

Reduplicative Words in the Short Story Collection “A Strand of Hair” by Thạch Lam

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Abstract— Reduplicative words are a powerful stylistic device in literary art. Each reduplicative word conveys a nuanced and vivid expression of subjective perception, reflecting the speaker's evaluation and attitude toward objects and phenomena in social life. Thạch Lam is one of the prominent writers of the *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* group and of Vietnamese literature during the 1930–1945 period. The short story collection “A Strand of Hair” (Đời Nay Publishing House, 1942) represents one of Thạch Lam’s innovative and groundbreaking explorations in literature. Comprising five short stories, Thạch Lam delves into the complexities of human emotions and the internal struggles of individuals confronting the realities of life, thereby expressing his sympathy for those grappling with their existence. In this study, based on a statistical survey of various types of reduplicative words in the collection, we provide an analysis and evaluation of the artistic effectiveness of reduplicative words in “A Strand of Hair” specifically and in Thạch Lam’s literature more broadly.

Keywords- Reduplicative words, short stories, Thạch Lam, A Strand of Hair, artistic effectiveness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reduplicative words are an effective means of creating vivid imagery in literary art. Each reduplicative word encapsulates a subtle and dynamic expression of subjective perception, reflecting the speaker's evaluation and attitude toward the objects and phenomena of social life. According to Đỗ Hữu Châu, “Every reduplicative word is like a musical note of sound, containing within it a specific ‘picture’ for the senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell...” [4; p. 54].

Thạch Lam is one of the most prominent writers of the *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* group and Vietnamese literature from the 1930–1945 period. In addition to his works in genres such as novels and essays, his short stories are considered a lasting legacy for readers and have solidified his reputation. The short story collection “A Strand of Hair” (Đời Nay Publishing House, 1942) is one of Thạch Lam’s significant literary explorations and breakthroughs. Comprising five short stories, the collection delves deeply into the complexities of human emotions and the internal conflicts individuals face when confronted with the realities of life. Through this, Thạch Lam poignantly expresses his sympathy for those struggling in the world. One of the linguistic successes in “A Strand of Hair” lies in the use of reduplicative words to enhance description.

With this in mind, this article conducts a statistical survey of different types of reduplicative words used in the collection

and provides an analysis and evaluation of their artistic effectiveness in “A Strand of Hair” in particular and in Thạch Lam’s literary works in general.

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

Surveying the short story collection “A Strand of Hair” (Đời Nay Publishing House, 1942), which consists of five stories, we identified and recorded a total of 288 reduplicative words (30 fully reduplicative words, 217 sound-based reduplicative words, and 41 rhyme-based reduplicative words). The details are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1: Reduplicative Words in the Short Story Collection “A Strand of Hair”

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Fully reduplicative	30	10.4%
Sound-based	217	75.4%
Rhyme-based	41	14.2%
Total	288	100%

The distribution of these types of reduplicative words across the five stories—“Under the Frangipani Shade”, “New Year’s Eve”, “The Shopkeeper”, “Old Love”, and “A Strand of Hair”—is as follows:

TABLE 2: Types of Reduplicative Words in the Short Stories from “A Strand of Hair”

No.	Short Story	Pages	Fully Reduplicative	Sound-based	Rhyme-based	Total	Frequency
1	Under the Frangipani Shade (Dưới bóng hoàng lan)	11	5	26	5	36	3.27
2	New Year’s Eve (Tối ba mươi)	11	5	35	6	46	4.18
3	The Shopkeeper (Cô hàng xén)	25	3	10	75	88	3.52
4	Old Love (Tình xưa)	23	11	55	15	81	3.52
5	A Strand of Hair (Sợi)	14	6	26	5	37	2.64

No.	Short Story	Pages	Fully Reduplicative	Sound-based	Rhyme-based	Total	Frequency
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Looking at the statistical data, it is evident that the short story utilizing reduplicative words most frequently is “*New Year’s Eve*” (4.18 instances per page). The story with the fewest reduplicative words is “*A Strand of Hair*” (1.94 instances per page). In terms of structure, sound-based reduplicative words appear most frequently.

The various types of reduplicative words vividly reflect the diversity of life, from impressions of nature to depictions of people, from evocative imagery and the colors of objects to the emotions and states of the characters.

2.1. Reduplicative Words Describing Nature in the Short Story Collection “A Strand of Hair”

In Thạch Lam’s “*A Strand of Hair*”, reduplicative words play a crucial role in describing nature, highlighting the author’s refined, gentle, and poetic literary style. These words are often used to portray the softness, gentleness, and liveliness of natural landscapes. For example, reduplicative words such as *faintly*, *coolly*, *brilliantly*, *vastly*, *desolately*, and *clammy* vividly and realistically depict nature, while words like *tattered*, *scattered*, and *quietly* convey human emotions through natural settings.

In the story “*Under the Frangipani Shade*”, readers encounter a light, fragrant, and cool natural scene: “A faint scent of fresh leaves lingered in the air.” The word “*faintly*” (phảng phất) is structured by repeating the initial consonant “ph,” combined with the back vowel “â” (a slightly narrow, unrounded back vowel) and ending with the consonant “t.” This word conveys a sense of subtlety and freshness. The image of the frangipani tree and the faint scent of fresh leaves evoke a cool and refreshing feeling within the character’s soul. The gentle, pure fragrance “faintly” lingering in the air brings Thanh back to cherished days of the past and distant realms. Under Thạch Lam’s pen, the shadow of the fragrant tree becomes almost like a character itself—one that brings readers a sense of lightness, purity, and tranquility.

In “*New Year’s Eve*”, the lonely and sorrowful mood of two women of the night unfolds against the backdrop of cramped city life and the streets outside: “Drizzling rain fell tattered, as though darkness everywhere had gathered into this narrow stretch of street. On the wet, clammy sidewalk, no one passed by. The desolate emptiness seemed to stretch endlessly across all the streets of Hanoi tonight.”

Thạch Lam uses three reduplicative words—“*tattered*” (toi tả), “*clammy*” (nhóp nháp), and “*vastly*” (mênh mông)—to express the sorrowful plight of women who must sell their bodies. These words are structured with repeated initial consonants: “t” (a dental consonant), “nh” (a nasal consonant), and “m” (another nasal consonant). The rhyme patterns include vowels like “o” (a narrow, back, unrounded vowel) and “ê” (a slightly narrow, front, unrounded vowel).

The imagery moves from the overarching view of empty streets down to the desolate sidewalks, where “*tattered*” (toi tả) evokes the scene of rain falling incessantly. Through Huệ’s

eyes, even the trees and streets appear silent and sorrowful under the “*clammy*” rain-soaked pavement. This desolate stillness reflects the women’s inner turmoil, stretching out “*vastly*” (mênh mông) into the unknown.

The word “*vastly*” (mênh mông) extends the feeling of emptiness, while “*everywhere*” (đâu đâu), a fully reduplicative word, creates a sense of limitless expanse. The structure of “*everywhere*” (đâu đâu) includes the repeated initial consonant “đ” and the vowel “â” (a back, slightly narrow, unrounded vowel), ending with the semi-vowel “u.” In this silence and darkness, the “*clammy*” (nhóp nháp) streets extend across the city, while the reduplicative words “*vastly*” and “*everywhere*” amplify the sense of boundlessness.

In “*A Strand of Hair*”, reduplicative words not only enrich the musicality and imagery of the prose but also allow readers to perceive the delicacy and beauty of nature through Thạch Lam’s poetic lens. This contributes to the author’s unique literary style—gentle yet profound, simple yet deeply emotional.

2.2. Reduplicative Words Describing Character Appearance in the Short Story Collection “A Strand of Hair”

Reduplicative words describing character appearance frequently appear in connection with the female characters in the stories. Examples include: *petite*, *lovely*, *gentle*, *diligent*, *quick-witted*, *graceful*, *modest*, *decent*, *playful*, and more.

Firstly, there is Nga’s beauty in “*Under the Frangipani Shade*” when she picks vegetables: “The tender green leaves, beside her small, rosy-white hands.” The cool tiles covered with moss make Thanh reminisce about Nga’s *lovely* feet as they used to tread those paths. Her small feet, speckled with sand, left trails from the pond back to the house.

The reduplicative word “*petite*” (nhỏ nhắn) is structured by repeating the initial consonant “nh” and a rhyme featuring the vowel “o” (a slightly open, rounded back vowel). This single word evokes Nga’s beauty, with her soft, rosy-white hands.

The word “*lovely*” (xinh xắn) is constructed by repeating the consonant “x,” with the rhyme formed by the vowel “i” (a close, unrounded front vowel), and ending with the consonant “nh.” This structure helps readers vividly imagine Nga’s elegance and beauty. Her *petite* rosy-white hands and *lovely* feet are gracefully depicted. Through masterful language use, Thạch Lam skillfully captures the character’s beauty with just these two reduplicative words: *petite* and *lovely*.

In “*The Small Shopkeeper*”, the word “*lovely*” (xinh xắn) not only describes Tâm’s physical beauty but also reflects her personality and life circumstances. Her beauty evokes the image of a youthful, charming girl while also expressing her vitality and optimism, even as she shoulders many responsibilities. Tâm’s *loveliness* creates a sharp contrast with her impoverished life, highlighting her struggles and sacrifices. This word also symbolizes her dreams and aspirations for a better future for her family, despite the burdens of reality dimming her radiance over time.

In “*Old Love*”, the word “*lovely*” (xinh xắn) goes beyond simply describing Lan’s appearance; it also conveys the subtlety of her soul and character. Lan’s *loveliness* evokes the

image of a youthful, gentle girl with charming and innocent traits. However, her *loveliness* also carries undertones of sadness and loneliness in love, as her affections remain unreciprocated. This word not only highlights her external beauty but also reflects the desires, dreams, and pain within the soul of a young woman in love. It underscores the fragility and vulnerability of love in the social context of the time.

Through this, Thạch Lam skillfully portrays the complexities of human emotions, allowing readers to deeply empathize with the inner struggles of his characters.

2.3. Reduplicative Words Reflecting the Characters' Emotions in the Short Story Collection "A Strand of Hair"

Compared to reduplicative words describing nature or physical appearances, those expressing characters' emotions are more prevalent. Examples include: *delighted*, *cheerful*, *exhausted*, *restless*, *anxious*, *uneasy*, *humorous*, *relieved*, and others.

2.3.1. Reduplicative Words Reflecting Positive Emotions

In "Under the Frangipani Shade", readers are enchanted by the image of Nga, the village girl, waiting for Thanh, who works in the city. During a meal, "Thanh ate with relish, feeling calm and delighted." Thanh's emotions are described with the reduplicative word "*delighted*" (*sung sướng*), which appears twice in the story. The word *sung sướng* effectively conveys Thanh's joy through its repeated consonant "s" and the rhyme "ươ" (a slightly close, back, unrounded vowel) ending with the consonant "ng."

Similarly, the word "*calm*" (*thư thái*) features the repeated consonant "th" and the rhyme vowel "ư" (a close, back, unrounded vowel). This word evokes feelings of serenity and relaxation. The combination of "*delighted*" and "*calm*" skillfully portrays the happiness and peace within the character's heart.

In "The Small Shopkeeper", readers are moved by the selflessness of a rural woman who sacrifices for both her maternal and marital families, enduring a life of hardship without moments of joy: "She felt *delighted* to see her mother taking care of her siblings with such affection. All her exhaustion seemed to dissipate. At these moments, she forgot all her worries and challenges. She felt *cheerful*, and in her heart blossomed aspirations for the well-being of her family."

The word "*delighted*" is particularly effective in expressing human emotions. With just this word, the joy in Tâm becomes vivid—her *delight* stems from seeing her siblings well-fed, warmly clothed, and attending school. This reflects her profound love for her younger siblings. Beyond "*delighted*", the word "*cheerful*" (*vui vẻ*) is also adeptly employed by Thạch Lam to depict the character's emotions.

The reduplicative word "*cheerful*" is constructed with the repeated consonant "v," the vowel "u" (a close, back, rounded vowel), and ends with the semi-vowel "i." This creates a lively tone, allowing the writer to capture the character's aspirations for her family. These aspirations define Tâm's life, yet in the final scene, when Tâm gives her younger sibling ten coins—money borrowed for her husband—and returns to her marital home, readers are deeply touched. Her *delight* and

cheerfulness intertwine with her responsibilities to both families, showcasing her profound love and care.

2.3.2. Reduplicative Words Reflecting Negative Emotions

A profound sense of regret is depicted in "New Year's Eve" when emotions overwhelm the siblings: "At this moment, the two siblings felt so utterly *isolated*."

The reduplicative word "*isolated*" (*trơ trọi*) is formed by repeating the consonant "tr" combined with the vowel "o" (a slightly close, back, unrounded vowel). This structure imbues the sentence with a somber tone, evoking deep sadness. The sense of *isolation* blends with the setting, contrasting the warmth and joy of the past with the current sorrow, disappointment, and loneliness.

In "Old Love", the reduplicative words "*restless*" (*trằn trọc*) and "*complaining*" (*phàn nàn*) vividly capture the protagonist's emotions. "*Restless*" not only describes worry and anxiety but also reflects the internal conflict faced by the character when navigating love and societal expectations. The unsettled feeling reveals the character's constant contemplation about the relationship with Lan. Conversely, "*complaining*" adds a sarcastic nuance, mocking the poverty-stricken circumstances of Mrs. Cà and her daughters. Together, these words paint a rich psychological portrait, highlighting the character's inner conflicts and desires amid societal pressures.

In "A Strand of Hair", the words "*anxious*" (*bồn chồn*) and "*uneasy*" (*bứt dứt*) powerfully convey the protagonist's complex emotions. "*Anxious*" reflects worry and anticipation, depicting the internal turmoil when facing temptation and tough decisions—particularly the moral dilemma of taking money from Bân. In contrast, "*uneasy*" expresses discomfort and frustration, illustrating the character's discontent with their choices. Together, these words craft a layered psychological image, emphasizing the struggle between conscience and temptation, and allowing readers to grasp the complexities of human emotions.

III. CONCLUSION

Reduplicative words play a significant artistic role in literature. They are crafted through a harmonious integration of various artistic elements and, in turn, enrich and clarify those elements. Creating a distinct system of reduplicative words unique to one's work is no easy feat. However, Thạch Lam's talent shines through in his nuanced and distinctive use of these words, leaving readers with a lasting impression and a unique emotional resonance.

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