

Analysis on Minimalist Poetry from the Perspective of Reader-Response Theory

Xiaoqian Nong*

School of Foreign Language, Nanning Normal University, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 530000, China

* Corresponding author: Xiaoqian Nong (Email: 18978177757@163.com)

Abstract: Minimalist poetry, with its unique artistic approach, leaves a lot of blank space and unlimited imagination for readers. This style not only challenges the traditional way of poets' expression, but also encourages readers to actively participate in the process of constructing the meaning of poetry. This interactivity coincides with the viewpoint of reader-response theory, which emphasizes that the meaning of a literary work does not exist in isolation, but is constantly generated and evolved in the reader's reading experience. The reader-response theory holds that the subjective experience and response of each reader is unique, and therefore the meaning of a literary work is pluralistic and dynamic. Under the guidance of such a theory, this thesis aims to delve into the mysteries of minimalist poetry such as imagery poetry and micro-poetry, analyse how poets provide readers with clues to their understanding through refined language and profound imagery, and at the same time, examine how readers make use of their own emotions, knowledge and experience to interpret these poems, so as to form a personalized understanding. Through this analysis, we are not only able to reveal what is so fascinating about minimalist poetry, but also to better understand the role of the reader in the construction of meaning in literary works.

Keywords: Minimalism; Poetry; Reader-Response Theory.

1. Introduction

Minimalism is an art movement that originated in the United States in the 1960s. Minimalist artists seek to present the most basic and purest forms and colours in their artworks, emphasizing the texture and presence of the objects themselves, rather than expressing complex emotions or symbolism through their works. Over time, the influence of Minimalism was not only limited to the field of visual arts, but it also extended to design, architecture, literature and life, becoming a philosophy and way of life that pursued simplification and extreme functionality.

The introduction of minimalism into the realm of poetry can be traced back to the modernist poetry movement of the early 20th century. Pursuing a new way of expression, modernist poets rejected the Romantic and Victorian styles of poetry of the late 19th century, arguing that poetry should be freer, more open, and reflect the complexities of modern life. This movement encouraged poets to explore new possibilities of language and to break the traditional rules of poetic form and rhyme. The use of minimalism in poetry is reflected in the further simplification and development of modernist poetry. In the mid-to-late 20th century, some poets began to pursue a more concise and direct mode of expression by reducing symbols and metaphors in their poems and using more ordinary and straightforward language to convey emotions and ideas. This kind of minimalist poetry is characterized by clear statements, intuitive themes, and a strong visual and sensory effect achieved through refined language and compact formatting. Minimalist poetry tends to allow readers more room for interpretation and reflection, which is similar to the reader-centred perspective emphasized by reader-reflection theory, therefore, in this thesis, minimalist poetry will be analyzed based on reader-response theory.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the definition of minimalism, scholars have given different definitions from different perspectives. Baker (1968) argued that minimalism refers to "any austerity of style in the arts," which can be applied to poetry with slight adjustments. Williams (1967) stated that minimalism in poetry usually refers to a literary genre characterized by extreme brevity or directness of expression. According to Petter Barry (2016), minimalism in poetry refers to ultra-short forms of poetry, such as haiku and imagist poetry. They may be as brief as a single word and require originality of interpretation on the part of the reader. Minimalist poetry often seems to generate comments of "maximalism", where the extreme simplicity we are faced with means that almost all the elements that provide clues to meaning have been removed, so that the reader has to reconstruct more.

Foreign scholars' research on poetic minimalism mainly focuses on two aspects: poetic understanding and poetic creation. Gerald (1992) explored the minimalism in contemporary Russian poetry, mainly analyzing the position of punctuation, the repetition of words and the characteristics of blanks in the poems, and he believed that, in the contemporary Russian poems, the poets used the extremely simple linguistic materials, such as graphic elements and the layout of punctuation, to reflect the minimalism, which leads the readers to pay attention to these inconspicuous linguistic materials through artistic means and think about the meaning of the poems from them. One of the controversies in French minimalist literature is whether different types of minimalism can achieve the same status, i.e. whether poetry minimalism can be recognized by the public in the same way as prose minimalism. Therefore, Baetens (2005) elucidated the scientific nature of poetic minimalism by comparing the relationship between minimalist poetry and philosophy, poetic minimalism and pictorial minimalism. In addition, he

argued that the influence of pictorial minimalism on poetic minimalism should be viewed correctly, and the role of multi-layered meaning significance and single significance in different reading processes should be correctly understood as a prerequisite for the realization of poetic minimalist composition.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Reader-response theory emphasizes the active role and importance of the reader in the process of understanding, interpreting and evaluating literary works. This theory suggests that a literary work is merely an open framework of meaning that needs to be populated and interpreted by the reader in the light of his or her own experiences, knowledge, and emotions. Barthes (2001), in his famous essay *The Death of the Author*, made it clear that the text is out of the hands of the author the moment the words are put on the page; the author loses his power over the written text, whether he likes it or not. Barthes writes, "The birth of the reader must come at the price of the death of the author". The central concepts of reader-response theory will be presented as follows.

3.1. Blanks

The reader-oriented theorist Wolfgang Iser (1988) claimed that literary texts always contain "blanks" that can only be filled by the reader. These "blanks" are filled in different ways by different readers. The "blanks" here refers to the incompleteness or uncertainty of the information in the text, which means that readers will always encounter some unclear or ambiguous information when they understand the text, and they need to fill in the blanks through their own experience and reasoning. This incompleteness and uncertainty is an important aspect of textual comprehension that enables readers to understand and interpret texts in greater depth.

3.2. Implied Reader

"Implied Reader" is a concept proposed by Wolfgang Iser (1988), a representative figure of German reception aesthetics. It refers to the potential recipients that writers are aware of in the process of creation, i.e. the potential readers of the works conceived by the writers. This concept emphasizes the important role of the reader in the process of literary creation. When a writer creates a work, he or she will subconsciously imagine an ideal reader who can understand and appreciate the writer's creative intention, thus influencing the writer's creation. The concept of the "implied reader" helps us to understand the meaning and value of a literary work and emphasizes the subjective initiative of the reader.

3.3. Identity Theme

In the process of reading literary works, the reader's identity, cultural background, personal experience and other factors have an impact on reading experience and understanding. Reader-response theory holds that a literary work is not a fixed and unchanging carrier of meaning, but a dynamic process of interaction and mutual influence with the reader. In this process, the theme of the reader's identity plays a key role.

3.4. Interpretive Group

In reader-response theory, an interpretive group can be viewed as a collection of readers who share a common interpretation of and reaction to a literary work or literary

phenomenon at a given time. This group may share certain common characteristics, such as similar educational backgrounds, cultural experiences, social status, or a common language and symbol system.

This thesis focuses on how readers parse and perceive the meanings and emotions conveyed by poets on the basis of reader-reflexivity, rather than on interpretations of the same textual diversity.

4. Analysis

Imagist poetry is categorized as minimalist poetry because of the extreme openness and simplicity of the imagery in imagist poetry and the lack of statement and embellishment. Imagist poets specialize in strange imagery and esoteric language to add mystery to their poetry. They seek to construct elusive images of ideas or set up tunnels of ideas that are difficult to dig into, leading the reader to challenges and confusion in understanding. Imagist poets T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound's imagery poems possess the characteristics of minimalism, and in the process of constructing meanings for the imagery in their minimalist poems, readers need to tap into the richness and multiplicity of the poems.

Case 1 is a short imagery poem written by modernist poet T.E. Hulme, with only one sentence in the whole poem, which is in line with the aesthetic concept of minimalism, i.e., to achieve the greatest artistic effect through the simplest vocabulary and the least sentence structure.

[Case 1]
*Sounds fluttered,
like bats in the dusk.*

In this poem, there are two images "sounds" and "bats", the poet uses the rhetorical techniques of generic and anthropomorphism to connect "sounds" and "bats" with one "like", forming a visual metaphor, i.e.: sound is like a bat fluttering in the dusk, and the image "bats" is like a bat fluttering in the dusk, through which the dynamism of the image "bats" is given to the image "sound". However, there is a gap in the poem: the poet does not tell the reader what the sound is and where it comes from, nor does he know what attitude the poet holds towards the sound and what kind of emotion it evokes in him.

Perhaps the imagery of "bats" provides a clue, but when we think about the relationship between "sounds" and "bats", another question arises: why does the poet use the word "bats"? Why does the poet use "bats" instead of other flying animals? In both Chinese and Western cultures, bats are familiar flying animals. The poet will subconsciously presuppose an ideal reader, i.e., an implied reader, who is required to be able to understand the imagery chosen by the poet before creating the poem.

However, bats equipped with different symbols in Chinese and Western cultures, therefore, influenced by different cultural backgrounds, Western readers and Chinese readers will interpret this poem differently. In Western culture, bats are often seen as a symbol of evil, darkness and mystery. This perception partly stems from the biological characteristics of bats, such as their nocturnal activities, their resemblance to rats, and the fact that some bat species suck blood. These characteristics have led to the frequent association of bats with witchcraft, vampires, and other supernatural horrors in Western folklore and literature. In the famous Aesop's Fables,

for example, the bat is seen as a symbol of disloyalty and dissolute because of its ambiguous status between bird and beast. As a result, Western readers may associate the word “sounds” in the poem with dark and scary sounds, such as the whistling of the wind outside the window at dusk, or the sound of thunder from afar, etc. In Chinese culture, on the other hand, bats are often used as a symbol of disloyalty and dissolute behaviour.

In Chinese culture, on the other hand, bats are usually regarded as a symbol of good luck and happiness. This is due to the fact that “Fu” and “Bat” are homophonic in Chinese, so bats stand for happiness in folklore, signifying good fortune, good luck and prosperity. Bats are often depicted in traditional Chinese art, especially in New Year’s and celebration decorations, where the motifs and images of bats are very common and are believed to attract good luck and wealth. Thus, when Chinese readers read the word “sounds” in the poem, they may associate it with happy and joyful scenes, such as the singing of a loaded farmer returning home at dusk on an autumn day, or the rustling of the ears of rice on a cart as it bumps along the road, a peaceful scene.

Pound was a major initiator of the Imagist movement, and Case 2 *In a Station of the Metro* is his masterpiece, a famous Imagist poem inspired by an experience at the Place de la Concorde metro station in Paris. Despite its brevity, the poem was composed over a long period of time with much deliberation and refinement.

[Case 2]

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd,
Petals on a wet, black bough.*

The poet has chosen three images, “faces”, “petals” and “bough”, all of which are familiar to most readers, to help the reader make sense of the poem. The three images are familiar to most readers to help them understand the poem. In both Chinese and Western cultures, “petals” is a symbol of beauty and delicacy, while “wet black bough” has a dark and murderous feeling. Readers can perceive the tone of the poem from the clues provided by these two botanical imageries. Although the poet clearly points out the imagery, there is still a gap at this point: why does the poet connect “face”, “petals”, and “wet black bough”? Whose face is the “face” mentioned in the poem? According to Pound, imagery is “a complex of reason and emotion that unfolds in a single moment”, and this definition gives imagery a wide range of meanings. As readers have different cognitive levels and experiences, their feelings and emotions towards the same thing are diversified, so different readers will have their own unique interpretations and emotional experiences towards the same imagery. The author guesses that although “petals” signify beauty, they grow on the wet and dark boughs of the tree, and the contrast between light and dark is sharp. The flowers in the poem are not complete flowers, but petals scattered on the damp and dark branches, giving an impression of incompleteness. One can imagine the wonderful faces standing out in a dim and humid underground station, with its bustling crowds and noisy voices. But in the hustle and bustle, these beautiful things seem unusually fragile and fleeting. The poet may thus associate them with departed relatives, friends or loved ones, expressing a melancholic and sad mood.

In the 1960s, with the co-emergence of pop art, minimalism and conceptual art, single words or letters could be recognized as poems. Petter Barry (2016) stated that a micropoem is a

type of extremely compressed poetry, where a poem contains only a single word, a modified form of a single word, or a part of a single word, or even just a schematic, to draw attention to the missing part. Case 3 is a micropoem written by the American poet Aram Saroyan, with only one word in the entire poem. Saroyan was not the first poet to write one-word poems, but he was probably the most prolific and creative practitioner of the form.

[Case 3]

Lighgt

Minimalism favours repetitive design elements, and in the visual arts, music, and architecture, this simplicity is often achieved through the repetition of basic forms. Repetition creates a sense of rhythm and order, as well as reinforcing the viewer’s sensory experience and understanding of the deeper meaning of the work. When a poet applies this repetition to poetry, it is reflected in the poem as the repetition of letters or the repetition of words. Through repetition, the poet is able to create a rhythm and rhyme that allows the reader to more deeply appreciate the meaning of the poem. In Saroyan’s poem, the word “light” appears and the letter “gh” is repeated twice. The poet has chosen the word “light”, which is familiar to most of the readers, to help them understand it. Other than that, the poem leaves the reader with a blank space, why did the poet create this poem? Why did the poet choose to repeat the letter “gh”? The reader, Bob Grumman, understands the poem to mean that when one switches on the light bar, the light bar first flickers for a moment, and then the light bar lights up completely after a small “zip” of electricity. The author strongly agrees with this understanding, but if we relate this poem to the poet’s life, a different understanding will arise. The author guesses that the poet has put a lot of efforts and tried many times to cope with some challenges or deep difficulties and finally achieved success. The repetition of “gh” in the poem is taken from the last two letters of the word “tough”, which means difficult, hard, but also strong and indomitable. The word “tough” means difficult, hard, but also strong and indomitable. Therefore, the poem can be interpreted as the poet’s perseverance in the face of hardship and difficulty, and his success in the end, ushering in the light, i.e. the “light” in the poem.

Case 4 is a micro-poem - “Aughawall Graveyard” - by poet Paul Duran.

[Case 4]

“Aughawall Graveyard”

Lonely lonely lonely lonely:

The story with a middle only.

The title of the poem appears as a “graveyard”, and the word “lonely” is repeated four times in the poem. The poet has already predetermined the implied readers of the poem when he created it, and the readers who can understand life and death are the implied readers of the poet. Therefore, the reader can easily perceive the tone of the poem from the words “graveyard” and “lonely”. The gap in the poem is that the reader does not know whether the word “lonely” refers to the poet or the person lying in the grave, nor does he know why the poet has come to the graveyard. However, the word “middle” in the last line of the poem triggers the author’s conjecture, and the author believes that the word “lonely” is

used to describe the people lying in the graves. In a cemetery, no one is around, one tombstone stands for one “lonely”, four tombstones symbolize four “lonely”, the poet looks at the tombstones one after another, feeling lonely. In the last line, “the story with a middle only”, the middle of the four “lonely” is still “lonely”, and the people inside the graves are only left with “lonely”. Through repetition and allusion, the poet conveys to the readers his gloomy and despondent mood.

5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical foundation of reader-response theory, this thesis analyses in depth the characteristics and influences of minimalist poetry, especially imagery poetry and micro poetry. The findings show that minimalist poetry presents a unique aesthetic orientation in its creation, which attaches importance to reader’s participation and interpretation, and subverts readers’ perceptions of traditional poetry through simplified art forms and direct linguistic expressions, inspiring them to explore and appreciate the beauty of poetry from a new perspective. This form of poetry not only requires readers to engage in active thinking activities while reading, but also encourages them to fill in the gaps in the text with their personal emotions and experiences, thus enabling the meaning of poetry to be reconstructed in the readers’ minds. In addition, minimalist poetry also shows its unique charm on the emotional level, which emphasizes the emotional resonance and psychological interaction between poetry and readers, and can effectively touch the readers’ emotions, triggering deep emotional reactions and resonance. This emotional interaction not only enriches the connotation of the poem, but also enhances the reading experience of the reader, making the poem a link between the author and the reader’s mind. Overall, through its unique artistic techniques, minimalist poetry not only promotes readers’ in-depth understanding of poetry, but also enhances the artistic value of poetry in contemporary literature.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. , my Zhao, my advisor, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout this research project. Their expertise and

insightful feedback were instrumental in shaping this paper.

I am also grateful to the faculty and staff of Foreign Language School at Nanning Normal University for their assistance and encouragement. Special thanks to my friends and colleagues for their stimulating discussions and support.

Lastly, I want to thank my family for their unwavering love and support. Their belief in my abilities has been a constant source of motivation.

Thank you all for contributing to the completion of this research.

References

- [1] Barry, Peter. “Minimalism and micro-poetry.” Reading poetry. Manchester University Press, 2016:158-168.
- [2] Barthes. The Death of the Author. In V. B. Leitch (Eds.), The Norton.
- [3] Anthology of Theory and Criticism, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- [4] Baetens, Jan, and Scott Kushner. “Enough of This So-Called Minimalist Poetry. SubStance, vol.34, no.2, 2005:66–74. JSTOR, Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
- [5] Janecek, Gerald J. “Minimalism in Contemporary Russian Poetry: Vsevolod, Nekrasov and Others.” The Slavonic and East European Review, vol.70, no.3, 1992. JSTOR, Accessed 15 Jan. 2024.
- [6] Kenneth Baker, Minimalism, New York, 1988 (hereafter Baker), p.17. For other views of Minimalist art, see Gregory Battcock (ed.), Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, New York, 1968.
- [7] Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi, East Meets West: The Reader Response Theory in Thriller Fictions, Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, Vol174, 2015:58-63.
- [8] Stephens, Paul. “Aram Saroyan and the One-Word Poem” ASAP// Journal. 2019: 189-209.
- [9] Smigel, Eric, and Nan L. McDonald. “Lessons That Bear Repeating and Repeating That Bears Lessons: An Interdisciplinary Unit on Principles of Minimalism in Modern Music, Art, and Poetry (Grades 4–8).” General Music Today , 2012:5-10.
- [10] Williams. Anthology of concrete poetry. NY: Something Else Press. New York, 1967.