

Exploring the Tragic Aesthetics in *Hamlet* and the Differences with Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Views

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Abstract: Tragedy, as an important form of human art, transcends time and space with its profound emotions and noble spiritual content, becoming a carrier of cultural resonance around the world. In different cultural backgrounds, the aesthetics of tragedy presents a variety of styles. These differences are reflected not only in aesthetic orientation but also in expressive techniques and value pursuits. *Hamlet*, as a distinguished representative of Western tragedy, constructs a unique and magnificent tragic tableau through its deep psychological analysis, complex character development, and intense conflict. The complexity and contradiction of human nature are vividly displayed in this work. In contrast, traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts place more emphasis on harmony, balance, and inner beauty. This aesthetic orientation emphasizes the moderation of emotions and moral education, pursuing a restrained and implicit beauty. In traditional Chinese tragedies, characters are often more reserved and implicit, with more controlled and moderate emotional expression. Comparing the tragic aesthetics in *Hamlet* with traditional Chinese aesthetic views reveals significant differences in several aspects. This comparison helps us understand more deeply the art of tragedy under different cultural backgrounds, recognize the complexity and diversity of human nature, and profoundly appreciate the fragility and preciousness of life.

Keywords: *Hamlet*; Traditional Chinese; Aesthetic Views.

1. Overview of Tragic Aesthetics in *Hamlet*

The ghost of the King of Denmark tells his son Hamlet to avenge his murder by killing the new king, Hamlet's uncle. Hamlet feigns madness, contemplates life and death, and seeks revenge. His uncle, fearing for his life, also devises plots to kill Hamlet. The play ends with a duel, during which the King, Queen, Hamlet's opponent and Hamlet himself are all killed.

1.1. Character Development

In Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*, the art of character development reaches its peak, especially with Prince Hamlet, who deeply reveals the multifaceted and complex nature of humanity. Hamlet is not simply a hero or a villain but a complex character filled with internal contradictions and struggles. His personality is like a complex maze, fascinating and perplexing. Prince Hamlet carries lofty humanistic ideals, deeply contemplating the dignity, value, and justice of humanity. However, these ideals are shattered by harsh reality, forcing him to confront his family's bloody vendettas and the corruption of the state^[1-2]. The flames of revenge burn within him, yet they conflict violently with his humanistic principles, plunging him into profound pain and struggle. This complexity and contradiction make Hamlet a character full of tragic color, providing audiences with deep reflection and enlightenment while feeling his pain and helplessness.

1.2. Plot Construction

In terms of plot construction, *Hamlet* is undoubtedly a model of excellence. Shakespeare skillfully accumulates the emotional tension of the entire play through a series of carefully designed plots and conflicts, pushing it to an irresistible climax. Each scene and dialogue is full of suspense and twists, like puzzles waiting for the audience to solve, maintaining a tense and expectant mood throughout.

Moreover, Shakespeare adeptly uses classical dramatic techniques such as reversal and discovery, making the plot development more dramatic and captivating. These reversals and discoveries are closely linked to the characters' internal conflicts and external clashes, driving the story forward. They not only surprise the audience with the unpredictable plot but also provoke deep contemplation on human nature and fate. This carefully constructed plot not only greatly enhances the story's appeal and entertainment but also significantly amplifies the tragic effect.

2. Overview of Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Views

2.1. Beauty of Harmony

Traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, emphasize the beauty of harmony. This harmony is not a simple balance or compromise but a deep, comprehensive pursuit of aesthetics. It manifests in the relationship between humans and nature, society, and individuals, forming the rich content of traditional Chinese aesthetic views. In the relationship with nature, traditional Chinese culture pursues the supreme realm of "unity of man and nature", advocating for harmonious coexistence with nature, respecting, following, and protecting it. Under this aesthetic influence, ancient Chinese artists often expressed their reverence and love for nature through landscape paintings and garden art, showing an ideal state of harmony between humans and nature. In societal relationships, traditional Chinese aesthetics also emphasize harmony. Family unity and social harmony are seen as the foundation of societal stability and personal happiness. Therefore, traditional Chinese culture advocates the value of harmony, emphasizing mutual respect, love, and assistance among people, creating a unique social custom of the Chinese nation.

2.2. Beauty of Restraint

The beauty of restraint in traditional Chinese aesthetic views emphasizes the principle of unsaid profundity, where rich implications and profound contexts are embedded in simple and implicit expressions. In literature, this beauty is often achieved through metaphors, symbols, and other rhetorical devices. Authors use these techniques to subtly blend complex emotions and deep thoughts into their writings. Readers need to carefully interpret and appreciate the unsaid meanings to grasp the rich content of the works^[3]. This reading experience not only exercises the readers' thinking but also invisibly enhances the aesthetic value of literary works. In painting, the beauty of restraint is mainly reflected in the use of blank spaces and the creation of ambiance. Artists skillfully arrange compositions and use brush and ink to leave appropriate blank spaces, providing infinite space for imagination. These blanks become an important part of the visual experience, guiding viewers to explore the profound implications beyond the painting, where simplicity reveals rich emotions and deep meanings.

2.3. Moral Education

Fundamentally, the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese culture have always underscored the intrinsic link between art and the realms of politics and morality. In the annals of Chinese history, art transcended mere aesthetic enjoyment, assuming a pivotal role in the moral enlightenment and the promotion of societal harmony. Through various mediums such as literature, painting, sculpture, and theater, art became a key conduit for disseminating the virtues of Confucian ethics, including loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and integrity. Literary figures extolled models of these virtues, weaving Confucian ideals like benevolence, righteousness, decorum, wisdom, and sincerity into the societal fabric, capturing the imagination of audiences and gently molding societal values and norms. This paradigm, mirrored across different art forms, imbued ancient Chinese art with not only aesthetic allure but also significant social and educational value, marking art as a cornerstone of politics and moral teaching.

Table 1. Moral Education Content and Examples in Different Art Forms

Form of art	Moral education content	Examples
Literature	Depictions of loyal officials, filial sons, chaste women, and righteous individuals	Stories such as <i>The Filial Piety</i> and <i>The Twenty-four Examples of Filial Piety</i>
	Promotion of Confucian ethical and moral concepts	Quotations and interpretations from classic texts such as <i>The Analects</i> , <i>The Great Learning</i> , and <i>The Doctrine of the Mean</i>
Painting	Themes with moral implications involving historical figures and mythological stories	Paintings like <i>The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea</i> and <i>Zhong Kui Catching Ghosts</i>
	Using landscapes, flowers, and birds among other natural sceneries as mediums to express Confucian moral ideas	Implications in landscape paintings like "The benevolent enjoy mountains, the wise enjoy waters"
Sculpture	Sculptures of mythological legends and historical figures	Sculptures of loyal and courageous figures such as Guan Yu and Yue Fei
	Moral education elements in temple and palace architecture sculptures	Images of Bodhisattvas and Arhats in Buddhist temples, and deities in Taoist temples and palaces

3. Differences Between the Tragic Aesthetics in *Hamlet* and Traditional Chinese Aesthetic Views

3.1. Tragic Endings and Aesthetic Effects

Hamlet, as an outstanding representation of Western tragedy, culminates in deep sorrow and destruction, enveloping the plot from its unfolding to its final curtain with an atmosphere of intense pain and devastation. This tragedy's sense of sublimity and heroic grandeur not only emotionally shocks the audience but also resonates deeply on a spiritual level, celebrating the eternal victory of the human spirit through the portrayal of individual misfortune and resistance. In contrast, traditional Chinese aesthetics in tragedy often emphasize moral admonition to abandon evil and promote good. This aesthetic orientation is reflected in the plot's design and pervades the entire tragic aesthetic effect. Traditional Chinese tragedies do not seek excessive emotional catharsis or intense conflict but focus on showcasing characters' inner worlds and moral choices through peaceful means. The aim is to educate people to be content and face

life's misfortunes with a calm attitude, offering an aesthetic experience that is both a pleasure of tragic art and an enlightenment and purification of human nature.

3.2. Character Development and Heroism

Character development and heroism are two core elements of tragic art, each displaying unique characteristics across different cultural backgrounds, as shown in Table 2. *Hamlet*, a quintessential Western tragedy, vividly embodies the spirit of heroism through the deep character development of its protagonist, Hamlet. He is not only a prince of distinguished birth but also a complex character who bravely faces familial vendettas, love entanglements, and self-exploration. Despite heading towards a tragic end, he never regrets his actions, embodying a steadfast, forward-moving spirit of heroism common in Western tragedies, celebrating courage, resilience, and sacrifice^[5]. However, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, character development focuses more on inner qualities and moral cultivation. Unlike the overt heroism in Western tragedies, characters in Chinese tragedies are more reserved and implicit, valuing inner peace and self-improvement over external grandeur. This aesthetic orientation, deeply rooted in

traditional Chinese culture, emphasizes the enhancement of inner cultivation and moral quality as the true value of life,

marking a significant difference from Western tragedies in terms of character development and heroism.

Table 2. Differences in Character Development and Heroism

	Hamlet (a representative of Western tragedy)	Tragedy under traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts
Character development	Complex, multifaceted character personalities	Reserved, implicit character personalities
	Profound psychological analysis and internal conflicts	Emphasis on inner qualities and moral cultivation
	Interweaving of the hero's identity with family and social backgrounds	Commoner, everyday character settings
Heroism	Distinct spirit of heroic sacrifice	Greater focus on inner resilience and moral strength
	Courage in facing adversities, pursuing justice and revenge	Calm acceptance of misfortune, emphasis on moral education
	Strong initiative, unflinching even in the face of death	Influencing others through inner cultivation and virtues
	Intense conflict between external actions and inner emotions	Harmony between inner feelings and external actions

3.3. Aesthetic Style and Emotional Expression

In *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, the pursuit of sublimity is achieved through the embodiment of heroic ideals, which permeates the narrative, character arcs, as well as the emotional and linguistic expression within the play. This quest for sublimity enables the audience to transition from initial feelings of pity and empathy to a profound contemplation of human nature and destiny, culminating in a form of spiritual catharsis. The depth and immediacy of these emotional experiences, together with the vivid and poetic use of language, create the distinctive aesthetic allure of Western tragedy. On the contrary, traditional Chinese tragedy treasures the aesthetic of restraint. This approach prioritizes controlled and balanced emotional expression, adopting a composed demeanor even amidst the portrayal of grief and adversity, striving for a beauty that is poignant yet free from overt distress. In such tragedies, the emotional articulation of characters is subtly nuanced and understated, shying away from the extravagance of overt emotional displays, and instead, emphasizes the conveyance of profound sentiments through refined psychological depiction and symbolic gestures. This understated manner of emotional conveyance is a reflection of the Chinese valorization of moderation, epitomizing the enduring cultural values of "harmony" and "balance" within the fabric of traditional Chinese ethos.

4. Conclusion

Exploring the nuances between the tragic beauty in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the aesthetic values rooted in traditional Chinese culture transcends a mere comparison of artistic expression; it signifies an in-depth cultural dialogue between the spiritual ethos of two distinct traditions. Western tragedies, with "Hamlet" as a prime example, celebrate the sublimity found within conflict and the human psyche's

depths, heralding the splendor of the human condition through narratives of heroic defiance and sacrifice. In contrast, the aesthetic philosophy of traditional Chinese art treasures the tranquil allure of balance, confronting the unpredictabilities of life with a serene disposition and underscoring the importance of moral teachings and the subtleness of emotional expression. This juxtaposition does not imply a hierarchy but rather illuminates the rich tapestry of cultural narratives, each with its own historical, philosophical, and aesthetic legacies. Delving into and juxtaposing these perspectives not only enriches our grasp of tragedy's complex nature but also cultivates a profound respect for the diverse cultural landscape. In the era of globalization, recognizing the unique tragic aesthetics from varied cultural backgrounds with an open mind is pivotal, fostering dynamic exchanges between distinct artistic traditions.

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