

Approach of New Criticism to *Upon a Spider Catching a Fly*

Xiaoli Huang

English Group, Longwan Vocational and technical Education School Group, Wenzhou, Zhejiang, 325038,
China

sun3hxl@163.com

Keywords: Upon a Spider Catching a Fly, New Criticism, Edward Taylor, Net

Abstract: New Criticism exerts great influence on poetical criticism. It emphasizes the close reading of a text. Elements like rhyme, setting, plot are employed to identify the theme of a text. Such rhetorical devices as metaphor, simile, personification, etc. help establish the interpretation of the text. New Criticism mainly focuses on poems since poems contain all necessary information on their meanings. Edward Taylor was an early American poet. His poems were mainly about his meditation and Puritan doctrines. Employing New Criticism, this paper analyzes one of his poems whose name is *Upon a Spider Catching a Fly*, aiming at helping readers appreciate the natural beauty and religious themes.

Edward Taylor(1645?-1729) was a famous poet during American colonial period. He was born in Great Britain and accepted orthodox education. Because he refused to abandon Puritanism in order to be a parishioner of Church of England, he left his hometown and lived in New Land, i.e. North America. After graduating from Harvard, he went to Westfield which was a small town of Massachusetts. There he worshiped God devotedly and preached puritanical doctrines in the style of poems and sermons. His poems were influenced by British literature tinkled with images of wilderness[Huang Zongying, 36] and Puritanism.

Almost all poetical critics analyze Puritanism and Calvinism lied in his poems from the perspective of lives and social background. The author manages to emphasize the inner structures, such as rhythm and rhetoric with the approach of New Criticism, then obtains the religious doctrine.

1. Briefs on New Criticism

Terry Eagleton believes that the three typical paradigms for literary criticism in the western history are mainly author-centered (Romanticism), text-centered (New Criticism), and reader-centered (Reader-Response theory). [Stanley Fish, 3] Therefore, New Criticism is indispensable for contemporary literary criticism.

New Criticism first developed in Great Britain of the 1920s, rose formally and dominated in the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the late 1950s, New Criticism was normalized. New Criticism does not concern context, such as historical background, authors' lives and experience, authors' intention and influence of works of art. It only concerns the text in itself. New critics treat a work of literature as if it were self contained and independent. Such being the case, it "is concerned to trace how the parts of the text relate, how it achieves its 'order' and 'harmony', how it contains and resolves 'irony', 'paradox', 'tension', 'ambivalence' and 'ambiguity'; ---." [Raman Selden, 18]

2. Structural Analysis on *Upon a Spider Catching a Fly*

Upon a Spider Catching a Fly was a natural poem written by Edward Taylor. He vividly depicted a spider which preyed on a wasp and a fly. By describing the spider's prays, he generated his comments on the relationship between God and men.

This poem was a verse, which numbers of lines in each stanza were different as well as rhythms of each stanza. Taking numbers of lines for example, there were 5 lines in the first stanza, while 6 lines in Stanza 2. For instance, rhythms of the first stanza were ABACC, the ones of the second

stanza were ABCADD, and the ones of Stanza 4 were AAAAA.

Thou sorrow, venom elf;
Is this thy play,
To spin a web out of thyself
To catch a fly?
For why?

This stanza raises questions of the poet: To catch a fly? For why? “Elf” of the first line and “thyself ” of the third line are rhymed, “fly” of the fourth line and “why” of the fifth line are rhymed. Those rhythms are visible to the poet’s wonder: a spider, this elf, spun a web in order to catch a fly?

I saw a pettish wasp
Fall foul therein:
Whom yet thy whorl pins did
not hasp
Lest he should fling
His sting.

But as afraid, remote
Didst stand hereat,
And with thy little fingers
stroke
And gently tap
His back.

Thus gently him didst treat
Lest he should pet,
And in a froppish, aspish heat
Should greatly fret
Thy net.

Whereas the silly fly,
Caught by its leg,
Thou by the throat tookst
Hastily,
And ‘hind the head
Bite dead.

This part depicts the prey of a spider, which answer the above questions. Facing different preys, the spider adopted different strategies. After a wasp fell in the net, the spider, at first, was afraid and stood aloof, then touched the wasp gently in case the wasp damaged its net and flew away. “T”-rhymed words, such as “treat”, “pet”, “heat” , “fret ”and “net” , were short and clear, fitted into the anxiousness and alertness of the spider when it faced the strong enemy.

On the other hand, the spider bit the throat of a fly the moment it saw the fly being caught by the net. Voiced consonants, like “g” and “d”, were pronounced sluggishly and strongly, demonstrating the sad fate of the fly.

This goes to pot, that not
Nature doth call.
Strive not above what

strength hath got,
Lest in the brawl
Thou fall.

This frey seems thus to us:
Hell's spider gets
His entrails spun to whipcords
thus,
And wove to nets,
And sets.

The poet made comments on the prey. Because the fly was weak, it could not get free and died in the end after it fell in the net. At the same time, the spider obtained the power from nets it wove, and killed the fly.

To tangle Adam's race
In's stratagems
To their destructions, spoiled,
made base
By venom things,
Damned sins.

The death of the fly was linked with the dilemma of human beings. Men were tangled and spoiled and became evil by sins. Destruction was their fate. "Adam's race" means human kind, and hinted the fly mentioned above as well. "Vicious thing" was the spider and "damned sin".

But mighty, gracious Lord
Communicate
Thy Grace to break the cord;
afford
Us glory's gate
And state.

Grand God was invited by the poet. He broke cords woven by sins, brought "us" to heaven. In this stanza, the poet employed "thy", producing a scene which talked with God directly. Thus, the poet showed to readers that he was close to God.

We'll nightingale sing like,
When perched on high
In glory's cage, thy glory,
Bright:
Yea, thankfully,
For joy.

Thanks to God, human kind went to heaven. "We", like nightingales in cages, were in the glory of God and under the protection of God, joyfully and thankfully.

3. Rhetorical analysis on Upon a Spider Catching a Fly

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a term is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance. All delicate emotions are explored only by metaphors. [Zheng, Mingyuan, 39] In this poem, the poet used metaphors skillfully in order to preach doctrines of Puritanism.

Metaphors were everywhere. From the first stanza, “thou sorrow, venom elf” refers to a spider. This metaphor clearly showed the disgust of the poet towards the spider. “Adam’s race” of Stanza 8 meant human kind. The ancestor Adam committed the original sin after being tempted by the snake. This metaphor displayed the present human beings, like their ancestor Adam, were tangled by sins. Herein “venom things” apparently were “damned sins”. They, like this spider, tangled and trapped human beings with strategies, spoiled them and made them fall.

”Cord”s in Stanza 9 were woven into a vicious net which trapped human kind. Through “net”, men’s dilemma was emerged. Both “glory’s gate” of Stanza 9 and “glory’s cage” of Stanza 10 indicated heaven. Where glory of God shines was heaven.

This poem also used simile. In Stanza 10, “we” were compared to “nightingale(s)”. Nightingales were pretty and fragile. They were adored and caged by men because of their sweet voice. “We” were nightingales, who were delicate and corruptible. God protected us, broke the cords and cast the glory over us.

Personification is another rhetorical device. In the third stanza, the poet used personification to depict the action of the spider after a wasp fell into the net. The spider

“--- as afraid, remote
Didst stand hereat,
And with thy little fingers
stroke
And gently tap
His back. “

Words as “stroke” and “tap” displayed vividly the carefulness of the spider when it meets strong enemy.

From the first beginning, the poet deciphered his opinion towards the spider, that is, “thou sorrow, venom elf”. Then he made good use of the inner similarity and cultural communication between the net of the spider and the net of sins. The scene which human beings were trapped by sins was portrayed. In the end, the relationship between human beings and nightingales was lords and pets. Similarly, for human kind, the role of God was the lord. Men were caged by God. Men lived on God’s glory.

4. Conclusion

The poem is mainly divided into three parts, which are the lead-in, prey of the spider and comments of the poet. The poet expressed his religious beliefs through this prey. He associated the net of the spider with the net of sins, and preys of the spider with human being. He pointed out that human kind was spoiled, tempted and turned base by sins. Only could mighty God break the fetters by the vicious net, freed human kind and led men to Heaven.

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