

# Analysis of Rhetorical Device

## ---Repetition in “The Killers”

Ru Wang<sup>1</sup> & Xin Wu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

Correspondence: Ru Wang, School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China. E-mail: 13804582603@163.com

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### Abstract

"The Killer" is known for its concise style, but has many repetitions in this short story, including words, phrases, and sentences. The repetition and concise style seems contradictory, but actually shows that Ernest Hemingway's unique narrative skills. This paper discusses how repetitive rhetoric plays an irreplaceable role in depicting characters and conveying themes.

**Keywords:** rhetorical device; repetition; “The Killers”; Ernest Hemingway

### 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway was one of the most famous novelists of the 20th century. His works have influenced the English and American literary circles with his unique language style and superb writing skills. “The Killers” is one of his outstanding short stories and has attracted the attention of many literary critics since came to public.

It is a story unfolding with an act of murder. The two killers want to murder a man named Ole Anderson, so they go to the restaurant that he once had to visit and prepare to kill him. Due to Anderson's absence, the attempted murder was committed. After the two killers leave, Nick, a kind young man, decides to inform Anderson. But Anderson already knew that, saying that he would not take any action and would only wait for death. After hearing the truth, Nick decides to leave the city. Chinese research of the short story focuses on narrative strategies such as minimalistic writing techniques( Dong Jing,2006) and analysis of the usage of a great deal of dialogues(Zhou Fei,2012), as well as the language style.(Cao Ping,1997)

This paper mainly discusses the use of its rhetorical devices: the repetition in “The Killers”. Repetition, as the term implies, refers to the continuous or intermittent appearance of the same word or sentence in a sentence or paragraph with the same structure, often intended to emphasize, to highlight a particular meaning.( Zhang Delu,2016)

"The Killer" has 2,962 words, of which 1,688 words are character dialogues, accounting for more than half of the full text.(Xiong Jian,2013) The plot development depends mainly on the dialogues between the characters. In describing the conversation, Hemingway used a large number of direct quotes, and omitted all of the contextual and descriptive words. In this way, the language of the whole story is very concise and implicit. However, there are also many repetition of words, phrases, and sentences in the story, which seems to violate the whole concise style. In fact, this contradictory linguistic phenomenon only shows Hemingway's unique narrative skills. And Hemingway portrayed the figures with repeated rhetorical devices, revealing the themes of the story.

### 2. Analysis

#### 2.1 Repetition of Words

In "The Killer", Hemingway always tended to record action and dialogue, paying little attention to the character's appearance, besides describing the two killers. He has repeatedly mentioned the presence of the two killers, which certainly has some purposes.

[1]He wore a derby hat and a black overcoat buttoned across the chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves.

[2]Their faces were different, but they were dressed like twins. Both wore overcoats too tight for them.

[3]Both men ate with their gloves on.

[4]Inside the kitchen he saw Al, his derby hat tipped back, sitting on a stool beside the wicket with the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun resting on the ledge.

[5]The cut-off barrels of the shotgun made a slight bulge under the waist of his too tight-fitting overcoat. He straightened his coat with his gloved hands.

[6]In their tight overcoats and derby hats they looked like a vaudeville team.

(Ernest Hemingway "The killers")

Here, the word "hat" was mentioned three times, "overcoat" four times, and "glove" twice. Through the repetition of the words, the image of the two killers is reinforced, which solidifies the tension in the story. From sentence [1], [3], the two killers have wearing gloves for hours from entering the restaurant to leaving the restaurant. So both killers are experienced and they know to watch the details.

According to sentence [2], the two killers can also be seen dressed as twins, which proves that they are a default team and should collaborate in many murders. Here, Hemingway deliberately pointed out that the two killers' overcoats were too tight for them. The inappropriate clothes of the two killers seem to contrast to their attention to detail. In fact, the unprofessional details of the two killers reflect their immoral behavior. They dare to kill people, even if they are not well prepared. This shows that homicide was very common in the society at that time.

What's more, when the two killers left, Hemingway added a metaphor: [6], and they looked like vaudeville. The metaphor seems incompatible with the tense and oppressive atmosphere of the entire story. In the previous narrative, Hemingway largely emphasizes the horror of both killers, but here he describes the interesting images of both killers. This seems to violate the narrative logic, but it is the irrational plot and the strange images of the two killers that reveal the anomalies of the outside world and the absurd chaos of society. The two killers are symbols of evil and violence. Like other young people, the killer are the lost generation. They murder strangers for money, ignore the law and justice, and see themselves above all. But in fact, they are like a vaudeville actor, living aimlessly in this chaotic society.

Sometimes, by repeating a word in different contexts, the author can convey a different meaning or connotation, and change the meaning of the word.(Robert Paul Lamb, 2010). For example, in the plot about ordering food, despite being told that dinner was not yet served, the first person named Max still ordered a chicken dinner, but was rejected by the counter attendant George:

"That's the dinner."

"Everything we want's the dinner, eh? That's the way you work it."

(Ernest Hemingway "The killers")

Here, two speakers changed the meaning of the repeated word "dinner". For George, "dinner" refers to the wrong menu. For Max, the "dinner" was not just an unprepared meal, but also an excuse for George to refuse. Moreover, this refusal indicated George's unwillingness to serve him. That's why Max is angry. To calm Max's anger, George begins repeating the list of available items again. By repeating the word "dinner", the reader can realize the tension in the restaurant and infer Max's arrogance and George's caution.

After the tense ordering plot, Hemingway continued to tell the story words by words. As the dialogue progressed, the communication between the two killers and their work rival George gradually went off track. They took direct control of George and Nick, and Black Chef Sam, using a series of commands and command words. George's submission satisfies the killer, and they have come up with a witty idea, calling George and Nick "bright boys". The term "bight Boy" was repeated 29 times throughout their conversation. The term "bight boy" means that George and Nick had better follow the killer. As far as the murderer is concerned, everyone in the restaurant must obey them unconditionally, and they will not allow anyone to disrespect or disobey them all.

## 2.2 Repetition of Phrases

In "The Killers", repetition of phrases are also used to shape the characters and convey the theme. Most importantly, three groups of oral phrases are mentioned repeatedly throughout the story. The first verbal phrase is "look in/into the mirror". After the meal, the murderers began to prepare for the murder. Al takes control of the kitchen, kidnapping chef Sam and customer Nick, while Max controls foreman George and monitors the restaurant's dining area. Max utilized the layout of the restaurant to expanding his surveillance. He repeatedly looked in the mirror to control the whole restaurant.

He didn't look at George but looked in the mirror that ran along back of the counter.

“Well, bright boy,” Max said, looking into the mirror, “why don't you say something?”

Max looked into the mirror all the time he was talking.

(Ernest Hemingway “The killers”)

Here, by repeated verbal phrase “look in/into the mirror”, Hemingway describes Max's professionalism as a killer that seems to contradict the image of Max above. In previous episodes, Max deliberately reveals their cruel intent to George even before they can meet the target that they were waiting for. This undoubtedly increases the risk of implementing the murder plan, as they do not know if George had enough courage to resist or if George was close to Anderson. In addition, Max constantly chats with his work rival, George, asking him about his hobbies.

Max's contradictory behavior is manifest in multiple details throughout the novel, and this particular design fits its intent. It is intended to reflect the social reality. It takes place in a small town called Summit near Chicago in the early 20th century. Hemingway's description of Max's careless behavior was to fully reflect the social context. It highlights the crime-ridden Chicago society, where killers like Al and Max are rampant and unscrupulous, and they are not afraid to be punished.

The second repeated verbal phrase is “look up at the clock”. The whole story is narrated in a linear time. From the conversation between Max and George, the reader learns that Anderson usually comes to the restaurant at 6 pm, meaning that the murder is planned at 6 pm. Thus, time became an important factor in promoting the event, and the only thing that showed time was the clock on the wall. Hemingway mentioned the clock and the time three times.

George looked up at the clock.

George looked up at the clock. It was a quarter past six.

George looked up at the clock. It was a twenty minutes past six.

(Ernest Hemingway “The killers”)

Here, Hemingway repeatedly mentions the clock, depicting a sense of tension. Moreover, the subject of repeated actions was always George, indicating that he was concerned for Anderson's safety. George shows his desire to end the situation quickly, and hopes to convince the killers to abandon their murder plans as soon as possible. It may be inferred that George was a kind man, cool-headed even in such nervous circumstances. He was always looking for an opportunity to change the terrible situation.

The third repeated oral phrase is “Look at the wall”. After the two killers leave Henry's restaurant, George returns to the kitchen and unlocks Nick and Sam. Nick is a kind, simple, inexperienced young man who has the least social experience, and still sees the world as very naive. He readily promised to inform Anderson that someone was going to kill him and continued to help what he considered a “victim” and “weak”. By contrast, however, Anderson was indifferent to his own safety. He acted as calm as stagnant water, always facing the wall. His reaction to Nick was a constant denial of all possibilities of survival, just looking quietly at the wall.

Ole Anderson looked at the wall and did not say anything.

“I don't want to know what they were like,” Ole Anderson said. He looked at the wall.

He looked at the wall. “There ain't anything to do now”.

As he shut the door he saw Ole Anderson with all his clothes on, lying on the bed looking at the wall.

(Ernest Hemingway “The killers”)

Here, Hemingway repeated the phrase “Look at the wall” four times, depicting a desperate and helpless boxer, Ole Anderson. He did not want to know what kind the killer was, or to call the police, or to leave the town, because all the efforts would end in vain. The recurring wall is an important image of Anderson's despair, because a boxer should look straight ahead and never flinch when fighting his opponent. But now he lay still, facing the wall, and showing his back. Anderson's indifference to everything shows that the two killers are symbols of evil power in society, and that the real world is full of chaos and crime.

In the face of such a reality, a person looks so weak, so small. Anderson is a professional boxer, and his massive size and fighting skills in contrast to his helplessness and despair in the face of violence. The reader can feel the cruelty of violence and the helplessness of people in the dark society. A boxer who is powerless in the face of a threat retreats to a wall of despair and abandonment, let alone ordinary people without the power to compete

with violence. It was Chicago in the early 20th century, an era of violence and killing. Hemingway rebuilt the social environment of Summit Town, or in some way, the entire United States.

### 2.3 Repetition of Sentences

One of Hemingway's typical writing features is that he greatly loves the use of dialogue in short stories. The short story "The Killers" is no exception. At the start of the story, two men come in the Henry's lunchroom. Hemingway did not mention any identifying information of the two men, or even mention the name. But by repeating their conversations, the reader can perceive these abnormal features---they are not just ordinary customers. When the waiter George asked them what they wanted to eat, they answered as follows:

"I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?"

"I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat."

(Ernest Hemingway "The killers")

Here Hemingway used the repeated sentence "I don't know" to imply that the two did not come here for dinner, but that they had another purpose. Furthermore, through the dialogue, the reader can infer that a second person named Al is in the leadership of the two-man group. Because the first man subconsciously asks Al for his opinion. All the implied information is passed through repetition.

Hemingway then used the repeated sentence, "got anything to drink" to describe the ordering process between the killer, Al, and George the counterman. Here, the meaning of the sentence varies according to the discrepancy between the speaker's intent and the auditor's understanding.

"Got anything to drink?" Al asked.

"Silver beer, bevo, ginger-ale," George said.

"I mean you got anything to drink?"

(Ernest Hemingway "The killers")

For George, drinking means some water, but to Al, it means alcohol. More importantly, when George misunderstands him, Al does not attempt to explain his true intentions, but repeats "got anything to drink". This repetition suggests Al's dissatisfaction with George's service, and his anger at being misunderstood. The reader can also infer that Al and Max really wanted more than just food or drink, but rather George's unconditional obedience to their attitude. They need to emphasize their discourse ability to control George's actions.

When the two killers left, the crisis was temporarily eased. Three people in the restaurant, counterman George, chef Sam and customer Nick, had a brief discussion about whether they should tell Anderson about the murder. Hemingway used repeated sentences to depict Black Chef Sam.

"I don't want any more of that," said Sam, the cook. "I don't want any more of that."

"I don't like it," said the cook. "I don't like any of it at all."

(Ernest Hemingway "The killers")

Here, through a series of negative sentences, the reader can feel Chef Sam's great fear of the two killers, and his strong opposition to the decision to inform Anderson. Sam's concerns are understandable, because in American society, blacks cannot be treated equally like whites. If Sam was involved in the murder, he could have lost his job and even been killed. Thus, his response was representative of most ordinary black Americans, which was excusable.

### 3. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Hemingway is good at using repeated rhetorical devices to depict characters and reveal themes. By repeating words, phrases, and sentences, he creates a series of lower-class characters, for example, two killers: the talkative and lazy Max, and the cold-blooded and cautious Al. At the same time, he reproduces the chaos and absurdity of 20th-century American society. Killers like Al and Max are unscrupulous, and they are not afraid of punishment. And these young people are confused and distressed in the face of the absurdity of life. At the end of the story, Anderson decides not to take any action and instead quietly waits for death. Nick decides to leave the city, Summit. All the people do not have the courage to face the dilemma, and choose to escape. This is a true portrayal of the lost generation. When they face the absurdity of society, they feel frustrated, anxious, and overwhelmed. The absurdity of their circumstances inevitably plunged them into depression. Hemingway reflected such a profound theme in a concise style, in which the use of repetition plays an irreplaceable role.

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