

An Analysis on Metaphors in Lydia Davis's Short Stories

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Abstract: American short story writer, Lydia Davis's writing style is famous for the "brevity but emotion". In 2013, Davis was awarded the Man Booker International Prize and this brought her a world reputation. Since then, a growing number of scholars have attracted by her stories. Based on a close reading of some of Lydia Davis's short stories, this thesis makes a detailed analysis of the metaphor use in the novels and explores the deep meanings and effects brought by metaphor.

Keywords: Lydia Davis; *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*; Metaphor

1. Lydia Davis and Her Short Stories

Born on July 15, 1947, in Northampton, Massachusetts, Lydia Davis is a famous American short story writer, essayist and a great translator. Till now, Lydia Davis has published seven main collections of short stories, namely *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories* (1976), *Sketches for a Life of Wassily* (1981), *Break It Down* (1986), *Almost No Memory* (1997), *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001), *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007) and *Can't and Won't* (2013).

2. Literature Review

In 2013, Davis won the Man Booker International Prize, making her a world-renowned short story writer, however, there are relatively small number of academic studies related to Lydia Davis and her short stories at home and abroad.

The first essay was written by Wu Yongxi. She argues that Davis not only breaks the boundaries of established novel forms, but enlarges the contents of fiction writing. With a strong philosophical touch, these stories accurately hit the question of existence and reflect the reality of contemporary life (Wu Yongxi, 2013:7). Later, Feng Yuanyuan emphasizes that Davis's stories are filled with tension and emotion since Davis attaches great importance on normal life to explore human instincts (Feng Yuanyuan, 2013:102). Zhang Feng in her master's thesis analyses the techniques used in the texts with the theory of defamiliarization in 2017. Li Rui states that Lydia Davis frequently builds a déjà vu narrator, and the characteristic of whispering is based on the frequent self-identity construction in these short stories (Li Rui, 2020:152).

Christopher Knight firstly attempted to analyze the philosophy in the only novel of Lydia Davis (Knight, 2008). In 2013, Jonathan Evans tried to analyze how Davis look at the borders between translation and other forms of intertextual writing (Jonathan, 2016:176). In 2018, Anette Erøy Hansen thought that Davis's texts are of feminist significance both in form and in content. Davis's literary innovation accords with the feminist idea of breaking the patriarchal structure in literature (Hansen, 2018). In 2020, Robert Clark writes that the frequent appearance of allusion, brevity and omitting as a means of generating implications places her firmly within the minimalist tradition of American literature (Robert, 2020:38).

Thus, it can be seen that most researches focus on the innovation of narrative form and content. However, the language itself that Davis used is full of creativity and charm, too. Therefore, this thesis is aimed to explore the tactics and effects of metaphor with a detailed analysis of Lydia Davis's short stories.

3. Metaphor Theory

The word "metaphor" derived from the Greek word "μεταφορά" (metaphorá), in which the first part "μετά" (meta) means "across" and the second part "φορά" (phorá) means "to carry". In 1955, Max Black proposed three traditional views of metaphor in his essay, *Metaphor*, namely the substitution theory, the comparison theory and the interaction theory. Aristotle is a representative of the substitution theory since he stresses that the use of metaphors must discover "metonymic

similarities” between things of the same kind. The substitution theory is represented by Marcus Fabius Quintilian, who points out in his book *Institutes of Oratory* that the value of rhetoric lies in the beautification of everyday language while metaphor can be seen as an ornament on the style. Later, Ivor Armstrong Richards, proposes the interaction theory and believes that there are two interdependent parts with the structure of metaphors, tenor and vehicle. The tenor is the subject to which attributes are ascribed. The vehicle is the object whose attributes are borrowed (ZhaoYifan, 2006:779). In the late 20th century, more interdisciplinary studies about metaphor emerged. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have made prominent contribution. They believe that metaphors are not merely stylistic, but that they are cognitively important as well.

4. Metaphors in Lydia Davis’s Short Stories

4.1 Metaphors in the nominations of Lydia Davis’s short stories

Conventionally, the characters in novels are always given meaningful and symbolic names which can display the personalities, family backgrounds, social status etc. However, one of the most obvious features in Davis’s short stories is that Davis does not pay much attention to the names of the protagonists. The protagonists are represented by “A fly”, “A rat”, “I”, “He”, “She”, “X”, “Y”. Therefore, there are some metaphorical meanings behind these names.

Problem is one of the typical examples in which all the names of characters are written in capital letters, thus, the readers have no idea about their social background and relationship:

X is with Y, but living on money from Z. Y himself supports W, who lives with her child by V. V wants to move to Chicago but his child lives with W in New York. W cannot move because she is having a relationship with U, whose child also lives in New York, though with its mother (Davis, 2015:127).

It is apparent that the relationships among these characters is so complex and intricate that readers may easily fall into Lydia Davis’s language trap. The title, *Problem*, is depicted vividly through the relations between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between money and survival. However, there is no need to clarify the identifies of them and “X”, “Y”, “U”, “V”, “W” can be nobody or even everybody. Davis’s metaphor technique here then creates a striking feeling for the readers.

Another point about nomination metaphors in Lydia Davis’s short stories is that the characters are named by their family or social identities. For example, words like “husband”, “wife”, “sister”, “mother”, “housemaid” have appeared a quite number of times. Motherhood has always been the topic of Lydia Davis. It is essential to note that the mothers in stories are not willing to disguise themselves and they have their own bad qualities——indifference, impatience, madness and selfishness. Here is a story selected from *Break It Down, The Mother*:

The girl made a small pillow for her father. But would it a quilt be more practical, said her mother. The girl dug a small hole in the garden. But how much better if you dug a large hole, said her mother. The girl dug a large hole and went to sleep in it. But how much better if you slept forever, said her mother (Davis, 2015:99).

When it comes to “mother”, the traditional image in the mind is a beautiful, gentle woman who will comfort and encourage their children when encountering setbacks. Instead, there is no difficulty to draw a conclusion that the mother above probably has psychological problems and always discourages her daughter and she is like a control freak. By using metaphor, Davis offers a new way for readers to reflect on themselves according to their real life experiences and presents a strong sense of immersion when reading these stories.

4.2 Metaphors in the contents of Lydia Davis’s short stories

As it mentions earlier, Lydia Davis is a master of literary form and she has her own narrative style in writing. Meanwhile, Davis did not confine her writing subjects into the traditional ways and the range of her subjects is so wild that a certain part of body, an emotion, a peculiar behavior, a grammar lesson, or even a small animal can be her focuses. She likes to write tiny and trivial things that other novelists will not pay much attention to. The next two stories will be used to explain this point.

The Fly

At the back of the bus,

inside the bathroom,
this very small illegal passenger,
on its way to Boston (Davis, 2015:406).

Flies are generally taken as a mark of disgusting, filthy and annoying creatures, whereas Davis here puts them to the equal place as human beings. She supposes that the fly is also a passenger like her on the bus to Boston. Through metaphor, these ordinary scenes in daily life are empowered with liveliness and happiness, making it possible for readers to resonate. With a highly original form to make the most of clear and accurate language, Davis's stories leave a lot to imagination for readers and call on people to introspect themselves.

Grammar questions

When he is dead, everything to do with him will be in the past tense. Or rather, the sentence "He is dead" will be in the present tense, and also questions such as "Where are they taking him? or Where is he now? (Davis, 2015:219).

Superficially, it seems that the narrator is talking about a series of emotionless questions of whether it is appropriate to use present tense or past tense to describe her dying father. This story makes a strong impression of strange and gimmicky on readers because how could a daughter talk about her dying father with such a calm mood. However, this story is surprisingly emotional and there is a deep metaphorical meaning beneath the surface of every sentence. These questions are strongly powerful when it comes to the topic of life and death in the end. In fact, with the help of metaphor, this story is not merely a syntactic question, but a problem full of philosophy and significance. At the same time, Davis helps readers to explore the most important themes of modern life, such as self-consciousness, instability of identity, anxiety, loneliness, etc.

5. Conclusion

Lydia Davis's short stories can be regarded as anti-traditional both in forms and contents in contemporary literature world. With concise language and acute observation, her stories reflect the reality of modern society. The deep metaphorical expression embedded in the precise grammatical structure shows Davis's supreme writing skills in language. Moreover, with metaphor in philosophical thinking, Davis presents her thought, perception and opinions towards some of the significant problems in the world, like death, anxiety, family affection. Therefore, it can be widely acknowledged that Davis is unique, and her special writing style together with her original writing mode has opened up a new world in literature.

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