

Analysis of the Vocabulary Ambiguity in *Rappaccini's Daughter* from the Perspective of New Criticism

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Abstract

The short story *Rappaccini's Daughter* written by Nathaniel Hawthorne mainly relates about a scientist Rappaccini who conducts an experiment on his own daughter for the sake of protecting her, leading to the end of the love between her and Giovanni. The article will be based on the New Criticism which is a critical method focusing on the text and emphasizing the close reading, to analyze the ambiguity of the language in the text from the microcosmic perspective of its ambiguous vocabulary, thus revealing the sense of beauty and philosophy in this kind of uncertain language.

Keywords: New Criticism, *Rappaccini's Daughter*, vocabulary, ambiguity

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Work

The novel "Rappaccini's Daughter" takes place in the culturally rich northeastern Italian city of Padua. When Giovanni Gusconti, a young Italian man, arrives in Padua to study at the University of Padua, he meets Beatrice, the beautiful daughter of Dr. Rappaccini, from the window of his rented apartment overlooking the neighbouring garden, and falls in love with her at first sight. Dr Rappaccini, in order to satisfy his own fanatical pursuit of science, has no qualms about using his own daughter Beatrice as a test subject, feeding her poison from birth, making her the deadliest poison in the world. Giovanni quickly falls in love with Beatrice in spite of the warnings of Professor Baglioni, a rival of Dr. Lapacini and his father's old friend, but the seeds of doubt grow in his mind. Especially after learning the truth, Giovanni's tirade completely crushes Beatrice's hopes of survival, and eventually, at the instigation of the ill-intentioned Professor Baglioni, Giovanni gives Beatrice the antidote. Beatrice drinks the antidote and falls to her death at the feet of her father and Giovanni.

1.2 Preview of Previous Research

The information searched was obtained from CNKI, Gale, and Hundred Links, with a total of 33 articles, of which 5 were master's theses and 28 were journals. In terms of time, the research on it mainly focuses on the beginning of the 21st century, and the number of research articles increases year by year. The themes of the research can be broadly divided into the following categories: 1) Kent Bales, Bishop Pietro Barozzi and others studied the origin of the names in the text and their symbolic meanings from the perspective of historiography, revealing their profound cultural connotations; 2) Charles Boewe focuses on the garden in the story, and in the article he wrote on *Rappaccini's Garden*, concentrating on the difference and connection between the conventionality and the reality of Hawthorne's garden; 3) John N. Miller, Oliver Evans, Sheldon W. Liebman analyzed the allegorical colours in the novel from the perspective of mythological psychology, and excavate the profound philosophical thoughts behind it; 4) Edward H. Rosenberry, Richard Fogle, M. D. Uroff, Liu Wenyang, Gao Qingxuan, Wang Tong, and Li Chunyan analyzed the religious background of the text, original sin, and science and technology from the perspective of religious belief and scientific outlook, which projected the "poison" of human nature; 5) Roy. R. Male, Liu Wei, Liu Wenyang, He Xin, and Zheng Xianyuan studied the binary opposites in the novel from structuralism, revealing the opposing and unified connections between spirit and flesh, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, etc.; 6) Wang Jing and Wu Lanxiang analyze the images of windows, suns, trees and other images in the text from the perspective of symbolism, revealing the deep meaning they contain; 7) Ronald J. Nelson, Liu Haixia studies the idea of ecological femininity in fiction from the perspective of ecofeminism.

From the above studies, it is found that scholars at home and abroad have mostly interpreted the multiple thematic meanings of the work from the macroscopic perspectives of religion, symbolism, structuralism, etc., but relatively little research has been done on the micro-level vocabulary and syntax of the text, and the research on its linguistic analysis has not yet formed a scale. Therefore, from the perspective of New Criticism Theory, this paper will analyse the ambiguity of its vocabulary through close reading of the text, and reveal the beauty and value behind the uncertain language.

2. Overview of New Criticism Theory

New Criticism theory is one of the most important and far-reaching theories of literary criticism prevalent in the West in the 20th century, and it was established on the basis of a summary of past literary criticism. Ransom-ontological criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley-intention fallacy and feeling fallacy, Wellek-internal and external research, the main representative theorists of the New Criticism regard literary works as an independent and unique world, which is detached from the external objective world, and does not have the relationship of relying and being relied upon. There is no relationship between dependence and being dependent. The New Criticism established close reading of texts as the basic principle of literary criticism, believing that only through delicate, in-depth and repeated “close reading” can the unique aesthetic value of literary works be discovered. The New School of Criticism advocated the method of close reading of texts, and created a new world of literary criticism by explaining and applying the concepts of repetition, metaphor, irony, and tension to the interpretation of texts. Yan Busun, another representative of the New Criticism, also believed that the polysemy and ambiguity of the literary language is the obvious sign that the literary language is different from the scientific language. In the first edition of his masterpiece *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (also translated as *Seven Types of Complex Meaning*), he defined ambiguity as “any minor effect of language that can add delicate meaning to a direct statement”. The New Critics used semantic analysis and combined it with the proposed “paradox”, “irony”, “ambiguity”, “tension” and “context”. Irony, “ambiguity”, “tension”, “context” and other categories to analyse the multiple meanings and complexity of literary language, forming a kind of micro-semantic criticism. This paper will further analyse the linguistic features of Hawthorne’s short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter” from the perspective of ambiguity in the theory, revealing the aesthetic value behind its ambiguity.

3. Ambiguity of the Vocabulary

Ambiguity, which means “hazy”, “vague”, “uncertain”, “multiple meanings”, “obscure” and so on, is a kind of linguistic expression which contains multi-level meanings and cannot make people determine the meaning of the text, and it is the basic means to enhance the aesthetic power of the work. The novel “Rappaccini’s Daughter” has such a characteristic in the use of vocabulary, and the author Hawthorne chooses a large number of ambiguous words, shrouding the whole text with a mysterious atmosphere of plausibility, which is worthy of the reader’s careful scrutiny. The following will specifically analyze some of the ambiguous real words “seem”, “might”, and imaginary words “as if”, “its” those appear frequently in the text.

3.1 Ambiguous Content Words: “Seem” and “Might”

A close reading of the text shows that the ambiguous real words SEEM and MIGHT appear in the text with the frequency shown in the table below:

Table 1. Frequency of use of the ambiguous words “seem” “might”

ambiguous morpheme	Seem	Might
Number of occurrences	18	14

The number of occurrences of seem and might in the text is 18 and 14 respectively: the word “seem” appears 8 times in the text’s description of the garden, which is used 6 times in the psychological description of the young man Giovanni, and occurs 2 times in the description of Rappaccini and his daughter Beatrice, respectively; in addition, “might” occurs 4 times in the text’s description of the garden, the psychological description of Giovanni appears 5 times, the conjecture of the garden owner Lapacini appears 3 times, and the description of Beatrice appears 2 times. From the perspective of the distribution of the use of the two, the psychological description of the garden and Giovanni appears more often, implying the ambiguity of the garden image in the article and the chaos and wandering of Giovanni’s heart, which makes the reader have an ambiguous feeling of scenery and people.

For example, the description of the garden in the novel includes “a variety of plants, which **seemed to** have been cultivated with exceeding care.” Here is the first description of the garden in the article, and as Giovanni’s gaze

wanders, the garden is revealed in all its springtime splendour. This scene makes the reader easily associate the garden owner with the garden's hard cultivation and careful care, but the author uses the word "seemed", indicating that the garden just seems to be carefully cared for, which makes the reader puzzle, as if the author is trying to imply something to give the reader more room for speculation, and the ambiguity of the meaning of the words arises from this, laying the groundwork for the development of the story. The ambiguity of the meaning of the words is thus created, and the ambush is laid for the development of the story. The next few descriptions of the garden also use the word "seem", "all about... ..that seemed to require a plentiful supply of water... that **seemed to** require a plentiful supply of moisture...", "...that **seemed to** require a plentiful supply of moisture...", "...it **seemed** enough to illuminate the garden" and so on, the author describes how everything in the garden just seems to be the way it is, and this uncertainty leaves more room for speculation. The garden in the article seems to be different from the garden in the earthly world, and the secrets behind her seemingly unreal beauty can only be found by the reader between the lines of the author. Similarly, in the depiction of the garden, the number of occurrences of **might** is higher, such as, "it **might** once have been the pleasure place of an opulent family", "so happily arranged that it **might** have served a sculptor for a study", "it **might** be the odor of the flowers" etc. The author's use of the word "might" also creates semantic ambiguity. The signs in the garden give room for the imagination, the plants and trees seem to be real or fake, they seem to be a big family, but also seem to be experiments under the owner's hands, and all this is like a fog hanging over the reader's mind. It is this uncertainty that increases the readability of the article, allowing the reader's mind to roam freely between the author's handwriting.

Another psychological description of Giovanni and the gardener Rappaccini, SEEM and MIGHT also appear many times, reflecting the ambivalence of both and the dual character traits. For example, in a passage in the text, Lapasini, the gardener, says, "Yet, shattered as I am, my life **might** pay the penalty of approaching it so closely as circumstances demand. Henceforth, I fear, this plant must be consigned to your sole charge." Rappaccini treats the plants in his garden with care because he is aware of the depth of the toxicity they contain and fears that he "might pay the penalty". From his cautiousness towards the plants and flowers, it can be deduced that he shuns Beatrice, who is also highly poisonous, which is very different from his mentality of protecting his daughter from the outside world, and this ambivalence reflects his dual personality traits. Similarly, Giovanni's psyche is in a state of chaos and ambiguity. After listening to the advice of his father's friends, he is suspicious of Beatrice and the plants in the garden, "The aspect of one and all of them dissatisfied him; their gorgeousness **seemed** fierce, passionate, and even unnatural. The aspect of one and all of them dissatisfied him; their gorgeousness **seemed** fierce, passionate, and even unnatural." The plants in the garden no longer look as beautiful to him as they did before, it is as if the landscape has deteriorated, the plants and trees, so full of life and vigour, seem unnatural, they are just experiments for the owner of the garden as his father's friends say, and the secret of the garden is revealed step by step with the suspicion of Giovanni. Out of his inner doubts and curiosity, he watched even more closely at what was happening in the garden and with Beatrice, "His eyes, gazing down afar, **might** have deceived him as to the lizard, the insect, and the flowers." as he looks out of the window, an insect seems to die between Beatrice's breaths, and the plants in the garden are not as pure as he thought they were, and he ponders that he may have been deceived all along, and that what is in front of him has blurred his vision. Subsequently, "He turned his eyes full upon the withered face that was puckering itself into a smile, but **seemed to** behold it not. "Giovanni, who was entangled in his heart, couldn't believe it, he forced laughter, trying to convince him that he had overthought it. In a wandering state, he can no longer really understand his heart, and what kind of emotion he has towards Beatrice, as if it is not love, nor fear, but in the middle state of love and fear, trapped in it, and unable to extricate himself. On several occasions he tried to make his feelings known to Beatrice as he wished, but when he did, Beatrice's reaction forced her to doubt, and all her inner fears seemed to become instantly true, "On the few occasions when Giovanni had **seemed** tempted to overstep the limit, Beatrice grew so sad, so stern, and withal wore such a look of desolate separation..." Is Beatrice an angel or a demon in Giovanni's eyes? What steps will he take? He doubts his love for Beatrice and cannot let go in the struggle of his thoughts. At the same time, he also wonders if he is also infected with the poison, and whether he has unwittingly become Dr Rappaccini's experiment during his time with Beatrice. As the text reads, "that this interposition of old Lisabetta **might** perchance be connected with the intrigue, whatever were its nature, in which the Professor **seemed** to suppose that Doctor Rappaccini was involving him." Here the author no longer narrates from Giovanni's point of view, but describes Giovanni's psyche from the author's point of view, and this shift in perspective also gives the reader a sense of ambiguity, as Giovanni's psyche is interpreted differently by the author, the reader and the protagonist of the text. The author's use of "might", "seemed" also indicates a feeling of uncertainty, making the reader unclear whether Giovanni was poisoned or not, and the mystery is not given by the author until the end, and more for the reader to speculate.

The use of ambiguous content words “seem” and “might” make the whole article in the development of speculation, the suspense thus arises, the plot is highlighted step by step, the uncertainty behind all the accidents become reasonable, giving the reader unlimited space for imagination, and the narrative technique of this white space also gives the article increased aesthetic significance.

3.2 Ambiguous Function Words: “as if” and “its”

The use of the ambiguous conjunction “as if” and the function word “its” also adds a great deal of uncertainty to the text, making it more readable, and the depth of the text is enriched by the reader’s speculations. The ambiguity of both in the novel is mainly reflected in the description of the garden, Giovanni and Beatrice.

In describing the situation in the garden, the author uses the vague words “as if” and “its” to imply that the garden is not general, but an intermediate combination of an earthly garden and a mythical Garden of Eden. As the text reads, “A little gurgling sound ascended to the young man’s window, and made him feel **as if** a fountain were an immortal spirit...” The pomp and circumstance of the garden dazzled the young Giovanni, and for the first time such a beautiful garden was seen, all the things inside seemed to be immortal elves, full of vitality and color. The beauty is so unreal, as if the existence of only in the myth can be imagined actually appeared in front of Giovanni, simply unbelievable. As the storyline develops, after listening to Baglioni’s warnings, Giovanni becomes suspicious of the garden, and his feelings for Beatrice are in a state of indecision and hesitation, and one more look at the garden seems to be a betrayal of his own emotions, “For many days after..., **as if** something ugly and monstrous would have blasted his eyesight had he betrayed into a glance.” Seeing or not seeing reflects the contradiction between his desire to explore his inner world on the one hand, and his frustrated confusion and fear on the other. On the one hand, the conflict between his desire to explore the inner world and his frustrated confusion and fear, and on the other hand, the tangle of his own erotic desires. Giovanni gradually realized that the garden was unusual, and driven by curiosity to find out, he walked into the garden, “... he placed a kind of mask over his mouth and nostrils, as if all this beauty did but conceal a deadlier malice.” The beauty of the garden seemed to become a deadly poison in Giovanni’s eyes, exuding a poisonous smell, they were no longer ordinary flowers and trees, “it seemed **as if** he was looking into their inmost nature, making observations in regard to their creative essence”, Giovanni wanted to see their nature clearly, as if he did not want to believe that behind these beauties there were unknown secrets, and the author does not tell the readers the truth, allowing the readers to speculate on Giovanni’s misgivings, making the text full of uncertainty, and letting the ensuing accidents be a matter of reasonable conjecture.

Beatrice also seems to have become a spokesperson for virulence in Giovanni’s eyes, “...inhaling their various perfumes, **as if** she were one of those beings of old classic fable...”. She seemed to merge with the flowers and trees in the garden, Giovanni’s heart suddenly felt a sense of dazedness, his love for Beatrice turned to fear. He didn’t dare not want to believe it, but he had to believe that the psychological wandering allowed the tragedy to unfold one after another. “Could it be Beatrice’s breath, which thus embalmed her words with a strange richness, **as if** by steeping them in her heart? “Giovanni’s suspicion of Beatrice is getting heavier, making the reader feel that love seems to be very small, the trust between them seems to be gone. Giovanni’s love for Beatrice seems to stay only at the sensory level, so that the later is so vulnerable that it cannot withstand the test. Between the lines of the author’s words, it seems that the love between them seems to be only unreal, as the text writes, “She watched for the youth’s appearance, and flew to his side with confidence as unreserved **as if** they had been playmates from early **infancy**—**as if** they were such playmates”, the time they spent together only looked like two childhood sweethearts on the surface, the author here used two times in a row, “as if”, leaving the reader to decipher the puzzle of what is supposedly true love behind this uncertainty.

Is Beatrice human? Giovanni blurred, and the author was unclear. “... there was a peculiar quietness in the look, **as if** taking merely a speculative, not a human interest, in the young man. “It was as if Beatrice was not an ordinary human, as if she was at one with the flowers become one, the flowers are her sisters, her family, and she is part of the garden. As the author uses the word **its** in several places without explicitly referring to it, “... the young man was even startled to perceive how much her beauty exceeded his recollection of it; so brilliant, so vivid in **its** character, that she glowed amid the sunlight.” The author uses **its** rather than **her**, anthropomorphising the “flower” and at the same time anthropomorphizing the “man”, giving a sense of semantic ambiguity, as if Beatrice was also a species of these plants, the existence of her father as an experiment. “Her face being now more revealed than on the former occasion, he was struck by **its** expression of simplicity and sweetness...” The author further mixes the two, “is Giovanni shocked by Beatrice, surprised by the plants, or both?” The depth of meaning is left for the reader to savour. Another example is, “a resemblance which Beatrice seemed to have indulged a fantastic humor in heightening, both by the arrangement of her dress and the selection of **its** hues.” Beatrice is once again so integrated with the flowers and plants that both the author and the protagonist can no

longer tell whether she exists as a human or a plant. The psychological depiction of Giovanni here adopts an inverted structure in the sentence structure, which further highlights his wandering and hesitant psychological state.

The use of ambiguous function words “as if” and “its” makes the fog of the article thicker, and the reader is haunted by the heavy mystery, following the author’s handwriting in a daze to play his imagination, step by step to remove the clouds in front of him, increasing the sense of heaviness of the article.

4. Conclusion

The artistic technique of virtual and real life in the novel text, and the ingenious and flexible narrative perspective give the whole novel a rich aesthetic meaning. The analysis of the micro-level characteristics of the text’s ambiguous vocabulary from the perspective of ambiguity and compounding in the New Criticism Theory unravels the fog of indeterminate language that haunts Rappaccini’s Daughter, and triggers a reflection on the relationship between the individual and the society, the other and the self, and the science and the religion, which adds readability, openness, and breadth to the text.

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