

The Aesthetics of Tragedy in the Conflict of Romeo and Juliet: Romance and Ethics

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This paper attempts to interpret the famous play by William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, through the lens of aesthetics of tragedy. Most of the predecessors who researched this play focused on investigating from the perspectives of social background, humanism and comparative analysis, while the author emphasizes the artistic value of the play and attempts to elaborate from the perspective that transcends rationality, logic, and utilitarianism based on the experience of aesthetics.

Keywords: *Romeo and Juliet*, aesthetics of tragedy, Shakespeare

Introduction

For centuries, different schools had their own theories and comments when encountering ethical problems in artistic beauty. Some, such as the romanticists, aesthetes, Croceans and expressionists, insisted on the intrinsic value and aesthetic independence, affirmed the subjectivity of beauty, and therefore proposed that art should be made for the sake of art. While others held a different opinion that art, as a servant to ethics, is dependent on life and ethics. When ethics and art are caught in a conflict, tragedies are needed to provide an argument, otherwise, this debate will never end (Zhu, 1983, p. 4). That being said, tragedies, as a unique example of art, often contain plot conflicts caused by opposite parties. *Romeo and Juliet*, written in 1594, although excluded from the Four Great Tragedies by Shakespeare, is more well-known and considered the greatest and most typical tragedy of love (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 29). The plot in a play, once generated in the mind, produces a visualized sense of beauty with the help of concepts and consciousness. In most cases, this kind of beauty is derived from the conflicts and convergence in tragedies, which brings both visual and psychological pleasure to readers and the audience.

Conflicts of Characterization

The play gives a clear account of the long-standing feud between the two families and the non-stop disputes between them. The beginning of the first act depicts the dueling scene, in which the shield and the sword metaphorically describe the relationship between the two families, bringing the audience into unconscious

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“suffering”. Subsequently, Romeo, a melancholic and withered captive of so-called love, entered the stage, moaning morbidly. It is not difficult to see that even melancholy gives out a sense of pleasure in the eyes of romanticists. This melancholy endows them with a sense of superiority and nobleness, which, in their opinions, shades mysterious lights on the dark side. Therefore, they often worship melancholy. Whereas in the eyes of aesthetes, melancholy is a matter of psychology. Zhu Guangqian pointed out: “Melancholy itself is a consequence of a man being prevented or held back from his desires. So it is often accompanied by an undertone of misery” (Zhu, 1983, p.). If melancholy disappears from the poem of the famously disgruntled Petrarch, Spencer, and Keats, reading their poem would be like appreciating monochrome pictures, losing their elegant demeanor. As melancholy is a sentiment, the Russian writer Chekhov once said: “For me, sorrow is the special feeling I get when I observe the true beauty alone” (Yermilov, 1985, p. 179). One simply cannot deny that the beauty in this melancholy fits the saying by Emile Antoine Bourdelle that beauty is diffused in the gentle breezes filled with sorrow and melancholy (Bourdelle, 1990, p. 94).

With the entrance of the heroine, Juliet, came the conflict between romance and ethics. Romeo fell instantly and truly in love with Juliet, the daughter of his rival family, at a ball. This psychological conflict was like when the roaring flood clashed with a leaky dam, where the flow was steady yet raging. Juliet was frustrated by Romeo’s surname, and Romeo knew perfectly well the unremovable feud between the two families. But eventually, the incitement of love beat reason, Romeo risked being killed by his foe and snuck into Juliet’s back garden. The two told each other their hearts and vowed their love. The warm summer wind, the sweet buds, and the blushing cheeks of the lovers under the moon made love a winner in this game. Still, the hesitation and repetition in their conversation were palpable, suggesting the internal struggle of the two in this conflict of ethics. It was precisely because of this conflict of ethics, the rendez-vous scene was enriched and made superior to the simply pretentious depiction of love.

Conflict of Storyline

Unfortunately, the story did not have a fairytale ending. Their pledge to each other in the church did not grant them a happy-ever-after, but a dramatic twist. On their way back from the church, Romeo accidentally stabbed and killed Juliet’s cousin in a row, and was unfortunately sentenced to exile. This made Juliet, as well as the readers, heartbroken and desperate. We cannot help but draw a conclusion from Romeo’s dilemma that characters in tragedies are victims of their fate. From a certain perspective, we see that as the nature of tragedies. As the storyline progresses, the conflict of ethics becomes the major conflict, and this reversing change brings calamity to the characters, provoking readers’ compassion and sympathy. This often stimulates the spiritual pleasure that readers obtain from tragedies. A reversal in a tragedy brings readers deeper into it. We will turn away from the miserable scenes, but desperately seek relief from resolutions. In the meantime, it should be noted that the compassion mentioned here is aesthetic compassion, instead of moral compassion. According to Tragedy Psychology, “moral compassion is inseparable from the spirituality, past experience, and present situation of the subject, as it is always accompanied by calculating gains and losses, searching for ends and means, and various other practical considerations” (Zhu, 1983, pp. 57-58). Comparatively speaking, our compassion when reading a tragedy is generally aesthetical. We do not try to turn back the tide by telling Romeo not to stab this man standing in front of him to avoid the fate of exile.

Resonance for Tragic Ending

Fate did not stop teasing Romeo even after he made the compromise to leave the city. At this point, the conflict of the family was pushed to the teeth of the storm. Juliet's father made a decision to marry her to someone else. The desperate heroine decided to take the priest's advice to fake her death by drinking poison. However, her fake death dramatically led to Romeo's death. The two yielded to the test to their love and the conflict of ethics and chose to give up their lives. Unable to change the status quo, they seemed only too small in the family feud and had to uphold family interests. But at the same time, they were in love with and vowed never to part with each other. The seed of love grew so fast that it became a gaint tree that cannot be unrooted. The magnitude of the conflict had cornered them. Therefore, the death of Juliet was like the last straw for Romeo. Death at this point was more like a relief and a helpless attempt to break free.

In terms of pleasure from tragedies, readers do get satisfaction from misery, which is exactly why we all love tragedy. Some would see this pleasure as malicious, while others think it is the nature of human compassion (Zhu, 1983, p. 54). I believe that tragedies move people because it resonates with their internal feelings. When we see a tragedy, we naturally compare it to reality, during which we tend to seek emotions that are connected to ourselves for comfort and understanding, and even spiritual redemption. Meanwhile, a great deal of potentially repressed emotions are also sprung out, and negative emotions are offered a way to let off. In addition, it is because it resonates with the soul that a long-standing tragedy is remembered. This enduring resonance earns people's recognition and convinces them even more. In terms of the psychology of escape, we are often happy to accept ideas that are consistent with our own and reject those that are not. This is probably derived from the confidence that each one of us is born with.

Conclusion

Although tragedies usually bring tears and bitterness, people cannot get enough of them. The charm of Shakespeare's tragedies lies in their aesthetic features of the characterizations structured around human nature and the emotional turmoil deep within, as well as the profound resonance between dramatic conflicts and tragic endings. In addition, the artistically unobtrusive emergence of tragic atmosphere and minor characters makes the story even more abundant and vibrant, eventually leaving the readers lastingly awestruck.

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