

An Interpretation of *My Last Duchess* from the Perspective of Defamiliarization

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Abstract:

“Defamiliarization” proposed by Shklovsky is a very important concept in Russian formalism literary theory. It emphasizes fresh feelings, the texture of things and specific forms of art. The English poet Robert Browning subtly incorporates the technique of defamiliarization in the poem *My Last Duchess* and integrates various techniques to make unexpected achievements in character portraying and plot development. Therefore, this paper interprets Browning’s monologue *My Last Duchess* from the perspective of defamiliarization and analyzes the anti-automatization charm brought by language, narrative and symbolism, and opens the door to the deep meaning of this poem.

Keywords —defamiliarization; monologue; *My Last Duchess*

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to break the “excessive automation” caused by life and restore the sensitivity of modern people’s perception, Shklovsky, the leading figure of Russian formalism, proposed the concept of “defamiliarization”, which is “the creative destruction of habitual and standardized things to show us a fresh, childish, and lively prospect”(Hawkes, 2003). In other words, the purpose of defamiliarization is to remove the aesthetic object from the normal field of sensation. By displaying creative means, we can reconstruct the feeling of the aesthetic object, enlarge the difficulty and breadth of cognition, and constantly give readers a fresh way of creation. Shklovsky believes that defamiliarization, as a technique and art that reflects the literariness of works, can lengthen aesthetic feeling and enhance the artistic appeal.

The famous poet Robert Browning’s representative work *My Last Duchess* is world-

renowned and highly praised. However, the literary research on it mainly focuses on the fields of aesthetic analysis, feminism and discourse control, and rarely involves the poet’s use of defamiliarization techniques. And this paper suggests that the unique achievement of *My Last Duchess* is largely due to the poet’s integration and application of defamiliarization theory. Browning skillfully used the poetic form of dramatic monologue and displayed it with techniques such as symbolism, paradox and irony. So the poem not only enhances the inexplicability, but also prolongs the aesthetic feeling of the poem. Meanwhile, the distinct characters of the Duke and Duchess are revealed vividly.

II. DEFAMILIARIZATION OF NARRATION

Browning’s most original achievement in English poetry was the successful development of the dramatic monologue, which is a first-person poem written in the tone of a hypothetical character. Browning once said that he likes to “unveil the

soul". Compared with the external image of the characters, he pays more attention to the deep analysis of the characters' inner world. In *My Last Duchess*, Browning creatively uses the poetic form of dramatic monologue as the best way for the Duke to express himself, which realizes the defamiliarization of poetic narrative.

First of all, the narrator in the dramatic monologue is often unreliable, only presenting partial or distorted views of the event, and *My Last Duchess* is the most representative one. As the narrator, the Duke's words dominate the whole poem and guide the development of the plot, while the Duchess becomes the aphasia being talked about. There is a huge gap between the Duke who completely controls the right to speak and the Duchess who completely does not have the right to speak. This distinct sense of disparity will not only make readers think about whether the Duke's words are completely authentic, but also guide readers to break the "excessive automation" caused by the Duke's monologue in the poem, restore the sensitivity of readers' perception, and ponder the Duke's words with thinking.

For example, in the second verse of the poem, the Duke seems to be remembering his last Duchess and all that bothered him about her. It would seem that she was too easily pleased by everyone around her. The Duke was not happy with this. He didn't like that if someone like Fra Pandolf were to tell her that her shawl covered her wrists too much, she would blush. The Duke did not like she would blush at the flirtations of another man. All in all, he did not like that the things he called common courtesy would "call up that spot of joy", which she seemed to always have on her face. The Duke accuses her of having a heart that was "too soon made glad" and "too easily impressed". He was annoyed that she liked everything that she looked at. This man seems more and more psychotic and controlling as the poem goes on. It would seem that he put away his Duchess because he could not control her feelings. He wanted to be the only one to bring her joy and make her blush.

As another example, in the third verse of the poem, the Duke continues to explain all of the flaws in the Duchess' character. He says that she values

her white mule, a branch of cherries, and sunset as much as she values a piece of jewelry that he had given her. He is irritated that she does not seem to see the value in what he gives to her, or that she seems to value the simple pleasures of life as much as she values his expensive gifts to her. He also seems irritated that she does not seem to understand the importance of his place in life. By marrying her, he had given her a "nine-hundred-years-old name". This reveals that his family had been around for a very long time and thus he gave her a well-known and prestigious name by marrying her. She did not seem to be any more thankful for this than she was thankful to watch the sunset. This annoyed the Duke so much that was not even willing to "stoop" to her level to discuss it with her. He thinks it would be "trifling" to do so.

It can be seen that the Duke has repeatedly stated that the Duchess should be punished for her infidelity. But if we read this poem carefully, we will find that the Duchess just caused the Duke's dissatisfaction because she was kind to others and smiled too much. Only the Duke is speaking in the whole poem, so he has the right to speak and controls the development of narration (Liu, 1981). "The dramatic plot in this poem is not displayed through the characters' activities, but reflected in the characters' monologue. Through the Duke's monologue, the images of the "noble Duke" and the "frivolous Duchess" seem to jump on the paper. However, through the Duke's clear narration, readers gradually see the character image of the Duke and Duchess hidden under the Duke's monologue, which is diametrically opposite to the description. The seemingly simple dramatic monologue is ingenious, and the defamiliarized characterization method makes the two protagonists' explicit and implicit characters more vivid and persuasive.

Secondly, besides the speaker, the listener is also indispensable in the dramatic monologue. Although the listener always kept silent, his existence and reaction were fully reflected in the speaker's words. In *My Last Duchess*, the words "you" and "Sir" remind us of the existence of the listener (Adler, 1997). The line "the count your master's known munificence" tells us that the listener's identity is

an envoy sent by the count. And “are you to turn and ask thus” implies to us the behavior of the listener. It can be seen that although the listener doesn’t say a word, his thoughts and confusion can be displayed incisively and vividly in the poem. Therefore, through Browning’s construct, although the envoy didn’t say a word, we can clearly feel his existence without being disturbed by his silence. The envoy in the poem is like us readers, as he receives “will’t please you sit and look at her?” we can find that the Duke began to talk about his last Duchess. And until “will’t please you rise?”, the Duke just finished talking about his Duchess and began to turn to the next topic. Finally, after the listener receives the proposal of “nay, we’ll go together down”, the whole poem is about to end, and the whole plot tends to end. So it can be seen that although the listener is silent, it implies the development of the plot, conveys defamiliarization effect, and makes the readers feel the Duke’s character and intention with the listener’s identity. This defamiliarization process, which makes the listener not speak, can move our way of understanding this poem from the normal range and experience the beauty in a new way, so as to achieve the effect of “silence is better than words”.

Moreover, the scene where the speaker and listener are located is also very important for the creation of dramatic monologue, and every detail helps to increase the dramatic and unfamiliar effect of poetry. The poem *My Last Duchess* is set in Italy during the Renaissance in the mid-16th century. The location is in the private art gallery in the palace of the Duke Ferrara, where the portrait of the Duchess painted by “FRA Pandolf” is displayed. The Duke is leading the envoy to watch this painting and describe the reason why it was painted. Later, we will also find the statue of Neptune and the seahorse carved by Claus of Innsbruck. The background of Browning’s poetry enables readers to focus on the significance of these specific works of art and bring them into the interpretation of poetry. In a word, all these hints about the background of the monologue make the plot displayed in the monologue more real and full. Browning doesn’t describe these scenes in too much detail. His seemingly casual description can

make the reader think “twice” about them and prolong the aesthetic experience.

The dramatic monologue in this poem makes the language independent from the daily language. This narrative liberates the readers from the bondage of automation and unconsciousness by means of creative methods. It not only stimulates people’s nearly numb nerves, but also reawakens people’s understanding and perception of the world, so as to obtain aesthetic pleasure and poetic feeling.

III. DEFAMILIARIZATION OF SYMBOLISM

A. *White mule*

Mules are a combination of horses and donkeys, and generally have no fertility, so mules only devote their lives to work. But in this poem, Browning used the word “white” to decorate the mule. And white is the color advocated in western culture, which is considered to represent elegance, purity, integrity and honesty. Therefore, the “white mule” here not only symbolizes that the Duchess is now dedicated to marriage, but also symbolizes her innocent and indomitable nature.

On the one hand, by reading the whole poem, we can find that the Duke always wants to control the Duchess. The Duchess’ smiling behavior towards others will make the Duke dissatisfied. Furthermore, her cherishing ordinary things will cause the Duke’s anger. It can be seen that the wife the Duke wants is just a “doll” that can be manipulated. While as a flesh and blood person, the Duchess has her own thoughts and opinions, and will not deliberately please the Duke at all. Such a married life seems to be a shackle to her. Although the Duchess finally passed away, seemingly getting rid of this marriage, her portrait always reminds the world that she is the Duchess’ wife. So it is obvious that the Duchess dedicated her whole life to this marriage.

On the other hand, the poem says: “The dropping of the daylight in the West/ The bough of cherries some officious fool/ Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule/ She rode with round the terrace— all and each/ Would draw from her alike the approving speech.” Although riding around the terrace on a white mule is a trivial and insignificant thing for the Duke, it is a pleasure for the Duchess,

which shows that she is innocent and unrestrained. Besides, the Duchess “rode” around the garden on a white mule, which also signifies that the Duchess adhered to her pure and beautiful character and followed her own heart, trying to be the most authentic herself. From this point of view, the Duchess showed her persistence to us. The white mule is just like the embodiment of the Duchess, carrying her will and doing what she yearns for. Although she is the Duchess, she will not be influenced by the Duke’s opinions. Even if it would cause the Duke’s dissatisfaction, she insisted on doing what she liked. It is this that caused the Duke’s dissatisfaction, leading to the Duchess finally fate of becoming a soulless work of art.

The poet defamiliarized the “white mule”, which not only combined such ordinary things as the “white” and “mule”, but also made them appear in the poem together with the Duchess. This ingenious idea regards the white mule as the externality of the Duchess’ characteristics, which not only symbolizes the Duchess’ gentleness and purity, but also overturns the Duke’s one-sided remarks, helping readers deepen their understanding of poetry.

B. Neptune and the seahorse

As we have mentioned above, every detail in this poem helps to prolong the readers’ staying experience and increase the defamiliarization effect of the poem. Here we focus on the defamiliarization effect of the statue in the poem.

When the Duke led the envoy downstairs, he pointed out his cast-iron sculpture of Neptune taming a seahorse he was proud of: “Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though/ Taming a seahorse, thought a rarity/ Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!” The scene of Neptune taming the seahorse is in sharp contrast to the scene of the Duchess riding a white mule around the terrace. In other words, after reading the seahorse tamed by Neptune at the end of the whole poem, we will not only associate the previous picture of the Duchess riding a white mule, but also connect this scene to the former one and experience the feelings brought by visual differences in comparison.

Neptune and seahorse bring us the feeling of force and cruelty, while the Duchess riding a white mule reveals joy and harmony. Such a difference between “ferocity” and “kindness” has brought about the extension of perception and enhanced the tension of the whole poem.

Neptune symbolizes the Duke’s desire of controlling and possess. In Roman mythology, Neptune is the God of the sea, and his chariot is pulled by the seahorse he controls. Like the “Neptune”, the Duke also attempted to put his “horse” - his Duchess under his absolute domination, forcing her to follow his own path and live according to the pattern he set. The seahorse symbolizes the carefree and unrestrained nature of the Duchess. In Roman mythology, seahorses are fierce, independent and free-willed creatures. However, Neptune can make them submit to his will. Just as the lifeless seahorse in the art can be artificially “tamed”, the Duchess is always unyielding. She seems like a “horse” that cannot be tamed by the Duke, and her inner noble character cannot be changed. Only after death can she be “obedient”.

The Duke also stressed that the sculpture of the Neptune taming the seahorse was created by Claus of Innsbruck and was a rare treasure “specially made” for him. Ironically, although the word “specially made” literally shows that the Duke, who claims to be an art connoisseur, is highly respected by artists, it actually implies that the statue “specially made” for him is a true portrayal of himself (Ower, 1980). It is he, the connoisseur of beauty, who personally “tamed” his young and kind wife and destroyed the real beauty.

Whether the white mule, Neptune or the seahorse, they are providing a way to experience the artistry of things, so that “stones have the texture of stones”. As Shklovsky said, “the purpose of art is to convey the visual feelings of things, not to provide recognition knowledge of things. (Shklovsky,2015)” These things in the poem do not explain anything to us. The purpose of their

existence is to wait for us to excavate meaning and find the truth.

IV. DEFAMILIARIZATION OF LANGUAGE

“Art should restore things from the familiar cognitive field to the fresh feeling field, as they were strange at first sight, rather than as they are used to. (Yang, 2003)” The defamiliarized language in *My Last Duchess* is more obvious in terms of rhetoric and tactics. Through these creative techniques, many lines in the poem move the aesthetic object we want to perceive out of the normal sense field, expand the depth and breadth of our cognition, guide us to reconstruct the feeling of the aesthetic object, and constantly explore the sense of freshness and experience. As Russian formalists said, “Literary language is different from daily language. Literary language is a distortion and deformation relative to daily language, and it contains various skills.(Song, 2008)”

There are many paradoxes in this poem. And because ambiguity and irony often cause paradox, they are inextricably linked, so the poet combines paradox, ambiguity and irony these skills together to expose the Duke’s greedy and hypocritical nature, while setting off the Duchess’s beautiful and kind image.

First of all, the “last” in the poem’s title *My Last Duchess* is the central paradox of the development of the whole poem, which is reflected by irony and ambiguity. We know the word “last” has the following meanings: “the most recent”, “the final one”, “the most insignificant”. If we only look at the title of the poem, we may have a lot of reveries. As M.H. Abrams(1993) says, ambiguity is a poetic device that uses “a single word or expression to signify two or more distinct references, or to express two or more different attitudes or feelings”. Browning uses the multiple meanings carried by “last” here to touch people’s intuition and speculation, and stimulate readers’ curiosity and thinking. But as we read the whole poem, we can know that the word “last” which has the meaning of “the final one” violates the actual situation of the whole poem, because the dead Duchess is not his final Duchess. As lines 48-52 of the fifth verse say: “The Count your master’s known munificence/ Is

ample warrant that no just pretense/ Of mine for dowry will be disallowed/ Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed/ At starting, is my object.”The Duke is now going to marry the count's daughter. My “Last” Duchess in the title and the Duke marrying another lady at the end of the poem create a satirical effect, which enhances the artistic appeal of the whole poem. But if the last here means “the most recent”, then it is reasonable for the Duke to marry another lady. It can be seen that the word “last” bearing multiple meanings here will have diametrically opposite effects on this poem in different situations, but all in all, the usage of the paradox here is to expose the Duke’s selfishness and indifference.

Another example is “wonder” in the third line of the poem “that piece a wonder, now; FRA Pandolf’s hands”. The Duke called the work completed by Fra Pandolf a “wonder”, but then we find he added “worked busily a day” in the fourth line. It is not easy for any artist to finish an excellent work that can be called a treasure in a short period of time. So the word “wonder” here seems wrong, but it is actually right. The Duke only agreed Pandolf to spend only a short day with the Duchess to complete this “masterpiece”. The appearance of this paradox incisively and vividly shows the Duke’s strong possessive desire for the Duchess, and satirizes his narrow-minded and selfish.

For another example, in the end, the Duke claimed that the Count’s beautiful daughter was his ultimate goal, not the dowry given by the generous Count. But to the envoy and all the readers, this statement seems to be his real idea, but in fact, the Duke also said “The Count your master’s known munificence/ Is ample warrant that no just pretense/ Of mine for dowry will be disallowed”. He told the envoy that everyone knew his master’s generosity, so he hoped that he would give her daughter as much dowry as possible. In addition, he told the envoy that he was not worried about the dowry, because he knew the generous nature of the Count. And it was the charm of the count’s daughter he really cares about, not money, as he mentioned earlier at the beginning of the discussion. The focus of the Duke’s remarks these two times is different, one is the beauty of the Duke’s daughter, and the

other is the dowry of the Duke's daughter. These two concerns are easy to cause ambiguity to us. But after careful consideration, we can find that it was out of envy and concern for the property that the Duke mentioned this issue in order to ensure the value of the dowry. This is the second form of paradox, which also sets off the Duke's hypocrisy and greed. The Duke stated that his goal was to pursue a fair lady, but what if she was not fair? The episode of the Duke asking for the dowry not only indicates that his next Duchess may suffer the same tragic fate as the former Duchess, but also further highlights the real relationship between the Duke and his last Duchess in a deep sense: there is no love between them, and he just regards her as private property, which can be controlled by him as will like money or art collections. Browning used the technique of paradox to defamiliarize this poem, which not only conveys a sense of beauty to us, but also makes this poem contain rich philosophy, leading us to find the truth along the reasoning ideas it guides. In the process of deciphering, we will constantly lengthen the aesthetic feeling process and enhance the artistic appeal of literary works.

“Automation makes people feel dull, lose their poetic feelings about life and things, and lose their ability to appreciate the beauty of the world. (Dong, 2005)” Therefore, the poet did not use too much effort to depict the Duke directly, but used rhetoric and techniques such as irony and paradox to defamiliarize the language of the poem, so as to break the readers' original habitual thinking, let the readers interpret the poem from a new perspective, and comprehend the artistic charm of poetry more profoundly and vividly. This further confirms the theory of Russian formalist literary critics that “form is more important than content, rhetoric is more important than meaning, and defamiliarization is more important than familiarity (Zuo, 2011).”

□. CONCLUSION

Defamiliarization is the core concept of Russian formalism. Breaking the shackles of habits and traditions, making ordinary things unusual and charming, and creating a fresh and amazing experience for readers is the function of

defamiliarization. In the poem *My Last Duchess*, Robert Browning skillfully arranges the narrative perspective and structure, adopts monologue, a unique poetic form, and integrates symbols, paradox, irony and other techniques into the plot development, so that the Duke's selfishness and coldness are combined with the Duchess's kindness, purity, brightness and darkness, which not only breaks the tradition and inertia of readers' thinking, but also makes readers feel fresh and surprised, so as to feel a unique charm and artistic beauty of this monologue poem.

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