

An Analysis of How the Literary Features of The Teahouse Reflect the Tragic Core of the Play

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Abstract: *The Teahouse* is a play written by Lao She in 1956, included in the magazine Harvest in July 1957 by Bakin and published in June 1958 by the China Drama Publishing House. The play presents three chaotic historical periods in modern China: the Hundred Days' Reform, the Warlords' War, and the eve of the founding of New China. The play has a high literary status and high literary attainments, and it has become a classic work of contemporary Chinese theatre mainly because of its characteristic dialect language features and special artistic presentation form. The use of language in the original play reflects the regional characteristics, and the portrayal of the characters suggests the tragedy of the historical destiny of the time from the side. The main body of the play, "Yutai Teahouse", serves as a clue to expose how the modern Chinese society is a dark and corrupt world that eats away at all human beings. Moreover, his literary works with its unique style of writing reflects the tragic colour of drama literature, with the tragic fate of the nobody suggesting the tragic colour of the whole era.

Keywords: Lao She, drama, literature, history.

1. Introduction

The Teahouse, a novel by Lao She published in 1956, garnered significant attention amidst the literary boom following the announcement of the 'Double Hundred Policy' (a policy encouraging cultural development). At this time, the newly established People's Republic of China was still finding its footing, grappling with the aftermath of a tumultuous historical period. The text reflects the chaotic backdrop of the pre-liberation era, embodying the tragedies intrinsic to that age. Lao She's work has since become a model for playwrights. Today, the art of theatre creation remains a hot topic in both literature and the film industry, with scriptwriting having a profound impact on the theatre. Lao She's *Teahouse*, as a classic play, has an important influence on the development of drama.

At present, there have been researchers have conducted an in-depth study of the tragic core of *The Teahouse*, that the author of these three, six, nine, and so on characterisation embodies the tragic colours, the use of character appearance description, language description, three different periods of the image of the contrast and more, the embodiment of three types of characters shaping the three revolutionary paths, and the use of simple characterisation to expose the dark period of China's history [1]. Some researchers have also shared the unique linguistic features of his works, which are very "Beijing-flavoured" and can be regarded as a model in the history of Chinese drama. However, the results are not comprehensive, and there is still much room for thinking about how the literature

embodies the characteristics of tragedy, and it does not fully distinguish the differences from traditional literature. As a classic work of theatre literature, *The Teahouse* is still worthy of deeper investigation.

This paper is mainly based on the views of former researchers, and it summarises and uses the technique of textual analysis to expose the tragic core of dramatic literature.

2. Introduction to content and key concepts

2.1. Introduction to content

The Teahouse is a drama written by the modern literary master Lao She in 1956, first published in July 1957 in the inaugural issue of the Harvest magazine, edited by Ba Jin, and later in June 1958 as a standalone volume by the China Drama Publishing House. The play encapsulates the social transformations spanning almost half a century across the eras of the Hundred Days' Reform, the Warlord Era, and the eve of the establishment of New China.

Set against the backdrop of the rise and fall of a grand teahouse named Yutai in Beijing, the work portrays the societal panorama of Beijing and the evolving lives of the teahouse's denizens from the twilight of the Qing Dynasty through the Beiyang Warlord period to the triumph of the resistance war over five decades. Each act unfolds within a time when individuals from all strata of Beijing society frequented this expansive teahouse. The entire play unfurls like a majestic historical scroll, vividly depicting the inexorable decline of Old China and the advent of the new. Ultimately, the tragic destiny of the protagonist heralds the conclusion of a bygone era.

2.2. Key Concepts

Tragedy is one of the main genres of theatre. Originating from ancient Greece, it evolved from the ode to the god of wine in the sacrificial ceremony of the festival of the god of wine. In a tragedy, the main character inevitably suffers setbacks and ordeals and even fails to lose his life, but his reasonable willingness, motives, ideals, and passions foreshadow the arrival of victory and success. The heart-stopping power of tragedy comes from the deepening of the personality of the tragic hero.

Tragedy is roughly divided into four types: heroic tragedy, character tragedy, tragedy of fate, social tragedy. Lao She's *The Teahouse* should belong to the social tragedy, that is, the tragedy of the little people, through the tragic fate of the little people in the book to reveal the tragedy of the society and this era. The dramatic conflict in *The Teahouse* is expressed as the conflict between ideals and reality. The main characters' wish to save the country and their lives is contrary to this corrupt era, and all of them end up in a tragic ending [2].

3. Text analysis

3.1. Environmental changes

As a drama novel, *The Teahouse*'s environmental descriptions serve as the foundation for establishing scenes. *The Teahouse*'s environment acts as the stage for the characters' activities and the setting where the story unfolds. These descriptions not only elucidate the background, evoke the atmosphere, and create a typical setting for the characters' actual actions, but they also significantly impact the content and manner of the characters' activities, enriching the thematic depth with a strong sense of the times. *The Teahouse* acrosses the three historical periods showcase distinct atmospheres, and the novel conveys the overall tragic hues through both the descriptive details and the shifts in the environment.

Environmental description is generally carried out in two ways: one is to provide a broad social and historical background for the activities of the characters by depicting the social life of a specific historical period. From the beginning of the first act, the focus is on describing the life scenes, where people's daily routines like "bird fancying", discussing matters in the teahouse, and engaging in "various discussions and transactions, as well as acting as intermediaries and matchmakers" [3]. The overall social life is depicted as very relaxed and comfortable. However, in the last two acts, the number of tea guests dwindles, people are no longer free to speak their minds, the trend of wearing pigtailed fades, and the remnants of the late Qing Dynasty gradually disappear until they meet their end, reflecting the conclusion of an era.

Secondly, through the specific environment of the character's life, the layout and color tone of the depiction, we can highlight the character's temperament and interests. In Act One, it is described that once upon a time, the tea house was very tall, featuring long tables and square ones, long benches and small ones—all characteristic of a traditional teahouse. Even the backyard, visible through the window, boasted a high pergola beneath which teahouses thrived. Transitioning to Act Two, post-warlord era, the teahouse has adapted its appearance and style to avoid obsolescence. While the front part continues to sell tea, the rear portion has been transformed into living quarters. Now, the offerings are limited to tea and melon seeds; dishes like "noodles with minced pork" have long since passed into history [3]. *The teahouse* itself has downscaled to small tables with wicker chairs, no longer boasting the grandeur of its former self. By Act Three, the cane chairs have vanished, supplanted by simple stools and benches. Everything from the building to the furnishings appears drab [4]. The atmosphere of the teahouse mirrors the somberness of the times, growing rapidly darker and more oppressive, reflecting the loss of free expression in society and the increasing depression of the people [5,6].

Environmental description can render and set the atmosphere, express the character, and promote the development of the storyline, among other things. Analysing the environmental changes in the play allows the reader to witness the decline of a teahouse. From the long tables and benches to the small stools and benches, from the past's liveliness to the final decline, the gradual deterioration of the teahouse scene also symbolises the tragedy of the decline of this era [7]. It deeply conveys the tragic main theme of the novel.

3.2. Linguistic features

The play employs a significant number of retroflex finals (-er), such as 'Whole Village' (Quán Cūn'er in the original Chinese version), 'Today' (Jīn'er in the original Chinese version), and 'Tomorrow' (Míng'er in the original Chinese version) [8]. These retroflex finals carry distinct colloquial tones, which can be finely tuned to reflect the author's subtle emotions [7,8]. The scripts also show a particular fondness for the use of reduplicated words. For instance, phrases like 'just for a moment' (Zuòzuo Qū in the original Chinese version) and 'try somewhere else' exhibit a strong flavour of Old Beijing. Compared to the original expressions, these reduplicated words appear more authentic and imbue the work with the colours of that bygone era.

In addition to the Beijing dialect, Beijing culture is also influenced by the feudal era [5]. In the microcosm of the teahouse, Lao She particularly emphasises the rituals and constraints that persist under the influence of the feudal system; for instance, the "etiquette" of showing deference is ubiquitous within the text, and the patrons of the teahouse are also addressed as masters. In the opening act of the play, set against the backdrop of the final years of the Qing Dynasty following the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, Eunuch Pang is greeted with the words, "Oh my master! May Heaven bestow fortune upon you!" [3] Even Wang Lifa, the proprietor of the tea pavilion, addresses him deferentially as "my master," illustrating the pervasive nature of feudal bureaucracy. Not only do they adhere to etiquette, but they also seem to underscore the hierarchical order. For example, no one

dares to cross the foreigner-intimidating Master Ma Wu, and even Erzei must suppress his indignation. These vestiges of feudal society also signify that the new era is merely gilded on the surface, but rotten at its core.

Lao She also particularly likes to use humorous linguistic colors to vividly express the realm of irony and sorrow. As Li San once said, 'Reformed indeed! Soon you'll have nothing more left to reform' [3]; this sentence employs an ironic technique, using Li San's words to convey the sadness of the ineffectiveness of reform in that era. Another example is that the entire three acts revolve around state affairs, and the 'Do not discuss affairs of state' [3] posted on the wall serves as an ironic rhetorical device, satirising the dark government and the social environment where freedom of speech is restricted.

The Teahouse is Lao She's most iconic play, a major feature of Beijing School literature for its characteristic Beijing accent and strong Beijing flavour, and the work often features the use of authentic Beijing dialect. The play is predominantly in the form of dialogue, and the characteristic dialect adds to the immersion in the context and environment of the time. The characteristic dialogue of the characters not only reflects the traits of Beijing literature, but also foreshadows the tragic fate of the protagonists and serves as an epitome of this dark era.

3.3. Portrayal

Lao She's portrayal of his central characters is also very evocative. The main positive characters are divided into three categories, which can sum up the general historical process of New China during its turbulent period. These include the reform-minded teahouse owner Wang Lifa, the industrious Qin Zhongyi, and the upright and courageous Chang Sifu [1,9]. In the bustling Yutai Teahouse of old Beijing, people from all walks of life gather daily. Each character has a distinct personality, and the three main characters each face a different tragic fate, imbued with a strong sense of tragedy. Lao She expresses both sympathy and criticism for these characters [1,10]. Besides the more positive character portrayals, there are also quite characteristic negative characters, such as the feudal representative eunuch Pang and the trafficker Liu Mazi, among others. They remain corrupt to the end, treating the lives of common people as insignificant as weeds, rootlessly drifting like floating duckweed. Together, these three types of characters form this man-eating society. This paper mainly focuses on analysing the three positive characters to reflect the tragic core of the play. Unfortunately, these three types of positive characters do not complete the tasks of improvement and rejuvenation, instead succumbing along with the era.

3.3.1. Wang Lifa

Wang Lifa is the pivotal character of the entire work, permeating throughout. He represents the lowest stratum of working people in society, yet Wang Lifa's character consistently embodies an element of inherent goodness. For instance, when Liu Ma-zi engaged in human trafficking within his teahouse, his conscience wavered, revealing a latent kindness within his persona [11]. In the second act, as a merchant, he learns to be flexible and changes the arrangement of the teahouse, which is described in the book as "a sage of who follows the fashions" [3], which obviously reflects Wang Lifa's Characteristics of adaptation to new environments from the positive characterisation and the change of the teahouse. Wang Lifa is a character who "develops according to the times"; he is open to change, and simultaneously, the portrayal of a petty individual altering his ways for profit becomes more pronounced on the page. In the third act, Wang Lifa's suicide serves to depict the tragic conclusion of a small-minded man [1]. His dying words, "Why shouldn't I be allowed to live? Who have I hurt? Who?" [3], are a series of impassioned rhetorical questions that intensify the sombre tone, underscoring the tragic destiny of the secondary characters in the play and reflecting the drama's

tragedy through the characters' fates—not just their personal tragedies but also the historical tragedy of the epoch.

3.3.2. Master Chang

Chang Si Master is a late Qing dynasty Manchu official, straightforward, quickly embroiled in conflict at the start of Act One with Er De Zi, but fortunately, with Master Ma Wu's intervention, the dispute was brought to an end. However, upon learning of Master Ma Wu's allegiance, he retorts: "I've no time for people who serve foreign masters." [3] Though sharp-tongued, he is kind-hearted at heart. Resisting fate, he confronted it with positivity and dedicated himself to the salvation of his country and its people. He joined the Boxer Rebellion, battled against the foreigners, and ultimately lamented, "I love our country, but who loves me?" [3] This encapsulates his inner helplessness and bitterness. In the end, Master Chang remains ensnared by the tragic web of destiny.

3.3.3. Qin Zhongyi

Qin Zhongyi is a national capitalist who advocates for the salvation of the country through industry. In the first act of the play, Qin Zhongyi is portrayed as high-minded and arrogant, and he does not let the powerful eunuch intimidate him. He sought to save the country by engaging in industry, but at that time, very few people grasped his ideas and intentions. "I'm going to put all my capital together and start a factory... That's the only way to help the poor, keep out foreign goods and save the empire" [3]. However, due to the constraints of the era, he failed to realise his ambitious goal of national salvation, and the industry he had diligently managed for over forty years was seized. Towards the end of his life, he remarked: "If you have money, spend it all on wine, only enjoy life, and never try to do anything useful" [3].

4. Discussion

The author of *The Teahouse*, Lao She, descended from those who had lived in Beijing for many years, leading a comfortable life and enjoying what could be termed an aristocratic lifestyle. However, this dream was shattered after the Opium War, as the Qing Dynasty began to gradually decline. The repercussions of these transformations compelled Lao She to view the era with a critical gaze. Lao She embraced every opportunity that presented itself—the backdrop of a unique historical epoch, the diverse range of characters surrounding him, and, most importantly, he grasped the essence of human tragedy and emotions—experiences of sentiment, destiny, and personality [2]. Being a product of that particular era, Lao She possessed intimate insights into its realities, constituting the essential contextual prerequisites for crafting his narrative. To utilise the tragedies within the play as a cautionary tale for the world, reminding us never to forget the tribulations our nation has endured, Lao She, drawing upon his own experiences, crafted a series of poignant characters, orchestrating one tragic and deeply resonant scene after another. Through empathising with the tragic fates of these minor figures in their twilight years, he also incorporated the notion of tragedy, thereby birthing a work suffused with sorrow. *Teahouse* holds significant literary and historical importance; it unveils the inexorable dissolution of Old China's historical trajectory [12, 13] and transcends being merely a tragic piece, possessing substantial aesthetic and artistic merit.

It is also through this work that readers are able to catch a glimpse of an era that has long passed, with its transformations ranging from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the establishment of the Republic of China and up to the fall of the Kuomintang regime. This piece serves not merely as a portrayal of an epoch but as a profound reflection on human nature, societal dynamics, and historical progression. Each period of historical change is brilliantly presented on the small stage of this teahouse, thereby illustrating the profound influence of macro changes in society on the lives of

ordinary people. Through the singular setting of the teahouse, Lao She, with his distinctive brushstrokes, delicately depicts the living conditions of various characters, as well as their joys and sorrows in the social changes, thus constructing a colourful and vivid microcosm of the society. Though these narratives took place in the past, they continue to resonate strongly with contemporary readers, prompting deep reflection.

5. Conclusion

Lao She's Teahouse has been regarded as an excellent model for playwriting, and this paper analyses its linguistic artistic attainments; he is not only the creation of words composed of beautiful words but also the authentic Beijing dialect and vernacular, which makes the play more fresh and vigorous, and closer to the people's life in that era. Beijing flavour not only represents a dialect but also a culture, highlighting the sadness of that era. Character portrayal is also an important part. It can be said that the whole play is covered with a layer of tragedy, and the play's big tragedy is composed of the tragic fate of the small characters, the tragedy of the small characters, to achieve the tragedy of the age of the torrent. This paper mainly analyses the characters and destinies of Wang Lifa, the owner of the teahouse, Chang Si Master and Qin Zhongyi as cases. The environmental changes have also been buried in the whole article as a dark line and rendered the tragic atmosphere.

This paper is based on the classic work *The Teahouse* and delves into its tragic core. This play holds significant artistic value and has been widely discussed and studied by scholars and enthusiasts of literature and theatre. As a representative of Eastern tragedy, its tragic core is a focal point of research. This paper examines the attributes of tragedy through the lens of technical aspects, dramatic features, and textual analysis, offering fresh perspectives grounded in the findings of previous scholars while refining our understanding of the origins and artistic significance of "*The Teahouse's*" tragic core. Nevertheless, given the work's status as a classic, it is replete with intricate details, and the scope of this paper remains somewhat limited. Beyond the tragic core, "*The Teahouse*" possesses additional artistic values and literary accomplishments deserving of further exploration. Moreover, aside from the script, the theatrical performance (on stage) offers more immediate impacts that warrant investigation. Thus, researchers anticipate future discourse on the literary and theatrical merits of *The Teahouse*.

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