

A Stylistic Analysis into the Art of Deviation as Stylistic Features of Dickinson's Poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died"

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Abstract: Emily Dickinson is one of the most outstanding and influential American poets of the 19th century. Her poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died" is told from a perspective of narrator who is near her death. As a typical modernist poet, Dickinson's poems have prominent modernist characteristics. Her poetry language deviates from the norm, not limited to the language norms, forming a unique foregrounding effect from different levels such as phonetic level (the repetition of diphthong, flow, nasal, and iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter), graphological level (the frequent use of capital words and dashes), rhetorical level (enjambment, contrast, synesthesia, oxymoron), semantic level (lexical meaning transference) and grammatical level (juxtaposition and ellipsis). Exploring the stylistic characteristics of Dickinson's poetry based on the theory of deviation from the functional stylistics is helpful to excavating the implicated theme meaning and unique aesthetic value of Dickinson's poetry.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died"; Deviation; Functional Stylistics.

1. Introduction

Emily Dickinson is one of the most outstanding and influential American poets of the 19th century. Her poems deal with many subjects, including nature, religion, love and so on. However, it was this exploration of the subject of death that made her more famous. Dickinson is known for her short poems, filled with shocking imagery and dark ideas. She wrote "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died" during the Civil War in 1863, which is told from a perspective of narrator who is near her death. Dickinson shunned society and lived in isolation all her life. She has a unique personality, and the poems she creates break the rules and do not stick to one form. Therefore, as a typical modernist poet, Dickinson's poetry has outstanding modernist characteristics. Her poems deviate from the usual rules and are not limited to the rules, forming a unique deviation style.

In order to explore the effect of deviation on the theme, aesthetic connotation and aesthetic effect of Emily Dickinson's poetry, it is necessary to conduct a stylistic analysis of this poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died" based on the deviation theory, and to classify and interpret the various deviations in this poem. Language in use will be restricted by many rules such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and then form a language convention, and deviation is a creative use of language. It is a language form that deviates from the language convention. In the use of language deviation, deviation is the mean and foregrounding is the purpose. Deviation is an important bridge between poetry and language. The difference between poetic language and everyday language is that poetic language can realize the function of defamiliarization through the means of deviation. Exploring the stylistic characteristics of Dickinson's poetry based on the theory of deviation is beneficial to excavating the theme meaning and unique aesthetic value of Dickinson's poetry.

This essay will be divided into the following five parts. The

first section mainly briefly introduces the writing characteristics of Emily Dickinson and the theme of this poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died". The research object, research purpose and the frame structure of the essay will be introduced in this section; The second section will show readers the previous research and value of scholars on Emily Dickinson's poem, point out the shortcomings and evaluate the space of previous research, and then argue the research feasibility of this essay. Section 3 will show the theoretical methods to be applied, such as key concepts in functional stylistics, and explains the reasons. Section 4 is the most important part. In this section, the stylistic features and values of this poem will be analyzed in detail, including the deviation techniques of phonology, graphology, vocabulary, rhetoric, image, etc. Section 5 is a summary of the whole essay, summarizing Dickinson's stylistic deviation to strengthen the theme of poetry and the embodiment of the value of its aesthetic connotation.

2. Literature Review

It has been more than one hundred years since Emily Dickinson died, but the study of her poetry began to appear in the 1920s. In 1924, a commentary by the famous American writer Aiken marked the beginning of the academic study of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Generally speaking, the study of Dickinson's poetry in the 1920s lacked breadth and depth, but in the 1930s it began to deepen. Due to the mystery of Emily Dickinson's life, the research of this period mainly focused on the excavation of her life experience. This kind of social and historical criticism of Dickinson lasted until the 1950s and became the mainstream of the research in these 30 years. In addition, in the 1940s, the rise of the British and American New criticism, Emily Dickinson's text reading criticism formed a small trend. The most prominent feature of the 1960s and 1970s is the use of feminist criticism and psychoanalytic criticism prevailing at that time to study Dickinson, and achieved fruitful research results. In the 1980s

and 1990s, under the influence of reader response criticism and deconstruction theory, and due to the rise of Emily Dickinson's status as a writer, the research in these 20 years has two characteristics: one is the tendency to beautify the shortcomings of Emily Dickinson; the other is the close reading of the original manuscript, emphasizing the interpretive role of readers and the uncertainty of the meaning of the text (Kelly 967).

2.1. Previous Studies of the Poem

Generally speaking, in the past two decades, the research on Emily Dickinson's poem is very diversified, mainly focusing on the exploration of Dickinson's poetic form, poetic theme, the image and perspective of death, and her attitude to religion. For example, some scholars introduced Dickinson's belief in life, perception of death and strong vitality hidden behind the poem, and demonstrated that the form Dickinson chose for the poem was both liturgical and musical through the analysis of the poem's narrative tense, grammar, rhythm and rhyme, and thematic imagery (Ryan 15-17). In terms of Dickinson's attitude to Christianity, there is a scholar concluded that Dickinson followed the common trajectory of one who, when young, struggles with conventional religious faith and then rejects it in favor of a secular, naturalistic world-view (Grieve 31-47,59). Clune supposed that The Emily Dickinson's strategy is to present an experience of listening as an analogue for the experience of dying, which reflected the aesthetic structure of Dickinson's poem (633-654). He argued that Dickinson simply asks that we take seriously that aspect of the experience of absorbed listening that causes us to speak of "losing ourselves." Sandra used the reader's reflection theory to show the symbolic significance of a fly in this poem (317). In addition, it's worth noting that there are scholars traced a tradition of "deathwriting" as it stretches from Emily Dickinson, to Franz Kafka, to Samuel Beckett, to Cormac McCarthy (Boxall 192-211). Boxall argued that is driven by the urge to give a poetic form to the experience of death, to make death thinkable and narratable. Especially, Curran argued that the ecological consciousness situates the importance of Dickinson's poetic practice in developing modes of global ecological thinking, thinking the air, the spirit, the breath and the on-going process formed the conscious relationship by Interpreting Dickinson's work through yogic and Buddhist meditation discourses (86-106,135).

In general, these researchers have played a great role in deepening the theme of the poem. The research on this Dickinson's poem presents a variety, and to some extent excavates the unique image and writing technique of the poem as well as the factors behind it.

2.2. Previously Adopted Methods and Research Findings

In the previous researches on "I Heard a Fly Buzz -When I Died", scholars mainly adopted the comparative study method, the text close reading theory and the reader response theory, etc. For example, in the essay "Pursuing the Form of a Ghost: Emily Dickinson Thinks about Death through Hamlet", Bayley compares Hamlet's feeling after his father's death to Dickinson's metaphysical world, and argued that Hamlet provides Dickinson with a way of thinking about death as though it were the perpetual apotheosis of life: death as an event in the drama of life (46-68,111). While Sandra used the reader's reflection theory to show the different

symbolic significances of a fly in this poem (317). Besides, in the essay "HOW POEMS KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO DIE", scholar Clune provide us a very typical example of how to use the close reading method to explore the deep connotation and aesthetic values of poetry (633-654).

2.3. Inadequacies, Causes and Possible Solutions

It is worth affirming that previous studies on the influence, theme, image and other aspects of this poem have indeed achieved a lot of achievements, but there is an obvious shortcoming that the research is repetitive. In recent years, there are not many innovative studies. Although the research on the theme of poetry and the image of death is more in-depth, the research scope is relatively narrow.

One of the reasons may be that the establishment of Emily Dickinson's classic status and the prevailing theories such as reader response criticism and deconstruction influenced the research in the 1980s and 1990s. Many critics seek justification for the deviation in Dickinson's poetic language based on deconstruction and reception theory. They advocate respect for the original manuscript and believe that any stroke, shape, orientation and even paper differences in the original manuscript have unique meaning, and excessively pursue the uncertainty of the meaning of the text.

This is the limitation of previous studies, but it also provides a feasible reference for this study. Using the theory of functional stylistics based on systemic functional linguistics to analyze the prominent forms and their foregrounding effect different levels of poetic language is conducive to a comprehensive and systematic induction and study of the prominent features of this poem.

3. Methodologies

3.1. A Functional Stylistic Approach to Stylistic Features and Significance

Functional stylistics is a branch of modern stylistics theory. This kind of stylistic theory is based on systemic-functional grammar. The system function pre-grammar consists of two parts: system syntax and function syntax. Systematic grammar regards language as a system and focuses on the internal relations at the bottom of language. It is a system network composed of several subsystems which are associated with meaning and can be continuously selected by people. Functional grammar, on the other hand, studies the process or result of language choice, which is the study of the function of language structure in discourse. The research goal of functional stylistics is similar to the latter. It focuses on the stylistic effect of the selection process and the result of selection.

Halliday, the founder of systemic-functional linguistics, made a systematic summary of the mode of prominence from the perspective of function. In his opinion, prominence is the general term of linguistic prominence, which means that some linguistic features of a text are exposed in some form. Halliday accepted the views of linguist Leech and divided foregrounding features into two categories, one is qualitative and irregular, and the other is positive, strengthening the regularity. The former is called incongruity and the latter is called deflection. The former emphasizes qualitative deviation, while the latter emphasizes quantitative deviation. But there is no clear distinction between the two, because the range of comparison can change the attribution of a feature.

For example, the use of a large number of figurative words in poetry is in line with the convention of poetic language, but in the general daily language is deviated.

3.2. The Reasons and Strengths for Adoption of the Functional Stylistic Approach

Poetry, as a unique literary form, can give people beauty in music, vision, image and meaning. Traditionally, a poem is studied from the point of view of pronunciation and meter, with the introduction of the author and the background of the poem, and the analysis of the layout of the poem, the number of lines, the use of metaphors, sentence patterns, punctuation, etc. The use of the core concepts of functional stylistics is conducive to a more comprehensive analysis of the deviant stylistic features in this poem from the phonetical, graphological, lexical, grammatical, rhetorical, imagic levels, to show the role of the selection of form on the meaning of the theme, as well as the profound connotation and aesthetic value of the poem.

4. Deviations and Their Stylistic Values in Dickinson's Poem

"I heard a Fly buzz-when I died" by Emily Dickinson is told from the perspective of a narrator who is near her death. Rather than mourning this fact, the speaker focuses on a single fly that buzzes around her as she's nearing the end. This is an interesting juxtaposition, one that highlights the actions of her family members. The poet also emphasizes the stillness of the room as everyone around her waits for her death. Then, when the fly comes in, she describes it as interrupting the intended flow of the day.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died
 Emily Dickinson
 I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air -
 Between the Heaves of Storm -
 The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset - when the King
 Be witnessed - in the Room -
 I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable - and then it was
 There interposed a Fly -
 With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -

Between the light - and me -

And then the Windows failed - and then

I could not see to see- (208)

4.1. From Phonetic Level

The innovation and uniqueness of Emily Dickinson's exquisitely designed rhythms and cadences in her poems all help to create musical effects, emphasize emotion, and make the reading catchy to the reader.

4.1.1. Repetition of the /ai/, /l/, /m/ and Phonaesthesia Effect

Dickinson made extensive use of the vowel /ai/, lingual /l/, and nasal /m/. The vowel /ai/ appears in "Fly", "died", "Eye", "dry", "light", "signed", "my" and so on. The repetition of the vowel creates a calm and soft atmosphere. At the same time, when we pronounce the diphthong /ai/, we need to open our mouth wide and transition the lip shape, which can make the readers feel the gradual passage of time, the softness of space and the sense of boredom, bringing the readers into the space created by Dickinson and further accentuating the quiet scene. In the first section of the poem, the diphthong /ai/ appears for a total of three times, and in the third section, it appears for four times. The continuous use of this soft vowel further accentuates the soft and calm atmosphere. This stylistic effect of phoneme shows the phonaesthesia. In addition, when readers read this poem, they will notice that the word "buzz" contains the fricative /z/ sound, which mimics the buzz of a fly. Therefore, the connection is not only through the ear itself, but also through the subtle pathways of empathy and synesthesia that are known.

On a more mysterious and abstract level, people use this effect to give a certain color to sounds. Lingual and nasal sounds can give people a softer feeling. The lingual /l/ occurs many times in words such as "fly", "Stillness", "like", "Blue", "light" and so on, leaving a soft impression on the reader. In addition, the nasal /m/ is repeated throughout the poem, as in the words "Storm", "firm", "room". This slight sense of vibration echoes the buzzing of a fly, allowing readers to connect the quiet sense of space with the sound of fly's wings stirring and integrate it into the context.

4.1.2. The Repetition of the Use of Iambic Tetrameter and Iambic Trimeter

Dickinson's poetry broke the shackles of traditional iambic and pentameter, and adopted an unprecedented form, giving independence to American literature and art. This poem makes extensive use of common meter, namely through the alternating conversion of singular verse iambic tetrameter and even verse iambic trimeter, such as "I heard/a Fly /buzz -- when/I died -- The Still/ness in/the Room" in the first stanza. She also uses slant rhyme, which is a relatively modern concept of creation. For example, in stanza 1 and 2, the second and fourth lines, "Room/Storm", "firm/Room", hardly seem to rhyme, but they can form slant rhyme well in syllables. Both measures have A-B-C-(slanted)B, with the final rhymes all slanted to the consonant /m/. The end of this subtle rhythm leaves a series of obscure hum, giving the reader a strong feeling.

4.2. From Graphological Level

Poetry is the representative of poetic thinking, with many aesthetic dimensions, focusing on the reality of the beauty of

sound, meaning, form. The beauty of graphology can stimulate people's visual sense and give readers visual beauty. Graphological deviation is to bring visual impact to readers and give poetry novel artistic effect through the deviation of graphemic style. Graphological deviation is the most common stylistic deviation in Dickinson's poetry, which mainly consists of two aspects: the use of dashes and the substitution of upper case for lower case.

The dash gives Dickinson's poetry a special vitality. The 16-line poem "I Hear the Buzz of Fly - When I Died" contains 19 dashes, without any of the traditional commas and periods, that play an important role in setting the mood and sublimating the mind. First, the unpredictable dashes suggest the incoherence of the narrator's speaking rhythm, the illogicality of the language, and the discontinuity of memory. She specializes in writing poetry to the rhythm of the human breath. In the first stanza, for example, the two dashes in the first line, "I heard a fly buzz - when I died", break the internal coherence of the sentence and create suspense for the following; The second sentence, "The Stillness in the Room\Was like the Stillness in the Air -\Between the Heaves of Storm -" spanned three lines. Each line is an incomplete clause connected by dashes, creating a ghostly, eerie Gothic atmosphere. Secondly, Dickinson uses dashes to render artistic conception for poetry, so that poetry produces artistic blank. In this poem, each line of the fourth stanza is followed by a dash, slowing down the rhythm of the poem and suggesting the slow process of death. The poem has no title and no ending, and the last line is combined with the first line to form a special circular structure. At the same time, these innovative symbols give the poem a vague and mysterious artistic sense, that is, the sound and thought are suspended, and the consciousness of the narrator is sometimes absent. Finally, the narrator slowly withdrew from the subject of the discourse, but left a blank meaning. This kind of artistic white space arouses the curiosity of the reader, which in turn stimulates association and imagination.

4.3. From Rhetorical Level

4.3.1. Enjambment

Dickinson makes use of several literary devices in this poem. These include but are not limited to enjambment, oxymoron, and contrast. Enjambment is another common technique, one that's concerned with the transitions between lines. If the poet cuts off a line before the conclusion of a sentence or phrase before its natural conclusion. For example, between lines two and three of the first stanza as well as lines two and three of the third stanza. Each line is an incomplete clause connected by dashes, creating a ghostly, eerie Gothic atmosphere.

4.3.2. Contrast

The opening of "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" is rather startling, and Dickinson intends for it to shock her readers. The phrase initially gives the readers the idea that this is going to a rather boring poem, about nothing in particular. But then, after a short pause marked by the dash, the speaker informs the audience that she heard the fly buzz at the moment of her death, and suddenly the readers become aware that the rest of this poem will be spoken by a voice from the other side. She draws a sharp contrast between the sound of the buzzing fly, and the stillness of the room she is in when she dies.

4.3.3. Synesthesia

Synesthesia, originally a psychological term, refers to an urgent mental process that occurs when one of the sensory

organs of a person's many senses is stimulated. When synesthesia is used in literature, it refers to a figure of speech in which language describing one meaning can be used to represent another meaning, so that sound has a taste, taste has a color, color has a sound, and so on. The complexity of this sense is sometimes referred to as the translation of meaning. In the last stanza of the poem, the author uses "Blue", "stumbling" to modify "Buzz". "Blue" and "stumbling" is a visual sensation, while "Buzz" is an auditory sensation. In the poem, the hum of a fly is embellished with blue, the English symbol of sadness, reflecting the narrator's inner restlessness and sadness. Here, Dickinson creatively combines the three senses of sight, hearing and feeling, which are highly contagious in art appreciation.

4.3.4. Oxymoron

The poem, which begins with a fly interrupting the stillness of the room, is intended to capture the readers' attention. The reader may well wonder why the narrator focuses on the trivial sound of a fly when death is imminent. Mourners stood solemnly and mournfully around the deathbed of "me", yet "I" seemed detached from the mass of grief before me, merely an observer, indifferently observing the reactions of those around "me". The sentence "The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -\And Breaths were gathering firm\ For that last Onset - when the King\Be witnessed - in the Room -" shows that the loved ones have shed their tears and are anxiously looking forward to the last moment, when the King will come. Here, the author uses the oxymoronic modifier "last Onset" to indicate a religious idea in which a dying man ends his sojourn on earth and then begins a new journey under the guidance of King. King is expected to lead the narrator into another world in exchange for spiritual salvation.

4.4. From Grammatical Level

Juxtaposition and ellipsis are Dickinson's two main methods of refining poetry. Samuel Levine pointed out that the refinement and implication of language is one of the three differences between poetry and ordinary language. The words omitted by poets are often unable to be recovered from the deep structure of poetry and song, resulting in a gap in meaning, constituting the greatest difference between poetic language and ordinary language. In order to keep the poem concise and rhythmical, poets often use ellipsis in their creation. The ellipsis can make the poem orderly and sonorous, so as to avoid long and complicated, make the theme prominent, and enhance the effect of the poem. In this case, Dickinson could easily recover the omitted words by following the traditional poetic meter. In this poem, she duly omitted some implied pronouns and added a layer of hazy color to the poem in terms of structure and meaning. She also skillfully uses the juxtaposed word "and" to connect short sentences, and combines abstract images with substance to construct her own aesthetic world. In the last two sentences of the last section, she connects two short sentences with "and", creating a diversified perspective and making the whole structure grammatically reasonable and semantically clear.

4.5. From Semantic Level

In this poem, some words, especially capitalized nouns, have symbolic meanings. In this poem, "light" symbolizes life and heaven, while "king" represents God who welcomes the dead with open arms. There are also some who believe that the King may refer not to God but to death, who takes people's

lives. However, it could be found that the king may echo the image of “light” in the penultimate line after reading the whole poem, which symbolizes hope and rebirth. And the eyes are the “Windows” of the mind. If “Windows failed”, then “I” is left in the eternal darkness, that is, death.

A fly appears at the beginning and end of the poem, and it is clear that the narrator is endlessly preoccupied with this annoying presence. Therefore, the most insignificant image of the fly must be rich in meaning. Firstly, the fly is associated with decay and death, feeding on rotting food and flesh. Thus, the fly reminds the reader that once “I” is buried in the ground, “I” will soon become a mortal bone. All relatives, possessions and even beliefs would vanish from my eyes, so the image of the fly is infectious, full of regret and sadness. Secondly, instead of God coming to take the narrator away, “I” is accompanied only by “the wavering hum”. The fly replaces the absence of God, the divinity and the afterlife, destroying all certainty of the “I” for eternal life. It is not difficult to see that the fly is a symbol of spiritual doubt, and its aimless wandering implies the confusion of people’s hearts without knowing where to belong. Finally, the fly blocks the light, and “I” find myself unable to see anything, in other words, it is the decay of the body that blocks the narrator’s path to the light of the spirit. She saw no hope and gradually retreated into darkness. God’s salvation did not come, and death remained unknown. It should be emphasized that the word “see” in the poem has a double meaning. One is that the narrator loses her physical vision, the other is that she sees the true meaning of death and gives up the pursuit of immortality. Obviously, the poet uses this to express her skeptical and pessimistic attitude towards death, which runs counter to traditional Christian beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The stylistic deviation in the poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died”, such as phonology, figurative writing, rhetorical, syntactic and semantic, could provide readers with a refreshing aesthetic experience. In fact, the stylistic deviation in Dickinson’s poems implies Dickinson’s peculiarity in poetry creation and her loneliness as a female writer in a patriarchal society. Male writers played an absolutely dominant role in the field of literature in the 19th century. Dickinson’s poems were often rejected by other so-called orthodox poets, and her unique ideas could not be understood by ordinary people. But even in this difficult situation, Dickinson did not stop speaking and continued to write. Even if a punctuation change was made to her work, she considered it exploitative. Through the appreciation of Emily Dickinson’s poem from the perspective of functional stylistics, it can be concluded that Dickinson’s skilled use of language deviation techniques can help her to integrate the form and content of poetry.

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