Heterogeneity in Bao-yu from a Deconstructive Perspective

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Abstract: From the perspective of deconstructionism, by employing Miller’s repetition theory, we find a different way to understand heterogeneity in Bao-yu, the protagonist of A Dream of Red Mansions. The repetitive relationship between Bao-yu and the Stone, and the repetitive relationship between Bao-yu and Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting, together bring into shape and highlight heterogeneity in Bao-yu.

Introduction

A Dream of Red Mansions, as one of the four most famous classical novels in China, contains Western post-modernistic elements as well as realistic elements, which offers us a wide and deep space to explore the profound meanings in its themes and the distinctive traits in its characters.

In studying the literary text of A Dream of Red Mansions, researchers tend to focus their attention on what characteristic traits Bao-yu Jia exhibits and how Bao-yu develops into a person as such. In recent years abundant fruits concerning his traits have produced. American sinologist Weizong Huang [1], who reveals the trait of being oppressed in Bao-yu, classifies this novel into the category of Growth Novels in accordance with the Western literary theory and criticism. In China, comprehensive research achievements have been accomplished by researchers like Liwen Wang and Decai Lu [2]. After their study of the long years of the findings of the preceding scholars, by adopting the method of comparative literature, they compare details in the text with Chinese traditions and cultures and conclude that Bao-yu Jia is a rebel deviating from the social hierarchy with the male at its dominant positions.

In this male-dominating social system, when the true life in Prospect Garden is smashed into pieces, Bao-yu fled from the mortal world back into the Incredible Crags of the Great Fable Mountains in the myth.

However, if we regard A Dream of Red Mansions not merely as a realistic novel, but more as a post-modernistic work, we may find a new deconstructive perspective. From this perspective, even if we do not have a good mastery of traditional Chinese culture, we may be able to use the deconstructive perspective and appreciate the trait of heterogeneity in Bao-yu. According to researcher Hongbo Zhang[3], time-space interweaving skill in A Dream of Red Mansions confirms with the post-modernistic way of thinking in the West. Thinking this novel can be more meaningful than Ulysses by James Joyce, he proposes that the suitable way to read A Dream of Red Mansions is repetitive reading. This is because the meaning of each unit in the novel is uncertain, which requires the reader to read it over and again, and to explore the meaning of each unit from the “overall” network in the novel. To look for the meaning of in a text is exactly where deconstructive theories are being applied.

Deconstructionism and Repetition Theory

Deconstructionism is built up on Saussurean structural linguistics. Saussure proposes that a linguistic sign has in it signifier/ signified. Each unit has a single fixed meaning, and the sign system made up of such units is reliable and stable.

This static language system is gradually deconstructed. Jacques Lacan changes Saussure’s signifier/ signified into signified /signifier because he gives priority to signifier. In people’s
utterances, Sign A may have the meaning of Sign B and in this case, the meaning in Sign A in the language system becomes “not present”. Jacques Derrida, a representative of deconstructionism, pushes the uncertainty of meaning to a new height. He finds when we read a signifier, its signified does not come immediately. On the contrary, it delays its presence, or never presents itself [4]. The meaning of a sign spreads in all directions without a centre. Therefore, a text is no longer the one enclosed from Sausssurean perspective. Rather, it is a text in motion, not having a stable structure or a single meaning. Deconstructive literary theories declare that in a literary text there runs horizontally a logical line of certainty and vertically some illogical elements of uncertainty. On the one hand, a literary text can be read and comprehended only if it is based on a logical structure and grammatical sentences within; on the other hand, some elements of a literary text have to deviate from the norms and be rhetoric. Remarkable contents and unconventional word uses contribute to the existence of a literary text as a work of arts.

To go further, Hillis Miller, a representative of deconstructive literary theory, proposes the concepts of “line” and “repetition”. He gives the above mentioned horizontal axis the name “line”, and the other vertical axis “repetition” [5]. The former refers to the reappearance of an event, a scene, a theme, a character, an image, etc. The later is repetition difficult to detect because the thing repeated has been changed in form. While the former leads all the utterances in the work to advance in the same direction in an attempt to offer a unified interpretation and integrate into a whole, the later gets some irrelevant or even contradictory elements involved into the work, leaving with the reader a text full of variety, complexity or even contradiction.

In deconstructive critical theories, there is no centre and meanings are far from certain. Therefore, the interpretation of a particular text can never be accomplished through an intensive reading once and for all. Each reading will be a fresh adventure into the text, or a new attempt to appreciate the art skills employed in the text. Exposed to repeated reading, all the units of a text slowly have their links connected with one another, and their meanings may be explored more fantastically.

In A Dream of Red Mansions one narrative line is the development of Bao- yu’s character. Vertically interweaving with it is heterogeneous repetition. Each repetition helps to foster and highlight heterogeneity in Bao-yu.

Interpretation of Heterogeneity in Bao-yu

Heterogeneity in a protagonist usually involves two aspects [6]. One is the depiction of an abnormal person against normal people. The other is the depiction of the weaker (a child or a woman) against the mainstream group. Heterogeneity in Bao-yu falls into the second category. Namely, he is the abnormal, which trait runs through the whole novel and is displayed by means of heterogeneous repetition.

In A Dream of Red Mansions, Bao-yu, the protagonist, is a person in the real world, but he also exists in the form of the abandoned stone and Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting in the myth. Obviously, Bao-yu is not a duplication of either of the two. From a deconstructive perspective, Bao-yu and the Stone, Bao-yu and the Stone-in-Waiting are what is called heterogeneous repetition. On the one hand, the Stone transforms into Bao-yu, leaving in him its inner spirit—naturalness. On the other hand, Bao-yu is the afterlife of the Stone-in-Waiting. Bao-yu’s love of Dai-yu is a heterogeneous repetition of the love story between the Stone-in-Waiting and Crimson Pearl Flower. Actually, the stone and the Stone-in-Waiting and Bao-yu are actually trinity. In conclusion, the author of this novel originally employs heterogeneous repetition to make Bao-yu’s characteristic trait more heterogeneous and appealing.

Repetitive Relationship between Bao-yu and the Stone

Though it centers on Bao-yu, A Dream of Red Mansions opens with the story of the stone transforming into a jade, and later on into Bao-yu. In the first chapter, the author, on the basis of a well-known myth, creatively modifies the myth by writing that one stone is left unused. In order to repair the sky, the goddess Nüwa melts down a great quantity of rock and moulds into 36501 blocks of stone, only to leave one block of stone unused. One day, a monk and a Taoist pass by. As the
Stone begs them to take him to the mortal world, the monk allows him to follow Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting into the earthly world, transforming him into a jade.

The Stone is heterogeneous compared with the other 35600 stones in terms of usefulness. Given the fact that Bao-yu has no interest in making contributions to society, it can be said that Bao-yu is a heterogeneous repetition of the Stone. The Stone is made to repair the sky but turns out to be left unused, unable to fulfill the obligation he bears. When Bao-yu is born, he has a jade in his mouth, which implies that Bao-yu is depicted the same as the stone in nature, an anti-social person in origin [7].

In the beginning, the stone is pure and natural, so is Bao-yu. Even if the Stone turns into a jade, he is not a genuine jade in a strict sense. Bao-yu Jia, as his name suggests, is not a genuine jade too. This explains why Bao-yu rejects social conventions, becoming a victim of the real world.

The Stone is Bao-yu’s natural form, and Bao-yu’s life is a repetition of the stone’s experience in the myth. It is clear the Stone is the key for the reader to understand the whole novel. The reason for the Stone to be abandoned is that he is full of natural beauty, which leads to Bao-yu’s heterogeneity, adding some timeless mysterious atmosphere to the novel.

**Repetition Relationship between Bao-yu and Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting**

Not an ordinary person on the earth, the Stone-in-Waiting lives in Sunset Glow Palace in The Land of Illusion. There, by the Rock of Rebirth, he conceives such a fancy for the beautiful Crimson Pearl Flower that he waters her every day with the sweet dews. Thanks to the vitalizing effect of the sweet dews, Crimson Pearl Flower is able to shed her vegetable shape and assumes the form of a girl. The consciousness that she owes something for his kindness becomes an obsession. This story is called by critics as Wood-Stone Pledge.

Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting has the nature of a stone, and Crimson Pearl Flower has the nature of a plant, so both of them are part of the Nature, simple and pure. Watering Crimson Pearl Flower on a daily basis symbolizes sexual love of a man for a woman, and Crimson Pearl Flower’s obsession with him represents the natural attribute of love between them. This story implies that sex instinct is the essential part of true love [8].

When they are reborn as humans in the world below, the Stone-in-Waiting transforms into Bao-yu and Crimson Pearl Flower transforms into Dai-yu. This can be justified in many details. For instance, when he meets Dai-yu for the first time, Bao-yu says “I have seen this cousin before” and “her face seems so familiar that I have the impression of meeting her again after a long separation”. In Chapter 23, when they both read together The Western Chamber, they derive a harmonious feeling inside. Although people around all criticize Bao-yu for not holding high aspirations, Dai-yu nenver says anything to blame him.

As the Stone-in-Waiting in the real world, Bao-yu naturally cares for the girls and his love of Dai-yu is a repetition of Wood-Stone Pledge. However, in the mortal world, true love is thought of as “sin”, prohibited by the mainstream social value system where “gold and jade predestined match” is promoted.

The natural beauty in Divine Luminescent Stone-in-Waiting can be accepted in Land of Illusion, but in the mortal world, it is superrealistic and heterogeneous. Bao-yu is doomed to be a failure because of heterogeneity in him that originates both in the Stone-in-Waiting and in the Stone.

**Deconstructive Perspective Reading**

A deconstructive perspective is a reading method, or a reading strategy [9]. To take this method, we find no centre in a literary text, but only lively utterances. A deconstructionist believes that a literary text has multiple meanings, which requires the reader to read repeatedly to seek the trace of a signified.

A deconstructive perspective does not reject any rationality, nor does it doubt about truth [10]. It provides the reader with an open mind to read a literary text. An excellent literary text can be read with different expectations and preset knowledge.

Reading from a deconstructive perspective is different from hermeneutic reading. When seeking
a single, widely-accepted meaning of a text, we need to adopt a hermeneutic reading method, which is concerned with what the meaning of a text is, while reading from a deconstructive perspective pays attention to how a text generates such a meaning. For example, how heterogeneity in Bao-yu is highlighted by means of repetition.

In academic research field in China, the efforts to study Bao-yu’s character have reaped substantial rewards. Some of Bao-yu’s characteristic traits have become common knowledge. A deconstructive perspective will add to the value of research in this respect. With Miller’s repetition theory, we see the repetitive relationship between Bao-yu and the Stone, Bao-yu and the Stone-in-Waiting, and eventually have a clear and original understanding of the trait of heterogeneity in Bao-yu.

References