

The Influence of Eugene O'Neill's Tragedies on Cao Yu's Playwritings

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Abstract: Eugene O'Neill and Cao Yu are both viewed as the most prominent dramatists in American and Chinese modern drama history. This paper tries to analyze the influence of Eugene O'Neill's tragedies on Cao Yu's Playwritings from two aspects: the connotation of tragedy and the technique of tragedy creation, including characterization, the construction of plot, and the application of expressionism. In this way, how Cao Yu accepted, imitated and developed O'Neill's playwritings can be found easily.

1. Introduction

As the founder of American modern drama, Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) led the small theatre movement and serious drama creation, which created a new situation of American modern drama and made outstanding contributions to the development of the world theatre. Just as Yale University awarded O'Neill a doctorate in literature on June 23rd, 1926, "A man who has made creative contribution to one of the oldest Arts in a new form is the first American writer to enjoy a universal reputation and appreciation on the European stage". Since O'Neill was introduced to China in the 1920s, he and his works have been the focus of Chinese literary circles. Especially after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, there has been a boom in the introduction of O'Neill and his works, which lasted until the end of 1940s. It can be said that during this period, O'Neill was introduced and studied in an all-round way, involving not only his life and biography, but also the translation and introduction of his works. By the 1930s, O'Neill's five one-act plays and two plays were introduced into the Chinese stage. Chinese audiences could watch O'Neill's stage plays directly, which marked a new climax of O'Neill's spread in China. Cao Yu is a playwright with distinctive personal style and strong national style. Among the foreign dramas that Cao Yu came into contact with, O'Neill's influence on Cao Yu is the most complex.

This paper attempts to discuss the acceptance, imitation and development of O'Neill's tragic art in Cao Yu's dramatic creation from two aspects: tragic theme and tragic creation techniques, including characterization, plot structure and the application of expressionism.

2. Tragic Connotation

2.1 Tragic theme in O'Neill's plays

Born in an actor family, O'Neill grew up performing with his father's troupe everywhere, leading a life of vagrancy. In both primary and secondary schools, he lived a lonely life in a Catholic boarding school. In 1906, he was admitted to Princeton University and later dismissed for alcoholism. In the next few years, in order to survive, O'Neill wandered around, working as sailors, warehouse keepers, assemblers and so on. His rough social experience provides rich material for his creation. He understood the life and feelings of lower-class people. O'Neill lived in an era when the United States entered monopoly capitalism from free capitalism. The prevailing psychology in society at that time was that people felt hopeless because of the disillusionment of their ideals. O'Neill lamented, "We are tragedies in ourselves, the most shocking tragedies that have been written and have not yet been written."

O'Neill's family background, personal experience and age prompted him to think deeply about life and society which formed his own unique tragic concept. He believed that human beings could not avoid the control of fate. Behind life, there was a powerful force to push human beings to failure. But the power behind it came from human nature itself and human desires. The spiritual conflict within human beings determined human destiny.

The central theme of tragedy in modern society is the alienation of human beings in modern society and the loss of human value and dignity. The living state and spiritual pain of the characters in O'Neill's plays reflect the spiritual confusion that modern people are facing. His insight and analysis of human nature show that people in modern society cannot coordinate with society and reason. The conflict between dream and reality has lost the goal of life and the value of survival. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is O'Neill's reflection of the spiritual crisis of the times when belief is lost. In this play, O'Neill's psychological analysis of the characters has reached a new height, showing the different levels of psychological activities of the characters. The dialogue of the characters contains a large number of subtexts, which truly reflects the inner pain and struggle of the characters. O'Neill inherited the aesthetic character of Greek tragedy and successfully used the form of ancient Greek tragedy to express the way of life of modern people. O'Neill deeply understands the pain and perplexity of modern people's heart. His works focus on the display of human's inner contradictions and profoundly reveal the true tragic significance.

2.2 Cao Yu's understanding and recognition of O'Neill's aesthetic thought of drama

Cao Yu's appreciation of O'Neill's plays is the attraction of the soul and the enlightenment and understanding of modern drama aesthetics. Cao Yu believes that O'Neill's plays have the charm of grasping the soul of contemporary people. When exploring the root of the tragic fate of the characters, Cao Yu not only analyzed the external forces, but also explored the inner will of the characters. His tragedy presented the real content of the times and society, and gave people a rational view. The background of *Thunderstorm* is the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in China's social development. Cao Yu focused on exploring the spiritual value in the collision between external social forces and internal self-will by choosing many contradictions and conflicts that appeared in the replacement of the old and the new era. He regarded the psychological exploration of human beings as an entry point. He emphasized the deprivation of human freedom by specific external will power in the spiritual field, and the heavy price that human beings pay in the process of self-redemption. In *Thunderstorm*, Fanyi is a cold-looking and hot-hearted woman. The depressive atmosphere of Zhou Mansion makes her breathless. In order to pursue free love and release her passion, she has incest with Zhou Ping, regardless of her stepmother's status. For Zhou Ping, he tries to escape condemnation and hopes that his soul can be saved by himself. So he "seized Sifeng and refused to let her go. He wanted to clear himself with a new inspiration, but he unconsciously committed a more terrible crime." Cao Yu pays attention to the spiritual suffering and its essence that people have experienced under the double oppression of society and culture. Cao Yu's tragedy also contains rich social and cultural connotations with its unique personality characteristics, and its value is measured by its epochal and national characteristics. Cao Yu describes Qiu Hu as a fierce soul struggle in *The Wilderness*. Through the inner evolution of Qiu Hu, people can see the antagonism and conflict between the feudal culture concept and consciousness in the soul of Qiu Hu.

3. The Technique of Tragedy Creation

3.1 The exploration of real life, human nature in the form of drama

O'Neill is good at portraying the lower-class people. He believes that modern tragedy is the tragedy of ordinary people. Drama creation should explore everyday life and reflect the living conditions and emotional mentality of ordinary people. Therefore, O'Neill's dramas are based on real life, reflecting the characters and events from the bottom of society. Plays have a far-reaching impact. O'Neill accepts the traditional ideas from his own standpoint and uses drama as a weapon to

explore the human mind with his life experience, thus sublimating tragedy to the height of all mankind.

From 1933 to 1942, Cao Yu devoted *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *Wilderness* and *Peking Man* to modern Chinese drama, which can be regarded as classical masterpieces. Moreover, every new work has new experiments and creations in the exploration of real life, human nature in the form of drama. O'Neill wrote to his friends in 1920: "I will not be content to stick to any comfortable niche. It's absolutely nothing! I'm still young and I won't stick to any comfortable niche. It's O'Neill's manifesto of artistic innovation." In O'Neill's plays, melodrama and psychodrama, realism and expressionism have achieved a skillful integration. This is the theatrical realm Cao Yu yearned for and pursued. Cao Yu did achieve this state in his plays. This is another aspect of O'Neill's influence on Cao Yu. No other Chinese playwright has ever had such a wide and profound "dialogue" with O'Neill, an outstanding representative of 20th century drama on the other side of the ocean, as Cao Yu did. The significance of this dialogue lies in that it highlights the innovative vitality and unique features of Chinese modern drama art in the multi-cultural pattern of the world.

3.2 The application of expressionism

Expressionist drama flourished from the beginning of the twentieth century. Because it emphasizes the description of human intuition, subconsciousness, dreams and other spiritual activities, it provides a new visual and expressive means to explore human spirit for modern tragedy. By means of inner monologue, narration, stream of consciousness, masks and other techniques, and through psychoanalysis of the characters in the play, O'Neill opens up the inner world of the characters, and reveals the hidden internal ideological conflicts of people. *Emperor Jones* is O'Neill's expressionist masterpiece. The main manifestation is Jones' panic on the way to escape. O'Neill uses sound, mask and other devices to explain the complex heart of the characters. In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill breaks through the traditional way of expressing inner monologue and uses it as a weapon to express the character's soul. For example, there are six scenes in *Emperor Jones*, in which Jones' monologue is the main part, which vividly depicts the hero's psychological state of tension and panic when he absconds. The last scene in *The Hairy Ape* is when Yank tells the gorillas at the zoo about his pain. In order to better present the inner spiritual world of the characters, O'Neill often uses symbolic images to present rich connotations. For example, "Hairy Ape" symbolizes the human beings represented by Yank, while "Steel" represents the material power of modern capitalist society. The relationship between the two represents the social crisis brought about by materialism.

O'Neill combined realism with expressionism, which influenced Cao Yu. In the presentation of realism, the play *Wilderness* applies expressionism to the construction of drama and the inner display of characters. It uses drum changes similar to those in *Emperor Jones* to set off the inner psychology of the characters and create an atmosphere of terror and gloom. Cao Yu cooperates with the psychological changes of the hero Qiu Hu with the sound effect, and various sound elements set off the tense atmosphere of the stage, which shows the complex psychology of the characters' pain and despair. At the same time, illusion is also used in *Wilderness*. In the third act, after Qiu Hu and Hua Jin zi fled into the forest, five illusions emerged, which externalized the complex psychology and inner world of Qiu Hu. Meanwhile, the use of a large number of symbolic images in *Wilderness* implies the theme of the works: *Wilderness* is not only a place for the recovery of wildness, but also an analysis of the complex nature of human beings.

Cao Yu's works are mainly realistic dramas, which are influenced by O'Neill in the way of expression. By using expressionist techniques, Cao Yu strengthens the artistic expressiveness of portraying characters. This helps Cao Yu to push the expression of human nature in Chinese drama to a deeper level and promote the development of Chinese drama and literature.

Conclusion

O'Neill's influence on Cao Yu is complex and multifaceted. O'Neill has become the pioneer of American modern drama and created a unique style of drama in the wave of world drama

innovation. Cao Yu has also become an innovator and representative of Chinese drama. In the innovative transformation of melting other theatrical schools with realism, especially modern theatre, Cao Yu has been recorded in the history of world theatre with his unique national style.

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