

Comparative Analysis of the “Madness” of Hamlet and Jia Baoyu

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Abstract: Jia Baoyu and Hamlet are respectively the representatives of classic "madness" images in Chinese and Western literature. And their embodiment of "madness" images is also strongly contrasted in the context of different cultural values. By comparing the descriptions and meanings of "madness" in the two images, it is of great significance to the in-depth understanding of the two classic works, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Hamlet*, as well as the perception of madness in Chinese and Western literature. This paper discusses the value conflicts and the concept of life and death behind the two literary characters, starting from the causes of madness. The research demonstrates that "Madness" is essentially the attitude and perspective towards human nature, and that both Chinese and Western cultures try in different means to integrate moral discipline and true nature into one, so as to achieve the redemption and sublimation of humanistic glory.

Keywords: Jia Baoyu, Hamlet, madness, human nature

1. Introduction

Madness is an important theme in the history of Chinese and Western literature. From Ancient Greece to the pre-Renaissance period, madness was associated with the spirit of Dionysus, which was regarded as a mysterious power with transcendental abilities in spirituality [1]. In the Renaissance, madness and irrationality were regarded as one and separated from rationality. At this stage of cognitive transition, "madness" combines the paradoxical sublimity of creativity and the evil of irrationality, and the constant struggle between the two contributes to a series of images of "madness" in literature, the most classic of which is the Hamlet of Shakespeare [2].

In China, "madness" has been regarded as one of the symbols of literary spirituality and included in the category of aesthetics since ancient times [1], and usually madness is closely related to the frustration of political and moral ideals. In modern times, the political and moral ideals have been extended to the transcendental understanding of life and worldly affairs, but the constant is invariably associated with the conflict of internal and external values. In *the Dream of Red Chamber*, Jia Baoyu, who is commented as "sometimes an idiot seemed and sometimes mad", is a typical representative of this mad culture.

As the classic images of "madness" in Chinese and Western literature, they have many commonalities and differences rooted in cultural backgrounds, and a comparative study of their "madness" writing can help to further understand the perception of "madness" in Chinese and Western literature. Consequently, this paper intends to take the conflict between inner nature and outer

morality as the starting point to explore the role of "madness" in the spiritual shaping of the characters. What's more, the analysis and study of the spiritual portrayal of mad literary characters can help highlight the differences and convergence of Chinese and Western cultural values.

2. Manifestations and Causes of Madness—Hamlet and Jia Baoyu

2.1. Hamlet

Hamlet's madness stems from a series of accidents and calamities. Growing up as the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet shines with the sublime light of human truth and is convinced of the perfection and nobility of mankind. Meanwhile, Hamlet is a firm and pure humanist, and advocates rationality. However, the death of his father for no apparent reason, his uncle's usurpation of the throne, his mother's remarriage to his uncle within a short period of time, a series of changes caused the former lovely family and bright future into nothing, Hamlet's situation is like falling from heaven to hell. Hamlet is shocked by his uncle's despicable behaviour of disregarding human relationship and killing brother, and he cannot accept his mother's indifference of abandoning love and succumbing to the enemy, which causes Hamlet's trust in the nobility of human character shaken and even collapsed. While Hamlet is in agony, his father's ghost appears in the middle of the night, telling the truth about the murder and urging him to revenge. Hamlet is hesitant to trust the ghost's words, as the ghost is a combination of irrational illusion and moral truth. The honour of vengeance and the concern for rationality struggle in his soul, which leads to his madness.

Hamlet's "madness" is actually a judgement made by others based on the moral standards and perceptions of the world. Through analyzing other's descriptions, Hamlet's mad behaviour can be concluded. In Ophelia's point of view, Hamlet is disoriented and miserable after suffering a terrible change in his life. From her pure love for Hamlet, Ophelia simply deplores and laments the fall of her beloved's mind, not knowing the truth behind Hamlet's madness. Polonius, who is also unaware of the truth, is convinced that Hamlet is trapped in love and thinks that "*this is the madness of a failed love affair*". They seldom pay attention to and ponder over the wisdom in Hamlet's madness, and on the whole regard his madness as a deviation from the morality of worldly behaviour.

On the other hand, Claudius and Queen sense fear and alarm at Hamlet's 'madness' since they are aware of the sinfulness of what they are doing. Claudius clearly foresees that Hamlet's "nonsense" poses a great threat to himself, while the Queen, faced with Hamlet's rebuke, confesses "*Thou turns my eyes into my very soul, and there I see such black and grained spots as will not leave their tinct*". As evidenced by the reactions of Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet's "madness" is full of warning and wisdom.

Although Hamlet is superficially dishevelled, verbally confused and illogical, the deep pain and wise philosophical thoughts that flow from his heart at times suggest the intriguing definition of "madness": it's not a kind of disease which is native to the individual, but the result of the conflict between one's behaviour and worldly perception.

2.2. Jia Baoyu

Jia Baoyu's madness stems from the confinement of Chinese feudalism, and his pity for the tragic fate of the girls in the Grand View Garden. Jia Baoyu hates the feudal rituals which promotes the value of entering the official abhorrence, so he even burns the books angrily in the face of Xue Baochai's counselling. However, Jia Zheng (Jia Baoyu's father) has high hopes for him and strict educational requirements. As a result, although Jia Baoyu is the apple of everyone's eyes and live a comfortable life, he is faced with the potential threat of feudal forces and confinement all the time. This kind of oppression is also concentrated on the girls in the Grand View Garden, who own distinctive

personality and perfect beauty. Their spiritual world is pure and rich, but they can hardly resist the ruthless manipulation of feudal forces on the fate, which arouses Jia Baoyu's deep pity.

Consequently, similar to Hamlet, Jia Baoyu's madness is also the judgement of others based on secular moral standards. In the third chapter of *the Dream of Red Chamber*, Jia Baoyu's poem of judgement describes him as "that both indoors and out he was disgraced (Yu guo yu jia wu wang)", which shows that the evaluation criteria is the Confucian view of merit and fame in the world. Most of the "mad" comments about Jia Baoyu come from other people's perspectives, for example, the ladies in the Grand View Garden often regard Baoyu's words that exceeds the rules of the world as "crazy words" and "dull words". Jia Baoyu has a spiritual consciousness that transcends the limitations of the times, but these anachronistic words are a kind of madness in others' perspective.

2.3. Comparison

Comparing the two people's cause and performance of madness, Hamlet's madness tends to be a moment of excitement, which is caused by the sudden major change of the outside world, while Jia Baoyu's madness is like fine water flowing through life, and gradually deepening the constriction bitterness over the years [3]. The most common feature of their madness is that both of them are to a certain extent the evaluation of others on their behaviours which do not conform to the social norms, and the madness contains their own beliefs and truths, as well as the bitterness of not being understood by others.

3. The Value Conflict between Inner Nature and Outer Discipline

Both Hamlet and Jia Baoyu are faced with the contradiction between moral discipline and the truth of their nature. Behind the madness, as well as in the juggling and exploration between the self and the outside world, Hamlet and Jia Baoyu gradually realise the maturity and perfection of their self-personalities, and cope with the contradictions and conflicts in their own unique ways [3].

3.1. Hamlet

Hamlet's inner self is a rational humanist who believes in the nobility of mankind and the power of reason. However, the external environment he faces is full of chaotic political struggles and mutual killings. From the philosophical point of view, Hamlet recognises the universal value of individual evil, which is a metaphor for the flaws and sins of human nature. The essence of such "sins" is the animal nature of human beings, and when animal nature invades the realm of social power and expands into brutality, it turns out to be evil under rational cognition[4].

In the Renaissance context, brutality usually has the potential to transcend the moral context, symbolizing the irrational in opposition to reason. The possibility of irrationality being tamed by reason and brought into the realm of moral critique is ambiguous [2]. In the face of the ghost urging him to take revenge, Hamlet is caught in a state of indecision, trying to defend rationality in his "madness". When his father's ghost tells him the truth, Hamlet questions whether the spectre he sees is the devil (irrationality incarnate), which in turn attacks his own tender melancholy and induces him to sink through this brutal flaw. He undergoes many cautious pleas before taking his revenge, until he finds conclusive evidence that convinces him of Claudius's guilt, and the source of the truth about his father's death is transformed from an irrational ghost to rational evidence. Hamlet finally returns to the rational context and resolves to take revenge by killing Claudius in the final duel.

3.2. Jia Baoyu

Jia Baoyu's inner self pursues the nature and truth of life. He loves the pure human nature, and respects and appreciates the natural spirituality of each individual. He regards the feudal rituals as the thing that taints the true human nature. The girls in the Grand View Garden is one of the few groups in the feudal society to retain the natural nature. Jia Baoyu reckons that the married girls have to be submissive to the constraint of feudal rituals, and even gradually turned into the accomplice of the feudal forces. According to Zhiyanzhai, Jia Baoyu loves everything, even concluding things without emotions", and his love extends from people to things. a true love for all life in heaven and earth [5]. However, the external environment Jia Baoyu faces is full of feudal force's oppression. Jia Baoyu treats people as equals, showing the same friendship and love to the ones he admires regardless of their status, but this kind of behaviour is regarded as exceeding the etiquette, for which Jia Baoyu is criticized and even flogged.

However, the pressure of external moral discipline contributes to Jia Baoyu's spiritual metamorphosis and personality refinement. Jia Baoyu's madness shows his spiritual growth and maturity, and his self-nature is becoming fuller and fuller. On the one hand, Jia Baoyu's love for the girls has gradually shifted from equal treatment to the search for a spiritual world fit. He is gradually getting closer to Lin Daiyu, who shares similar interest and value, and keeping more distant from Xue Baochai, as well as growing more fond of and respect for the natural and forthright Qingwen [5]. On the other hand, "Jade" is the symbol of secular status, while "stone" is a symbol of the true nature. Jia Baoyu's relationship with the Jade implies his betray of the feudal society in the course of his personality growth. Jia Baoyu's madness is often accompanied by smashing the Jade, which suggests that he is gradually breaking with the feudal forces.

3.3. Comparison

The "madness" of Hamlet and Jia Baoyu are both caused by the conflict between moral rationality and nature truth. The difference between the two is that Jia Baoyu regards human nature as the simple truth that is all in one, and although he is regarded as mad, his inner self-belief is becoming more and more firm and clear. Hamlet, on the other hand, elevates the external ugliness to human flaws, and the irrational truth symbolized by human nature struggles with rational beliefs, causing him to slip into madness. Compared with Jia Baoyu, the self-contradiction behind his madness is even more complicated and profound.

4. Hamlet and Jia Baoyu: The attitude towards Death and the Quest for the Meaning of Life

Faced with the spiritual suffering, Hamlet and Jia Baoyu are unable to seek the fulfilment of their own values from the external world, and thus turn to the pursuit of the ultimate meaning of life and the contemplation of death. Their views on life and death are rooted in traditional Eastern and Western cultures, and the way they settle their souls shows the unique light of each culture.

4.1. Hamlet

Hamlet is deeply involved in the struggle between reason and irrationality. As a rational humanist, Hamlet firmly believes in the nobility of man and believes that death extinguishes the glory of man. During the Renaissance, people's religious understanding and belief in the world after death wavered, and death became the realm of the unknowable and a symbol of the irrational, which is in conflict with reason and humanism. In order to settle the soul, people turned to focus on the happiness of the present world and the value of human life activity itself, so life became a precious thing that could

not be easily taken away. However, when reason collapses and the value of existence is reduced to nothingness, the irrational shadow of death invades the present world and madness becomes a preview of death [2]. The discourse of moral criticism deconstructs and the meaning of revenge dissolves. However, rationality prompts Hamlet to avenge his father's death, and the powerful action of putting his uncle to death is the proof of rationality, which is the necessary way for Hamlet, as a rationalist, to realise the perfection of his own humanity. The foundation of rationality is shaken in the shadow of irrational madness, and "to be or not to be?" predicts that the boundary between rationality and irrationality symbolised by the death becomes ambiguous.

During the delay, Hamlet witnesses many deaths in succession, and the accumulation of death experience prompts his view of death to become clearer and more mature. Facing the death of his father for the first time, Hamlet is deeply shocked by the horror of death and the grief of losing his father. The loss of life and the destruction of human relationships cause him to fall into the questioning and uncertainty of rationality. The second time he accidentally kills Polonius. At that time, the rationality collapses, making the contrast between the nobleness of life and the horror of death powerless, thus the meaning of life and death are both dissolved. The third time he faces the death of his beloved Ophelia, when Hamlet's chaotic and perplexed mind is once again awakened by the pain of death, which strikes his mind like a lightning bolt and makes him realize the madness that he has fallen into in his endless quest for rationality. Reason and madness are the opposite of each other, one and the same, and reason proves its value once again in madness. Reason finally incorporates irrationality into its conscious awareness [2]. The vividness of life and the heaviness of death shock his heart, making him re-examine life and feel the indelible glory of humanity. Hamlet completes the self-consciousness of death, and thus conquers it, frankly meeting his self-destiny [6]. The death of the duel contributes to the mutual understanding between human beings. Death symbolizes the recovery of reason and the redemption and sublimation of humanistic glory.

4.2. Jia Baoyu

Jia Baoyu's practice of the concept of "true nature" can only be limited to the world of the Grand View Garden, and he is deeply impressed by the weakness of his own resistance and the strong power of the corrupt feudal forces, so he is often plunged into the futility of life and sentimentalism [5]. His "crazy words" often mentions death, but Jia Baoyu's outlook on life does not stop at this seemingly negative pattern. In essence, Jia Baoyu has the transcendental Confucianism, that is, he dislikes the feudal rituals that bind the true nature, rather than rejecting Confucianism outright. Jia Baoyu thinks that the essence of "the civil officers die for admonishing, while the generals die for fighting" (Wen si jian, Wu zhan si) is to seek fame and honour, and to abandon the emperor and the country. He appreciates the real attention to people's livelihood in the world and seeking the great righteousness of the people, as well as the real care for the well-being of the people, which coincides with the origin of Confucius and Mencius's thought. Jia Baoyu criticizes the later generation's "fabrication", burning books written by later generations of Confucian scholars without the *The Four Books*, which proves that he just despises the concept of all kinds of merit and etiquette generated in the Confucianism.

Facing the depression of reality, Jia Baoyu also seeks enlightenment from Buddhism and Taoism. He is originally a stone on the Greensickness Peak, brought to earth by a monk and a Daoist priest, seeking transcendence and stability in the nature of "stone". No matter Confucianism or Taoism, the kernel of ideology is the concern for human nature, and the two doctrines are compatible and complementary. Since ancient times, Qu Yuan, Ruan Ji and other disenchanted scholars have practised the philosophy of "internal Confucianism and external Taoism (Nei ru wai dao)", which can be also seen in Jia Baoyu. In Cao Xueqin's (the author of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*) writing, Jia Baoyu, like many other "madmen" in ancient times, is a man who distinguishes between good and

evil. Jia Baoyu's outlook on life and death is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, full of truth and sound.

4.3. Comparison

Both Hamlet and Jia Baoyu fully affirm the value and glory of humanity itself and use it to dispel the emptiness of death. However, their perceptions of humanism are rooted in the soil of Chinese and Western history and culture, showing different tendencies. Hamlet's humanistic light is rationality, and his "madness" symbolises rational understanding and enlightenment. Whereas Jia Baoyu regards humanistic light as the true feelings of nature that are free from worldly constraints, which is originated from the unity of Confucianism and Taoism of traditional Chinese scribes.

5. A Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultures' Perceptions of the Nature of Madness

The madness of Hamlet and Jia Baoyu is a microcosm of the ideological dilemma of the times, and their images are typical and archetypal, thus containing the root "code" of the cognition of madness in Chinese and Western cultures.

5.1. Hamlet

Hamlet was written in the second half of the 16th century, a period when man was already sceptical about the existence of God, becoming more concerned about the value of man and the pursuit of worldly happiness, relying on rationality to understand the world and human. In this process, man inevitably encounters moral objects that are detached from the rational order, and realizes the animal instincts of human beings. The brutal truth becomes the end of rational knowledge, heralding the dissolution of reason, and brutality becomes an irrational and tragic existence. *In Hamlet*, Claudius's murder of his elder brother in his desire for power and the mother's submission to Claudius are symbols of the victory of brutality over reason. Hamlet, as a pure rationalist, strives for the perfection of reason, and the shameless behaviour of his uncle and mother implies that reason cannot overcome irrational.

On the other hand, reason made various attempts to "tame" the brutality. The literary and philosophical realm viewed madness as a moral flaw and error, and made reason and madness correspond to each other in the form of moral condemnation. People attempted to justify reason and morality, but couldn't be able to ignore the troubling undercurrents of brutal madness [2]. The ghost of father urges Hamlet to follow reason and morality in demanding revenge, but the ghost itself is nothing more than a dangerous phantom symbolizing irrationality. As the humanistic splendour of reason perishes, existence is reduced to nothingness. Death and brutal madness is presented to Hamlet as a preview of death. Hamlet tries to find the truth in the endless search for proof, but he is involuntarily drawn into madness. However, when madness and reason merge into a single moment, reason is also miraculously revived [2]. The world returns to order, and reason tames the irrational and incorporates it into its own discourse. Hamlet is awakened by Ophelia's death and finally faces his destiny frankly [6]. The change of Hamlet's thought is foreshadowing and reflecting the process of critical consciousness gradually replacing tragic experience of madness in the 16th century [7].

5.2. Jia Baoyu

In China, since the time of the Hundred Schools of Thought, the culture of "madness" has been closely associated with the temperament of intellectuals. Confucius' admiration for the "madness of Zeng Dian" already implies recognition of the freedom to express one's nature, suggesting the potential for unity between "madness" and "holiness". During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Wang Yangming, Li

Zhi and other representatives of the “madman” group questioned the distortion of Confucius' thought by the famous religion of Neo-Confucianism and respected the critical examination of the classics of the later generations. They recognized Confucianism from their own independent thoughts and temperament [8], which coincided with Jia Baoyu's transcendental Confucianism. This kind of independence and critical consciousness is in conflict with the moral discipline of the times, and is therefore regarded as madness. The “holiness” points to the ideal moral norms, while the “madness” points to the true feelings of nature and independent thoughts. The holiness is always examined by the madness, and is constantly self-correcting. Jia Baoyu is one of the men “with natures in which good and evil are commingled in more or less equal proportions”, showing both holiness and madness. He is a symbol of the deep tradition of madness in Chinese culture, possessing the high and clear temperament the same as Ruan Ji, Ji Kang, Li Bai and other famous madman.

6. Conclusion

Madness is an artificial definition from the outside, but it is essentially the attitude and perspective of human beings towards their “true nature”. Faced with the proposition of “nature”, the Western Renaissance culture opposed it with the perfect reason, seeing it as a threat and trying hard to tame it and bring it back. But reason and madness are themselves opposite, and containing the potential to move towards unity. Chinese culture can naturally accept the human nature pointed out by the tragic madness in the Western culture, forming a culture of madness with a deep historical origin. The free expression of one's nature and questioning of rules and regulations are regarded as the necessary way to the “holy”. The inside is the true nature of human beings, and the outside is the moral and ethical norms necessary for the operation of society. Both Chinese and Western cultures have tried to integrate the true nature of human beings with the moral rules and regulations, so that the two are opposite to each other and mutually dependent on each other, thus driving human civilization forward. Studying Hamlet and Jia Baoyu, we can clearly see the similarities and differences in the way Chinese and Western cultures deal with “nature”. “The way ahead is long with no ending (Lu man man qi xiu yuan xi, Wu jiang shang xia er qiu suo)”. Hamlet and Jia Baoyu as well as such kind of seekers use eternal spiritual light to illuminate the future, leading human nature to become more expansive, pure and true through the great waves of different times.

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