

# **A Stylistic Analysis of Rape Fantasies by Margaret Atwood**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on the theory of deviation and power and turn-taking in discourse stylistics, this paper provides an analysis on the short story *Rape Fantasies* by Margaret Atwood, including the analysis of some certain sentences, turn-taking conversations between Sondra and Estelle, conceptual metaphor of “game of bridge”. Through the analysis, the paper explains the specific reference of the silence of Sondra and the relationship between “game of bridge” and the relationship among the characters, and demonstrates that women's rape fantasy is a morbid reaction of women to a male dominated society.

**Key words:** Literary stylistics, rape fantasies, deviation, power and turn-taking

## 1. Introduction:

Margaret Atwood's creative and social activities represent some of the most dynamic and combustible aspects of 20th century Canadian literary development. She was known for her poetic talent at youth, and invested more heart, passion and intellect in her fiction in the following 40 years. Like the intellectual women of her times, she embraced feminist enlightenment to consider the situation of women and their prospects. It could be argued that Atwood represents the well-educated, middle-class white woman in a rather privileged position. However, she was not satisfied with the quiet life of a book and the freedom of imagination given to her creative work. This reality is the self-reliance of Canadian literature, the establishment of Canadian identity, the powerful economic and cultural invasion of the United States to the south, women's liberation, ecological issues, and so on. She can be called a nationalist writer, a conscious feminist or an ecologist.

Rape Fantasy focuses on a very sensitive and realistic issue. The novel is narrated in Estelle's first-person monologue and uses "fantasy" as a point of reference to bridge the gap between the story and reality, leaving the reader with a wealth of room for interpretation. The novel has been widely used in high school and college classrooms, not only as an intensive reading in literature classes, but also as an important text in women's studies courses that discusses rape. The novel is important among many novels about rape. Because it is not only politically correct or offers effective strategies for preventing rape, but it raises fundamental and forward-looking questions such as how women constructed as passive and powerless, how women can gain confidence and strength in the face of rape and how women avoid becoming victims and subjects of fear.

## 2. Body

### 2.1 Deviation

In the 1930s, the linguist Mukarovsky delivered the concept of deviation. Writers often try to make their language distinctive, and only language that is beyond the usual can be attractive and reflect their own style. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the deviation in the work when analyzing a work. The sum of the deviation is the unique style of the work (Liu Shisheng, 2006: 32). In the book "Introduction to English Stylistics", Wang Zuoliang points out that conventional and deviation are in a general range, the edges of which are often blurred and crossed. For example, too much convention becomes cliché, and too much deviation becomes grotesque. The boundaries are vague. All in all, the use deviation should be based on specific contexts and with appropriateness as the standard.

“The way they’re going on about it in the magazines you’d think it was just invented, and not only that but it is something terrific, like a vaccine for cancer.”

The sentences uses simile to compare rape fantasies to the vaccine for cancer, which belongs to semantic deviation. The common denominator between vaccines to prevent cancer and rape fantasies is that they are relatively rare in daily life and exist in specific areas and scopes. They

address specific physical diseases or psychological ideas. However, the use of “terrific” reveals the magazines’ attitude toward rape fantasies. They want to use the topic to draw more attention, while standing aside to see what would happen next.

“They put it in capital letters on the front cover, and inside they have these questionnaires like the ones they used to have about whether you were a good enough wife or an endomorph or an ectomorph.”

Magazines holds the stereotypical imagery of rape and uses intriguing headlines to satisfy readers' curiosity. Margaret uses metaphors in the first paragraph of the article without any background introduction, it is a semantic deviation, which defies the normal pattern of explaining a concept at the beginning of a story. In these sentences, rape is likened to a game and can be tested and scored for amusement, whose aim is to make it more relevant to daily life. And the form of the game overwhelms the topic itself. From the magazine's point of view, it is more important for women to understand the topic of rape rather than realizing the horror of it. The semantic deviation serves as a kind of irony and reminder, allowing the readers to feel the absurdity of the current social thought from the side, and laying the groundwork for the following narrative. At the same time, it is a deviation of register. The author uses the language of the novel's narrative in combination with the idiomatic expressions of the magazine to form a new form of expression (Liu Shisheng, 2006: 32). "endomorph", "ectomorph" and "RAPE, TEN THINGS TO DO ABOUT IT" are usually used in magazines. The more vivid terms used in the questionnaire add to the irony to the magazine in the context of semantic deviation.

“She’s the oldest, she’s forty-one though you wouldn’t know it and neither does she, but I looked it up in the employees’ file. I like to guess a person’s age and then look it up to see if I’m right. I let myself have an extra pack of cigarette if I am, though I’m trying to cut down. I figure it’s harmless as long as you don’t tell. I mean, not everyone has access to that file, it’s more or less confidential. But it’s all right if I tell you, I don’t expect you’ll ever meet her. Though you never know, it’s a small world. Anyway.”

The paragraph reflects textual deviation, which is mainly characterized by the haphazardness of the narrative and the low relevance of the rest of the story. At the beginning of the paragraph, the author mentions Darlene's age and explains that her thoughts about rape fantasies are different from those of others. The disorganized narrative and psychological activity can faithfully record the trajectory of a person's thoughts. And the paragraph shows that Estelle's thinking is problematic to some extent. She has a large jump in thinking and habitually gossips about others. These views and comments are largely full of prejudice and complaints, and the words described are vicious. Although she dismisses Greta's unreliable fantasies about rape and emphasizes the disgusting and abnormal nature of rape, the episode in which she asks the rapist to help her pull out the plastic lemon reveals the limitation of her cognition.

## 2.2 Power and Turn-taking

'Speech communication is indispensable in human society. Conversation, involving at least two participants, is the activities happening everywhere and everyday or every second. Many scholars have focused on this subject for many years, but till early 1960s they got scientific researches. Previously, scholars investigated more about how people should talk and evaluate utterances. Generally speaking, most linguists tendentiously consider daily conversation as chaotic and disordered. Nevertheless, Mey Jacob maintains that the lack of a formal set of regulations for generating the set of completely and only correct utterances doesn't equal to no rules or even unruliness.' (Dong Mengmeng, 2014: 16)

The most thought-provoking and representative character relationship in the story is between Sondra and Estelle, with Estelle as the first point of view controlling the entire story, and Sondra as a less prominent supporting character in the dialogue where other people's views collide. The power relationship is closely related to the turn of phrase between the characters (Liu Shisheng, 2006: 75), and the power relationship can reflect the central idea that the author wants to emphasize. From the analysis of Power and Turn-taking theories, we can demonstrate the characters' relationship and its derived meanings in terms of topic formulation and control, length and type of the turn of phrase and discourse interruption.

Sondra: What fantasies?

Estelle: For Chrissake, I'm eating an egg sandwiches, I bid one club and Darlene passed.

.....

Sondra: You mean, like some guy jumping you in an alley or something? (She was eating her lunch. She always brings and started to chew away on it with this thoughtful expression in her eyes and I knew we might as well pack it in as far as the game was concerned.)

Estelle: (silence)

.....

Estelle: Listen, those aren't rape fantasies. I mean, you aren't getting raped, it's because.....Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to.

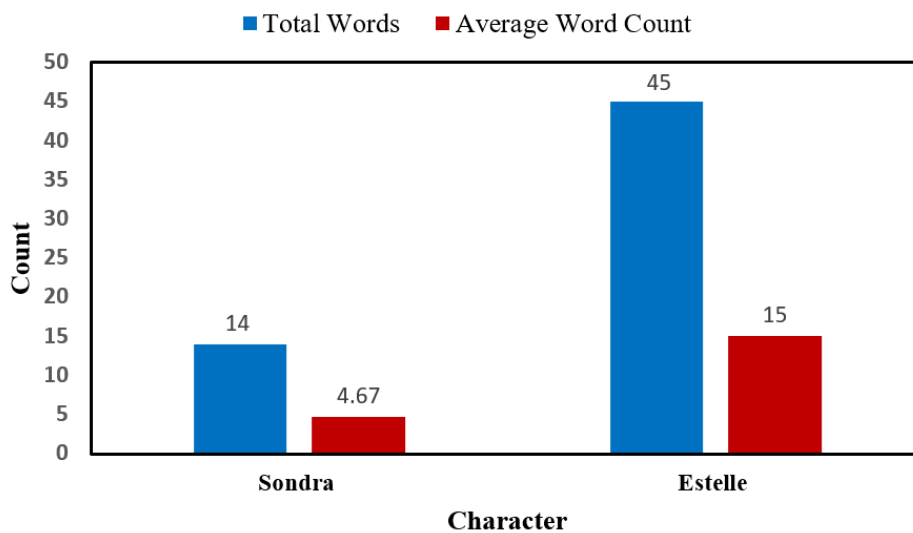
*Sondra: (She wanted to tell about hers, but she hadn't got in fast enough.)*

The three turns between Sondra and Estelle show that Estelle dominates the sender position in the dialog, and the length of speech is much longer than those of Sondra. The average length of speech per turn for Sondra is 4.67 words and 15 words per turn for Estelle as flowing in figure 1. Estelle chose to be silent in the second turn and did not give Sondra a chance to speak again in the third turn, interrupting Sondra when she wanted to make a point. Sondra was interrupted in the third turn. This interruption was not direct interruption, but in a form of selective interaction with others and ignoring Sondra. We can see table 1 for specific data.

**Table 1**

Turn-taking between Sondra and Estelle

Character	Words	Number of Turns	Average Word Count
Sondra	14	3	4.67
Estelle	45	3	15

**Figure 1: Turn-taking between Sondra and Estelle**

From the above analysis, we can know that Estelle's attitude towards Sondra is not friendly and antagonistic to some extent. Estelle blames Sondra for their team's failure in their bridge game. The reason is that Sondra does not understand that communication in the bridge game is not a traditional conversation, but a code with implications, where experienced players can use it correctly to tell their teammates their strengths and weaknesses so that they can work with each other to win the game. However, Sondra takes Estelle's words literally without decoding so that Estelle is unable to properly judge the current situation. From Estelle's point of view, that Sondra can not understand these informal but easily learned verbal exchanges affect the outcome of their card game.

The turn of speech between Estelle and Sondra is problematic, which is reflected in the bridge game, where the description of the bridge game is largely overshadowed by the follow various embedded rape fantasy, which hint at the relevance between the characters' behavior in bridge game and the characters' thoughts in the reality. For example, Estelle knows the rules of the bridge game and she rebukes Sondra for her dereliction of duty. However, we can know that Estelle's cognition of the rape fantasy is half-understood in the following context, and she unconsciously glorifies the rapist's behavior. For example, she allows the rapist to help her find the plastic lemon and open the lid. And let the rapist hands it to her so that she can attack him. The whole process is fantasized to

be gentle and controllable. In reality, rape is often violent and uncontrollable. And the victim will be physically violated and traumatized beyond repair.

Sondra's silence in the third turn has a deeper meaning. She regards rape as an assault rather than the aesthetically pleasing sexual act that her colleagues imagine. Her thoughtful expression suggests that she thinks differently from others.

At the beginning of the story, Estelle acts as a positive figure who dispels some of the misconceptions about rape for the women. On the opposite, in the turns between her and Sondra, we can find the gaps in her thoughts. It is not only the glorification of rapists as suggested above, but also her sympathy for the perpetrators. Sondra's passive silence and active silence are indicative of her views. Her attitudes moves from wanting to express herself to being unable to express herself to giving up on expressing herself. Sondra's silence and untold story may represent a different kind of silence - that of a true victim of sexual assault. Sandra's silence echoes the silence of countless women who have not publicly acknowledged being the subject of rape or sexual brutality

### **3. Conclusion**

Using the theory of Deviation and Power and Turn-taking, this paper makes a stylistic analysis of the novel "Rape Fantasy", mainly focusing on the expression related to rape fantasy and the dialogue between Estelle and Sondra. Through the analysis, readers can see the irony of the author on the incorrect rape fantasy set up by modern society and the media for the public. At the same time, Estelle controls the dominant position in the conversation with Sondra on the surface, but it also shows Sondra's disagreement with Estelle's view. It also shows that the author does not agree with Estelle's point of view. Sondra, as the silent party who speaks the least, represents the author's position. Rape fantasy is not a controllable aesthetic or compassionate sexual act, but a terrorist, violent and uncontrollable behavior.

'For Atwood, today's world is often frightful and scary, especially to those who fail to see how it is ruled by hidden and frequently indecipherable codes. To depict this in her fiction, she uses game imagery as metaphor, endowing it with symbolic potential. Although the bridge game in "Rape Fantasies" is only a paragraph in length, a miniature portrait, it clearly suggests a wider landscape of interpersonal relationships. Specifically, it points to the silence of victims of sexual assault. Until society understands this code of silence regarding rape, all women will continue to be vulnerable, just as Estelle is. If we rely on the truths presented in popular magazines, rather than those contained in women's actual stories, even those that are silent, we will never succeed in protecting ourselves.' (Workman, 2000: 10)

The author uses fantasies to explain the important social problems that are hardly discussed, leaving room for the public and readers to consider. The article criticizes the truth presented by popular magazines from the perspective of normal women, and criticize the imprisonment and misleading of women's thought in the society. As a feminist, the author hopes to actively guide more people to think in a different way. The media mislead the public not only in terms of gender,

but also in people's views on global development. The media can't decide what people think, but it can decide what people think. Popular magazines are an example. We can see the social reality that the author wants to satirize and emphasize from the variation and turn taking in this article.

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