

An Analysis of Repetition in *L'Amant*

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Abstract: *L'Amant*, the masterpiece of Marguerite Duras, won her the Prix Goncourt in 1984. Duras used a concise text to establish a narrative structure, which defied standard novelist views. In this article, *L'Amant* is taken as the subject of study in an attempt to analyze repetition and its functions.

Keywords: *L'Amant*; Repetition; Stylistics

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1. Introduction

Marguerite Duras, born in Vietnam in 1914, spent her first 18 years of life in this French colony of Indochina. The Eastern culture left its mark on her and averted her assimilation with the French culture upon her return to France. It was the culture shock and unique encounter that provided her with inspiration to write. Duras' *L'Amant*, for which she won the Prix Goncourt in 1984, was her most significant work. In view of the distinctive features of this novel, epitomized by the conciseness of the text and the weak connectivity of the plot, Duras used repetition to construct the narrative structure. The narrative is based on the recollections of a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girl, an old lady, and the author herself, but the memories are fragmented and filled with errors and inconsistencies. The distinction between the truth and falsity of events makes the reading difficult. Only by observing the structured representations formed by repetition can readers unravel the narrative structure. The repetition in *L'Amant* can be divided into three components: sonorities, words, and sentences.

2. Repetition of sonorities

The repetition of sonorities leads to orchestration effects. In that way, a scene or a theme is easily retained by readers ^[1]. In this novel, the repetition of sonorities is manifested through assonance, alliteration, and polyptoton.

2.1. Assonance

Assonance is a homophony of vowels, which acts as a discrete rhyme; it helps to emphasize a character or a scene ^[2].

Example 1:

“Son premier mouvement c’est de tuer, de rayer de la vie, de disposer de la vie, de mépriser, de chasser, de faire souffrir ^[3].”

Duras used five verbs in a row, “tuer,” “rayer,” “disposer,” “mépriser,” and “chasser”, all of which end with the vowel “[e]” to show the indifference of the older brother. The first three verbs “tuer,” “rayer,” and “disposer” express what the older brother desires. This was what he did: he deprived his little brother of his property and instigated the death of his little sister by inciting his mother to inflict violence on her. The two verbs “mépriser” and “chasser” reflect a higher level of indifference. The complement of these two verbs is not limited to the objects of people’s reach, but rather it refers to everything in the world. Not only does the older brother have no respect for life, but he is indifferent to everything. With these five verbs ending with the vowel “[e],” the personality of the older brother is revealed, in that he is indeed indifferent.

Example 2:

“Je vois la guerre comme lui était, partout se répandre, partout pénétrer, voler, emprisonner, partout être là, à tout mélangée, mêlée, présente dans le corps, dans la pensée, dans la veille, dans le sommeil, tout le temps...^[4]”

Through repetition, readers will notice a strong rhythm in this sentence. In addition to the repetitions of “partout” and “dans,” there is an assonance formed of the verbs “se répandre,” “pénétrer,” “voler,” “emprisonner,” “mélangee,” “mêlée,” and “présente,” all of which rhyme with the vowel “[e].” The two verbs “se répandre” and “pénétrer” illustrate that war is constantly taking place in various places and that nothing is safe from it, while the verbs “voler” and “emprisonner” denote the consequences of war, in which the invaders rob the inhabitants of their property and imprison them; however, these are only physical damages. The last three verbs “mélangee,” “mêlée,” and “présente” describe the spread of war not only on a geographical scale, but also on an intellectual scale. When people’s minds are only consumed by a single idea, which is war, invaders no longer seek peace, the invaded lose hope, and life plunges into fear. These assonances draw readers’ attention to the brutality of war, and the fact that Duras compares the older brother to war illustrates his nature once more.

2.2. Alliteration

Alliteration refers to a repetition of consonants or syllables in a tight succession of words, which plays a rhythmic and formal role^[5].

Example 3:

“Elle ne sait pas qu’elle est très belle, Hélène L... Elle. Hélène L. Hélène Lagonelle... Elle est beaucoup plus belle que moi... elle, Hélène Lagonelle, elle...^[6]”

The words “elle,” “belle,” “L,” and “Lagonelle,” all ending with the consonant “[l],” constitute an alliteration to describe the beauty of Hélène Lagonelle. The first clause starts with the pronoun “elle” and ends with the adjective “belle”; the name “Hélène L.” rhymes again with “belle.” The repetitions of the consonant “[l]” form a cyclic reciprocal. The name “Hélène Lagonelle” is a tender feminine name; in the sentence “Elle. Hélène L. Hélène Lagonelle,” the series of the consonant “[l]” appeals to the memory of Hélène Lagonelle. This consonant is not pronounced as full and rounded as a vowel, which accentuates the sweetness of Hélène Lagonelle. Three pages of the novel, whose words are composed of the consonant “[l],” are devoted to the description of Hélène Lagonelle. This alliteration creates the musicality of the text, while depicting the woman’s charms.

Example 4:

“Et c’est pour cela aussi que l’enfant sait bien y faire déjà, pour détourner l’attention qu’on lui porte à elle vers celle que, elle, elle porte à l’argent ^[7].”

The pronouns “elle” and “celle,” ending with the consonant “[l],” form an alliteration, which directs the readers’ attention to the female protagonist. When the pronoun “elle” appears for the first time, it refers to the French girl. Although the pronoun “celle” refers to the same French girl, it now depicts a girl who knows how to draw attention and trade her body for money – a conduct that is clearly incongruous for her age. The last two repetitions of “elle” contain profound meanings; the young heroine they refer to is no longer a simple girl, but rather a prostitute her mother spoke of. This circularity brought about by the consonant “[l]” gives readers time to reflect on this social phenomenon.

2.3. Polyptoton

Polyptoton refers to using words derived from the same root, verbs conjugated in different persons or tenses, and so on. It is a rhetorical means of fixing readers on a leitmotiv ^[8].

Example 5:

“Tout à coup elle sait, là, à l’instant, elle sait qu’il ne la connaît pas, qu’il ne la connaîtra jamais, qu’il n’a pas les moyens de connaître tant de perversité ^[9].”

The repetition of the verb “connaître” in present tense, simple future tense, and infinitive, as “connaît,” “connaîtra,” and “connaître,” respectively, allows readers to see the contradiction between the French girl and her Chinese lover, as well as the fact that their love is an unsolvable puzzle for a variety of reasons. To begin with, their skin tones are different: her Chinese lover has yellow complexion, while the French girl has white complexion. The French girl is restrained from being in love with a Chinese man in view of strong societal prejudice, of which he knows nothing about; instead, he is completely enamored with her. Other than that, their living situations differ considerably: the Chinese lover is wealthy and powerful, while the French girl is forced to exchange her body for money, apportioned by her Chinese lover, to support her family. The Chinese lover is unaware of her poverty and powerlessness, and he will remain ignorant of it in the future. Their love is doomed fall victim to the passage of time.

Example 6:

“Il lui avait dit que c’était comme avant, qu’il l’aimait encore, qu’il ne pourrait jamais cesser de l’aimer, qu’il l’aimerait jusqu’à sa mort ^[10].”

Many literary critics dismiss the ending as “cheesy,” yet it is a classic example of polyptoton, in which the verb “aimer” is repeated in compound past tense, infinitive, and simple future tense, as “aimait,” “aimer,” and “aimerait,” respectively, giving readers a sense of depth of this love. In the years following the war, the female protagonist went through many hardships, including the death of her little brother, divorce, and the loss of her son. Accepting fate, the Chinese lover married a girl he did not love. Thus, when he arrived in Paris, the first person who came into his mind was the French girl; he did not hesitate to tell her that he had loved her in the past and that he could not stop loving her now or even in death. However, this is a desperate love: the French girl and her Chinese lover have both set aside a place in their hearts for this impossible love because of societal prejudices and their differing social status.

3. Repetition of words

Similar to the repetition of sonorities, the repetition of words produces a rhythmic effect, but it also helps to emphasize images, express feelings, and deepen readers' impression ^[11]. In this section, we will analyze the two types of repetitions of words: anaphora and anadiplosis.

3.1. Anaphora

Anaphora refers to the practice of starting multiple successive sentences or paragraphs with the same word or set of words. The author used it to reinforce the rhythm and eloquence of the text ^[12].

Example 7:

“Jamais bonjour, bonsoir, bonne année. Jamais merci. Jamais parler. Jamais besoin de parler ^[13].”

The word “jamais” appears four times at the start of each of the four thirteen-word sentences, accounting for one-third of the total number of words used. “Jamais” refers to the non-existence of something. Here, in the text, the first two repetitions of “jamais” refer to the non-existence of conveying common polite expressions, such as “bonjour,” “bonsoir,” “bonne année,” and “merci,” thus setting in notion the non-existence of speaking. A person who never uses these banal, everyday expressions, by implication, does not speak, or more precisely never speaks; as stated in the fourth statement, “Jamais besoin de parler.” For an indifferent person, the act of speaking pains the individual, thus he or she does not speak or does not need to speak. Through these four repetitions, the nature of the heroine's family is revealed – a family with a heart of stone.

Example 8:

“Ça a été long. Ça a duré sept ans. Ça a commencé nous avions dix ans. Et puis nous avons eu douze ans. Et puis treize ans. Et puis quatorze ans, quinze ans. Et puis seize ans, dix-sept ans ^[14].”

The repetition of “ça a” in the compound past tense, as “Ça a été,” “Ça a duré,” and “Ça a commence,” allows readers to empathize with the mother's desperation, which is an emblem of her hard life. The first sentence simply states that the ordeal lasted for a long time; the second sentence specifies that the ordeal lasted for seven years; the third sentence indicates that the family had suffered under the ordeal since the children were ten years old. The anaphora of “ça a,” with the assonance of “[e]” in a series of verbs, “bété,” “duré,” and “commencé,” is used to emphasize the mother's despair and her sense of helplessness. The anaphora of “et puis,” with the assonance of “ans,” allows readers to better gauge the duration during which the mother was in despair, giving readers a sense of a prolonged time.

3.2. Anadiplosis

Anadiplosis is a figure of speech, in which the last word of a proposition is repeated at the beginning of the proposition that follows ^[15]. This repetition gives an ideal concatenation.

Example 9:

“Le corps est mince... Je vois bien que tout est là. Tout est là et rien n'est encore joué, je le vois dans les yeux, tout est déjà dans les yeux. Je veux écrire ^[16].”

Here, the expression “tout est là” constitutes an anadiplosis. The word “tout” in the first “tout est là” alludes the heroine's entire possessions, in that she is alone, she has no support from her family, her older brother curses her death, her younger brother has no say, her mother favors her older brother, and her

family's financial situation is worsening. The second "tout est là" re-emphasizes the heroine's loneliness, while also explaining that she only has her body and beauty, thus forcing her to commit to a love relationship with the Chinese lover for the sake of money. She also has the desire and determination to reject the patriarchal society, as represented in the last statement, "Je veux écrire." The unique encounter inspires and motivates the heroine to write, which again highlights the theme of the novel – writing.

Example 10:

"Ça a duré tout cet âge, sept ans. Et puis enfin l'espoir a été renoncé. Il a été abandonné. Abandonnées aussi les tentatives contre l'océan ^[17]."

The anadiplosis of "abandonné" allows readers to once again empathize with the mother's despair and being in a state of numbness towards life. The first "abandonné" used in conjunction with the verb "renoncé" illustrates that the mother has no hope in life and indeed has abandoned it, due to prolonged physical and mental suffering, wherein her eldest son is in debt, her youngest son has died of illness, and the salt land is unproductive. The second "abandonné" paints a picture that even attempts against the ocean have been set aside by the mother, who emigrated to the French colony to make a fortune; the salt land was her dream, and money was her source of support; when she gave up her dream and her source of support, it amounted to renouncing existence and the meaning of life. The combination of these two types of repetition: the assonance of the verbs "renoncé" and "abandonné" as well as the anadiplosis of "abandonné" not only creates a strong rhythm in the text, but also reinforces the mother's helplessness, and thus expresses one of the themes of the novel – despair.

4. Repetition of sentences

Duras is an inventive and subversive individual, who refuses to comply to the norms of traditional novels. She enjoys structuring her narratives around her own ideas, which manifest themselves in the repetition of sentences.

Example 11:

"Que je vous dise encore, j'ai quinze ans et demi.

...

J'ai quinze ans et demi... ^[18]."

In the opening paragraphs of the novel, the author mentions "J'ai quinze ans et demi" twice. She first describes a real-life scene, and then moves on to recalling memories of the past. She emphasizes that the female protagonist was only fifteen and a half years old at the time of the river crossing; readers may be surprised by the account of a girl of that age. Before the third appearance of this sentence, the story revolves around the girl and her family.

Example 12:

"Quinze ans et demi ^[19]."

This third repetition draws readers' attention to the river-crossing scene. From page four to eight, the author recounts the protagonist's attire, focusing on her man's hat; it is through this hat that the story of her mother begins.

Example 13:

“Quinze ans et demi ^[20].”

When the sentence is repeated for the fourth time, the author begins to describe the Chinese lover. From page eight to page ten, Duras illustrates that women are born with charm and desire by depicting the stories of women around the protagonist. The lover is drawn to the young girl's allure, while the young girl relies on the Chinese lover to fulfil her desires.

Example 14:

“Quinze ans et demi ^[21].”

The meeting between the French girl and the Chinese lover took place at the fifth repetition of the phrase. However, from pages 10 to 50, Duras narrates the stories of several characters, including the two brothers, Hélène Lagonelle, and others. By narrating the stories of those who have a strong influence on the protagonist, her image is enriched, allowing readers to have a deeper understanding of her nature and the reasons for her falling in love with the Chinese lover.

Example 15:

“Quinze ans et demi ^[22].”

This last repetition serves to describe the separation of the French girl and the Chinese lover. The love relationship between them was known in the past of Sadec, which enraged her mother and later incurred public disavowal; this is one of the reasons for the separation of the protagonist with her lover.

In four of the six repetitions of “J'ai quinze ans et demi,” Duras omits the subject and verb and forms a short sentence with “quinze ans et demi,” which is a typical Durasian linguistic style that makes the repetition more explicit. The sequence in which the sentence is repeated corresponds to order in which the old lady's recollections are narrated, which helps readers understand the chronology of events. This constantly repeated sentence constitutes the thread that connects the stories of different characters. Through repetition, the fragments of memory belonging to the old lady and the young girl are connected, allowing time for readers to reflect and plod along the narrative. The repetition of sentences becomes a means of transition.

5. Conclusion

Without adhering to the norms of classic novels, Duras used new writing methods to simplify the plot and raise ambiguity among readers about the identities of the characters, in order to mirror the real world and provoke readers to reflect on life and existence. Our analysis shows that in *L'Amant*, Duras used the repetition of sonorities, words, and sentences to introduce characters and scenes, develop the plot structure, as well as present the themes. This article helps us to better understand the Durasian style and will benefit anyone who studies this work in the future.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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