

The Analysis of Shakespeare's Tragedies from the Perspective of European Tragedy Theory

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Abstract: *Deeply influenced by the European tragedy, William Shakespeare, during the Renaissance, created his unprecedented tragic plays. By analyzing the connection between the ancient European tragedies and Shakespeare's tragedies, we can clearly see the power of influence that this mythical system exerted upon the production of Shakespeare's tragedies and hence deepen the understanding of Shakespeare's tragedies.*

Keywords: *myths, tragedy, production, surface, deep*

1. Production of Shakespeare's tragedies

1.1 Development of the European Tragedy Theory

Tragedy can be classified in a broad and narrow way. The narrowly defined tragedy refers to a kind of artistic style and dramatic genre, which has a relative status with comedy. The broadly defined tragedy is a category of aesthetics. It includes realistic aesthetic, artistic aesthetic etc. Originating from the ancient Greece and developing afterwards till now, the European tragedy has a long history of more than 2000 years[1].

On the premise that the ancient Greek tragedies depicted the human being itself, and using the prototype of myths, they interpreted the myths in a new way and used them to reflect the social reality and express their own point of view to different kinds of things[2]. The ordinary way of creating was: The hero was the main character in the story. They had a noble character, but always were ruined by the upheaval of their fate. By using this way, the audience felt painful, sad and even horrible. The way of expression for tragedy had always influenced the western concept of tragedy for more than 1000 years.

The Renaissance originating from Italy in the 14th century brought about new thoughts, the thought of Christian theology met brand-new challenge. What people more concerned about was human being rather God. The theory of tragedy centered on "God" in the period of the ancient Greece and Rome gave place to the theory of tragedy centered on "human being" in this period[3][4]. The Enlightenment in the 18th century was another anti-feudal cultural movement. In the aspect of drama, the thinkers in the Enlightenment period carried out a fight against the popular classicism, and gradually founded the realistic drama in the period. It was a succession and development to the tragically realism in the Renaissance period. From the 19th and 20th centuries, human being stepped into a period of modernism and post-modernism. The development of the social civilization didn't bring about warmth for the people. On the contrary, the absurd and indifferent reality brought anguish and despair to people. The development of European tragedy theory was a process of alternation, and development between irrationalism and rationalism[5]. During the process, the theory of tragedy was enriched and developed. And it provided playwrights with deep theoretical basis.

1.2 Summary of the Production of Shakespeare's Tragedies

The period from the 14th century to the middle of the 17th century was the period of Renaissance symbolizing the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern society. "Thirsting curiosity for the classical literature and the keen interest in the activities of humanity were the two characteristics of this period." [6][7] It was a little bit late for the Renaissance to spread to Britain, but great achievements were acquired, among which the plays by William Shakespeare reached the ultimate peak and enjoyed the greatest glory.

The period when Shakespeare began his tragedy production was an alternation between the old age

and the new age. For one thing, the established feudal lords did their best to maintain the old social order, while the newly rising bourgeoisies wanted to occupy a leading social status. The sharp confrontation between the two classes resulted in the violent struggle for power and the deterioration of the ordinary people. The sharp and complicated social contradiction resulted in the turmoil and unease of the society. Facing this kind of social situation, Shakespeare created his critical and gloomy "great tragedies". [8]Shakespeare's tragedies were ones that exposing the darkness, dissecting the human nature, and manifesting the power of justice and truth. The contents of Shakespeare's tragedies were various, relating to all aspects of social life, among which the earliest one to gain success was *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare's production of tragedy gained great achievements. From the aspects of theme, scenario, character and language etc, his works of tragedies deeply reflected the social life of the Renaissance Britain. He exposed and criticized the dark society, completely dissecting human nature. Shakespeare often borrowed themes from both home and abroad, like the story of the ancient Greek and Roman myths, the chronicles of Britain and so on. The characters in his tragedies often succeeded from those in the ancient Greek and Roman myths. They were often closely related and more based on reality and time compared with the original myths story. It was a direct and true reaction to the social life of Shakespeare's time.

2. Surface analysis of the influence

2.1 Thematic Aspect

Aristotle once defined the tragedy as follows: "Tragedy was an imitation of a serious, complete and long action;... bringing about compassion and fear to edify this kind of feeling." Aristotle's definition reflected a basic theme in ancient Greek tragedies—"tragedy of hero" composed of the confrontation between human being and their fate. This kind of tragedy usually presented that the powerful and inevitable power of fate defeated the "noble hero" as an individual. In ancient Greek myths, Oedipus was supposed to be the king for finding out the answer to Sphinx. He had to leave his family for avoiding the oracle of killing his father and marrying his mother, but finally the oracle came true. Facing the cruel reality, Oedipus stabbed his eyes and banished himself to look for penance. The inscription in the fane of Apollo "To Know Yourself" had a close relationship with Oedipus. He could guess the riddle of Sphinx but could not guess the riddle of his own fate.

In the story of ancient Greek and Roman myths, both Gods and heroes had a strong spirit of revolting against the pressure and the power. Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele. From the very beginning, he was persecuted by Hera. Later, he fought for a long time against Apollo. Dionysus fought against all kinds of persecutions. He wandered without any stop, taught people to cultivate grapes and make wine and spread his own thought. The primogenitor of human being Prometheus taught people to build houses and cure diseases. He stole the fire of heaven at the risk of his own life. In order to force him to surrender, Zeus tied him to the rock on the Caucasus Mountain and tortured him every day. But Prometheus never gave in to Zeus and finally was saved. Prometheus' spirit of revolting against the authority was both a kind of praise and encouragement. The returning Odysseus after the Trojan war was persecuted for ten years for offending Poseidon, God of sea. During the ten years, with his own strong perseverance, wisdom and bravery, Odysseus never gave up, fought with all kinds of difficulties and finally returned home. Shakespeare's plays also were full of characters with spirit of rebellion. These characters fought strongly against all kinds of pressures and authorities either for pursuing their own love or for their own dreams. Shakespeare's tragedies, as mentioned above, demonstrated the revolt against the authority for love or dream in a direct or positive way.

2.2 Aspects of Structure and Plot

The Gods in the ancient Greek and Roman myths were in the heaven. They were immortal and had unprecedented wisdom and supernatural feat. But they shared the same thoughts and feelings with human being and often appeared in various kinds of men's activities. The Trojan war was actually a war of retaliation resulting from the kidnapping of Queen Helen by the prince of Paris. However, the Gods took part in the human war. The war was covered with secret and supernatural atmosphere. Both the warring sides were supported and protected by the Gods on their side. The Gods not only protected their own combatants but also directly engaged in the war. Finally, the side of Troy protected by Poseidon, God of sea, was defeated. Odysseus, on behalf of the army of Greece, was tormented by

Poseidon on his way home. No matter the Three Sirens or the lotus that could make people forget worries, all these can be seen as the Poseidon's retaliation on Odysseus. Here, secret or supernatural power played an unprecedented role. Apparently, Shakespeare was inspired by this. In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, in order to help the two lovers, friar Laurence made Juliet drink the medicine of mimic death. However it was the secret medicine of mimic death that played an irreplaceable role in the development of the whole story. The tragedy was about to take place.

The Prince of Denmark Hamlet was very sad back home when he saw the misfortune of his family. But he didn't realize that it was a conspiracy. The turning point of the story happened after his father's ghost appeared. The ghost not only told the prince everything, but also commanded him to revenge for himself. The whole story was in the hands of the old king's ghost. He didn't take part in any practical action, but controlled everything. Macbeth, the General of Scotland, returned from war. Three witches predicted that he would become the king. Instigated by his ambition, Macbeth killed the visiting king and climbed up to the throne. Also he killed his own companion Banquo for covering the murder. In the story the three witches' secret prediction was full of temptation for Macbeth. He firmly chose the road of killing the king and grasping the power. The prediction played the role of revealing the evil in the actual world. Since Macbeth came to the throne, he didn't live a peaceful life any more: sometimes the three witches' prediction rang, sometimes Banquo's ghost appeared in front of him.[9] Macbeth was exhausted and died in the battlefield. Shakespeare's application of the supernatural power in the plays made great achievements and deepened the tragedy of his plays.

3. Deep Analysis of the Influence

3.1 Interpretation of the Influence from the Viewpoint of Ethics

Ethics can be understood as a kind of tension of human nature. It is the objective revealing of ethic tendency of human being[10]. The ancient Greek ethics was predominantly manifested as the full acknowledgement and maximum tolerance for various kinds of human natural needs. In ancient Greek myths, Zeus' lechery, Hera's jealousy, Agamemnon's arbitrariness and Achilles' anger etc, stood for various aspects of human nature. In the free ethic environment, the Gods in ancient Greek myths fully exerted and enjoyed the human nature. Pyramus and Thisbe were a couple of lovers. Their parents strongly opposed their love. But they still tirelessly and secretly dated until the accident happened, they died for each other almost at the same time. Just like the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the love tragedy between Romeo and Juliet provided people with striking power. The family feud of long standing resulted that the two lovers could not stay together. They had to get married with the help of friar Laurence. The pair of lovers pursued their own free love, free and happy life. When the two lovers were to be separated, both of them buried themselves in the love tomb. "The text of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Oxford copy of the First Folio was almost thumbed to pieces by eager students of the 17th century." Their tragedy originated from the severe confrontation between the family feud of long standing and the personal love. In the play Shakespeare strongly condemned the family feud of long standing that resulted in their love tragedy and affirmed that the young people had the right to pursue their own love. All these manifested the humanist Shakespeare's respect for human nature. In the end of the two stories, the parents of the two couples of lovers realized their own faults. They reached out their own hands and asked for the opposite family's pardon and forgiveness. Both Romeo's parents and Juliet's parents took each other as their relatives. The parents of both Pyramus and Thisbe were also much moved and sad. They buried their children in one sepulchre and let the two lovers be together forever. The light of human nature once again penetrated the barrier of family feud of long standing, giving off bright light.

3.2 Interpretation from the Viewpoint of Culturology

The rising and flourishing of culturology were not accidental. On the contrary, it was a result in a special historical condition. From the viewpoint of the culture itself, culture became a kind of power and gradually became one of the important factors in the development of the society. Culturology studied the origin, evolution and transmission of cultural phenomenon. Its core study was human being, including the spirit, value, knowledge and feeling of human being.

Religion is part of culture or in other words one of the most important parts. The core of the culture is spirit. Religion mainly belongs to the layer of spiritual culture and the perception of value provided by religion had a direct influence upon people's perception of life. In some countries or regions in the

world, the religious culture was the mainstream culture, having an immeasurable effect on the countries and the regions. So, the religious culture was a most important research object for the study of culturology.

In the transition of the modern western society, as a kind of human spirit, religion made people dedicated, excited and brave in face of sacrifice, therefore accelerated the ripening of the spirit of capitalism and the formation of the modern Europe. Zuo Yan thought: "Protestant was just the deification of the human being by the humanization of Christianity. It restored people's dignity and glory in front of God, and the value and meaning in this earthly world, making the existence and all the activities of human being sacred." [11]The new religion made people free from the bondage of the old religion and become a true and free man. The liberation of man, undoubtedly, was the prior condition of the liberation of society. The ancient Greek and Roman myths were closely related to the religion. It not only provided the later western religion with lots of original materials, but also manifested its extremely important role in the process of development.

4. Conclusion

From the very beginning of its geniture, tragedy was paid much attention by the people. The tragedies in the ancient Greek and Roman periods were closely related to the religious rituals. When the imaginative myths were born, both of them were organically fused together. The myths entered the subject of the tragedy but given a new interpretation, becoming the new instrument of reflecting the social life and people's feelings. In the ancient Greek and Roman myths the Gods represented by Zeus became the prototype of the works of tragedy and this facilitated the emergence of the climax of tragedy creation. "The Renaissance was the second stick to inherit the ancient Greek and Roman cultures for the Europeans. In the aspect of culture, it was both a kind of return and a kind of transcendence. What it returned was its spirit and what it transcended was its formation and style."

The greatest form of arts in this period was play, among which Shakespeare's tragedies reached the peak. Shakespeare did not accidentally achieve his spectacular achievements. The people in this period were full of desire and curiosity for the classical literatures and passion and interest for the humanistic activities. In the ancient Greek and Roman myths they found "the ideas of universal love, respect to human beings and approval of man's power, ability and knowledge. In short, man became the center of the world instead of God as upheld in the Middle Ages."

The replacing of God by human being meant that the religious asceticism was criticized and the pursuit of one's own freedom, happiness, treasure and love was approved. The humanists' pursuit was reflected in Shakespeare's love tragedies. A pair of young lovers could not get married because of the family feud of long standing. They rose up to revolt against the social bondage. Although the end-result of the story was tragical, it greatly influenced the following young men's pursuit of free love. "The text of 'Romeo and Juliet' in the Oxford copy of the First Folio was almost thumbed to pieces by eager students of the 17thcentury." [12]

Humanists' desire and pursuit of his time were also reflected in Shakespeare's evil tragedies. The schemer Iago's jealousy of the love between Othello and his wife could be seen as a kind of oppression against the free love. He was like a despot and could not put up with the existence of free love. Under his provocation, the male character stepped into a way of bigotry in pursuing his own love. The tragedy inevitably took place. When people were sighing for the tragical love story between the male and female characters with all sorts of feelings, they deepened their hatred for the despot and their desire for the sweet love. Macbeth and Claudius who killed the king and climbed up to the throne carried out their own bloody ruling. They took every possible killing step to maintain their own power. The two old kings' judicious rules were gone, followed by the oppression against the freedom and democracy. The oppression eventually resulted in the revolt. Banquo's son killed the despot Macbeth in the fighting while the prince of Denmark also carried out a series of revenge actions against his uncle Claudius. No matter the evil tragedies or the love tragedies, the desire and pursuit for the freedom and love filled in Shakespeare's works. Although these desires and pursuits were largely shown before people in form of tragedy, it was because of these "sadness" that people more desired and cherished the free love and life.

As a humanist, Shakespeare was much familiar with the story of the ancient Greek and Roman myths. Borrowing these myths in his production, he expressed his own time in his own formation and style. And because of this, his tragedies achieved huge success and he himself became one of the greatest writers in the history of the world literature.

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