

The Voice of Monologues: Multiple Manifestations of the Inner Hearts of Dramatic Characters

Liangqi Liu^{1*}, Kaiman Pan², Ruoyu Tu³

¹Wuhan Yingzhong Senior High School, Wuhan, China

²Fuzhou Sedbergh School, Fuzhou, China

³Ulink High School of Suzhou Industrial Park, Suzhou, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: Casper200777@outlook.com

Abstract. This paper explores the dramatic function of monologues in Chinese and Western theater in the 20th century and earlier, with a focus on their role in character development and the depiction of psychological activity. Through an analysis of representative works such as Shakespeare's Hamlet and Cao Yu's Thunderstorm, this paper finds that monologues not only serve as an important means of revealing inner conflicts, but also play a central role in advancing the plot and deepening the expression of themes. In Western drama, monologues often carry philosophical reflections and self-examination, while in Chinese drama, they place greater emphasis on emotional expression and characterization through monologues. This difference in usage reflects the “cultural differences” between Chinese and Western drama in terms of narrative style and aesthetic concepts. Nevertheless, monologues still share the important function of expressing characters' emotions and revealing their personalities across different cultural contexts, reflecting the profound concern for the universality of human nature in dramatic art

Keywords: Dramatic monologue, characters, dialogue

1. Introduction

Monologue, as an important dramatic element, plays a significant role in the development of a play's plot. In a play, the progression of the storyline is not only driven by the actions and dialogue between characters but also relies on monologues to reveal the inner world of the characters. In dramatic works from the 20th century and earlier, writers often utilized monologues as a crucial dramatic tool to depict the rich and complex psychological activities of characters. For instance, in Cao Yu's Chinese play Thunderstorm from the early 20th century or Shakespeare's Hamlet from the late 16th century, monologues played a significant role in character development. In Thunderstorm, the inner monologues of characters like Zhou Puyuan and Zhou Fanyi reveal the suppressed suffering of people under the social conditions of the time and the conflicts arising from educational disparities; in Hamlet, the monologues gradually uncover the protagonist's vengeful psyche and moral dilemmas.

This paper will explore the role of soliloquy in character development and psychological expression in Chinese and Western drama in the 20th century and earlier through a study of the plays

Thunderstorm and Hamlet.

2. Feature and various types of monologues in drama

Characters have their own minds, just as humans do, instead of being puppets.

A dramatic monologue is one of the ways to show the different psychologies of how characters face various experiences in the drama realm. Meanwhile, dramatic play often involves diverse monologues for the creation of various roles, which can better show characters' properties and the results of their expressions.

2.1. Direct interior monologue

The monologue describes the role's frank words or subjective thoughts. For example, the line from Fan Yi, the main female character, was breaking down: [You push me to a situation which are not like a step-mother or mistress, you tempted me.] Fan Yi's straightforward judgement, which has no others' opinions involving her one relationship, her impressive love and doubt. Zhou Ping was her redemption under the unfairness and injury to females of the patriarchal society; she gave the heart but was finally abandoned [1]. [Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means.] When Hamlet saw the drama actors focusing on the "nonexistent" plots, he sighed with strong emotion about delaying the revenge plan, his hesitation, and struggle with it. Hamlet self-reflected his weakness, Fan Yi was crazy because of the exploitation from patriarchal society, their full character images also let the audience fall into, for feeling their real emotions [2].

2.2. Indirect interior monologue

It is involved in Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. [I did love you once. Are you honest? Are you fair? I did love you once.] The surface displayed his crazy words, in fact, he said out all his doubts and unbelievable state of love, was seeing "women's hypocritical nature" from his mother, made him believe all the women would follow their desire instead of mind, but the purity of Ophelia came to his mind. Hamlet was scared to see that they may act like his parents someday, which was why he asked Ophelia something doubtful for his own sign, which was his true mental breakdown under his pretended craziness [3]. In 'Thunderstorm', Zhou Ping's cold-blooded answer to Fan Yi : [You are the one I met the most intelligent, understanding woman, so I think you will forgive me. I don't care if you accuse me as a player or a chaotic bad man now, I can tell you that I expect this is the last time we talk.] His whole word expressed his expectation of washing his hands of Fan Yi quickly, used [You are the one I met the most intelligent, understanding woman] by implying Fan Yi about her status of his step-mother, this mature status as well let her realized his hypocritical, and if she chose to forgive him, it would inevitably decrease the guilty of this forbidden relationship, which involves ironic implication [3].

2.3. Self-interior monologue

[O all you hosts of heaven! O earth! And shall I couple hell? Oh, fie! Hold, hold, my heart! And you, my sinews, grow not instant old, but bear me stiffly up. Remember thee? Yes, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat in this distracted globe. O most pernicious woman! O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain! That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain; so uncle, there you are. Now to my word; it is "Adieu, adieu! Remember me." I have sworn." It is the plot device from Hamlet. He felt disgusted after hearing that his mother married his uncle a little time after his father's death, then he

broke down because he could not get revenge perfectly with a good reason, because he knew the truth that his uncle killed his father by using a non-humanistic way. It was one of the main factors that led him to become crazy and self-doubt. Finally, he started to talk to himself as if many people around him for verifying the truth. This uses self-interior monologue to show his expression of emotions, pushing the storyline obviously in this monologue.

2.4. Phase conclusion

These three different types of monologues, which relate to each other are not only augment the levels of creation which invisibly move the plot along to characters, but also increase the audience's immersions to draw into the play.

While multiple forms of expression----direct, indirect and self-expression display the complexity of human nature and social contradictions vividly.

3. A cross-cultural comparison of the portrayal of tragic heroes in the two works

3.1. Comparative analysis based on distinct cultural backgrounds

The formation and development of monologues in Western drama have often been shaped by two distinct cultural influences. One is Christian culture, and the other is humanism. Under these two cultural impacts, Western dramatic monologues have developed a defining trait: most of them tend to delve into and explore the characters' inner worlds [4]. More notably, they place special emphasis on using philosophical thinking to express the characters' internal contradictions and the existential challenges they face. Christian culture embodies a sense of "original sin," which runs like an underlying thread throughout the entire cultural framework. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's classic monologue—"To be, or not to be, that is the question"—reflects the profound influence of the Christian "original sin" consciousness on his thinking [5]. He reflects on morality and death, contemplates the existential dilemma humanity faces due to "original sin," questions the moral legitimacy of his revenge, and struggles with whether killing will worsen the sins of his soul. This reflects deep introspection on morality and death under the Christian concept of atonement. Since Christian culture has long focused on questioning the redemption of the soul, the interplay of these two cultural forces has laid a solid spiritual foundation for the existence and expression of monologues in Western drama [6].

Additionally, humanism has brought diverse perspectives and impetuses to the development of monologues. It prioritizes the value of "humans," thereby rediscovering human worth. In *Hamlet*, humanistic thought drives Hamlet to contemplate the value and meaning of human existence, as shown by his exclamation, "What a piece of work is a man!" This affirmation of human reason, wisdom, and value frees him from the mere constraints of religious authority. Faced with complex circumstances, he ponders how individuals can support their integrity and realize their values in a chaotic world [7]. His focus shifts from religious redemption to individual will and humanity itself, prompting him to constantly explore the meaning of action in his monologues. This shift effectively drove a transformation in Western dramatic monologues, leading to greater emphasis on individual will.

In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's monologues hold significance because they directly convey his inner thoughts, characterized by distinct "reflectiveness" and "internal conflict." Take his famous monologue "To be, or not to be" as an example; it poses philosophical questions that make Hamlet's inner struggle tangible and perceivable. On the one hand, he seeks to challenge the absurdity of the

world through revenge; on the other hand, he hesitates—due to uncertainty about the nature of death and doubts about morality and justice. Such monologues are not merely a simple outlet for the characters' emotions but also serve deeper purposes. Specifically, Hamlet repeatedly inquires into the meaning of life, reflects on the value of action, and deliberates on the boundaries of morality to articulate his ideas [8]. These inquiries and reflections aim to express a spiritual dilemma: the conflict between humanistic ideals and reality that humanists inevitably confront. Every monologue of the protagonist forms a gradual, in-depth self-analysis. Initially, he doubts his father's ghost, telling, "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil." Next, he looks down on his mother's hasty remarriage and sighs, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"—a line that clearly conveys his contempt. Later, he criticizes his own "procrastinating" nature and asks himself, "Am I a coward?" Through this in-depth process, the protagonist's complex mental state is gradually revealed: On the one hand, he is determined to seek revenge and cannot let go; on the other hand, he questions the righteousness of violence and refuses to blindly glorify it [9]. On the one hand, he has a profound understanding of human complexity and self-awareness; on the other hand, he feels lost and unsure of how to exist.

This monologue style stems from the "mimetic theory" tradition in Western drama, which emphasizes the right expression of characters' true psychology and reflects universal human existential issues through individual spiritual predicaments. As previously mentioned, Hamlet praises humans as "the paragon of animals" in his monologue. His monologues consistently center on the fundamental question of "how humans know themselves and choose to exist," elevating the monologue beyond a mere expression of the character's emotions to a carrier of philosophical thinking.

3.2. The portrayal of characters' inner worlds in monologues of Chinese classical opera: a case study of *Thunderstorm*

Monologues in Chinese classical opera—using the modern play *Thunderstorm* (influenced by traditional opera) as an example—use within the context of Confucian ethical culture and a patriarchal society. They place greater emphasis on the externalization of emotions and connection to specific situations to display the characters' identity, anxiety and helplessness within social relationships. Their core traits are "situationality" and "ethicity." The Confucian moral order of "ruler guides subject, father guides son" embeds individuals in family and social networks, making monologues a natural outlet for individuals struggling under ethical constraints [10].

In *Thunderstorm*, the monologues of Zhou Puyuan and Zhou Fanyi are closely intertwined with family ethics and social order. They reveal the characters' inner states in an oppressive environment through direct emotional confessions. Zhou Puyuan's monologues expressing "nostalgia" for Lu Shiping—such as his repeated mention that "the furnishings of this room have never been changed"—appear to be reminiscences of the past but are a defense of his feudal patriarchal authority. Each of his remarks emphasizes "order," and beneath this lies a fear of losing control over his fate and an obsession with family honor [11]. In this monologue, individual emotions always give way to family interests, embodying the Confucian concept of "self-cultivation and family harmony," where the individual is subordinated to the collective. Zhou Fanyi's monologues are filled with rebellion against her oppressive environment, as seen in her cries: "I am not a member of your Zhou family" and "I want to break free from this iron house [12]." These lines directly oppose personal emotions to the confinement of feudal family structures. Her monologues are often accompanied by intense movements and tones (e.g., smashing objects, speaking rapidly), continuing the traditional Chinese opera technique of "using emotions to construct a scene" and externalizing her inner anger into tangible emotional tension. Her monologues are not only an expression of her

own desires but also an accusation of patriarchal oppression—and this accusation is still tied to her identities as "Madam Zhou" and "mother." Her pain arises from the conflict between her individual emotions and her ethical roles. This monologue style inherits the "freehand" tradition of Chinese opera; it does not pursue Western-style in-depth philosophical reflection but instead highlights the characters' struggles within ethical relationships through their emotional outbursts in specific contexts. Monologues in *Thunderstorm* often correspond to the external environment, such as the symbolic use of *Thunderstorm* weather [13]. As a recurring natural symbol, *Thunderstorms* act like a boiling cauldron of emotions, intensifying the characters' inner turmoil. When Zhou Puyuan confronts Zhou Fanyi's resistance, the roar of a *Thunderstorm* embodies the externalization of his rigid order; when lightning tears through the night sky, it also creates an opportunity for self-reflection. For Zhou Fanyi, the *Thunderstorm* serves as a natural backdrop to her rebellion: the strong wind slamming rain against the windows mirrors her determination to break free from feudal shackles; the thunder echoes her inner cry for freedom and true love; the downpour is the release of years of pent-up resentment. These elements amplify her emotional fluctuations through natural forces, linking her personal inner pain to the social background and family fate, and making her inner world a microcosm of the era and society [14].

3.3. Differences in monologue traits across cultural backgrounds

Monologues in Western drama revolve around "individual reflection" and use philosophical questioning to depict characters' spiritual dilemmas. Rooted in the belief that "humans are rational animals" and Christianity's focus on soul redemption, they serve as a medium for dialogue between the individual, the self, and God, and aim to explore universal human nature. In contrast, monologues in Chinese opera (and plays influenced by it) center on "situational ethics." They connect social relationships through the externalization of emotions, display the characters' existential status within collective order, and align with the concept of "the integration of family and state." They stand for the voice of individuals either breaking free from or compromising within ethical networks and aim to reflect social reality [15]. The difference between the two stems from Eastern and Western cultural traditions: one is "inward-looking," while the other is "outward connecting." As a "spiritual window" of drama, monologues embody and convey cultural genes.

4. Conclusion

Monologues are a highly expressive technique in drama, serving the dual functions of conveying the development of a character's inner world and advancing the plot. In Western drama, monologues have always served as a bridge between the characters and the audience. Western drama emphasizes individual consciousness, and monologues often take on a philosophical and speculative tone, revealing the moral dilemmas characters face when confronted with psychological conflicts. In contrast, Chinese theater places greater emphasis on the fusion of emotions and situations. Monologues primarily serve to state facts, transforming inner emotions into the intrinsic meaning of dialogue to resonate with the audience. It is precisely these monologues rooted in dissimilar cultural contexts that give this dramatic technique its diverse forms and unique charm in both Eastern and Western theater. Through in-depth analysis, the authors can gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. The role of monologues in character development also helps us grasp the profound value of drama in expressing human emotions and addressing social concerns.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Cao, Y. (1996). *Thunderstorm*. In *The Complete Works of Cao Yu* (Vol. 5, p. 9). Huashan Literature and Art Publishing House.
- [2] Zhang, P. (2005). "Prison", "Nut Shell", "Monarch of Infinite Space" and "Nightmare": An Interpretation of a Line in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (1).
- [3] Cao, Y. (2000). *Thunderstorm* (Act 1, pp. 181-183). People's Literature Publishing House.
- [4] Li, H. (2019). *On the Philosophical Implications of Soliloquies in Hamlet* (Master's Thesis/Doctoral Dissertation, pp. 32-38). Fudan University.
- [5] Chen, G. (2020). Cultural origin and spiritual connotation of soliloquies in Western drama. *Theatre Arts*, (3), 45-56.
- [6] Wang, Q. (2018). Situational analysis of soliloquies in Chinese classical opera. In Z. Zhao (Ed.), *New Perspectives on Opera Studies: Collected Essays* (pp. 123-135). Culture and Art Publishing House.
- [7] Liu, Y. (2021, May 12). The development of soliloquies in Chinese modern drama from the perspective of *Thunderstorm*. *Literary and Artistic News*, (003).
- [8] Zhu, G. Q. (2002). *A History of Western Aesthetics* (pp. 234-245). People's Literature Publishing House.
- [9] Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet* [online]. https://lib2.buct.edu.cn/bookInfo_01h0138748.html (accessed 23 July 2025).
- [10] Nan Ci Xu Lu. (1959). In *Zhongguo Gudian Xiqu Lunzhu Jicheng* (Vol. 3, p. 246). China Theatre Press.
- [11] Jie'an Laoren. (1982). *Jie'an Laoren Manbi* (p. 194). Zhonghua Shuju. (Ed. by Zhonghua Shuju)
- [12] *Hamlet*. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet> (accessed 23 July 2025).
- [13] Greenblatt, S. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (as described on Harvard University English Department website) [online]. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/stephengreenblatt/will-world-how-shakespeare-became-shakespeare> (accessed 23 July 2025).
- [14] Bloom, H. (1998). *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books.
- [15] Bate, J., & Rasmussen, E. (2022). Review of RSC William Shakespeare. *Review of English Studies*, 73(311), 790-792. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgac048>