Heterogeneous Repetition in a Dream of Red Mansions
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Keywords: Hill Miller, Heterogeneous Repetition, Complexity, Heterogeneity.

Abstract. The study of A Dream of Red Mansions in China has so far been mainly based on Chinese literary critic theories. Western critic theories are needed to get more artistic value and meanings from this novel. Heterogeneous Repetition on the narrative line is a term developed for literary criticism by Hill Miller based on linguistic theories. It refers to one character or event being repeated later on in the novel yet in different forms. In A Dream of Red Mansions, some cases of conspicuous heterogeneous repetition can be identified. Analysis of heterogeneous repetition in the novel helps to shed some light on complexity of the novel’s narrative and heterogeneity of its protagonist.

Introduction

A Dream of Red Mansions, also known as The Story of a Stone has its Chinese and English versions and has long been widely studied in China for its literary value. Enormous fruits of scholars’ exploring into this great novel have been published concerning the techniques employed in its creation or the analysis of characters in this novel. However, the study of the long-lived novel is all the time on the way. The author, who lived more than 200 years ago, wrote such a work that still captures a growing number of people’s attention. Its charm increases with more efforts spent on its studies. In order to get more implied meanings and artistic value out of the novel, new approaches are needed as tools to shed light on it. Under this context, it is helpful to get inspiration from some western linguistic theories so as to open up a new pathway for Chinese researchers and readers to examine the work comprehensively.

However, explorations in this direction are rare. The major researcher found in CNKI worth mentioning is Dao-qing Rao[1], who, inspired by theories of structuralism and deconstructionism, concluded Bao-yu Jia as a factor to undermine the system that he lives in. On the one hand, Bao-yu is one element in the system which is considered solid and well-established. Bao-ju’s role has to be interpreted from his position in relation with others in the whole social hierarchy. On the other hand, any social structure is not completely still and fixed, therefore, Bao-ju’s anti-society serves as a challenging factor to undo the structure, disturbing its state of stillness and closeness.

This kind of research method is not enlightening enough because the structural theory and the deconstructive theory used are basic linguistic guidelines in the study of language phenomena. As to further literary review, literary critic theories need to be developed from these linguistic principles.

American critic Hillis Miller has done this share of work. When Derrida’s advocates his deconstructive theory in the United States, Paul de Man integrates his idea into his text rhetoric study, and Miller follows up by absorbing the findings of both of them so much so that he raises deconstructionism to its peak [2].

This paper employs Miller’s critic theory and aims at analyzing the writing technique of heterogeneous repetition used in the novel A Dream of Red Mansions, with the purpose of understanding the writer’s artistic style in creating complexity in the novel’s narrative and heterogeneity in the protagonist Bao-ju.

Hillis Miller’s Critic Theory

Fiction and Repetition by Miller is a classic work in the field of deconstructive criticism. In his
view, repetition is a word corresponding to Derrida’s difference, which undermines the thinking mode of logocentrism.

As is known, logocentrism, the traditional thinking mode, agrees that a thing has its two sides, with one side dominating the other, and together, the two sides are united into oneness. On the contrary, Derrida’s difference proposes that without A, B cannot exist. B is the complement of A, as well as the delayed variant of A, and vice versa. In other words, when it represents A, B not only preserves the elements of A, but also reconstructs A or modifies A in its unique way. Consequently, B has some elements of A and some of its own, resulting in contradiction inside. From Derrida’s perspective, the world consists of substances which are paralleled and complementary, having neither center nor unity, but rather, contradiction and complexity.

Miller’s concept of repetition in the field of literary criticism is equivalent of Derrida’s difference. It means a representation of an event in one way or another. This can be the repetition of words or images to form a narrative line and produce some particular meanings or effects. For example, in Hardy’s novel Tess of the D’Urbervilles, the image of the rape of Tess is repeated over and again to highlight the pains and hurts left in the heart of the protagonist.

Literary repetition falls into two categories [3]. The first is the exact copy of one event, named homogeneous repetition. The second is the modification of one event, named heterogeneous repetition. These two categories of repetition go hand in hand with one another in a literary work. All elements in a novel are based on homogeneous repetition and heterogeneous repetition, but it is the latter that leaves a literary work in contradiction and complexity.

A variety of repetitions form a narrative line, which has no starting point or ending point, remarkably different from concepts of logocentrism. According to logocentrism, a story consists of a beginning, a body, and an ending. However, in Miller’s view, it is impossible to find the starting point or ending point of the narrative line in a story [4].

For the body of a story, the narrative line is not consistently straight; otherwise, it will not hold the readers’ interest for long. Digressions make the readers difficult to distinguish the digressing elements from the main narrative line, adding to complexity and liveliness of the story. Considering the whole story, those digressions are multiple plots paralleled, which jointly constitute the framework of the story. For instance, a footnote reminds the readers of the fictional nature of the story, while the text tries to create a truthful atmosphere. This footnote destroys the unity of the story and ironically indicates that the author’s intention is not in agreement with that in the story, hence adding to the complexity of the text.

The originality of Miller’s critic theory lies in that it goes against the traditional critic trends. A literary work is traditionally believed to have been developed around a center. The objective of a critic is to find the center in it or to seek for the structure on which the central content of the work is built. Traditional critics will never reach their objective, in the eyes of deconstructive critics, because literary texts in themselves are contradictory and heterogeneous, lacking unity and a center. So Miller’s theory opens up a new path for literary critics to look at a literary work with their focus on the complexity of the narrative line and the interpretation of heterogeneity of elements in it.

If we follow Miller’s guidance and take this path, we may see with insight how A Dream of Red Mansions tells the readers an all-time-interesting story with subtle heterogeneous repetition and be able to see clearly the quality of heterogeneity in its protagonist Bao-yu Jia.

Heterogeneous Repetition A Dream of Red Mansions

The narrative line of A Dream of Red Mansions goes tangled and circled with conspicuous homogeneous and heterogeneous repetitions. There are three stories interwoven in the novel and in them characters and scenes and events are repeated. Here emphasis in given on heterogeneous repetition which can be identified by careful exploration.

The first striking heterogeneous repetition can be found in character repetition. The stone in the first story and the Stone-in-Waiting in the second story and Bao-yu Jia in the third, although in different forms, are identical with one another and are generally considered trinity [5]. Bao-yu is the stone taken into the mortal world by a monk and a Taoist who are impressed by its magical
properties. The story of the Stone-in-Waiting takes place in a dream providing a more romantic background for its trip to the world. Although the stone and the Stone-in-Waiting and Bao-yu are identical in essence, they are characters so independent that it is not easy to figure out the connections and implications of their behaviors. Actually, each of them has to be interpreted with reference to the other two.

The second noticeable heterogeneous repetition can be the appearance of the monk and the Taoist. In the story of the stone, while the stone in the midst of its lamenting for its not being used to repair the sky like other stones, a monk and a Taoist approaches “from a great distance, each of them remarkable for certain eccentricities of manner and appearance”. Their unexpected meeting leads to the stone’s trip to the mortal world that is said to be brilliant, poetic, delectable, luxurious and opulent. Later on, in the real world, a monk and a Taoist are seen on the street, “the monk scabby-headed and barefoot and the Taoist tousle-haired and limping”. They show up to point out the ill fate of a girl. In Chapter Twenty-Five, when Bao-yu is seriously ill, a monk comes, accompanied by a lame Taoist. The description about him is “A bottle nose he had and shaggy brows, through which peeped eyes that twinkled like bright stars. His robe was patched and torn, his feet straw-shod, his unclean pate blotched with unsightly scars.” Although it is not made clear that the monk and the Taoist in the Land of Illusion are the pair in the real world, the readers are sensible enough to reach the conclusion that they are. More importantly, in the Land of Illusion, an ideal world, the monk and the Taoist look remarkable, while in the real world, they take on ugly looks. This type of heterogeneous repetition reveals the contradiction between the ideal and the real worlds, adding to complexity and exoticness of the narrative line.

The scene repetition can also be recognized. There are twelve girls living in Prospect Garden while Bao-yu sees “Jinling, Twelve Beauties of Main Register” on the album in the Land of Illusion. According to Ying-shih Yu [6], Prospect Garden “was the shadow of the Land of Illusion projected onto the world of man, and originally these two were one and the same and their images fitted each other exactly.” Direct evidence in the work to suggest this repetition is interesting. In Chapter Five, Bao-yu follows the fairy Disenchantment to “a place of marble terraces and vermilion balustrades where there were green trees and crystal streams. Everything in this place was so clean and so pure that it seemed as if no human foot could ever have trodden there or floating speck of dust ever blown into it.” And “as he followed her, a big stone archway suddenly loomed up in front of them on which The Land Of Illusion was written in large characters.” Afterwards, in Chapter Seventeen, when Bao-yu visits Prospect Garden for the first time, the description is, “The sight of this building and its arch had inspired a strange and unaccountable stir of emotion in Bao-yu which on reflection he interpreted as a sign that he must have known a building somewhat like this before - though where or when he could not for the life of him remember.” This kind of scene repetition arouses in the readers a feeling of destiny that wherever the stone is, Fate is already decided. However, it takes the readers’ effort to perceive the repetition and appreciate more from their further reading.

There are some other characters and events repeated in the novel. For example, Dai-yu Lin in Prospect Garden is the repetition of Crimson Pearl Flower in the Land of Illusion. However, in this paper, it is unnecessary to list all of them.

With kinds of heterogeneous repetition, the narrative line actually does not look very much a line, but rather a network where one story overlaps another, pulling together the past, present the future. If we analyze the character traits in A Dream of Red Mansions from the perspective of repetition, we can find heterogeneity in its protagonist Bao-yu.

**Heterogeneity in Bao-yu from the Perspective of Heterogeneous Repetition**

Generally speaking, heterogeneity of character traits in a literary work embodies itself in the writer’s choice of his protagonist, usually an insane man, for instance, in contrast with the normal people, or of a woman or a child in contrast with the strong men which are the mainstream of society [7]. The purpose of developing a story around such an abnormal character is to show rebellion against the functioning social system. The protagonist’s insanity virtually is not merely a natural disease, but the result of the oppression of the social system, so this state of insanity can be a
metaphor to symbolize the ill effect of political life on normal people, likely to lead people to such an abnormal state. This writing technique is commonly employed to criticize the inhumanity of the modern world.

But heterogeneity in Bao-yu Jia, the protagonist of A Dream of Red Mansions, is not insanity in contrast with the normal people. An insane man is typically of lower social status, expelled from living a normal life. Instead, Bao-yu is a son of a privileged family, having noble family background to live a normal life. Heterogeneity in him goes out of tradition and lies deep within. In other words, the character traits in Bao-yu are not harmonious or united, but contradictory and heterogeneous.

In the novel, Bao-yu is described as having experienced four times of transformation. Firstly, there is a stone that was made by Goddess Nû-wa to repair the sky, but unused and deserted on the Incredible Crags of the Great Fable Mountains. Then, with magic powers, the stone wanders to the Land of Illusion and receives the honorary title Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting in the Court of Sunset Glow. There he takes to watering Crimson Pearl Flower every day with sweet dew. After that, he is brought into the mortal world below as a human born with a jade in his mouth. So he is named Bao-yu to mean “a jade”. Finally, he returns to the Great Fable Mountains.

In the first period there is the metaphor “the stone to repair the sky”. In Chinese literature it means “a talent to hold up the nation”[8], but “this stone” is the only one left, unworthy to repair the sky, which implies that Bao-yu is depicted as an anti-social person in origin.

In the second period, although luminescent, the Stone-in-Waiting is still a stone instead of a jade. In Chinese culture, “a jade” symbolizes “a talent for governance of the country” [9]. So, the nature of the Stone-in-Waiting remains that of a stone, reinforcing the idea that Bao-yu is not a man of the mainstream ideology which promotes ambitious political goals in life.

In the third period, as his name suggests that he is a not genuine jade, Bao-yu Jia behaves in a way that deviates from the social norms. On the one hand, he shows the nature of the unworthy stone, going out with Pan Xue to seek pleasure; on the other hand, he shows the nature of the luminescent stone, greatly concerned with all the girls in Prospect Garden, admiring and appreciating their beauty and purity. His concerns with those girls prove that he disapproves of the existing social hierarchy with girls at the marginal place. Anyway, inside him, we see two types of contradictory character traits, but both types are heterogeneous, not meeting the expectations of the mainstream.

After the three periods, in the last Chapter, “two other men appeared on the deck, a Buddhist monk and a Taoist, and holding him (Bao-yu) between them, they said: ‘Come, your earthly karma is complete.’” Bao-yu’s identity is made clear: He does not belong to the mortal world. In this sense, he himself is extraordinarily heterogeneous.

Conclusion

Heterogeneous Repetition on the narrative line is a term developed for literary criticism by Miller based on structural and deconstructive theories. It refers to one character or event being repeated later on in the novel yet in different forms. In A Dream of Red Mansions, the stone and the Stone-in-Waiting and Bao-yu are actually trinity. The monk and the Taoist in remarkable appearances in the Land of Illusion are identical with the pair looking ugly in the real world. Even the scene of the Land of Illusion is repeated as Prospect Garden the real world. Such repetitions make the narrative line complicated, adding to complexity of the novel’s narrative. Meanwhile, from this perspective, we can see with assurance how Bao-yu, the protagonist of this novel, is created with intrinsic heterogeneity.

A Dream of Red Mansions is a Chinese classic novel and its study mainly confines itself to Chinese literary methods. This paper’s attempt to adopt a Western critic perspective to analyze its narrative and protagonist may help bring in more efforts in this direction.
References


