

An Analysis of Hemingway's Hills Like White Elephants from the Perspective of Feminist Stylistics

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Abstract: The gender difference between men and women can be embodied in the different use of language, which is an important part for feminist stylistics research. The frequency of verbs in Hills Like White Elephants is rather high, and some verbs appear repeatedly in the short story. Through the analysis of the frequency of verbs, this paper tries to reveal that the female's social status is disadvantaged, ignored and repressed by the heroine, Hemingway gave his sympathy to the female character in the short story though as a male author, and that there might be a sign of awakening of feminist consciousness in it.

1. Introduction

Hills Like White Elephants is a classic example of Hemingway's short stories. With 1,469 words in all, the story could be summarized in one sentence: an American man and a girl are waiting for a train in a small Spanish station. Previous studies of the short story of Hemingway's mainly focus on his artistic style -- "iceberg principle", but few people have interpreted it from the perspective of feminist stylistics. In this paper, the English original is quoted from Introduction to Literature co-edited by Shao Jindi and Bai Jinpeng published in 2002 by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. Feminist stylistics is a new genre of stylistics proposed by American scholar Sara Mills in the mid-1990s. The gender difference between male and female can be expressed through discourse, which is the important content of feminist stylistics research.

2. Feminist Stylistics

The concern of stylistics as a discipline mediating between linguistics and literary criticism can be simply and broadly defined as thematically and artistically motivated verbal choices [1]. In 1995, Sara Millis published her book *Feminist Stylistics*. As an important book on feminist stylistics, it is of great help to analyze texts from the new perspective offered by feminist stylistic. According to Sara Millis, "In this way, the book intends to look at texts which appear to be explicitly dealing with gender issues; for example, love scenes in books, differential usage of terms for men and women, sexism and so on. But it will also analyze those elements which do not at first sight seem to have anything to do with gender; for example, metaphor, narrative and focalization"[2]. When interprets a text, we can pay close attention to the different use of words by men and women. In other words, the different use of words by men and women can reflect the gender difference.

3. Feminist Stylistic Interpretation for Hills Like White Elephants

1). Analysis of Women's Status. Hills Like White Elephants tells a story from a purely restrictive objective narrative perspective. To fully explore the deep meaning of Hemingway's works, it is necessary to combine stylistics with narratology to analyze the text in depth and in detail[3]. In the original story, 490 words of the 1,469 words are related to the background, and the remaining 979 words are related to the dialogues between the hero and the heroine. Judging from the place where the story took place, the heroine didn't speak the language at the Spanish station and she needed the man to serve as her translator all the time. From this one can concludes that the girl, the heroine,

was in a weak position from the beginning of the story. The seemingly ordinary dialogues reveal the intense emotional conflicts between the hero and the heroine, the unequal social statuses of the hero and the heroine, and the plight faced by the heroine. The story doesn't give readers enough background information about the man and the girl, except that Jig is the heroine's name, as found in their dialogues. The name "Jig" is indeed not a simple name. Jig is an old term for a kind of dance, and became a slang for a practical joke or a trick, there are idioms like "jig's up", "one's jig is up", "one's jig's up" and "the gig is up", which are all used to express the end of someone or something[4]. From the name "Jig", the short story implies the future direction of the hero and heroine.

2). Frequency of Verbs. Words are closely related to style, and researchers who study the stylistics tend to cite Jonathan Swift's definition on style as using the right words in the right places[5]. There is a high frequency of verbs in Hills Like White Elephants. Simple and common verbs are used in it, and some of the same verbs are used repeatedly. The extensive use of simple verbs reveals clearly the original attributes and characteristics of things without any affectation. Verbs play a great role in displaying rhetorical expression and emotional coloring. After analyzing the occurrence of verbs in the original short story, the author of this paper finds the occurrence frequency of verbs in the text is as follows: 37 times for "say", 18 times for "want", 14 times for "look" and "do" as a real verb, 13 times for "know", 10 times for "have" as a real verb, 6 times for "feel", "come" and "put", 5 times for "ask", "love", "try", "take", and "drink", 4 times for "care about", "mean" and "wait", 3 times for "smile", "worry", "see", "go", and "sit", 2 times for "taste", "realize", and "make", and once for "like", "bother" and "mind".

From "the man" and "the girl" used by Hemingway in Hills Like White Elephants, Hemingway is suggesting to readers that the two main characters were at different social status. As readers move on, they find that the style of the short story is embodied by the usage of common words, especially the simple verbs, some of which appeared repeatedly. The verbs frequent appearance in the short story, used by the man and by the girl, helps to reveal the different status, wishes, hopes and longing between the hero and the heroine.

3. Occurrence of Verbs and Social Status

From the story, readers can see that the hero and the heroine disagreed about abortion, and their relationship may fall apart as the disagreement escalated. By interpreting the use of verbs, it can be seen that the hero and the heroine have unequal social status in simple dialogues. With the development of the story, the reader can find that the heroine's pregnancy just upsets the hero, as shown by the verbs "worry" and "bother", and the adjective "unhappy". Although the hero verbally said "care about" to the heroine, and if she did "not really want to do", he didn't "want" her to "do it", from their conversations readers can't miss that he pressed hard, repeatedly stressing that the operation is "perfectly simple". It obviously shows that the hero did not care about the needs and feelings of the heroine at all, but only considered his own needs and feelings selfishly.

1). Different Feelings Brought by Pregnancy to the Hero and Heroine. Under normal conditions, the birth of a new life symbolizes beauty and hope. However, for Jig, the heroine, the pregnancy upset the male protagonist, who urged her to have an abortion step by step and repeatedly stressed that it was a very simple operation. The heroine desired the care and commitment from the man, and she wanted to build a family, raised children and enjoyed the warmth of a family. But the pregnancy itself upset the hero, and he behaved indifferently, as shown in the use of the verbs of "worry (3 times)" and "bother (once)".

2). Difference of Visual Object between the Hero and the Heroine. The verb "look" makes 14 appearances in the original story: twice in collaboration with "like", both in the phrase "look like white elephants", and 12 times used as description of movement. What the heroine saw was a mountain like a white elephant and the beautiful scenery across the river, suggesting that the heroine had a great longing for the future. When the man advised her to have an operation, the object of the heroine's gaze turned into the ground and bead curtain, which implies that the heroine felt panic and fear in her heart and was in a weak position in the dialogue. "I realize", the girl said,

“Can’t we maybe stop talking?” After that, Hemingway began to use the verb “look” 5 times to describe the vision objects of the man: the scenery, the luggage, the track and the crowd. The man and the girl looked at different objects, but it is this simple verb “look” that makes readers experience the inner activities of the hero. This series of “look” suggests to the reader that what the hero and the heroine yearned for would not be the same. The heroine suffered from inner torment in the communication, and she could not find a place to vent the pain at that moment.

3). The Man’s Pressing on the Heroine for an Abortion. The verb “do” appeared 14 times, and its objects collaborated are mainly the pronoun “it” which refers to “child” or “pregnancy”. In the man’s words, “do it” appeared many times, suggesting that the pregnancy or a child was bugging the man, so he persuaded the girl to have a surgery and attempted to convince the girl it was a pretty simple operation. The inner demand for the heroine was ignored by the man, and the pain for the girl to undergo the abortion was also ignored by him. Under the pressing persuasion of the male protagonist’s, the female protagonist repeatedly said “do it”. “Do it” explicitly exposes that the female protagonist was in a weak position in the dialogue, and her pain, disappointment and helplessness. The verb “want” appeared 11 times in the man’s mouth, and it came in the form of “don’t want”. Although the man said that he wouldn’t force the heroine to do it if the heroine was not willing to, readers can find out that the man was in a strong position in the conversation, pressing hard to persuade the heroine to do the surgery. He desired to get the heroine to do the surgery so as to get rid of the stumbling block which upset him. Readers can find that the verb “know” appeared 13 times, as shown 7 times in the man’s words and 6 times in the girl’s words. Under the persuasion of the hero, the heroine’s great longing for the symbol of new life turned into a mirage. The pain, disappointment and helplessness in her heart were completely revealed, and her needs were ruthlessly ignored. The verb “feel” is used six times: three times by the hero and the heroine respectively. When the hero found that his persuasion may fail, he just politely asked the heroine if she was feeling better. He didn’t show genuine care to the heroine, nor did he give any definite promise for the future. The three times of “feel” in the heroine’s mouth fully show the heroine’s inner experience of pain, disappointment and helplessness.

4). A Guessing for the Future between the Man and the Girl. This is embodied in the use of the verbs “have” and “smile”. The verb “have” appeared 10 times in the original text. The heroine used it 8 times when she felt disappointed in reality and sighed with emotion. The hero used it 2 times when he persuaded the heroine to have an abortion. The verb “smile” appeared only three times in the text. After the climax of the story, Hemingway used the word “smile” on the heroine, which makes the readers feel very strange. How can the heroine “smile happily”, “smile happily” and “throw a smile” after the situation of a fierce quarrel? In fact, this is exactly what Hemingway intended to let the readers ponder. Readers can guess from the use of “smile” under such a context that the heroine may have made a decision about the future after being disappointed and repressed, or she may not want to have another verbal conflict with the hero and she chose not to communicate with the man anymore. The “smile” in the context, readers can also conclude that the feminist consciousness is awakening.

Hemingway’s description of his female characters in the chaos of conflict with her male partner is meant to point out that women cannot find the way out of their bondage and are inevitably in the situation of confusion[6]. From the frequency of simple verbs in the short story of Hemingway’s, one can see that Hemingway, as a male author, didn’t neglect the sensitivity and needs of women, and he described their wishes, desires, repression and longing with sympathy instead. The female’s social status was disadvantaged, ignored and repressed by the heroine.

4. Conclusion

This thesis makes an interpretation on *Hills Like White Elephants* in the perspective of feminist stylistics, as shown through concrete interpretation for the usage of verbs. The difference of the hero and heroine’s social status can be seen clearly from the analysis of the frequency of verbs in the short story of Hemingway. From the usage of verbs, one can find that the hero was in a strong position in the dialogue, persuading the heroine pressingly to take the abortion that he wanted,

while the heroine was in a weak position the dialogue. It can be guessed from the story that there may be awakening feminist consciousness after a long-term repression. From the perspective of feminist stylistics, one can find what Hemingway wanted to express, though as a male author, is that women are usually in a weak position and lack of the right of speech, that women's needs and desires should not be ignored, and that there is also a sign for the awakening of feminist consciousness. Feminist stylistics offers a new perspective for the analysis of texts, and with it we can explore the relevant research field deeper and wider.

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