**A Stylistic Analysis of Emerson’s “The Sphinx”**

Yang Jing

杨婧

（广东外语外贸大学南国商学院 广州）

(Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College, Guangzhou)

**Abstract:**Ralph Waldo Emerson is a poet with his own style. This term paper explores the theme of “The Sphinx” through analyzing its unique stylistic features in three perspectives including linguistic deviation, linguistic overregularity and figures of speech. Firstly, there are three aspects of linguistic deviation, grammatical deviation, graphological deviation and deviation of historical period. Secondly, there are some means of expressions employing linguistic overregularity like repetition and parallelism. Last but not least is absurdity in the poem. There are so many paradoxes in the poem with surprising effect. Consequently, the themes of the poem “The Sphinx” concluded to be the dialectical unity and unfinalizability through the stylistic analysis in details.

**Key Words:** Emerson; Stylistics; *The Sphinx*; Dialectical Unity; Unfinalizability

**Introduction:**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, is the pioneer of the [Transcendentalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism" \o "Transcendentalism) movement of the mid-19th century. As an independent thinker, he finds that the cultural atmosphere in America is largely influenced by European culture and lacks of American characteristics. Emerson holds a firm belief that America definitely needs refreshment of independent thinking as he wrote in his well-known essay *Nature*, “There are new lands, new men and new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.” (Gilman, *Selected* 181)Thus, Emerson put forward the philosophy of transcendentalism, emphasizing on individualism, freedom and self-reliance. And his speech given in Harvard University, “The American Scholar” has been regarded as America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence”.

The role of Emerson as an essayist and lecturer has drawn much attention from the readers and researchers. Moreover, he is at the same time a poet with a unique style although fewer researches have been devoted to his poems. Emerson believes that essays could enlighten the public but only poetry owns the power to awaken the mediocrities.

And through reading Emerson’s poems, it is explicit that he expresses the profound thoughts without paying much attention to ornate words or phrases but prefer refined and concise utterance along with a series of images and metaphors. Emerson’s poems share one thing in common with his essays that his style of writing is grand and magnificent with convincing persuasiveness.

“The Sphinx” is the threshold poem of Emerson’s Poems (1846), first published in the third issue of The Dial. On the one hand, as the threshold poem, it partly functions as an introduction of this volume of poetry. On the other hand, it is known to all that the sphinx itself represents intricacy and symbolizes mystery and self-expression in the artistic fields. It originally appears in the myth of Oedipus of Greek mythology the haunches of a lion, sometimes with the wings of a great bird, and the face of a human. The monster would kill those who could not answer its riddle. And the poem Emerson writes is also difficult to understand, arousing hot debate on the explanation of the riddle of The Sphinx. What does the sphinx symbolize? Does the poet answer to the sphinx successfully?

This article would further explore the theme of the poem through analyzing its unique stylistic features in three perspectives including linguistic deviation, linguistic overregularity and figures of speech.

1. **Linguistic Deviation in the Poem**

There is a general idea of stylistics that, “Style is deviation of the norm.” (Leech F29) For Emerson, a poet advocates individualism and creativity; no doubt there are some abnormal usages of language in his poem turning out to have extraordinary effect.

* 1. **Grammatical Deviation**

According to Yu Xueyong, “Grammatical deviation refers to the violation of normal surface grammar, which mostly concerns unusual syntactic structure and unusual phrase structures.” (Yu, 48) In *The Sphinx*, there are several lines written against the grammatical rules.

For example, the last two lines of the second stanza:

“Life death overtaking;

Deep underneath deep?”

For the function of the definite article “the” is to prescribe a limit to the latter word and Emerson omit “the” before “deep” for twice. The intentional articleless style suggests the eternal cycle of birth and death. There is no limit and there is no end of metempsychosis, which reflects the theme of unfinalizability.

Another example is in the fourth stanza:

“The waves, unashamed,

In difference sweet,

Play glad with the breezes,

Old playfellows meet;”

According to the grammatical rules, “in” as a preposition should be along with nouns, pronouns or other nominal phrases. The following phrase “difference sweet” cannot act as a nominal phrase and “difference” as a noun cannot modify “sweet”, an adjective. Besides, Emerson’s employment of an adjective “glad” instead of its adverb form “ gladly” to modify the verb “play” is also grammatically wrong. The way of writing seems to simulate children’s speaking style. For the “old playfellows” meet again after a long time, it is so joyful and sweet that they recall their childhood and how they talk when they were children. Just as the Confucius says, “Thus things flow away day and night.” People may get older and older, but the friendship between human beings would last forever.

* 1. **Graphological Deviation**

Unconventional use of punctuation is one type of graphological deviation. “Punctuation, which is a tool that serves two purposes in poetry: to structurally organize words and thoughts, and to modulate flow and help to create rhythm, has striking stylistic effects.” (Yu 39-40)

Double quotes are generally used in quotations and often appear at the same time. In the poem, every stanza except for the 8th, 15th and 17th one has an unclosed quote, which indicates an unfinished sense throughout the whole poem. At the same time, there is no definite answer to the riddle of the sphinx, waiting to be explored again and again by human beings. It is in some way mankind’s self-reflection and unsettled searching for identity.

And in the 1st, 5th, 6th, 8th, 12th, 13th and 14th stanza of *The Sphinx*, instead of being used alone there is one dash after another punctuation mark in each stanza. The dashes represent different meanings after different punctuation marks and in different lines. The dashes after the commas in the 5th, 6th and 8th stanza means the latter lines would further explain the former ones; the ones in the 12th and 13th stanza signify the transition of meaning; the one in the 8th stanza after a colon and the other in the 14th stanza before double quotes just indicates the quotations’ coming; while in the first stanza

“‘Who’ll tell me my secret,  
http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifThe ages have kept?--  
I awaited the seer  
http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifWhile they slumbered and slept:-- ”

the dash implies the sphinx has waited for a long time and might still wait in the future for the seer to explain her riddle, which is another example of the unfinalizability of human beings’ cognitive process and quest of truth.

* 1. **Deviation of Historical Period**

Although Emerson lives in the 19th century America, modern English has been popularized. In this poem, there are still some archaic words like “creepeth” , “peepeth”, “lieth”, “asketh”, “thy”, and “thou”. As Leech noted in his book, “Archaism as the ‘survival of the language of the past into the language of the present’, is of course an institutionalized licence of poetry, and may perhaps be distinguished from linguistic anachronism, or the conscious and calculated resurrection of language”. (52)

And mixing the archaic and modern English together would leave the readers an impression that no matter in the ancient culture or the modern society, people are faced up with the same dilemma and identity crisis, thus they have to keep on looking without settlement.

1. **Linguistic Overregularity in the Poem**

According to Yu, there are three levels (phonological level, lexical level and grammatical level) form linguistic overregularity. And “to analyze the linguistic overregularity is one way to understand and appreciate poetry”. (Yu 67)

Repetition and Parallelism are two devices that can be easily mixed up with. As Leech states in his *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, “Free repetition of form means the exact copying of some previous part of a text (whether word, phrase, or even sentence), since of course, if there were merely a partial repetition, this would amount to parallelism.” (Leech 77)

The following part would analyze the repetition and parallelism in this poem.

* 1. **Repetition**

In the 15th stanza, there are two lines go like this:

“Always it asketh, asketh;

And each answer is a lie.”

Immediate repetition means copying the initial unit immediately. (Yu 78) The immediate repetition of the word “asketh” is to emphasize and highlight mankind’s quest of truth without stopping and again respond to the theme of unfinalizability.

Another kind of repletion is called intermittent repetition. And the last two lines in the 4th stanza is an example of intermittent repetition:

“Firmly draw, firmly drive,

By their animate poles.”

The repetition of the word “firmly” reflects that the two poles greatly attract each other and be the drive of each other. As a whole they work better, which is a signification the theme of dialectical unity.

* 1. **Parallelism**

There are two parts of the poem Emerson employs parallelism, one is in the 8th stanza:

'Who, has drugged my boy's cup?

Who, has mixed my boy's bread?

Who, with sadness and madness,

* Has turned my child's head?'

The sphinx regards herself as nature, the mother of human beings, expressing her disappointment towards mankind for their cowardice and fakeness as they grow up. And these three sentences form a sentence pattern with “Who, has---” as the beginning for each sentence. And this kind of parallelism on the one hand would make the poem sound fluent and full of momentum, and orderly arranged as one integral whole in form, on the other hand would reinforce the effect of the sphinx’s anger and then stimulate the emotion of the readers, recalling what they have experienced and transformed into since innocent childhood with bitter hatred and resentment.

The other example is in the 16th stanza:

* “She melted into purple cloud,
* http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifShe silvered in the moon;
* She spired into a yellow flame;
* http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifShe flowered in blossoms red;
* She flowed into a foaming wave:
* http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifShe stood Monadnoc's head.”

In this stanza, the sentence pattern is made up of six sentences with “She –ed” for start and form a parallelism. It emphasizes the multifaceted quality of the sphinx and also the objects human beings want to know about the underlying meanings or regular patterns.

The sphinx is no longer her original appearance, but to change into purple, silver, yellow and red, different colors and different forms, which indicate that there are great amounts of possible but not definite answers to the sphinx’s question waiting to be explored again and again. It reasserts the theme of unfinalizability of cognitive process.

1. **Absurdity in the Poem**

According to Yu, there are two kinds of absurdity, “Absurdity is the quality of being absurd or inconsistent with obvious truth, reason, or sound judgment, a logical contradiction. It consists of two types: oxymoron and paradox, which entail irreconcilable elements of meaning or reference.” (Yu 50)

And then he defines paradox as this, “A paradox is a statement of conclusion that seems self-contradictory or absurd but is really true.” (Yu 51)

In the poem “*The Sphinx*”, there exist quite a lot of paradoxes. Take the second stanza of the poem as example:

* “Known fruit of the unknown;  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifDaedalion plan;  
  Out of sleeping a waking,  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifOut of waking a sleep;  
  Life death overtaking;  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifDeep underneath deep?”

“Known fruit of the unknown” is the first paradox of the stanza. It at first sounds absurd that the known fruit is contained in the unknown. But the process of cognition is actually from the unknown to the known. People learn from the past and find the rules to understand better the subjects they want to know about, which shows the confidence of the poet that the truth exists and the riddle of the sphinx is possible to be resolved. It also reflects the dialectical unity of cognitive objects.

“Out of sleeping a waking, out of waking a sleep;” is the second paradox of the stanza. Waking and sleeping are two opposite states of human beings. And people always live in such a circle, from sleeping to waking and then from waking to sleeping without stopping, which represents that the civilization of mankind develops from obscuration to enlightenment and then from enlightenment to obscuration. It is a repetitive process with unfinalizability.

“Life death overtaking; Deep underneath deep?” is the third paradox of the stanza. Death is the antonym of life and it is generally believed that depth of “deep” could not be deeper than “deep”. And such kind of absurdity would simulate the readers to think it over. Life and death happens alternately in the world and there is always something deeper waiting to be investigated underneath the so-called “deep”, which means that there is no end on the way to search for truth.

Another example is in the ninth stanza:

* “thy dirges  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifAre pleasant songs to me”

The dirges are usually symbols of sorrows and sympathy. However to the poet in the poet, he feels happy to hear the sphinx’s dirges. He laughs at the sphinx for she is angry about the cowardice and foolishness of the grown up human beings because the poet believes that mankind has never stopped their curiosity or the urge for improvement and the sphinx’s sympathy is meaningless and unnecessary.

Then comes to the 10th stanza, the poet began his argument:

* “The fiend that man harries  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifIs love of the Best;”

Fiend is the representation of the evil that tortures human beings. However in the poet’s eyes is the best love because only the hardships one may experience could arouse the motivation to explore. And after the barriers and failures, one could “vision profounder” and “see the perfect” and “new heavens” for failure is the mother of success. This law signifies the dialectical unity of the process of cognition.

In the 12th stanza, the poet goes on to play with the paradoxes.

* “Pride ruined the angels,  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifTheir shame them restores;  
  Lurks the joy that is sweetest  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifIn stings of remorse.”

Generally speaking, pride is a characteristic to show one’s confidence and sense of honor; shame is something make one feel embarrassed and humiliated. But according to the poet, pride is bad and shame is good for the angles. At the same time, the sweetest joy is closely connected to remorse, a feeling usually full of regret and self-reflection. It shows that the poet attaches importance to modesty in front of the vast sea of knowledge and universal love for humanity instead of romantic love between males and females. This stanza reflects the two themes of the poem at the same time—the dialectical unity of sadness and happiness, and the unfinalizability to know about the world.

The same goes to these two lines in the 13th stanza:

* “And under pain, pleasure,--  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifUnder pleasure, pain lies.”

The coexistence of pain and pleasure is another means of expression of dialectical unity of one’s fortune. The only thing that would not change is change itself. It is like an old saying goes by Laozi that “Misfortune might be a blessing in disguise and vice versa.”

The last example of paradox is in the

* "Dull Sphinx, Jove keep thy five wits;  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifThy sight is growing blear;  
  Rue, myrrh and cummin for the Sphinx,  
  http://poetry.eserver.org/space.gifHer muddy eyes to clear!"

The sight of the sphinx is sometimes blear but sometimes clear, which means the sphinx herself could not judge whether the answers given by the human beings are right or wrong. It is an implication that there is no definite answer or absolute truth in the world. The process of cognition develops from the endless negation of the previous viewpoints.

**Conclusion:**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the pioneer of the [Transcendentalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism" \o "Transcendentalism) movement of the mid-19th century is an independent thinker, essayist and lecturer. At the same time, he is a poet with his own style. This term paper explores the theme of “The Sphinx”, a famous poem used to be hotly debated of its meaning among the researchers through analyzing its unique stylistic features in three perspectives including linguistic deviation, linguistic overregularity and figures of speech.

Firstly, there are three aspects of linguistic deviation, grammatical deviation, graphological deviation and deviation of historical period. For example, the articleless style suggests the eternal cycle of birth and death. There is no limit and there is no end of metempsychosis, which reflects the theme of unfinalizability. There is an unclosed quote almost in every stanza, which indicates an unfinished sense throughout the whole poem and the dash in some stanza implies the sphinx has waited for a long time and might still wait in the future for the seer to explain her riddle, which is another example of the unfinalizability of human beings’ cognitive process and quest of truth. And the archaic words leave the readers an impression that no matter in the ancient culture or the modern society, people are faced up with the same dilemma and identity crisis, thus they have to keep on looking without settlement.

Secondly, there are some means of expressions employing linguistic overregularity like repetition and parallelism. For example, immediate repetition of the word “asketh” is to emphasize and highlight mankind’s quest of truth without stopping and again respond to the theme of unfinalizability. It emphasizes the multifaceted quality of the sphinx and also the objects human beings want to know about the underlying meanings or regular patterns. The parallelism in the 16th stanza emphasizes the multifaceted quality of the sphinx and also the objects human beings want to know about the underlying meanings or regular patterns. It reasserts the theme of unfinalizability of cognitive process.

Last but not least is absurdity in the poem. There are so many paradoxes in the poem with unexpected effect because the contradictory rhetoric though appears absurd and illogical would simulate and at the same time inspire the readers to think the underlying meanings over.It also reflects the dialectical unity of cognitive objects and the fact that there is no end on the way to search for truth

In conclusion, the themes of the poem “The Sphinx” are the dialectical unity and unfinalizability through the stylistic analysis in details.

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作者姓名：杨婧

作者简介：1991年生于江西抚州，暨南大学英文系硕士，发表有《李立扬诗歌中的悲剧元素探究》、《李立扬的<夜之书>与超验主义》等论文，译有经典名著重译作品《假如给我三天光明》（花城出版社），研究方向为英美诗歌、华裔美国文学等。