

An Analysis of Anti-Climax in Robinson's Portrait Poetry

Wang Ying

Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, Guizhou, 550025, China

Abstract: Edwin Arlington Robinson was a great American poet of the 20th century. He is well known for his vivid character portraits which truthfully reflect the inner life of the people at the turn of twentieth century. Like the poet himself, characters of his poems are deeply indulged in the romantic and idealistic pastime, which are disoriented and confused in the modern time. This paper analyses the rhetorical device of anti-climax used in Robinson's poems, tries to prove that poet gets a sense of humor and irony towards the real world.

Keywords: Anti-climax, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Humor, Irony

1. Introduction

1.1. Robinson and his poems

Edwin Arlington Robinson is known to be one of the most distinguished American poets in the 20th century. He has awarded the Pulitzer Prize for three times from 1921 to 1928. He devoted his lifetime to the creation of poetry and remained single until the last day of his life. His early life was almost full of misfortune and failure. After his family suffered financial reverses, Robinson cut short his attendance at Harvard University (1891–93) and returned to Gardiner to stay with his family. The lives of both his brothers ended in failure and early death, so Robinson's poetry is much concerned with personal defeat and the tragic complexities of life. After the sales of *Tristram*, he became financially successful. When he died in 1935, he was regarded as the leading poet at that time.

In his poems, he uses the everyday speech to compose his poems, which contribute to the easy understanding of them for readers. His poems are based firmly on the traditional stanzas, skillful rhyming patterns, and a precise and natural diction, combined with a dramatic psychological description of the human. Moreover, he has been called the last American writer in the 19th century tradition of classicism and modernism, and psychological description. Robinson is a poet who combines New England gracefulness and American naturalism. He also broke the tradition of Romantic poems and introduced the theme of naturalism into the plain style of his poems. Thus, his poetry is seemingly simple for the readers to understand and appreciate, while the meaning behind the letters is also complex and inquiring.

Robinson's poetry has been considered by some literary critics to be the stylistic benchmark for English or American poetry. They have shown interest on his style of composing poems, especially his central "message" and true writing intention. In reply to Braithwaite's inquiry about his central "message," he said, "I suppose that a part of it might be described as a faint hope of making a few of us understand our fellow creatures a little better, and to realize what a small difference there is, after all, between ourselves, as we are, and ourselves, not only as we might have been but would have been if our physical and temperamental make-up and our environment had been a little different." [1]

This paper uses the rhetorical device of anti-climax to analyze the cause and meaning behind this technique, also trying to rediscover the beauty of Robinson's "Tilbury Town" poems. With the use of anti-climax, his poems add the effect of irony and humor to characters of his poems.

1.2. Anti-Climax

Anti-Climax, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), was first raised by Alexander Pope, "A sort of ladder to get down by the art of sinking." It uses as a figure of speech since that time. Anti-climax is also known as "bathos", as opposed to climax, another figure of speech. In *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, it defines in this way, "a sudden drop from the dignified or important in thought or expression

to the commonplace or trivial, sometimes for humorous effect. (Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1980)". In a word, anti-climax is to arrange clauses or sentences in an order from strong to weak, finally to achieve a sense of humor and irony, thus creating a deeper impression to readers.

There are two examples to show how anti-climax was used in the literature works. Here is the first example, "We had plenty of company in the way of wagon-loads and mule-loads of tourists-and dust." [2] This sentence comes from the first part of Mark Twain's *A Tramp Abroad*. The writer starts with the sentence "plenty of company in the way of wagon-loads and mule-loads", and readers are expecting such company as artists, professors, or other travelers, but there is a sharp contrast: dust. Through this kind of description, we can imagine that travelers are trudging on the road under the burning sun with clouds of dust rolling behind. Moreover, Alexander Pope is a humorous and satirical writer in 18th century. He once wrote this sentence in *Epistle to Lord Bathurst*, "But thousands die, without or this or that, Die, and endow a college or a cat." Here the writer made an abrupt drop from "endow a college" to "endow a cat", which produces an effect of satire and mockery. The use of anti-climax contributes to the humorous and unexpected effect to readers.

As indicated by the above definition and examples, the most salient feature of anti-climax is the semantic drop. The sudden drop break or change the logical order and linguistic flow to make a strong rhetorical effect of humor, surprise, irony.

2. Anti-Climax in *Miniver Cheevy*

Miniver Cheevy is one of the most outstanding poems written by Edwin Arlington Robinson. This poem tells us a story about the frustration and failure of man. He seems to be born in the wrong age. He indulges in the illusion of middle ages and dream of becoming a knight. However, he lives in the modern age filled with materialism and impotence.

Robinson depicts the character of *Miniver Cheevy*, a romantic and sarcastic man. He is "a child of scorn" who detests the time when he was born. He "grew lean" and "assailed the seasons" all the time. He wept that he was ever born and had many reasons to prove that. *Miniver Cheevy* says that he loves the "days of old", "swords were bright and steeds were prancing". He loves the heroism and fame of the knights or warriors. The "vision of warrior" would even set him dancing. Therefore, he "sighed for what was not" in the next stanza. He loves to be a kind of hero in his thoughts of antiquity. When he took a rest from his daily work, he dreamed of "Thebes" and "Camelot". Thebes is a city of ancient Greece, while Camelot is King Arthur's court. Moreover, he even imagined himself being Priam's neighbor, the last Trojan king. So *Cheevy* admires the classicism of ancient Greece and the folk tradition of England. The poet used a metaphor of ripe fruit to compare it with antiquity. *Miniver* thinks that the ancient culture reached such a height that the names of figures became "so fragrant" to hear about. However, *Miniver* mourned the modern "Romance" and art was far better than them in the ancient time. The poet mentioned one place named Medici, which was an Italian banking family---Europe's most powerful financial institution in the 15th century. The poet supposed that *Miniver* would have sinned incessantly for reaching the status of Medici. *Miniver* cursed the "commonplace" in the next stanza. He loved "a khaki suit with loathing" or the uniform of modern soldiers. So *Miniver* liked the things with the style of the medieval age, especially medieval knights. *Miniver* loved the ancient time as precious as gold and thought about days in the past all the time. He continued to keep obsessing about the golden pastime. The poet gave readers a frustrated and knowledgeable impression of *Miniver* above mentioned lines, he is crazy about things happened in the past time, while detested the obscurity of himself. Readers began to find the true colors of *Miniver*, a successful alcoholic. Readers realized that why *Miniver* was always blaming everything and everyone not on himself. Because he was a drunk without any fixed income. The writer tried to create a kind of character with a great deal of fantasy and illusion, which made readers began to feel some sympathy for these characters. Last line of the poem is an abrupt drop from the obsessive dreamer to a successful alcoholic. After those considerations, *Miniver* is still obsessed by alcohol and dream, does not want to change his lifestyle to catch up with the modern time.

We can find that the name of the character also has something humorous. *Miniver* means that a white fur originally nobles and used chiefly for robes of state. While *Cheevy* resembles the French word "chevalier", which means that a chivalrous man or a member of the lowest rank of French nobility. So *Miniver Cheevy* is an appropriate name for the character of this poem.

3. Anti-Climax in Richard Cory

Richard Cory is another famous poem written by Edwin Arlington Robinson. This poet uses four quatrains in iambic pentameter with a simple ABAB rhyme scheme. The language is straightforward yet stirring. The poet uses the “anti-climax” in the last stanza of this poem, which makes it more humorous and inquiring.

Robinson introduces the character of the poem, Richard Cory, a handsome and respectable man in the town. He attracts many townspeople for they “looked at him” and mentioned that “He was a gentleman from sole to crown clean-favored, and imperially slim.” All the words indicate that he has a sense of grace and elegance. The repetition of “And he was always human” shows that Richard Cory is always gentle and warm. He said “Good Morning” to other townspeople and glittered when he walked. Richard Cory is very rich, “rich than a king”. We can discover that he made his fortune through heritage. However, a doubt began to appear in reader’s minds where the speaker says “we thought that he was everything”, which may indicate the outcome of Richard Cory is not so well as the speaker considered. The speaker alludes to the fatigue and poverty faced by other townspeople. While Richard Cory is rich than a king. There is an obvious discrepancy between Richard Cory and other inhabitants in the town. Many residents even “went without the meat and cursed the bread”. However, Richard Cory chooses to put a bullet through his head by returning home and end his life in such an unexpected and terrible way. The reader is left speechless by this ending of the poem. The figure of speech Robinson used here is called “Anti-climax”. He describes how rich and gentle Richard Cory is, while gives the shocking and unexpected ending to readers. About this ending, Ellsworth Barnard believed that the first fourteen lines are a painstaking preparation for the last two, with their stunning overturn of popular belief. Wallace Anderson defends Robinson’s use of the surprise ending as a legitimate literary device and claims that “the poem has a rich complexity that becomes increasingly rewarding with successive readings.”[3]

Richard Cory draws the portrait of a seemingly honorable man with great possession, but he is too lonely and vacuous to live in this lifestyle. Although sixteen lines, the use of anti-climax offers a seemingly unexpected ending for readers, but all evidence shows that he lives a successful material life yet mental vacuity.

4. Anti-Climax in Mr. Flood’s Party

Mr. Flood’s Party is a seven-stanza poem about a drunk man named Eben Flood who keeps drinking wine on a hill alone, remembering and cherishing the pastime, especially the medieval chivalrous time. It conveys a theme of grief by juxtaposing humor with rhetorical devices pointing to the loss of loved friends and the pastime. The title of this poem is ironic, which implies festive party hosted by an honorable man. But the poem instead describes a man who is entirely alone with wine and memories on a lonely night.

Mr. Flood is depicted as the poor old man living on a hill, singing so loudly “auld lang syne”. He sings to himself and knows that “only two moons listening” with “weary voice gave out”. The comedy of Mr. Flood’s behavior is not to make readers laugh but to know about his grief through his songs. This strategy of juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy continues to describe how sad Mr. Flood really is. Mr. Flood was wandering around the hill and stood there in the middle of the road “like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn”. Here the poet uses “anti-climax” to make a contrast between Roland and Mr. Flood. The Roland here points to the hero of Chanson de Roland. Roland, the legendary knight, sounds his magic horn for helping his people at the battle of Roncesvalles yet his appeal is too late. Mr. Flood maybe was a chivalrous hero like Roland in the prime yet on the decline in the old age. He made numerous friends at that time while keeping alone now. He has lost his old friends and his prime of life. There is a simile used in this line, “as a mother lays her sleeping child”. By writing the memory as a simile, the reader understands that Mr. Flood’s tenderness towards everything. However, he has learned “most things break” “with trembling care”, a phrase that obviously indicates that his heart is broken into pieces. He sings “auld lang syne” again at the end of the poem and “raised again the jug regretfully”. As we known, “Auld lang syne” is a traditional Scottish song during memorial services. Perhaps Mr. Flood has experienced the loss of an important man for him to flood his mind with grief on this night, and he is trying to get drunk and forget this pain for a little while. At the end of the poem, the poet depicts the imagery of the village on the night, many doors have been shut, while “the many friends had opened them long ago”. About this poem, Wang Weidong thought that the sentiment of this poem is quite like a famous Chinese poem named “Drinking alone with the Moon”, Mr. Flood’s Party is binge of the New England town elder, while the other is of giant among Chinese poets. However, the pain between them

is probably connected.

Mr. Flood's Party by Edwin Arlington Robinson presents an ambivalent portrait of an old man named Eben Flood. As he is walking up a hill back to his humble house, he halts in the road to have a drink "from the jug" in the village, called "Tilbury Town". He has no wife and friend, living alone and undoubtedly has few possessions. "Flood" in his name means that he is an invincible drinker, also immersed in the grief and loss of old time and friends like real overwhelming flood swamped his heart.

5. Conclusion

Edwin Arlington Robinson created a mythical "Tilbury Town" based on his New England birthplace and populated the fictional place with eccentrics, such as Miniver Cheevy, whose life is wasted, meaningless, or impoverished. Richard Cory, who shot his head with a bullet to end his seemingly honorable life. Mr. Flood, who only remembered the glory of pastime, lived in a humble house to spend his old year. He created most characters of poems during his years growing up in Gardiner. His work is filled with these people, most of them residing in fictional Tilbury Town more similar to his hometown, who is in personal failure, frustrated ambitions. His writing was permanently shaped by the conflicts and problems of his life and the lives of those people around him.

In terms of form, Robinson owes much more to his English poetical predecessors like Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and John Milton. He also learned some new techniques from his American poets Whitman, Frost, like free verse, dramatic monologue. His poetry was stylistically simple and elegant, its rhymes, with basic rhyme schemes, have simple feet and meter, and has a consciously lyrical, musical art. It divides into segments, usually of quatrains or some other poetic convention. About the subject of his poems, Scott Donaldson, Robinson's biographer once wrote, "Usually he took for his subjects those who had failed in life and love. He wrote about the derelict and downtrodden, the old and bereft. Who wanted to read about successful aldermen, anyway? Those who led 'scattered lives' interested him, not least because for a long time he thought of himself as one of them." [1]

One of the most successful ways to compose poetry is to use "anti-climax" in the lines of poems. Anti-climax is to arrange clauses or sentences in an order from strong to weak, finally to achieve a sense of humor and irony, thus creating a deeper impression to readers. For example, Robinson describes a great individual, isolated by his fantastic greatness from his townspeople in Richard Cory. There is a sharp and stunning end to the idealized figure by an act of suicide, which makes readers to think about the reason of self-destruction. Miniver Cheevy, Robinson depicts an alcoholic living in the unfulfilled present yet fantasies about a medieval and classical nobility in a small town. There is an abrupt turning at the end of the poem, which makes readers' emotion from sympathy to aversion. Mr. Flood, Robinson depicts the drunken old man pressure himself into having another drink and argues with himself because he had enough. There is a sharp turning at the middle of the poem, when this old man was remembering the Roland, a chivalrous French fighter in the medieval ages. Readers can feel a huge difference and a little grief between the Roland and this old man. Thus, the use of anti-climax adds the effect of humor and satire, also dramatic influences to the composition of poems.

Edward Arlington Robinson is a brilliant humorist with a serious face to tell his story to audience, unexpectedly revealing the sharp turn or ending of poems. He even made no judgements to his characters of poems, leaving them to the readers to appreciate, analyze and comprehend.

References

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- [2] Mark Twain. *A Tramp Abroad*[M]. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014:123.
- [3] Anderson Wallace, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction*[M]. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967:175.