



## Stylistic Analysis of “40-Love” Written by McGough

Meihua Xu

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Chongqing Normal University

Chongqing 400047, China

E-mail: meihua852032.student @ sina.com

### Abstract

The aesthetical form has always been stressed in poetry. Efforts have been exerted on the skillful combination of rhythm and structure to create numerous great works all over the world. This article tries to analyze the unique features in structure, words, phonology, syntax and rhetoric in the poem of 40-Love by British poet Roger McGough in order to have a deeper understanding of the content and form of a poem.

**Keywords:** McGough, 40-Love, Love, Style

### 1. Introduction

It is well known that in a variety of literary genres, the form of poetry has been stressed most. Efforts have been exerted on the skillful combination of rhythm and structure to create numerous great works all over the world. Modern American poet E. E. Cummings (1884-1962) is a good case in point. He is famous for odd style, novel and unique form in the poetic world. His “l (a)” has been regarded as the “the most elegant and beautiful structure of the literature created by Cummings”. (Kennedy, 1980). Therefore, his poems are renowned as “poem picture” or “visual poetry”, or the concrete poetry that we are quite familiar with. The features of it is that vivid visual images of words coming from irregular syllables, letters, punctuation, syntax, format and print strengthen the internal imagination of poetry, deepen the artistic conception, convey and enrich the connotation. (Abrams, 2005). Coincidentally, besides E. E. Cummings, contemporary British poet Roger McGough (1937- ) is another master in writing concrete poems. His 40-Love can be considered as one of the greatest concrete poems.

McGough is the second of the three in Liverpool Group. The other two are Henry Adrian Henri and Patan Brian Patten. McGough, born in 1937, 5 years younger than Henry, is always in naughty mentality. His poems are full of secular fun and display more profound life from the perspective of a child. This article, from the viewpoint of stylistics, analyzes the features of structure, words, phonology, syntax and rhetoric in the poem of “40-Love” in order to gain a deeper understanding of this poem.

### 2. Stylistic Analysis

Greek poet Simonides once said, “Poetry is the picture with sound while the pictures are the silent poems.” (Zhu, 2005). That is to say, the content of a poem must be combined with its form to achieve its perfection, namely, the combination of form and spirit, what we often cherish. Here we will try to find how McGough do it in his “40-Love”. The poem tells that a middle-aged couple is playing tennis. Then they go home. But the net is still between them. It reflects the gap between middle-aged couples. I will quote the poem here to help to explain my opinion.

40-Love (Peng, 2000)

|        |         |
|--------|---------|
| middle | aged    |
| couple | playing |
| ten-   | nis     |
| when   | the     |
| game   | ends    |
| and    | they    |
| go     | home    |
| the    | net     |

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| will  | still |
| be    | be –  |
| tween | them  |

### 2.1 Structure

As a whole, the poem has a total of 20 words. But the two words “tennis” and “between” are separated by hyphens to be symmetric in structure. The words in the poem are set in two sequences, like two sides of the couple. The middle blank or empty is like a net to separate the two. There are only two words in each line to symbolize the bouts of the ball. The title of 40-love, the top of the net, is right on the top of the poem, signifying the scoreboard. This poem looks like a tennis court with a net being used to separate the words. It is like a tennis game. This side serves and the other side hits back. Many bouts form the poem. The invisible net is like the barrier between the middle-aged couple. Even if they finish the tennis game, they still have the net, which still exists invisibly. However, it is this net that they can depend on to handle their marriage and have the responsibilities not to break the rules. There is a net in tennis and there are rules to obey. With the net, there are more difficulty and more interests. So, accordingly, more training and attention is a must. Imagining that, when playing tennis with no net or rules, people would feel difficult to last their games for longer period. In addition, only the letter of “L” of “Love” in the title is capitalized and the rest is de-capitalized, which shows that, to some extent, the couple has not been in the pursuit of the perfect details again, because love between the middle-aged couple has faded away. Furthermore, there is no punctuation in the whole poem, indicating that life of marriage is closed and uninteresting. Since there is no end, gap appears.

### 2.2 Words

The poet pays special attention to the words in the poem. First of all, the title “40-Love” one of interests embodied in the poem. The figure of 40 stands for the age of middle-aged people. And 40-Love is a scoring term in tennis. Tennis scoring is love, 15, 30 and 45 in sequence. Love here means zero. Three goals scores 40. No goals, no score. Thus, the title is of pun with two meanings. One refers to be 40-year-old love and the other is 3:0. Whether 40-year-old love is vain or not depends on attitudes of the two parties. Let come to two words of “middle” and “aged” in the first line. “Middle-aged” means people are in their midlife. The poet deliberately separates it to achieve the reunification of form and others. It also symbolizes that middle-aged husband and wife can not be integrated again. The two important words of “tennis” and “between” are placed in two vertical columns to get a metaphorical meaning that there is an invisible net in the emotional world of the man and the woman. They are not intimate any longer. “Game” in the fifth line can be referred as either play game or sport. The scoring in tennis competition is more complex. Tennis game has games and sets. In a game, those who win 15, 30 and 45 will get one point. And the player who gets 6 points will win one set. In the poem, the couple does not finish even one game and go home since they have a deep estrangement. “Still” in the ninth line shows that the middle-aged husband and wife have ineffable anguish and can not get rid of their unpleasantness and gain relaxed though they make concessions as far as possible.

### 2.3 Phonology

Words in the poem are basically monosyllabic. They are mechanical and boring to read and easy to suggest that the life of the couple is dull and lack of amenities. From the perspective of phonology, the short vowel such as /i/, is used for many times in the poem to leave the pressing impression to the readers to realize the urgent emotional crisis of the middle-aged couple. But there is slowness in the urgency. The diphthong /ei/ and /əu/ are employed to slow down the speech rate and demonstrate that the middle-aged people have become calm and unhurried when dealing with things. Especially, the long vowel / i: / in “tween” in the last line leaves enough time for the middle-aged couple in crisis to think over the issue. In addition, there are rhymes in the poem, such as, middle and couple, ten and when, game and they, go and home, will and still. Rhymes here give the readers boredom, and symbolize the dull life of the middle-aged couple. Moreover, the alliterations of be and be-, tween and them, make the two words close and imply that the middle-aged husband and wife still have the ties that can not be cut off although there is a gap between them.

### 2.4 Syntax

For the convenience of analysis, I rearrange the order of the whole poem: middle aged couple playing ten-nis when the game ends and they go home the net will still be be-tween them. First of all, from the angle of tense, the plain and flat present tense, used from the beginning to the right end of the poem, indicates the dull or prosaic marriage life of the middle-aged couple. Nevertheless, “playing” is used unconventionally. If “plays” is used here, readers will know that the couple play tennis often rather than occasionally. There will be not much gap between them. “Playing” indicates that there is absence of regular communication between the husband and wife. It stresses that it is just at this moment that they are playing tennis. In sentence structure, there is a time adverb “when” to combine the sentence. As usual, however, there is no conjunction of “and” between the main clause and the subordinate clause. Thus “and” is added here to deliberately create a loose state, suggesting that there is no close contact between the husband and wife. And there should be an adversative conjunction of “but” in front of the next sentence “the net will still be be-tween them”. As we

all know, an adversative conjunction word usually give people an unexpected, rising and falling impression. The word "but" is omitted here to inevitably imply that life of the middle-aged couple is no longer full of ups and downs, great happiness or sadness.

### 2.5 figure of speech

Poets often use figure of speech because, as Emily Dickinson once said, the mission of a poet is to "speak the truth, but to put it in an implicit way" in order to seize the readers' interest and stimulate their imagination. In the poem of "40-love", the poet employs the figure of speech, e.g. metaphor. On the one hand, in form, the blank along the net is like a net to suggest the gap between the middle-aged couple. On the other hand, everyday life is like playing games. Everybody hit the ball to the others. Such routine game results in no passion at last. Moreover, in my opinion, the writing technique of understatement is employed in this poem. The tone of the whole poem is calm, without any fluctuating. However, it is the deliberate understatement that discloses the theme of the poem incisively and vividly.

### 3. Conclusion

This poem written by McGough with unique style has rich connotation in its unique form. In this poem with perfect combination of the spirit and form, the emotional gap of the middle-aged couple can be discerned and expressed by the stylistic techniques in the structure, words, phonology, syntax and figure of speech. In *Mending Wall*, a poem written by American poet Robert Frost, the neighbor is intransigence and stubborn. Even at the last line of the poem, he still murmurs that "good fences make good neighbors" (GU, 2005). Every couple, therefore, especially the middle-aged couples, should pull the fence between them down, believing "good communication makes good couples".

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