Appreciation of Repetition in Catch-22

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is a highly praised novel owning to its language characteristics. Repetition is one of the stunning features Joseph Heller adopts to create the splendid aesthetic effects. The paper aims to explore the role of repetition in terms of heightening the tension and horror of the war, emphasizing Yossarian’s aggressiveness to the officer and his persistence in keeping alive, strengthening the officer’s abnormal hatred towards the soldier, swelling absurdity and giving birth of and reinforcing the effect of black humor.

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Heller was born on May 1923 in Brooklyn, New York. His father was dead when he was only four years old. Heller was enrolled in the Twelfth Air Force after graduating from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1941, being stationed in Corsica where he flew sixty missions as a wing bombardier.

Heller started writing while he was a college student. He sold a few short stories to Esquire in 1947 and 1948, another few to Atlantic in 1948. In 1954 he started working on "Catch-18," a novel which had been gestating since 1947.

Prior to the publication in 1961, Heller was forced to change the title, Catch-18, to Catch-22 to avoid confusion with Leon Uris's Mila 18. Heller admitted that the number twenty-two, 22, had relevance to the novel "because so many things do repeat themselves so that the two 2's struck me as being very appropriate to the novel."2

The setting of Catch-22 is the fictional island of Pianosa, the base of the Twenty-seventh Air Force. Shimon Wincelberg sums up the story as a sprawling, hilarious, irresponsible, compassionate, cynical, surrealist, farcical and lacerating account of what happens to some American fliers on a small island in the Mediterranean during the Italian campaign of World War II. The protagonist is a former lead bombardier, John Yossarian, who is determined to stay alive. He uses all the means at his disposal to achieve that end.

Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short’s *Style* is to show that examining the language of a literary text can be a means to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the writer’s artistic achievement. *Catch-22* is a highly praised novel owning to its language characteristics. Repetition is one of the stunning features Joseph Heller adopts to create the splendid aesthetic effects, heightening the tension and horror of the war, emphasizing Yossarian’s aggressiveness to the officer and his persistence in keeping
alive, strengthening the officer’s abnormal hatred towards the soldier, swelling absurdity and giving birth of and reinforcing the effect of black humor.

REPETITION

It is too dogmatic to give a certain and fixed definition to repetition and its division. The attempt to attach a precise meaning to repetition and to classify the repetition results in the impoverishment of the definition and classification. Wang Yulong claims that there are two kinds of repetition, namely, repetition in writing and repetition in dialogue. Repetition in writing can be divided into immediate repetition and intermittent repetition. Intermittent repetition can be subdivided into anadiplosis, epiphora, symplece, epanalepsis, anadiplosis, climax, antistophe and ploce. The repeated parts may be words, phrases or clauses. Different from Wang’s classification based on the difference of style, dialogue and writing, Li Changbai in his book Rhetorical Repetition in English amends the division, combining some categories and making up some missing by Burton, such as cumulation. Li classifies repetition into three groups, the phonetic and letter repetition, word repetition together with semantic and structure repetition. In the following part, I will adopt Li’s classification to explore the linguistic characteristics of the novel and their contribution to the aesthetic achievement mentioned above.

Sound Repetition

All language has sound. Orators in ancient time know how to use the sound of their language for the maximum rhetorical effect. Classical rhetoric has a number of sound devices based on the echoing or rhyming of sounds. Modern English has inherited some of these devices. People are prone to build the bridge between the rhyme and poem, neglecting the sound beauty in the prose. Actually the elegant rhyme in the prose is a delicate device that the writer employs to interact with meaning or to echo the sense.

Repetition of sounds varies according to what sound is repeated and where the sound repetition happens. Alliteration, “the repetition usually initially of a sound that is usually a consonant in two or more neighboring words or syllable” 25 is a common sort of sound repetition. Contrary to alliteration, homoipteto is the sound repetition of similar ending in adjacent words. Besides these two kinds of sound repetition, assonance and consonance are also popular types. The former refers to the repetition of similar or identical vowel sounds in the adjacent words whereas the latter refers to the repetition of the similar or identical consonant sound in the adjacent word. These four types of sound repetition are scattered through the novel, Catch-22, creating a vocal picture in the novel and stimulating the reader’s hearing sense to experience the roar of the war and the tumult of the world in the novel.

Yossarian has a deep hatred and horror to drive the plane up to the air. The obvious threat that terrifies Yossarian up to air is the horror towards death. The war’s damning consequence is the root of his horror. The war being embodied with violence and blood together with military officer’s indifference to the soldier’s life propels Yossarian to make every effort to escape from the mission of flying. The violence and shock of the war is conveyed with the voice by Heller with the employment of homoipteto and consonance. “flaks were bursting and booming and billowing all around and above and below him in a climbing, cracking, staggering, banging, phantasmagorical,
cosmological wickedness that jarred and tossed and shivered, clattered and pierced, and threatened to annihilate them in one splinter of a second in one vast flash of fire.” 26

The voiced sound “b” appears around Yossarian’s ear shocking his every nerve and reminding him of the approaching of death. If the reader has a cute ear, he also can sense growl of the flak and experience the dangerous situation where Yossarian and his peers are. Besides sensing the roaring and the horror of the war scene, the reader may have sympathy on his persistent idea, escaping from the mission. The bad luck does not come once. Another repeated plosive sound “k” continues to torture him. The final purpose of the monstrous flak is to annihilate Yossarian and his peers. It seems that the reader can hear the flak swallowing them and burning their skin with the repeated sound “s” and “f” which sound similarly like the burning of fire. Consonance is tactically utilized by Heller to manifest the disastrous power of the flak and is a new angle to the reader to understand Yossarian.

**Word Repetition**

The sound repetition is far insufficient to prove Heller’s expert in language. Word repetition booms up in the novel, Catch-22. Word repetition is divided into multiple categories according to what is repeated and where the repetition happens including echo, gemination, antanaclasis, parallelism, epanorthosis, anadiplosis, anaphora, cumulation, ploce and so on.

**ECHO**

Echo considerably appears in the novel in different ways undertaking rich roles. Echo usually consists of three types: echo question, echo exclamation and echo declarative. Echo question is to repeat the former part wholly or partly with question tone to require the former speaker to retell or confirm the information stated, containing two sub-divisions, recapitulatory echo question and explicatory question. The former merely repeats the part or the whole content, while the later requires to explicitly explain the former information. Echo exclamation differs from the echo question on the level of the tone, using exclamation tone. Echo declarative repeats the former content partly or wholly with indicative mood.

Yossarian, the hero of the novel, with sharp contrast with other soldiers in the novel, is ready to fight against everything he dislikes or threatens his life, which is a most distinguishable character of him and also is praised by many critics and readers. His boldness is not only expressed by his action depicted with the word’s meaning but also by the form of describing his action. His boldness even bursts in the casual occasion. In the entertainment room, the two officers are playing ping-pong to their heart’s content and their ball falls off rolling down towards Yossarian. Yossarian bought his heel down hard on the ping-pong ball. The two officers laugh, “that Yossarian’, shaking their heads and got another ball from the box on the shelf.

‘That Yossarian’ Yossarian answered them.
‘Yossarian’ Nately whispered cautioningly.
The officers laughed again when they heard Yossarian mimicking them. ‘That Yossarian’ they said more loudly.
‘That Yossarian’ Yossarian echoed.
‘Yossarian, please’ Nately pleaded.”27
“That Yossarian” is uttered by the two officers and then Yossarian speaks the same words, which is the typical case of echo. The simple words with echo produce the magical power to show the different feeling among two officers, Yossarian and Nately. Obviously the two officers do not care about Yossarian’s offensive behavior and simply speak out “That Yossarian” with laughing and shaking heads. Their mild or to some extent friendly reaction does nothing to ease Yossarian’s resentment to them. He simply cracks back “That Yossarian”, a simple answer, but full of aggressive power, which meets the principle of Relevance Theory. On the basis of Relevance Theory, a communicator producing a stimulus intends to realize two aims: “first the informative intention, to make manifest to the audience a set of assumptions, and second, the communicative intention, to make his or her informative intention mutually manifest the notion of relevance itself is defined as a “cost-benefit relation: the cost is the amount of mental processing effort required to interpret the stimulus, and the pay-off consists in the contextual effect derived from it. Hence the less effort the processing of a stimulus requires and the more contextual effects it has, the more relevant it will be.”28 Heller’s simple but meaningful words “That Yossarian” satisfy with the principle of relevance theory. With no more than two words as well as no more information, Yossarian parrots the officers’ words to show his resentment to them. His bravery is also exposed by his short back answer. Contrarily, Natelty exposes his timidity by appealing Yossarian to stop his parroting with almost similar words as Yossarian and the officers do. We cannot help admiring Heller’s splendid competence in handling language adopting the two equivalent echo declarative sentences uttered by two individuals to transfer so profound meaning, Yossarian’s boldness and rebellion and Nately’s timidity and his care to Yossarian. It seems that one round of talk is not adequate to reveal their character. The same talk goes on at the same time Yossarian’s hatred and rebellious spirit is reinforced and Nately’s cowardice and concern about Yossarian is more explicit.

GEMINATION

Yossarian is bold enough to offend the officers, whereas taking the mission flying up to the sky is his nightmare and his wicked foe. Nothing than the mission throw him in a total depressing and hopeless situation. To escape from the mission and keep alive, he will take every measure. The embodiment of his dread about death and persistence to flee from the mission is supercharged by another sort of repetition, gemination. Gemination or immediate repetition is the repetition of words, phrases or sentences happening without the between. Owning to the identical content reappearing several times, the reader is able to taste that the scene, people, or the issue depicted by this rhetoric device is in a harsh speed and in a tense atmosphere as a result the reader can be involved in a haste and strained world that the character of the novel goes through. For another thing, it is a way for the writer to emphasize the information, to release his emotion and to arrest the reader’s eye. When Yossarian’s plane is hit, he knows that all the members in the plane are possibly to die. Without hesitation, he screams “climb” into the intercom at Mcwatt when he sees Mcwatt is still under the sun. “Climb, you bastard! Climb, climb, climb, climb!”33 The word “climb” emerges five times in a short time without any other word cut in uncovering his impendancy to get away from the attack and his scare to death. In such a thrilling situation, he hardly speaks out any other word but to scream the simple but fairly valid one, “climb”. Nothing remains in his mind but the idea to survive so that he overcomes dread to cry out the lifesaving one
which is the last straw for him to survive the flak. This repeated word urges Mcwatt to take action shaking off the dead evil. Besides creating the pressure on Mcwatt to pull up the plane, the repeated word also strains the reader’s nerve sensing the terrifying of the scene. The nightmare gets worse. The plane is slammed again and “Yossarian was struck with a weird sense of distortion.”34 Even though he still has a clear mind what it is his emergent issue, screaming to Mcwatt “Dive! Dive!”35 The order is brief, clear and forceful, conveyed with the device of germination. At such a critical moment, such a brief and clear order is more efficient than others informed by complex and flowery speech. Death do not easily drop Yossarian. “eight bursts of flak broke open—‘Turn left hard!’ he hollered to Mcwatt,—I said hard, hard, hard, hard, your bastard, hard”36 The repeated word “hard” shows that Yossarian is in a desperate situation and he uses all his strength to holler “hard” in the hope of getting away from death by guiding and urging Mcwatt to take action. “Hard, hard, hard, hard”, 37 every word like the thunder beats Mcwatt’s nerve as well as the reader. Finally the death is scared to withdraw by the unending roar and they survive in the flak. In this plot, the device of geminitation is employed again and again to depict how Yossarian behaves in the desperate surroundings, reinforcing his desperate feeling, and persistent desire to survive. What’s more, Yossarian’s smart and bravery is also reflected.

REFERENCES