

An Analysis of the Differences between East and West and Romanticism in Romeo and Juliet

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Abstract: The Chinese folk tale "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" and Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" are two poignant love stories. Although both love stories share a common melancholy theme and both aim to expose and criticise feudalism, there are many differences in their emotional expression, characterisation and tragic endings. Through a comparison of the two, this paper will analyse the inherent differences between Chinese and Western cultures and their different values, the resulting different ways in which the protagonists express their love and their different acts of resistance in the face of oppressive reality. On this basis, it will focus on the important connotations of romanticism in Shakespeare's works and the profound influence of this idealised romantic spirit on future generations. The paper will also focus on the different emphases of tragedy in China and the West, as reflected in the two works —Western tragedy emphasises the occurrence of tragedy as a result of chance events, while Chinese tragedy emphasises the inevitable outcome due to powerful social factors. Through these comparisons, let us revisit these two classic love stories and travel back in time to re-examine the steadfastness of love.

1. Introduction

"Romeo and Juliet" and "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", two love stories from the West and the East respectively, are still used as sources of the concept of love after thousands of years of historical and cultural changes. They are like two bright pearls that reflect each other in the world culture, representing the different views and values of love from the East and the West respectively. Both works are based on the theme of love in the feudal era, with the hero and heroine loving each other deeply and even choosing to die for love in the end in order to break bondage. Although there are many similarities in the themes and emotional tone of these two works, there are also many differences in the character traits of the characters and the way they express love.

2. The penetration of rhetoric and idealism

If the love in "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" is like a trickle of water, delicate and long, then the love of the main character in "Romeo and Juliet" is like a moth to a flame, fierce, impulsive and unwavering. Rooted in Chinese culture and bound by ethics and morals, Zhu Yingtai hides her love and expresses her feelings in a subtle way. This differs greatly from the bold and open expression of

love in the West. Romeo and Juliet fall in love at first sight, and afterwards they tell each other their feelings, comparing their lovers to the sun and praising the beauty of their beloved... This way of expressing love, which breaks through religious asceticism and feudal ethics, is not only reflected in the social conditions of the Renaissance at that time, which pursued freedom of love and emancipation of individuality, but also in the Western culture nowadays. 'This greater emphasis on human emotions, the pursuit of true love, and the enjoyment of life in a limited life, we can call it a romanticism of freedom and openness as well as individual expression [1]. Some scholars say that 'Romeo and Juliet' is the most lyrical romanticism among Shakespeare's tragedies, but I think it is not only a lyrical love song, but also an ideal ode against feudalism, advocating freedom and equality, emancipation of personality, and marriage autonomy.

This love under Shakespeare's pen, and what he wanted to pursue through his work, is not realism, but romanticism. It is also this romanticism, reflected in the entire work to people through the passionate language, magnificent imagery and even exaggerated techniques to express people's compliance with the heart, the pursuit of the ideal world.

As one of the most prominent realist playwrights of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's humanist outlook on life and moral principles focused on issues of love and marriage. While celebrating the spirit of resistance to tradition, he also exposes and criticises, in varying degrees, the dark and corrupt ideologies of the society of his time. On top of the reality, he expresses his desire for an ideal world through romantic depictions. This includes in 'Romeo and Juliet', where Shakespeare expresses a strong romantic spirit through the protagonist's rebellion, which to a certain extent transcends the asceticism of the medieval feudal system in both the moral and spiritual spheres. By expressing the pursuit of love, promoting the natural nature of man, celebrating the infinite wisdom and power, and thus affirming humans' value and dignity, Shakespeare encourages people to pursue a happy life and personal liberation in reality. This pursuit is reflected in Shakespeare's creative approach, which emphasises the role of the imagination, the freedom of individuality and the emancipation of the mind, 'and seeks to break away from conventional traditions in terms of content and form, while still paying attention to and following the creative approach of realist literature [2]. The Romanticism embodied in 'Romeo and Juliet' is, therefore, more than the traditional Romanticism of the past, a transition from realism to Romanticism, a beautiful eulogy that proclaims the beauty of humanity and affirms the value of human beings.

Shakespeare pushes the expression of romantic emotions to the ultimate peak through a large number of lyrical imagery and forms, as well as poetic dialogues between the hero and heroine. For example, Romeo's inner monologue when he enters the tomb and sees Juliet, who has taken medicine to fake her death: "for here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes this vault a feasting presence full of light." The gloom and horror of death and the cruelty of reality are swept away and replaced by the power of a romantic love that shines with infinite light. Shakespeare's lyrical brushstrokes make the pathos of death shine with the light of humanity and reverberate with the melody of romance.

3. Plot-driven with a cultural mindset

Not only that, but just as even though 'Romeo and Juliet' is a tragic love story, in the end Romeo and Juliet change the way the two feuding families get along by dying. There is no doubt that this is idealistic and romantic. 'But when we really place the setting in the Elizabethan period, in the social context of the time, if the children of the two families left this earth at the same time with such an ending [3], we cannot help but think: would the great elders of society, long imprisoned by feudal thinking, really have put their grudges against each other to rest? In fact, I think that in reality the two families may have deepened their hatred. The fact that the families were already feuding, plus

the fact that both children died because of love, would only make feudalism feel that this was a form of rebellion. So what would the feudal mindset have responded to the rebellion with? I think that the response would only have been harsher oppression and crackdown. In comparing the historical context of that period, we can see that the changes in marriage practices in England began in the Elizabethan era in the second half of the 16th century. Shakespeare's work was written during this time, in other words, *Romeo and Juliet* itself was a product of this era. It was only after this revolution that people began to further attack the old ideas and forms of marriage and to seek a new institution of marriage, hoping to break with the custom of arranged marriages by parents. In a realistic way, *Romeo and Juliet*, who are in the early stages of the transition, are only greeted with more intense repression in the wake of their resistance. Only in the confrontation between the old and the new will it be possible to witness the rise of new forces, and in the final confrontation to overcome the old.

Perhaps such an ending would have been more in keeping with the social context of the time. In comparison, it seems more in keeping with the Chinese cultural context that the conflict between social oppression and the pursuit of love is resolved in the already legendary way in which the protagonists are both transformed into butterflies —no matter how strong the resistance is, it still breaks the shackles of society in the end. Although this is a pessimistic and even negative ending, people seem to be more accepting of this way of ending love. *Romeo and Juliet*'s love begins with a blaze of passion and ends enthusiastically with the death of both heroes. In "*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*", on the other hand, the love between the two begins with a subtle and introspective expression. It ends with a butterfly that breaks with common sense, which undoubtedly brings the conflict to a climax, leaving us to lament the harsh reality while still feeling relieved that the two end up together in a different way.

At the same time, this also brings us a sense of difference regarding the cultural connotations of the West and China. In the West, literature is often narrated through direct descriptions, as in "*Romeo and Juliet*", where the main characters' final tragic end is already set — the two die together. But in "*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*", the two are finally transformed into butterflies, leaving plenty of room for our imagination. This is also a classic form of ending in Chinese literature —leaving the imagery to the imagination and giving a poetic beauty.

This is a reflection of the difference in the way of thinking used by the West and China in dealing with tragedy. The tragedy of "*Romeo and Juliet*" is more obviously subjective, and the personalities of the characters are maximized throughout the work. And according to the intention of the ending, even if the love between the two ends in death, but through the process of their struggle against the forces of the feudal family, they are able to show the most positive side of the individual in the process of struggling with fate. It is Shakespeare's use of romanticism that elevates the characters to a higher level and gives an idealized ending to a tragic one. The tragedy of "*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*", on the other hand, as I mentioned in the previous article, has a stronger characteristic of inevitability. That is, under the inevitable conditions of the social environment and family factors of the time, the protagonist's struggle seems slightly powerless. This is the accumulation of thousands of years of social factors, the embodiment of realism that is difficult to break. However, in the ending the two unexpectedly turn into butterflies and accompany each other, which is a poetic portrayal of the unyielding pursuit of ideal love. It can be seen that the West respects the individual's sense of independence more during the development with society, and advocates that people as individuals can participate in or even change the development of society.

What's more, there is a clear difference in the plotting of tragedies between China and the West, which can be seen through these two works. Western tragedies emphasize the chance of tragic events, which often lead to the tragedy of the whole story, while Chinese tragedies emphasize the ultimate tragic ending due to the inevitable influence of society and individuals. 'In "*Romeo and*

Juliet", the two fall in love at first sight, then fall in love and get married secretly, and then, due to an accident, the letter is not delivered to Romeo [4], which makes Romeo believe that Juliet has died, and choose to take medicine and die in front of Juliet's grave, causing Juliet to wake up and find her lover dead, finally draw her sword to commit suicide. It can be said that the tragic development of the plot to this, although in the love of two people in the family forces of opposition and heavy obstruction is a big factor, but ultimately directly lead to the two love but not both died because of this one accident. The tragedy of love between Romeo and Juliet is inseparable from the feudal dictatorship, but it is also related to the accidental events. It can be said that the final tragic ending is largely caused by the main characters themselves.

In "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", there is no possibility for free love to exist in reality under the feudal system: the free love of the main character and the whole social system at that time cannot coexist, which is the root of the society, and it is impossible to change the fact. The deep and strong feudal dictatorship and feudal marriage ideology in the feudal family have already decided that it is impossible for the two to be married together. For example, Zhu Yingtai insists on waiting for Liang Shanbo to propose marriage, and after Liang Shanbo knows that Zhu Yingtai is a woman and is already engaged to the Ma family, he can only pine at home alone. Although Zhu Yingtai fought, their resistance to the feudal marriage system was, on the whole, very weak. In the end, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai choose to die as their final weapon of resistance, silently venting their anger at the feudal marriage system. Of course, it seems to make up for the fact that the protagonists have difficulty in fighting against the cruel status quo in reality, the author closes with a legendary romantic ending of turning into butterflies and flying together after death. This tragic ending is to emphasize the inevitable factors in society. In that typical feudal social context, the death of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai has become a kind of representative. They are fighting against a society with a deep-rooted feudal consciousness, but this power is after all the power of an individual, which can only end in defeat if it tries to fight against the powerful social forces.

4. Approaching the tragedy of the times

While we compare the two works for the final positioning of the story's ending, we also need to base on the general background of the author's creation, which requires us to return to the deepest theme of the work. The story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is a love hymn against feudalism through a blend of realism and romanticism. Romeo and Juliet, on the other hand, leans more towards the ultimate romanticisation and idealisation.

Shakespeare's romanticism reflects objective reality by focusing on the inner world of the characters, expressing the passionate pursuit of an ideal world, and often portraying it through passionate language, magnificent imagery and exaggeration. In this approach to representation, we see a kind of love called love at first sight. This love, however, is essentially based on the most simple of appearances, the desire for love inspired by good looks alone. As Shakespeare tells us at the beginning of the story, we are told exactly what Romeo and Juliet are in love with each other for. Romeo is in love with her charming beauty, and Juliet is in love with his suavity. Romeo and Juliet met simply because they fell in love with each other's looks and made a martyr's choice of life and death. How shocking this would seem to us today, and certainly just as shocking in the past. Yet this seemingly absurd love is the very theme of romance that Shakespeare was trying to convey. Behind this seemingly absurd love is the main character's willingness to live and die for love at first sight. At the same time it is the most primitive and sincere of all human feelings, a passionate affection that comes from within the psyche and the soul. Of course, it is this romanticism, pushed to its peak, that brings us vivid characters and endless enthusiasm. This ideal of love, that is, the love of a man and a woman that is not disturbed by any social reality and that comes from the heart,

seems to stimulate the most primitive instincts of human beings, the natural instincts of people in search of beauty.

Despite the fundamental difference between the real and the ideal, the idealised romance is inherently higher than the real, and is more exciting and complete than the real, inspiring the desire for something beautiful and loving. Although the love in both works ends in tragedy, they will remain an inspiration for future generations to pursue the ideal love. People want to pursue the idealised romanticism that is unique to the author's writing, an expectation of beauty that is based on objective reality but breaks with the status quo and is entirely controlled by people's subjective emotions. Whether it is "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai", or "Romeo and Juliet", they both bring people to the point where the more they indulge in their idealisation, the more they feel sad about the harshness of real life and the difficult fate of love, and the more they feel sad about the oppressions and obstacles of reality, the more they yearn for the ideal love romance [5]. The author's romanticism reaches its peak through the idealistic narrative of the protagonist's love. This romanticism takes the ideal state as the basis for reflecting the reality of the emotions, but it does not exclude reason altogether; rather, it asserts that true literary art should be an organic combination of the sensual and the rational. It is for this reason that we can appreciate that the highest meaning of tragedy is to magnify the connotations of beauty and ultimately to prompt reflection. Through the conflict between love and hatred, romance and reality, emotion and reason, the story is turned into an idealised romantic and humanist expression by the stroke of romance. The humanist ideal of love is sublimated, which in effect takes mankind one step further from ignorance to civilisation and responds to the individual's quest for freedom and happiness.

5. Conclusion

It can be said that in the story of "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" we see a love that is steadfast and pure. Their fear of death for the sake of love shows the steadfastness of oriental love, with a poetic and infinite beauty. In particular, the use of the romantic device of both eventually turning into butterflies adds a legendary dimension to their love, bringing the two together forever in another, more beautiful way. In "Romeo and Juliet", on the other hand, the vow to pursue to the death the beautiful ideals of freedom of love and emancipation of individuality, to resist resolutely and courageously against the oppression of the feudal forces, is more of an idealised romanticised expectation. It can be said that although both love stories end in tragedy, the dramatic storyline, the infectious characterisation and the pursuit of freedom and independence of love contained in them are the ideal romance that humans have been pursuing for generations.

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