New Criticism, the meanings and the charms of the poetry are shown. “Song to the Men of England” and “Large Rat” are from different countries with the same emotions of accusing the cruelty of the exploiter and the miserable life of the exploited. However, “Song to the Men of England” is full of hatred to the exploiter, hoping to destroy the society. Nevertheless, the exploited of “Large Rat” keep the hope of moving to a new free land. The two poems show different characteristics of Englishmen and Chinese.

Keywords: “Song to the Men of England”, “Large Rat”, New Criticism

Introduction

Introduction to “Song to the Men of England” and “Large Rat”

“Song to the Men of England” is written by Percy Shelly, which shows the miserable life of the exploited and the luxury life of the exploited, and urges the exploited to rise. A Chinese poem expresses the same idea as Shelly’s. It is a “Large Rat” from the Chinese classic *Book of Songs*. These two poems will be analyzed perspectively, and then discussed their differences and similarities.

Introduction to New Criticism

Starting in the 1920s, New Criticism developed rapidly in Great Britain and flourished in the USA in the 1940s and the 1950s. This method closely reads text, especially poems. New Criticism regards a poem as an organic whole and “believes the structure and meaning of the text should not be examined separately” (Wang, 2012, p. 187). New Criticism does not care about context, such as historical background, authors’ lives and experiences, authors’ intentions, and so on. Instead, the text itself is the only concern. In “Wanted: An Ontological Critic”, Ransom wrote that “poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world that we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition, it is a kind of knowledge that is radically or ontologically distinct” (Pickering, 2018, p. 105); thus, the techniques and rhetorical means in the poem, such as tension, irony, metaphor, imagery patterns, and rhythm, are analyzed to show the meaning of the poem.

Analysis of “Song to the Men of England” and “Large Rat”

Beauty of “Song to the Men of England”

This poem is prominent in repetition, from word to sentence. First, some words are frequently used, such as wherefore, weave, sow, wear, and reap. Some words are coupled, which is contrary to the meaning. For example,

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robes are weaved by workers, though they are worn by tyrants. The seed is sowed by peasants, though it is reaped by landowners. The repetition of such words creates a sharp contrast between the life conditions of the exploited and those of the exploiter. Some of these are frequently used in lines. In the first two stanzas, "wherefore" is employed to question the different conditions of the two classes, which attracts the attention of readers who cannot help but be startled at injustice.

Apart from the repetition of words, there is also repetition in meaning. Such synonyms as "grave", "tome", and "sepulcher" in the eighth stanza are employed to alarm the lower-class people: If they would not rise, they should die. In the seventh stanza, there is semantic repetition. "Cellars," "holes", and "cells" are used to stress how small and shabby the places the exploited reside are.

Second, some phrases were repeated, such as weave robes, sow seeds, find wealth, and forge arms. These phrases depict ordinary people's lives. They worked hard every day, without a moment of rest. However, what they produced was robbed by tyrants. Such miserable conditions unquestionably arouse reader anger.

The fifth and sixth stanzas are parallel patterns that use "the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level" (Owl, 2007).

First, parallelized phrases are frequently found. In the fourth stanza, "with your pain", "with your fear", and "with your fear" emphasize that the exploit painfully and reluctantly buys products because their price is so dear and high. In the eighth stanza, "trace your grave," "build your tomb", and "weave your winding sheet" strengthen the forcefulness of expression: If the exploit does not rise, they should go to their doom soon.

Second, as mentioned previously, the fifth and sixth stanzas were parallelized. In every line of the fifth stanza, the first and latter halves are contradictory in meaning. No matter how hard the exploit sows seed, finds wealth, weaves robes, and forges arms, what they get is kept by the exploited. Such an antithesis vividly depicts the misery and helplessness of the ruled and the cruelty and greed of the ruler. The picture arouses readers' hatred against the ruler. The sixth stanza corresponds to the final stanza. Such structure as "let no—" gives special prominence to the important content, which the ruled should change their miserable condition by fighting against the tyrants.

Simultaneously, a simile and metaphor were employed. In the eighth line, "fair England" is compared to the sepulcher. This sentence aims to alert lower-class people to the dangers that they would die if they submitted to the tyrants.

In the second stanza, "cradle" and "grave" vividly suggest birth and death. However, drones do not produce honey. They live on bees. These characteristics are the same as those of the exploiters. In the third stanza, the metaphor continues. "Men of England" are substituted by "bees of England". Bees continue to fly all day to correct nectar and produce honey. However, they work hard as they live in small compartments that only hold their bodies and get as little food as possible. The queen and drones consume what they produce. The life conditions of bees are an exact picture of the working class. Overall, metaphor reflects the miserable life of the exploited.

Moreover, rhyme is also noticeable. Almost every two lines were end-rhymed, for example, "care" and "wear", "save" and "grave", "spoil" and "toil", and so forth. The most outstanding end rhymes are "reaps" and "keeps", "wears" and "bears", "reap" and "heap", "wear" and "bear". They attracted the attention of readers and highlighted the main meaning of the song. Alliteration was then performed, for instance, "lords", "lay", and "low", "wherefore", "weave", and "with", "rich" and "robes", "who" and "would", "that" and "these", "comfort" and "calm", "seed" and "sow", "weave" and "wears", "deck" and "dwells", "weave" and "winding-sheet". These

phrases attract attention to the miserable life of the exploited and arouse hatred toward the exploiter. In the first stanza, the alliterating words “lords”, “lay”, and “low” point out the fact that due to the tyrants, “men of England” are low in rank. Two sets of alliterating words such as “wherefore”, “weave”, and “with”, and “rich” and “robes” question the unfairness that “men of England” work hard though what they produce is consumed by someone else. In the seventh stanza, the consonant pattern is used to make a contrast between the exploited and exploiter. People who work day and night live in “holes” or “cells”; on the contrary, people who are idle and lazy live in “halls”. Working people “deck” the halls; however, the halls are “dwelled” by idle ones. Such contrasts severely criticize this oppression.

The song contains eight quatrains, each with four accented syllables. The rhyme scheme for each stanza is a uniform AABB. The short line and uniform scheme make the song powerful and convincing. At the beginning, the apostrophe of “men of England” shows that the addressee is exploited.

Overall, the wording and structural patterns serve the function of revealing exploitation and calling on people to rise.

Charm of “Large Rat”

As “Song to the Men of England”, “Large Rat” is outstanding for parallelism. The first three lines of the stanza echo those of the next stanza. For example, in these three stanzas, the first lines were parallelized, for example, “Large rat, large rat, Eat no more millet we grow!”, “Large rat, large rat, Eat no more wheat we grow!” and “Large rat, large rat, Eat no more rice we grow!”. This structure shows that the exploiter robs everything from the exploited and emphasizes that the exploited want to guard their products. The second line of each stanza depicts that the exploited work long hours, although the exploiter becomes greedier and crueler. The third line reflects the exploitation years for freedom and happiness. They hope to find a place that is free from exploitation. The last lines are quite prominent because they do not have the same pattern as the former and because their relationship with the third line is anadiplosis. They express good wishes for the exploited, which they imagine to be happy in that land of promise.

Another outstanding feature is word repetition. Emotions are highlighted. With the repetition of “large rat” and “a happier land” or “a happier state” or “a happier plain”, the hatred of the exploiter is intensified and the love for the bright future is deepened. Thus, this theme is emphasized.

The entire song is metaphorical. The exploiters were compared with a mouse. The mouse is lazy and glutinous. It does not work but consumes the products. “Large” not only describes what it looks like but also hints it’s greedy. Such an image vividly portrays the exploiter, like a large mouse, as not only fat but also greedy and cruel.

An end rhyme is a musical device that mirrors the narrator’s emotions. Taking the Chinese version as an example, in the first stanza, combined with four lines, the first seven half-lines are end-rhymed. For instance, four words are composed of a half-line. Each half-line is an end-gram, like “rat”, “millet”, “you”, “care”, and “land” in the Chinese version. This rhythm is short but powerful, showing the fury of the narrator being exploited by large rat. The last half-line does not end rhymed, showing that by thinking of moving to a happier land, the narrator feels better. Moreover, in the third stanza, the end rhyme of each line, such as “rice”, “labor”, “plain”, and “complain” reflects that the narrator’s anger is allayed and he looks forward to moving to a happier land.

End rhyme not only is a tempo device but also brings clues of the overall meaning. In the first stanza of the Chinese version, “millet” and “care” show how the mouse or the exploiter acts. It consumes food, though it does

not care about the producer. In the last two lines, “you” and “land” contrast. The first associates with the miserable life, but the latter refers to the happy life. In every line of the last stanza, instead of half line, it is end rhyme. “Rice” and “labor” reveal that the exploited work hard to plant rice shoots in hopes of harvest; however, the exploiter eats it, disregarding the toil of the pheasant. “Plain” and “complain” reflect that the exploited want to go to the land of promise, believing that they will not weep for the miserable life. The employment of the rhetorical question emphasizes their belief.

Other rhetorical devices are used. There is one example of hyperbole. “Three years you have grown fat” does not mean that the pheasant has worked for the exploiter for three years. It just exposes how long the pheasants serve this merciless exploiter. In addition, the apostrophe of “large rat” shows that the addressee is the exploiter.

Differences and Similarities of “Song to the Men of England” and “Large Rat”

The two songs have some differences, like the addressee and the rhyme scheme. Their addressees are different. “Song to the Men of England” is addressed to the exploited. It describes the miserable life of the exploited and encourages them to rebel. Otherwise, “Large Rat” is addressed to the exploiter. The exploited accuse the greed and cruelty of the exploiter and express their wishes to abandon the exploiter and search for a new happy life.

Regarding the rhyme scheme, “Song to the Men of England” is uniform, which is AABB. Such rhyme has a strong beat, which shows the fury of the narrator facing the miserable life of the men of England. But “Large Rat” is not so regular, which is much free in rhyme. Such beat shows that the exploited are still hopeful despite the of burdens the exploitation. They hope to move to a free and happy land, which is shown in rhyme.

From the perspective of the words, “Song to the Men of England” is long. It is somewhat lengthy. The last two stanzas are abrupt and weak. Contrarily, “Large Rat” is concise. With three short stanzas, it clearly describes the life of the two classes and expresses the wishes of the lower class.

However, they boast many similarities. Firstly, they both are songs, that describe the cruelty of the exploiter and the miserable life of the exploited. They both call on the rebellion.

These two are prominent in parallel patterns. “Song to the Men of England” is more variable because it is parallelized not only in sentences but also in words. “Large Rat” is parallelized as a whole.

Another characteristic is the metaphor. The former compares drones to the exploiter, and bees to the exploited. At the same time, the latter compares the mouse to the exploiter. Drones and mice both are lazy and idle, who are parasites, living on others. They are ungrateful and ugly.

Conclusion

All in all, the two songs are different in some aspects, like scheme, rhyme, and addressee. Subsequently these properties of the poetry reflect their distinct cultures of two countries. For example, “Song to the Men of England” encourages men of England to break the chains and make “fair England be your sepulcher”. However, “Large Rat” shows the narrator’s soft-heartedness because the exploited just want to leave, instead of fighting against, the exploiter. Moreover, “Large Rat” indicates the narrator’s enthusiasm for life as the exploited still believe in a happy land. Nevertheless, they have similarities. They both express the wish for rebellion and the hatred of the exploiter. The common theme is universal, that is, the hatred of oppression and the pursuit to freedom.

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