

Artistic techniques for depicting characters in the story *Early Autumn*: From cognitive perspective of metaphor

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of metaphor in the depicting of the characters for revealing the theme of the story by exploring the artistic technique employed by the author Langston Hughes in his short story *Early Autumn*. Time, weather, and even people rushing to and from in between are mapped as metaphors to the target characters to help readers to frame the discourse so as to highlight the behaviors of the characters and the story's theme. The manipulation of metaphor not only serves well the author's purpose of touching the everlasting issues of human concerns, but also demonstrates adequately the merits and common characteristics of high-qualified literary works: leaving audience/readers indefinite imaginary space to interpret or construe around the theme.

Key words: artistic technique; cognitive perspective of metaphor; *Early Autumn*

1. Introduction

Early Autumn, written by a well-known writer, Langston Hughes, is a short story of love affairs. The only two protagonists Bill Walker and Mary used to be lovers when they were young, although Mary actually was a little older than Bill. They spent many nights walking, talking together, but something trivial happened which stopped them from speaking to each other later. Acting on impulse, Mary married some man, leading Bill to bitterness about women for some time.

2. Encounter of the two protagonists

One autumn afternoon, before it got dark when the sky became less bright, Mary, while walking across Washington Square, saw Bill, the first time in years. She called to him, and Bill did not recognize her at first because she changed a lot in appearance, not young at all. For them, this unexpected meeting was a surprise, especially for Mary.

Bill's attitude towards Mary now changed. Obviously Bill's reaction to their meeting again differs from Mary's. When Mary saw Bill, she unconsciously lifted her face as though wanting a kiss, while Bill only held out his hand as a response. Bill's frowning between his eyes as well as his incomplete utterance "you look very..." clearly indicate that he is not fascinated by Mary any more, even though out of politeness he refrained himself from telling the truth that she looks very old now.

During the conversation, it is Mary who first sent out family invitation to Bill, rather than Bill to Mary. Bill responded to the invitation abruptly "sure", indicating his insincerity and ritualization. Although, out of politeness,

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he in return invited Mary to see his wife and children, his way of invitation—he grinned while inviting—again reveals his insincerity and ritualization.

3. The inner worlds of the two protagonists

Mary, in contrast, obviously still loves Bill. Seeing Bill, Mary felt excited and a strong passion for him, which is shown by both her impulsively raising her head “wanting a kiss from Bill” and by her naming her youngest child after Bill. Mary’s passion for Bill is so strong that several times she could not speak fluently, to the extent that when she had to leave by bus, she did not forget to ask the time when they would see each other again, although in reality, only one word “when...” came out of her mouth. She “regrets for forgetting to give him her address or to ask him for his...”.

After their unhappy separation, Bill received a good education, became a lawyer in a nice firm, way downtown, got married and had a good family with two kids, all of which show that Bill is now satisfied with his present life and has got rid of the unhappiness once happened between him and Mary. Meanwhile, Mary’s living condition appears not as good as Bill’s. She looked older than Bill had expected, took bus to and fro her work, and lived on central Park West.

Maybe Mary is now feeling regret for her present marriage. Her separation from Bill is not the consequence of something important between them. Her impulsiveness leads her to the present marriage. But from her behavior and attitude towards Bill when seeing Bill again after so many years, there is no difficulty to observe that from the bottom of her heart, she still loves Bill deeply, in spite of the fact that “she thought she loved her husband”. She desperately tried to reach back to the days when she and Bill spent walking, talking together. Perhaps it was beyond her awareness that she longed to be with Bill again. That is the explanation why Mary could not control herself by behaving so inappropriately and unnaturally. On the contrary, although Bill felt a little surprised to see Mary, that is all. The bitterness about women must have faded away, and he had already regained himself from depression. His success in life and career further demonstrates that Mary is no longer the one he holds dear in his heart and his readily responses to Mary’s questions could give further evidence to this point. He even did not ask for her address when she declared her departure.

4. Metaphors fit for the situation

4.1 Metaphor and its role in cognition

According to the cognitive science of metaphor, metaphors are mappings within two different domains, from one familiar domain or one area of experience to the unfamiliar domain or another area of experience, shaping an image or a concept, like “He is a **cold** person or He is a **warm** person”. Here “cold” and “warm” belong to the domain of temperature, but in these two sentences, they mean a person’s emotion or feeling or affection that “cold” and “warm” are associated with. Therefore, metaphor comes about when these two things get disassociated (Lakoff, 1980, 1999; Taylor, 2007). In China, we talk about “old age” in Chinese language by virtue of “falling leaves in autumn” (秋叶), or “the time in a day before dark” (黄昏), like “love between old people” (黄昏恋). Both in Chinese and English, if the lovers’ marriage is in a dangerous state, we may use the following metaphors to describe it: “We’re at a crossroad” (他们的婚姻处在十字路口); “We’ll have to go our separate ways” (我们俩要分道扬镳). “Our marriage is on the rocks” (婚姻触礁); “We’re going nowhere” (我们的婚姻已走到尽头); “We can’t turn back now” (婚姻无法挽回). Cognitive linguists view metaphor as a normal mode of thought.

When we talk about the target domains that are abstract, like emotions, thoughts, feelings, judgments, communication, life, time, and so on, it is very difficult to talk about them, so we use metaphor in order to gain understanding about abstract, untouchable or intangible concepts in terms of the concrete and the familiar. It is very difficult not to use metaphor because there is no other way to say it.

4.2 Life metaphorized as a day, a year and a fire in the story

The background in which the unexpected meeting occurred fits well the oppressive atmosphere enveloping Mary and Bill. The story took place on late afternoon, nearly sunset gold, early autumn. “The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred”; “The leaves fell slowly from the tree... autumn dusk”; “Suddenly the lights came up to the whole length of Fifth Avenue, chains of misty brilliance in the blue air”, all of which symbolize certain stages of human life. In other words, life is structured in metaphorical ways as a day, a year and a fire.

In the metaphor “A life is a day”, late afternoon signals the time that is going to be dark. In turn, you can not see where you are going, thus implying that Mary’s glorious time in life is soon to be over and that Mary may not know what direction her life is going to take. Why “the lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred”? Because a lifetime is seen as a fire. In the metaphor, “a life” is a fire, the beginning of the fire is when it is lit, and when the fire is brightest, it is maturity; and when you are down to the ashes in the cold, it is old age, hence forming a sharp contrast between Mary and Bill, also the difference between old and young. So we can say this depiction of the environment tallies with Bill’s feeling that Mary looks old. In the metaphor “A lifetime is a year”, youth is spring; maturity is summer; autumn is old age; winter is death. Autumn is about old age which means death is approaching. Therefore, it is quite understandable that Mary looks old to Bill since Mary is actually no longer young.

4.3 Life metaphorized as a journey in the story

Up to now, any reader who has read this novel would not miss the tactics employed by the author in depicting the unfamiliar people rushing to and fro in between: “A great many people went past them through the park. People they did not know...” and “People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn’t know, space and people”. It seems that it is a coincidence that “people” quoted in the above sentences took completely opposite directions of movement: “go past...” and “come between...”, or simply “come” and “go”, but on the second thought, it is abundantly clear that this is also what makes the story classic. By means of this uncanny tactics as well as others, Hughes’ theme of the story emerged before human’s eyes in the metaphor: “Life is a journey”. In this journey, bus is the vehicle, you have a starting point (indicating birth), a course or movement, during which you may have difficulties (indicating impediments in life, e.g., in love relationship), and destination (the end of life). People unconsciously go to and fro for some activities, and afternoon before night has increased activities; more and more people do things toward the afternoon before the decreasing activity at night until it is dark. The evening environment and atmosphere indicate that no one can stop this journey or life cycle, but rather get involved in them no matter you are familiar or unfamiliar with it; including Mary who was reluctant to enter the bus (or life journey) that will wait for no one to pull off.

5. Conclusion

Through this extremely highly structured story, the profound meanings about life and the nature of love are unfolded before human’s eyes. The success of this classic work lies in the author’s witticism and ingenuity in touching the everlasting issue of human concerns through the specific depiction of the protagonists of the story.

The manipulation of metaphor leaves readers indefinite imaginary space to interpret or construe around the theme. The term “early autumn” carries two meanings: First, it is the name of the story; Second, it symbolizes Mary’s stages in life.

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