

A Comparison of Male Characters in "The Great Gatsby" and "Farewell My Concubine" from the Perspective of Gender Poetics

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Abstract: "The Great Gatsby" by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, an American male writer of the early 20th century and "Farewell My Concubine" by Li Bihua, a female Hong Kong writer of the mid-to-late 20th century are two classical works in literary research. This dissertation analyses and contrasts the two novels' male characters from the standpoint of gender poetics. Our analysis demonstrates that male and female writers have the same perspectives on male characters when researching the objective assessment and warm caring of men displayed in their works.

1. Introduction

The birth of "gender poetics" has given feminist literary criticism a new direction. Gender poetics is a subfield of value theory and existential theory in literature and art that analyzes and examines gender factors in literature and art at the poetic level, studies the complexity of gender roles of authors, works, and recipients, explores the intersection and contradiction between gender roles and identities, which are formed by gender, race, class, time, economy, technology, and education, discovers the special spiritual underpinnings and aesthetic expressions of literature for both genders, and tries to explain the reasons for their creation, highlighting the value of "gender" and gender equality in literature.^[1] Our dissertation compares and contrasts the male characters in the two novels using the theory of "gender poetics" in order to care for men and repair male images. When we explore the causes, it also prompts us to consider the same male viewpoints as the two authors.

2. The portrayal of male characters in the two novels as well as the perspective and concern for male dilemmas

2.1 Shaping and Restoring Dictatorial and Dominant Male Characters

Tom Buchanan, in "The Great Gatsby", is a wealthy man of New York's upper-class society. Compared to the protagonist's white-knuckle start, he is a lucky man by nature. Tom had already indulged in the wine and light of New York when the protagonist named Gatsby, fought for his aspirations. In the novel, he stands in for the financially corrupted generation. He becomes haughty, decadent, and despotic because of his addiction to extravagance. On top of that, he is intensely racist,

chauvinistic, selfish, and irresponsible, yet he does not allow anyone to disobey him. He broke his mistress Myrtle's nose for calling his wife Daisy by her first name as an affront to his authority, and he lampooned openly in front of his wife Daisy and Gatsby as well as other guests, saying some rude words like: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out. Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white people."^[2] His language is full of provocation and racism. Despite having a mistress behind his wife's back, he willfully ruined the love between his wife and Gatsby and then "solemnly" rebuked Daisy's infidelity, which is extremely hypocritical, shameless, and domineering. After Daisy accidentally killed his mistress Myrtle, Tom cunningly imputed it to Gatsby, which led to Gatsby's death. However, this seemingly hateful man has a warm and charming side. Despite his irritability, Tom possesses a cool brain, thoughtful thinking, a powerful physique, and a strong desire to protect his family. For instance, facing Daisy's treachery, he did not merely detest her, instead, he attempted to mend their marriage by recalling some pleasant moments. When Daisy caused a car accident that kills Myrtle, Tom protected her by diverting Myrtle's husband's wrath. In contrast to Gatsby's inability to comfort Daisy, Tom appears to be the ideal choice as Daisy's husband in that era. Simultaneously, the author eloquently depicts the hardships and obligations of men through the character "Tom Buchanan."

Yuan Shiqing, an aristocrat in "Farewell My Concubine" is from old upper-class society in China. He possesses the grace of aristocratic literati, and is extremely knowledgeable in Beijing opera. Additionally, he enjoys being friends with Beijing opera performers and even developing some homosexual relationships with them. He is a money-spinner and a pleasure-seeker. In order to get close to Cheng Dieyi, he threw away thousands of dollars and then gave away an antique sword that he had treasured for years. His affections for Cheng are not sincere, but a lustful obsession and playfulness based on materialism. In addition, his actions reflect his domineering and overbearing nature. For instance, Cheng Dieyi was heartbroken after hearing that Duan Xiaolou, his secret crush, was about to get married to Juxian, a prostitute. Yuan took advantage of Cheng's hopelessness and then lured Cheng to his mansion. Despite Cheng's resistance, Yuan Shiqing deliberately used his precious sword to "cut the front clothes of Cheng". After that, "taking advantage of Cheng's weakness, Yuan pounced on him, grabbed his hands, and held him up to control him to have sex on the table..."^[3] We may infer from these words that Yuan compelled Cheng Dieyi to engage in gay sexuality without taking Cheng's consent into account at all. Instead, he just used his own strength and authority to force Cheng Dieyi to give in. Yuan's behavior as a homosexual rapist is crude and barbaric. What's more, Yuan Shiqing never demonstrates any compassion for those who are of inferior class. He just abuses and takes advantage of people, even killing them for no apparent reason. But Yuan is also not a wholly evil person. His life is exquisite, romantic, generous, and never stings with money. He gently directed Duan Xiaolou's performance on stage and also accompanied Cheng Dieyi, who was lost and sentimental, to play the opera together. His obsession with the culture of Beijing opera could be described as Cheng's half confidant—something that even Cheng's buddy Duan Xiaolou could not hope to match. It is also a restoration of this brutal male figure by our female writer, which makes people feel better about him and shows the reader that these men also have a charming and warm side.

2.2 Shaping and Restoring Infatuated and Childish Male Characters

Even though the main character Jay Gatsby in "The Great Gatsby" and the male protagonist Cheng Dieyi in "Farewell My Concubine" have quite different personalities, both of them represent infatuated and single-minded male images. They are obsessed with a love that sprouted at a young age and are even willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their "lovers". In Gatsby's eyes, Daisy

was not only the lover he had glimpsed in his youth but also the ultimate goal he had fought for in his life. Due to his underprivileged upbringing, he was naturally not Daisy's ideal mate. After being dumped, he did not feel discouraged but fought for it in an effort to win back Daisy's affection. Later, when he was wealthy, he led a luxurious lifestyle in order to attract Daisy, purchasing a castle next to her that reflected the splendor of a Normandy city hall. He tried every moment to approach Daisy's cousin Nick, treating him with respect in order to make Nick play "matchmaker" with him and Daisy. When he met his beloved woman again, he appeared very clumsy and childish—Gatsby had arranged Nick's house beautifully, waiting for Daisy, but when Nick welcomed Daisy in, Gatsby showed great nervousness: "Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into Nick's eyes." Even though Gatsby had become a member of upper-class society at this point, his success in his career could not erase his inferiority complex and weaknesses. He was afraid that people of Daisy's status would despise him, so he always hoped to package himself as an aristocrat. He foolishly believed that using money would help him keep Daisy's love for him since he was frightened of losing her once more. He was unaware that Daisy had already lost her natural compassion and original goal since she was a money-worshipping woman. She viewed Gatsby as a "stand-by boyfriend" to spend her free time with. Therefore, a sad ending is inevitable for an immature idealist like Gatsby. Gatsby ultimately agreed to take the blame for Daisy's alleged involvement in a car accident, even to the extent of being killed by the deceased's spouse. Daisy, on the other hand, was so cruel that she didn't even want to go to Gatsby's funeral.

Similar to Gatsby, Cheng Dieyi's homosexual feelings for Duan Xiaolou are equally paranoid and childish. When he was a child, his mother was a prostitute who sold him to a theatrical troupe. The care of his buddy Duan Xiaolou added a lot of warmth to Cheng's gloomy upbringing. When they grew up, Duan and Cheng cooperated to perform a Beijing opera named "Farewell, My Concubine" together. Because they always played the male character "Ba Wang" and the female character "Yu Ji" respectively in the opera "Farewell My Concubine", Cheng naturally fell in love with Duan Xiaolou. He also confused Duan Xiaolou with the male character "Ba Wang" in the opera. Various indications showed that his love for Duan was just a fantasy. However, Cheng stubbornly believed that he was the opera's only female character "Yu Ji" so he should marry "Ba Wang" in reality like the plot of the opera. Although Cheng was prepared to sacrifice everything for his lover, he never considered whether Duan had the same homosexual feelings for him or just regarded Cheng as his buddy. Just because Cheng and Duan performed the female and male characters "Yu Ji" and "Ba Wang" respectively on stage, Cheng had an imagination that he and Duan would spend all of eternity together, singing a lifetime's worth of Beijing opera and acting as a couple on stage for all of their lives, which is obviously unreal. His paranoid and childish affections became increasingly apparent after Duan Xiaolou and Juxian got married, even reaching the point of "no madness, no survival". Therefore, he was always jealous of Juxian and harbored great hostility toward her. For instance, Cheng offered to force Juxian to agree to leave his "secret crush" forever in exchange for helping him after Duan Xiaolou was captured by the Japanese invaders out of impulse, and even though he naively believed that Juxian would definitely keep her unrealistic verbal "promise", as a result, he had to wait for the consequences to disappoint himself. When Juxian's attempt to protect her husband from being injured by the Nationalist Army caused her to have a miscarriage, Cheng Dieyi, who was beside her, was delighted that her miscarriage was a good thing for him to "finally have no children in their middle" and "remove another eyesore". However, he did not feel any compassion for Juxian's massive bleeding even to the point of fainting. Furthermore, when the Cultural Revolution broke out, Duan Xiaolou had to expose Cheng Dieyi to deal with red guards because he wanted to protect his wife Juxian. His behavior made Cheng completely lose his mind to Duan Xiaolou and his wife. He actively renounced Duan and his wife because there was no warmth that could penetrate his cold heart at this time. It was only because Duan still called Juxian "my dear" at this point that all of Cheng's hatred

was ignited. Juxian was described by him as "a counter-revolutionary Jezebel and a shameless prostitute" as he started to insult her. Even then, he cursed that Duan and his wife Juxian should be killed by red guards. Finally, Duan Xiaolou was forced to say he wanted to divorce his "Jezebel" wife, the dark and vicious psyche of Cheng was now fully satiated. He even thought that: "if it weren't for the Cultural Revolution, perhaps he would have been in constant pain because of Duan and Juxian's marriage. Fortunately, China had a cultural revolution, with people's blood flowing like a stream and bones piling up like hills, even all cultures instantly almost disappeared." However, because this cruel revolution finally forced Duan to divorce, Cheng took advantage of others' lack of attention to secretly burst into a creepy smile on his face to show that he was very grateful for the Cultural Revolution—such a horrible opinion! The descriptions provided in the book are sufficient to demonstrate how extreme Cheng Dieyi's adoration and possessiveness of Duan Xiaolou have become. What a modest, insane, and pathetic unrequited love! He can even be thankful and content with the fatal calamity of the "Cultural Revolution" for the sake of his faith-like affection!

Like Gatsby, Cheng Dieyi is also a pitiful victim destroyed by his unrequited love. From the perspective of gender poetics, we can also see that both writers give their protagonists a deep sense of sympathy. Faced with emotional dilemmas, they both choose to be devoted to their lovers, willing to die for their childish and pathetic feelings. Compared to the "chauvinism" that characterizes patriarchal society, their views are quite different. Unfortunately, they are both bound by love, which makes their situation worse. The fullness and unique appeal of the images of Jay Gatsby and Cheng Dieyi are a result of the author's restoration of this sort of infatuated character.

2.3 Shaping and Restoring Inferior and Distorted Male Characters

Wilson from "The Great Gatsby" and Cheng Dieyi's apprentice Xiao Si from "Farewell My Concubine" are examples of male characters that are mistreated, distorted, and ultimately turn into "villains" in both novels. Wilson, Myrtle's husband, could only run a car repair store because he lived at the bottom of society. At first, he was faithful and honest, only wishing to have his own small business with his wife and not worrying about his future. But sadly, his wife was a restless and haughty woman. She frequently mocked and chastised him for his stupidity and made fun of him for not even fitting to lick her shoe. Wilson could only suffer in silence as his wife insulted him while he endured this humiliation. He had no social standing and was treated like a servant by his wife in all respects. In his previous life, Wilson's wife Myrtle controlled his fate and was the center of his choices. He "physically collapsed and fell ill" when he realized that his wife was truly "living in another world behind his back." He was on the edge of collapsing due to the betrayal of his wife and the burden of living. The loss of Myrtle, though, was the last straw that caused him to collapse completely. Wilson had initially intended to sell his car and bring Myrtle back to the West to rebuild their marriage, but after Daisy accidentally murdered his wife, he lost all faith in humanity. He lost his mind and became totally insane as a result. Hearing Tom's false imputation of Gatsby, Wilson sneaked into Gatsby's mansion and shot him dead. Wilson is no longer the former subservient "honest man" at this point, his masculinity drives him to exact retribution.

The life trajectory of Xiao Si in "Farewell My Concubine" is similar to Wilson's. He was once an abandoned infant who was found by Cheng Dieyi on the side of the road and adopted. Cheng Dieyi was like a "senior brother" and an "adoptive father" to Xiao Si, who grew up in a theatrical troupe and admired Cheng's accomplishments. He worked hard just to expect Cheng to accept him as an apprentice in order to become a Beijing opera star. He was a humble and unimportant character in the first half of the novel who only survived by appeasing his master Cheng Dieyi. He served tea and poured water all day for his master, flattering him with a bent heart, as if he had become a qualified disciple and servant. However, his master Cheng Dieyi delivered a brutal blow to him, by telling him

bluntly that he would "never become a real Beijing opera star" to undermine his self-confidence. Moreover, Duan and Cheng occasionally referred to him as "a target of abuse." As a humble apprentice, his only option was to put up with these mistreated stuffs day by day, allowing them to violate his sense of dignity. Nobody had truly cared for him and nurtured him with patience. The deformation and darkness of Xiao Si's personality were a natural result of his repressive surroundings. Therefore, as soon as the Cultural Revolution broke out, he quickly betrayed Duan and Cheng and ruthlessly retaliated against his former rescuer and master using the power of the red guards, earning him the reputation of a traitor that readers detested.

Gender poetics theory has repeatedly stressed the importance of not going to extremes. If the sense of subjectivity and dignity of men in a vulnerable position is stepped on by women or men with high social status, these men will not be given the respect they deserve, and over time they will develop a dark and distorted "anti-social personality", which is neither conducive to the harmony of gender relations nor to the prosperity and stability of society.

3. Conclusion

This essay uses the perspective of gender poetics to study what the two writers, Fitzgerald and Li Bihua, have in common in their depictions of men: domineering, infatuated, infantile, vulnerable, and distorted. Although they live in different countries and have different cultural backgrounds, they both share the same meticulous shaping and restoration of the male figures they write about. Fitzgerald, as a male writer of the American Jazz Age, gently listens to men's voices and understands the pressures men carry in society, exposing their shortcomings. He also vividly portrays men's helplessness, pain, and accusations of patriarchal oppression. As a female writer in the era of the transition between old and new in Hong Kong, Li Bihua reveals the struggles and choices of men while tracing the roots of women's tragic fate. Even though the male characters in her books are arrogant, selfish, insane, and incompetent, they are equally tragic and hopeless. These male characters erase readers' stereotypical impressions of men and cause them to rethink the male community. To a certain extent, her novels set off images of women, expressing the desire for harmonious coexistence in gender relations. Nowadays, when feminism has become more important in our society, using the theory of gender poetics to objectively examine men, making them neither absent nor deconstructed, undoubtedly deepens our understanding of literary works.

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