

An Explanation of the Heroic Images in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Tian Miaomiao

School of Literature, Baicheng Normal University, Jilin Province

Keywords: Shakespeare, Hero, Tragedy

Abstract: Shakespeare enjoys great popularity in world history of literature, and his tragedy works are household names. Shakespeare has written 39 plays in his life, including 10 tragedies. In the tragedies, Shakespeare described numerous heroes with distinct but different personalities, such as Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, who tried to revenge for his father but went through numerous difficulties, the emperor Macbeth who became atrocious in the pursuit of benefits and status, as well as Othello who suspected that his wife cheated on him because of his shortcomings in characteristics. However, who impressed me most is King Lear who came to his senses all of a sudden.

Among Shakespeare's four tragedies, Hamlet was a Danish prince who pursued humanism but had weak personalities; Macbeth was a cruel noble general who pursued benefits, Othello was a Moorish general with glorious battle achievements but lacked rational judgments, while King Lear was an old, headstrong and vain king. These four male images are four hero images with contrasting styles.

1. Seeking for humanity——Hamlet

Hamlet is an important feature in Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet. When Hamlet heard of his father's death, he hurried back to the castle for the funeral. However, when he found that his uncle ascended the throne and married his mother, deep suspicions raised in his heart, but he did not say it out. Later, Hamlet found out the truth, so he became suspicious and doubtful. His heart was filled with rage, but there was no way to let it out. He did not want to believe the so-called love and family. Therefore, he execrated "crazily" his beloved Ophelia. However, it did not occur to Hamlet that what he had done brought heavy strikes to the girl. Ophelia could not undertake the double strike of her father's death and the leaving of her lover, and she drowned herself when she was in a trance.

Hamlet also had a deadly shortcoming, i.e., he liked finding excuses for everything, and he was always hesitant. In Act 3, Hamlet let go of Claudius who was praying alone. To him, "He is cleansing his soul. If I finish his life now, the road to heaven would be open for him. Is that still vengeance? No! Take back my sword...Let his deep dark soul rot in hell." Here, Hamlet's strong religious beliefs as well as his personality shortcomings are clear, "A giant in words, a dwarf in actions." He always found various excuses for himself, and he did not kill Claudius in the end. The end was that Hamlet killed his uncle, but he was heavily wound himself, so he did not last long. The reason for his tragedy is not only the strong dark power, but also his personality shortcoming. Hamlet's tragedy is also the real epitome of the era.

2. The loss of humanity——Macbeth

The protagonist in Macbeth is a heroic general. He performed outstanding services repeatedly, but he encountered a witch on his way back from a war. It is because of Macbeth's secret ambition that under Mrs. Macbeth's persuasion and three witches' charms, he committed a series of atrocities. He killed the king, his brothers in arms and the relatives of the soldiers.

From Shakespeare's plays, we can see that Macbeth was very ambitious, but he lacked wickedness which is related to ambition. He wanted to achieve something, but he wanted to achieve success by proper means. When the three witches disappeared, Macbeth wanted them to stay for a little longer, which fully expressed his wish to be a king. Macbeth played hard for the throne, and he committed atrocities all along. Undoubtedly, a cruel king would not end up well. It is said that people commit evil because their desires cannot be restrained. However, Macbeth was sober all along. He did not stop his crimes, because power was irresistible to him. Macbeth was the brother of Duncan, so he also had right in succession. Therefore, under this circumstance, sparks were ignited in Macbeth's heart. Macbeth's tragedy was that he would not stop "killing the king" because of the surrounding kind people. Rather, it is his discontent with life that troubled him after he came to the throne. His murder of Bank and Macduff expressed his atrocity undoubtedly; also, he became increasingly more suspicious. After that, he suffered from insomnia. However, will a kind person commit tyrannous behaviors one after another? Therefore, Macbeth was only guilty instead of regretful. After Macbeth killed Duncan, he sighed, "What's wrong? Why a little noise would startle me? What is this hand? They are digging out my eyes. Will all the water in the ocean clean the blood on my hands?" His pain could only show that he was frightened for doing everything. However, as the story developed, he was accustomed to it.

Of course, all tyrants would not end up well since ancient times, and Macbeth is no exception. He not only destroyed ethical order, but also usurped the throne and killed the king as an official. In the end, he was killed by Duncan's son, leaving a regretful tragic ending.

3. Impulsive humanity——Othello

Othello is a tragic story full of romance. The protagonist Othello is a black marshal. As a black man, he could obtain such achievements, which is enough to present his marvelous ability. From the plots, we can see the excellent qualities that he possessed, i.e., candor, honesty, courage and adventurous spirits. Therefore, he could acquire the sincere love from Desdemona.

However, such a hero did not end up well. Othello's characteristics were also contradictory. He valued evidence, but was also suspicious and acted on hearsay evidence. He was courageous and skillful in battles, but was more brave than wise. He placed righteousness above family loyalty, but also trusted villains. Such contradiction led to his self-destruction.

At the beginning of the play, we can see that black people had low social status. Desdemona's father went to the king and lodged an accusation against Othello that he took away his daughter. He described Othello as a mean and inferior barbarian. However, when Othello confronted him face to face, he was not scared at all and he showed his love to Desdemona. In the end, he married Desdemona. However, Iago carried out his revenge, which resulted to Othello and Desdemona's destruction. Othello had a deadly weakness, i.e., impulsiveness, especially his wrath. This gave Iago a perfect chance, and he took advantage of this to instigate the relationship between Othello and his wife. Iago told Othello that his wife gave her handkerchief to his adjutant. It went without saying that Othello trusted the so-called "truth" and did not investigate. When Iago said that his wife slept with his adjutant, Othello trusted Iago's lies without consideration, and he swore to chop his wife furiously. He did not trust his wife; instead, he chose to trust other people, and his means are very cruel. Therefore, we can see that he did not pay attention to daily life, nor did he care about his wife. He was a selfish and hard-fisted person. Besides, Othello did not handle his interpersonal relationship well. He promoted a foreigner as his adjutant, which resulted the native Iago's dissatisfaction, and thereby leading to the beginning of the tragedy.

In the end, the kind Desdemona was killed, and it was Othello who killed her with his own hands. Maybe at the last moment, Desdemona still did not know the real reason. At last, when the truth was revealed, Othello really regretted it and committed suicide resolutely. It is Othello's own characters that led to the series of tragedies.

4. Picking up humanity again——King Lear

King Lear in the play is a tyrannic and authoritarian king. Being a king for a long time, he was not only opinionated, but also liked being flattered. He required his daughters to be obedient to him like his subjects. Therefore, he could not bear his youngest daughter's honesty. King Lear preferred compliance from his vain and obsequious eldest and second daughter, and he always imagined that when he abdicated, he could still enjoy power and high status. Therefore, he gave the properties of the youngest daughter to the eldest and second daughter, and he married the youngest daughter to a country far away. He also deported the loyal Earl Kent.

However, because of his inability of differentiating the good from the evil, he was punished by his selfishness. His eldest and second daughter hurt his heart with actions, and he lived a life worse than the servants after abdication. Therefore, King Lear created his own misfortune.

King Lear wanted to divide the country at first, but he became addicted to his two daughters' flattered words gradually, so he gave away his duty as a father. He forgot himself gradually and fell to the trap of the two daughters. He was forced to give up his throne and began his pains and trials of life. When he wandered destitute in a wasted land and went through hardships, he could see the good and evil of life eventually. He learned humility and began to review what he had done. He appealed to the rich on behalf of the poor, "People who are enjoying glory and splendor, please take a medicine and expose yourselves to feel the feelings of the less fortunate!" This is the sublimation of King Lear's thoughts. Later, he tried to take back his throne with force, but failed. He was caught with his youngest daughter. In the prison, he confessed to the youngest daughter. Therefore, when the youngest daughter was murdered, he always passed away mournfully and furiously.

In the four great tragedies of Shakespeare, besides the heroic images of male protagonists, there are also a lot of splendid male images that are worth our attention.

5. Scheming Claudius

It is Claudius that killed Hamlet's father. In the play, we can see an image with insidious means and extraordinary crafty. In Act Two of Chapter One, we see the dialogues of a hypocrite, "Though our dear brother Hamlet just passed away, our heart should be filled with sorrow, and our whole nation should express consistent mourn, we are fully aware of the important responsibility of the living and we cannot violate it. On the one hand, we should commemorate him with moderate sorrow, on the other hand, we should care about our benefits." These are the words of Claudius when he first appeared. When readers read these words, they must think of Claudius as a man who loved his brother. However, after learning the whole story, and when readers see that Claudius gave away the truth that he was the culprit but comforted his nephew like nothing happened, they can feel this is an extremely shrewd man.

Claudius was not only shrewd, but also was tricky and could won over the hearts. He deceived of the support of many ministers, including the senior minister like Polonius, who was loyal and devoted to him. Therefore, Claudius was a rigorous and exquisite man. However, when Hamlet was not aware of the truth at first, Claudius did not want to kill Hamlet. Also, when he was confessing in the church, he knew that "my sins were overwhelming stench." However, when people found out what he had done, there was no turning back for him if he wanted to protect his own benefits. Claudius was advantageous in the play. He poisoned the old king and held the funeral when Hamlet did not return. He gave the same rights to Hamlet superficially, but was suppressing Hamlet secretly, and he even wanted to get rid of Hamlet in the end. Such a crafty man was doomed to end up miserably. No matter how powerful the vicious are, they would never win over the justice, and this is the constant theme of Shakespeare's plays.

6. Evil and cunning Edmund

Edmund is a character in King Lear. At the beginning of the play, when Gloucester was talking with Earl Kent, Gloucester said sportively, "To be honest, this boy's mum gave birth to him when

she was not married. Do you think it is right? I have a legal son, who is 1 year older than him, but I don't like him. Though this brute came to the world obtrusively without summoning, his mother is really charming. When we were making him, we had a raptured game, so I have to admit this brute." When he was mentioning Edmund, he described him as "brute"; but when he was talking about Edgar, he called him "legal son". Edmund had to accept reality, and one of the reasons for his evilness was external stimulation. At the beginning of the story, Edmund's humanity began to struggle. He wanted to win his father's and the world's acknowledgement, but his requirements are reasonable and improper. An illegitimate child would never be accepted and he could never get what he wanted. Therefore, Edmund chose evilness to get everything, and this the root for his destruction.

Edmund had been maintaining superficial elegance, while in fact, he detested Edgar. He wanted to have his own rights and his own land. Therefore, he wrote a "fake letter" and let his father Gloucester to find that Edgar tried to kill him. Then, he schemed to aggravate the misunderstanding between Edgar and his father, which resulted to Edgar's leaving from home. Edmund's first step succeeded, and this was nothing compared with his ambition.

However, his brother saw through his schemes in the end. After their duel, Edmund was badly hurt. Edmund's ambition peeled off his kind humanity off every time he schemed. He lost love from his father for the first time, the love from his brother for the second time and pure romantic love for the third time. He was vicious, but he also struggled. Edmund's image has two elements, conspiracy and pornography, and it is these two elements that lead to Edmund's tragic destiny.

In conclusion, from Shakespeare's four tragedies, we can see that with transitions of time, Shakespeare did not regard humanistic thoughts as the source of happiness any more. Rather, he analyzed the seemingly ideal society and explored the darkness and hidden danger behind it. Shakespeare used tragic plots, depressing atmosphere and shocking end to express the alternation of ugliness and evilness of humanity. Though the dark society did not leave hope to people, the heroic images under Shakespeare's pens still kept positive and ideal beliefs. Shakespeare looked at problems from the perspective of human development in the great tide of time, and his plays are worthy of the name a resplendent pearl in world history of literature.

References

- [1] Zhang Kuo. Confrontations Between Humanity Ideals and Reality——An Exploration of Humanity of Shakespeare from the Perspective of Characters Image-Building from the Four Tragedies[J]. Art Education, 2016(7):254.
- [2] Jing Ying. Tragic Environment and Tragic Characters in Shakespeare's Tragedies [J]. Journal of Shenyang University, 2004(1):73.
- [3] Lu Shan. An Analysis of Prototype Structure in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Comedies [D]. Master Thesis of Northeast Normal University, 2004
- [4] Jing Lijun. An Research of Death in Shakespeare's Four Tragedies [D]. Fujian Normal University, 2009.
- [5] Wu Chongbiao. On Functions of the Minor Characters in Shakespeare's Four Tragedies [D]. Master Thesis of Anhui University, 2006
- [6] Jiao Fujun. Though Implications in Shakespeare's Four Tragedies [D]. Master Thesis of Jilin University, 2004.
- [7] Jin Xin & Dong Zhongfeng. Max and Engle's Construction of Artistic Spirits [J]. Journal of CCP Tianjin Municipal Party Committee School, 2007(2):11.
- [8] Song Xiaorong. On Characters and Images in Shakespeare's Four Tragedies [J]. Journal of Anhui Agricultural University, 2003(1):101.
- [9] Zhang Xuan. Confrontations between Good and Evil ——A Common Theme in Shakespeare's Four Tragedies [J]. Popular Literature and Arts, 2013(23):19.