

Use of Partial Repetition in *American Beauty*

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Abstract

A number of researchers have examined the relationship between understanding texts' cohesive devices and the overall comprehension of the texts. This paper explores the use of partial repetition as means to highlight the narcissism in the movie American Beauty. The partial repetition found throughout the film uses tense change, uses of modals, and negation. By examining the partial repetition, English learners can better understand the intended meanings in the film, such as the dissatisfaction with the exploitive working conditions of the main character or his deteriorating marriage. The scriptwriter Alan Ball's masterful use and interplay of language illuminate the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality.

According to Shklovsky (1965), art is characterized by a variety of techniques to promote defamiliarization, and the reader is compelled to look for the possible connections between what he sees and what the artist intends to convey. Mukarovsky (1977) and Jakobson (1960) propose that the language in literature is structured in such a way as to force the reader to be critical. At the beginning of the film *American Beauty*, for example, Lester introduces himself thus:

My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This... is my life. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead.

...

And in a way, I'm dead already. (pp. 1-2)

The oddity of this utterance lies in the fact that Lester himself says he will be dead in less than a year, which is an utterance not usually spoken by a sane human being. Furthermore, there is a repetition of the word "dead," and it stands out to the reader/viewer when he looks at the

tenses: the future tense and the present tense. Thus, the emphasis is on the word ‘dead’ and the act of being ‘dead’ is happening *now*.

According to Jakobson, cohesion involves partial repetition, whether of metrical patterns, rhymes, or sentence structure. He cites Caesar’s famous *Veni, vidi, veci* as an example. This sentence combines in a sequence of three words of the same grammatical category (verbs), same inflection (first person singular past tense), same number of syllables, same stress pattern, and similar sound structure (rhyme and alliteration). This effective cohesive device is what makes the sentence so memorable. At the semantic level, the cohesion has an interesting effect. By seeming to equate the acts of coming, seeing and conquering, Caesar’s sentence implies that the last act was as easy for him as the first two. In this way, the “impression of majestic arrogance” is achieved. Similarly, in the above example of *American Beauty*, we see the repetition of the word “dead” and the change in tenses. As a result, the emphasis is on the time of the speaker being dead. The speaker is dead even when he is speaking. The futility of being alive is emphasized: one can be dead even when one is alive.

Researchers, such as Allbee (2002), suggest that *American Beauty* portrays some compelling challenges faced by American society, one of which is the growing trends toward narcissism, a character disorder. The symptoms of weariness include dissatisfaction with life, a feeling that existence is “futile and purposeless.” (p.2) Emptiness, depression, and loss of self esteem occur, while at the same time fantasies of omnipotence are prevalent. People with narcissistic personality tend to act out conflict rather than employing self- restraint, causing them to display a “general inability to get along.” This paper focuses on how cohesion achieved by partial repetition helps convey the message to the audience. The changed elements include tenses, uses of modals, and negation.

In *American Beauty*, the change of the tenses and the repetition of the rest of the utterance can help reinforce the meaning. Consider the following example:

CAROLYN: Lester. I refuse to live like this. This is not a marriage.

LESTER: This hasn't been a marriage for years. (p.42)

Lester almost repeats his wife's sentence, with an important change in the tenses. He uses the present perfect tense, which emphasizes the long duration of the fact that their marriage has not been successful.

Another example illustrating how the tenses can help reinforce meanings can be found in the scene when Angela is revealed as a confused, vulnerable teenager.

ANGELA: (confused) What's wrong? I thought you said I was beautiful.

LESTER: (tenderly) You are beautiful. (p. 94)

The emphasis on the word 'are' sensitizes the reader to the present state of being 'beautiful'. Here, Lester, a complete burnout, interacts with his daughter's cheerleader friend who redirected his frustrated sexuality and fuels a series of sexual fantasies. In a pathetic response, he tries to recapture his youth, with unexpected and self-destructive consequences.

In addition to the change of tenses, the scriptwriter makes use of some modals to help reinforce his meaning.

CATERING BOSS: (to Ricky) Look. I'm not paying you to...
(eyes Lester, suspiciously) ...do whatever it is you're doing out here.

RICKY: Fine. So don't pay me.

CATERING BOSS: Excuse me?

RICKY: I quit. So you don't have to pay me. Now, leave me alone.
(p.33)

The content word 'pay' is repeated while the modals change. Ricky's first response is an imperative, which creates a surprise to the catering boss because he does not expect to receive a directive from an employee not to pay him. Then, the former uses a grammatical form signifying a lack of necessity *do + not + have to + V*, which further underlines the fact that he no longer needs to be paid by his boss. This event shows that Ricky is totally dissatisfied with his exploitive working condition and acts it out without any self-restraint.

Moreover, the addition of modifier dramatically changes the meaning of the former utterance. Consider the following intriguing scene, in which Buddy persuades Carolyn to try using a firearm.

CAROLYN: (embarrassed) I've never fired a gun before.

BUDDY: Oh, you've gotta try it. Nothing makes you feel more powerful. (smiles seductively) Well, almost nothing. (p.56)

Here, Buddy is referring to their extramarital sexual relationship, emphasizing the powerful satisfaction of it. Thus, the scriptwriter is successful in conveying his message that sex outside the marriage is a source of empowerment to both Buddy and Carolyn. This is an important reason why Carolyn's marriage is in trouble. Allbee (2002) shows that an increased rate of divorce can be attributed to narcissism.

In addition, the repetition of some morphemes can also emphasize the idea of the unhappiness of family life as illustrated in the following example.

Lester hurries out the front door, carrying a BRIEFCASE.

CAROLYN: (CONT'D) Lester, could you make me a little later, please? Because I'm not quite late enough.

.....

LESTER: (V.O.) Both my wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser, and... they're right.

.....

LESTER: (V.O.) I have lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this... sedated. But you know what? It's never too late to get it back. (p.5)

The words “late” and “later” share the same base; Alan Ball just adds the inflectional morpheme “er” to the latter. The base “late” is emphasized here purposely because it is contrary to what the reader expects. Carolyn is in a hurry so she does not want to be “later.” The sarcasm shows the deteriorating relation between her and her husband. In this family, the wife focuses her life on materialistic things, which the husband deeply resents.

Also, the repetition of the base in the words ‘loser’ and ‘lost’ helps reinforce the notion that Lester is a loser in this movie, rebelling against his dead-end job, cheating wife, and hostile daughter. His marriage is a failure, but Lester does not try to work on his relationship with his wife. Instead, he creates vivid and inappropriate fantasies about Angela, one of his daughter’s friends. Indeed, Jane’s complaints about her father at the beginning of the film (“I need a father, not some horny geek-boy”) seem largely supported by his actions.

The use of negation also helps the scriptwriter to convey his meaning. The use of it associates with repeating the whole sentence to emphasize his meaning. In fact, the longer the repeated part is, the more prominent it becomes. Consider the following example:

CAROLYN : (barely audible) Lester. You're going to spill beer on the couch.

LESTER :So what? It's just a couch.

CAROLYN :This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk. This is not "just a couch."

LESTER : It's just a couch! (p.69)

Carolyn's "This is not just a couch," almost repeats her husband's utterance, except one important addition: the insertion of "not." The scriptwriter's technique not only enhances the importance of the sentence, but also helps make the word "not" stand out because it is the only difference. The reader is thus aware of the incompatibility between the husband and his wife because one of them is too concerned with materialism and the other not only refuses to compromise but also finds it difficult to tolerate.

Another technique that helps make the script cohesive is the use of ellipsis because it compels the reader to recall a preceding mention. It is a guarantee that speakers are concentrating on the same topic and on the background knowledge relevant to it. Ball makes use of this technique in the scene in which Jane has decided to go away from her family with Ricky.

JANE :My parents will try to find me.

RICKY :Mine won't. (p.93)

Because of the omission of the verb phrase in Ricky's utterance, the reader has to refer to Jane's. In this way, "to try to find me" stands out and so does the word "not." The scriptwriter is successful in emphasizing the fact that Ricky's parents won't try to find him and that, to Ricky, his parents do not care for him, signifying the estranged feelings the son has for his parents.

The disintegration in Ricky's family is further illustrated when he has the following conversation with his father about their two homosexual neighbors:

RICKY : That's the whole thing, Dad. They don't feel like it's anything to be ashamed of.

The Colonel looks at Ricky sharply.

COLONEL : Well, it is.

A beat, as Ricky continues his calculations, before he realizes a response is expected from him. Then:

RICKY : Yeah, you're right. (pp.24-25)

The use of "is" in the colonel's utterance makes it necessary for the reader to read Ricky's which comes before it. The uses of "don't" and "is" signify that the neighbors are not ashamed of it. However, the colonel does not have the same idea. More poignantly, the scene shows that there is a lack of understanding between the father and his son: Ricky does not expect that he has to respond. Then, he has to answer the way his father wants although he does not appear to have the same opinion.

Another cohesive device employed in *American Beauty* is the use of lexicon with related meanings. Consider the following example:

LESTER : (CONT'D) This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. (p.69)

Here, the difference of "life" and "stuff" is emphasized to show how Lester deplores his wife's breakdown in family values. She is overly concerned with the expensive couch, ignoring his feelings. Alan Ball also makes use of related lexicons in other scenes:

CAROLYN: (ashen) How dare you speak to me that way in front of her? And I marvel that you can be so contemptuous of me, on the same day that you lose your job!

LESTER : Lose it? I didn't lose it. It's not like, "Oops, where'd my job go?" I quit. Someone pass me the asparagus. (p.61)

Here, the scriptwriter differentiates the words 'lose' (and its inflections) and 'quit.' The former implies suffering and passivity which a person has to face when he undergoes the action whereas the latter suggests a release from an obligation and assertiveness. To preserve his dignity, Lester asserts that he quits his job willingly, although he is conscious of the detrimental effects on his family of being unemployed.

In the following example, although there is no substitution for a verb phrase, which would signify to us that there is an ellipsis, the verb in the second utterance compels the reader to refer to the first one:

LESTER (V.O.) (CONT'D): Janie's a pretty typical teenager.

Angry, insecure, confused. I wish I could tell her that's all going to pass...

Outside, a CAR HORN BLARES. Jane stuffs items into her BACKPACK.

LESTER (V.O.) (CONT'D): But I don't want to lie to her. (p.4)

The verb 'lie' forces us to refer to Lester's former utterance and underlines the falsity of it. Thus, the state of being angry, insecure and confused that Jane is facing now is not going to pass, even in the future.

In conclusion, *American Beauty* invites its audience to scrutinize the supposedly perfect ideal of an American family. For many, the ideal picture turns into a nightmare of unfulfilled desires, repressed needs, and shattered hopes, which are usually concealed because of the necessity to maintain a successful image. Alan Ball's master use and interplay of language illuminates the discrepancy between the ideal and the reality.

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