

A Comment on Lawrence's Criticism of World-renowned Writers in His Poetry

Dong Wang

English Department, Foshan University, Foshan, Guangdong, 528000, China

ABSTRACT

In the poems titled "When I Read Shakespeare", "Now It's Happened" and "Tragedy", D. H. Lawrence makes his comments on world-renowned writers such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov from his own perspective, and puts forward his own views on tragedy. Based on Aristotle's definition of tragedy, Henry James' view of fiction, and the literary theory of Longinus, it can be concluded that Lawrence's comments on these world-renowned writers in his poetry are biased. Literary works should reflect the true face of the world and strive for the improvement of human nature and the enhancement of morality. However, if traditional morality is ignored, literary works won't be able to play a positive role in the progress of humanity.

KEYWORDS

Lawrence's criticism; World-renowned writers; Tragedy; Moral elevation

1 Introduction

Lawrence wrote poetry on various subjects, including literary criticism of world-renowned writers in poetic form. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and comment on Lawrence's criticism of writers such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, and to compare Lawrence's creative purpose with his works, attempting to draw a reasonable conclusion.

2 Lawrence's criticism of world-renowned writers in his poetry

2.1 Lawrence's criticism of shakespeare

In a poem titled "When I Read Shakespeare", D. H. Lawrence makes a comment on Shakespeare's works. In this poem, Lawrence discusses the characters in Shakespeare's three tragedies: King Lear and his daughters, Hamlet, and Macbeth and his wife:

When I read Shakespeare I am struck with wonder
that such trivial people should muse and thunder
in such lovely language.
Lear, the old buffer, you wonder his daughters didn't treat him rougher,
the old chough, the old chuffer!
And Hamlet, how boring, how boring to live with,
so mean and self-conscious, blowing and snoring
his wonderful speeches, full of other folk's whoring!
And Macbeth and his Lady, who should have been choring,
such suburban ambition, so messily goring
old Duncan with daggers!
How boring, how small Shakespeare's people are!
Yet the language so lovely! like the dyes from gas-tar. (Lawrence, 1994, p.408)

Lawrence thinks that Shakespeare's people are boring and insignificant, yet the language they speak is very cute. It is not easy for Lawrence, who is somewhat cynical, to express admiration for the literary works of other writers. Lawrence's comment on Shakespeare's language is objective. "Shakespeare's language is unparalleled, with a large vocabulary, strong expressiveness, and skillful and wonderful use. With over 19000 words used, Shakespeare is truly a master of language." (Zhang, 2009, p.2)

In Lawrence's view, the mission of a writer is to make the national spirit sound. If a writer fails to do so, they are a traitor to literature and a betrayal of the literary cause.

In Lawrence's view, even the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies are too self pitying, and their tragedies are insignificant compared to the tragedies brought to humanity by mechanical civilization.

In the poem titled "Tragedy", Lawrence talks about his understanding of true tragedy:

Tragedy seems to me a loud noise

louder than is seemly.
 Tragedy looks to me like man
 in love with his own defeat.
 Which is only a sloppy way of being in love with yourself.
 I can't very much care about the woes and tragedies
 of Lear and Macbeth and Hamlet and Timon:
 they cared so excessively themselves.
 And when I think of the great tragedy of our material-mechanical civilisation
 crushing out the natural human life
 then sometimes I feel defeated; and then again I know
 my shabby little defeat would do neither me any good
 nor anybody else. (Lawrence, 1994, p.421-422)

Thinking of the devastating damage that material-mechanical civilization has brought to natural human life, Lawrence believes that his personal defeat is nothing. Thus, to his mind, even the woes and tragedies of Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet and Timon are nothing when compared to the tragedy that mankind is currently experiencing.

From this, we can see that Lawrence's poetry is also a tool for his criticism and a mouthpiece for promoting his own ideas.

Lawrence stands on his own position and judges world-renowned writers based on his own standards. His fearless and outspoken personality is commendable, but some of his views may be biased.

One of the major features of Shakespeare's plays is their beautiful writing. The words that the characters in his plays speak are often full of inspiration and poetic flavor, leaving a lasting impression and providing imaginative space and enjoyment of beauty. Some words are often full of philosophy, giving people enlightenment in life. Lawrence's praise for the vivid and lively language of the characters in Shakespeare's works is appropriate. However, Lawrence lacks sufficient understanding of the value of other aspects of Shakespeare's plays, or his views are biased due to limitations in his worldview and literary views. In fact, Shakespeare analyzes the good and evil in human nature from the perspective of humanity in the form of drama, allowing the audience to reflect on themselves, purify themselves, distinguish right from wrong, distinguish between good and evil, and understand the aspects of human virtues that should be possessed, unconsciously achieving the standard of being a good person.

Characters in Shakespeare's works often have their own weaknesses and shortcomings, such as Hamlet's indecisiveness and lack of consideration. He pretended to be crazy in front of his lover Ophelia for later revenge instead of revealing his thoughts and feelings with trust, which objectively caused Ophelia to go insane due to pain and eventually die. He weighed the pros and cons repeatedly and missed the best opportunity for revenge. But it is precisely in this way that the audience can see a real character with flesh and blood. He combined indecision and courage, and ultimately overcame his own weaknesses and obstacles, eliminating the evil person Claudius who had killed his father and usurped the throne. He advocated justice with his own life and perfected his great personality. This vivid character image will bring many lively thoughts to the world: how to face evil, how to make life and death decisions, and so on.

Shakespeare's portrayal of characters in his plays often reveals deeper aspects of human nature. Macbeth was first tempted by the words of three witches to ascend to the throne of supreme power, and then incited by his wife, causing his desire for power to grow even stronger. He was blinded by his desire and stabbed King Duncan with a dagger when he stayed overnight at his home.

Ultimately, his evil deeds brought him and his wife retribution. Lady Macbeth gradually fell into madness due to her guilt and psychological pressure after regicide, and ultimately committed suicide. Macbeth ultimately fought against the rebel army led by Duncan's son Malcolm on the battlefield, but was defeated and killed due to the army's changing sides.

Through such a tragedy, the audience can gain a lot of enlightenment. They will be clear that one should not indulge in the desire for power. They will know that killing will be punished and that women should have female ethics, take care of their husbands and children, and not be as ambitious and ruthless as Lady Macbeth, inciting their husbands to seize power and harm their lives.

By watching such a tragedy, the audience's souls can be purified and they will have a clearer understanding of right and wrong. It cannot be said that such a tragedy is just a personal tragedy without significant meaning. On the contrary, it is precisely because Shakespeare's tragedy starts from human nature, excavates the despicable things that need to be eliminated in human nature, and thus has universal significance. It helps humans reflect on themselves, clear spiritual dirt, purify the soul, improve themselves, and meet the standards of being a good person.

In Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*, Timon was initially a generous and benevolent wealthy man. At that time, his family was often crowded with guests, enjoying the delicacies he provided and often receiving large amounts of money and generous gifts from him. However, when he was in a predicament, his once bustling mansion was suddenly deserted. When he urgently needed help, none of his former friends who had got great help from him were willing to give him any

help, and no one was even willing to return any of the money he had given him in the past to solve his urgent needs. He was very disappointed with human nature from then on, and even fled to the forest to avoid being with humans. He even wanted to destroy the entire Athens, and in the end, he left this world alone in his deep hatred for humanity.

Through such a tragic character, Shakespeare attempts to tell a deeper truth about life. Greed and unearned gains in human nature should not be tolerated. The practice of giving away wealth to others at will by Timon is also against heaven's will. Everyone has his own blessings arranged by heaven, and his lifetime wealth is also predetermined. Timon's arbitrary distribution of wealth to others is equivalent to destroying heaven's arrangement. His approach not only failed to gain gratitude, but also put himself in a difficult situation and ultimately led to despair towards humanity. At the same time, this drama also allows the audience to see the faces of those who are ungrateful more clearly and intuitively, and to deeply reflect on the standards of human beings. If a person is selfish, greedy and ungrateful, he will lose the meaning of life, become a walking corpse, and will even be hated and despised by others.

Shakespeare's tragedies conform to Aristotle's definition of tragedy and have a purifying effect on the human heart. In Aristotle's view, "Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents." (Bressler, 2007, p.20)

The destruction of human spirit by the material-mechanical civilization is indeed a tragedy, a universal tragedy that needs to be paid attention to. For example, many people have become slaves to wages and money in Lawrence's works. They live for the sake of survival, being tainted by cheap and worthless information, losing vitality, losing themselves, and losing their noble spirit. This is certainly a tragedy that requires human awakening and efforts to avoid. It is a tragedy unique to this special era of material-mechanical civilization. The tragedy caused by the imperfection of human nature is cross generational and has universal significance. The value of Shakespeare's tragedy is extraordinary and should not be underestimated.

To stay away from conflicts and conspiracies, to find a paradise and live a carefree life, was what Shakespeare, who wrote the Four Great Tragedies, yearned for. This can be reflected in the following poem taken from his play *As You Like It*:

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather.
Who doth ambition shun
And loves to live i' the sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleased with what he gets,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
but winter and rough weather. (He, 1999, p.108)

This poem was sung by Amiens, a follower of the exiled old duke, in the Forest of Arden. The old duke and his attendants left the palace and came to the forest of Arden, where they enjoyed beautiful natural scenery and lived a carefree life, singing along with birds. In their eyes, cold winters and bad weather were nothing. What mattered was that they were far away from their hostile enemies and enjoyed freedom in the sun. This poem showcases Shakespeare's attitude towards life.

The plot of *As You Like It* is as follows:

Rosaline was the daughter of a duke, and her uncle usurped her father's throne and exiled him. The duke and his attendants came to the Forest of Aden. Rosalind was left in the palace by her uncle to accompany her daughter Celia. Rosalind fell in love with Orlando, who was abused by her elder brother Oliver. Not long after, Rosaline was also exiled by her uncle and had no choice but to disguise herself as a man and flee to Aden Forest with her cousin Celia. Later, she met Orlando unexpectedly. Orlando saved his brother Oliver, causing Oliver to abandon evil and turn to good. And then Oliver fell in love with Celia. In the end, Rosalind found her father in the forest, and Frederick, under the guidance of the hermit, repented and returned the throne to his brother. And the lovers got married. The ending of the story is that good triumphed over evil, and everyone was happy. Here, the forest seems to be a purification field for the soul. This comedy expresses Shakespeare's longing for pastoral life.

The praise of truth, goodness, and beauty is a theme that runs through Shakespeare's works:

'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument,
'Fair, kind, and true' varying to other words,
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords. . (Shakespeare, 2008, p.210)

Lawrence shouldn't think that Shakespeare's people are boring and insignificant. Instead, they have universal significance and are in line with Shakespeare's portrayal of human nature. Shakespeare conceals the education of the world in the portrayal of characters in his plays, unconsciously changing the audience through the performances and endings of various characters, and making them realize the importance of being a good person in a subtle and imperceptible way.

2.2 Lawrence's criticism of dostoevsky, chekhov and tolstoy

From Lawrence's poetry, we can also see his criticism of Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Tolstoy.

Lawrence criticizes Tolstoy's work *Anna Karenina* in the poem titled "Now It's Happened", believing that a pair of rebels like Vronsky and *Anna Karenina*, if they could stand up for themselves and help Russia pull through crisis, Russia could be saved. In the poem, Lawrence also criticizes the pathological atmosphere of Dostoevsky and Chekhov.

The big, flamboyant Russia
might have been saved, if a pair
of rebels like Anna and Vronsky
had blasted the sickly air
of Dostoevsky and Tchekov,
and spy-government everywhere. (Lawrence, 1994, p.449)

Lawrence believes that Dostoevsky destroys the last remaining aristocratic spirit of the Russian aristocracy:

Dostoevsky, the Judas,
with his sham christianity
epileptically ruined the last bit of sanity
left in the hefty bodies
of the Russian nobility. (Lawrence, 1994, p.449)

And Lawrence also criticizes Tolstoy himself through this poem. He writes:

But Tolstoy was a traitor
to the Russia that needed him most,
the clumsy, bewildered Russia
so worried by the Holy Ghost.
He shifted his job on to the peasants
and landed them all on toast. (Lawrence, 1994, p.449)

Lawrence believes that Tolstoy should focus more on the issue of the mental well-being of Russians, rather than just the survival of farmers. He believes that Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's works are only "sob-stuff" of "such martyrs". "So our goody-good men betray us and our sainty-saints let us down." In Lawrence's eyes, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are only goody-good men and sainty-saints.

Yet Lawrence's criticism of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov is also biased.

Henry James proposes in his critical essay "The Art of Fiction" that "a novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression"; furthermore, "the only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result [are] innumerable." (Bressler, 2007, p.33) In his view, good novels must be a representation of life as it is and interesting.

Chekhov's novels just belong to what Henry James calls good novels. "Chekhov has his own unique way of writing novels, which is to approach things as they are, revealing the essence of life from the most ordinary phenomena... In addition, humor and wit are another major feature of Chekhov's novels, achieving the goal of sharp satire through light and humorous banter...Although most of his works are microcosms of daily life, he never gets stuck in the quagmire of daily life. Instead, the profound realism in his works often sublimates into philosophical symbols." (Chekhov, 2016, p.3)

Yet, the characters in Lawrence's novels have become increasingly stereotyped since his novel *Sons and Lovers*. Characters such as Birkin and Gerald in his novel *Women in Love* are deliberately created to promote what he believes to be a sound relationship between the sexes, lacking authenticity. And in Lawrence's novels, especially the novels after *Sons and Lovers*, we can see less and less of the true nature and fun of life.

According to Longinus, the first comparative critic in literary history and the first critic to define a literary classic, the

author must possess a great mind and a great soul, a text must be composed of dignified and elevated diction while simultaneously disposing the reader to high thoughts, and the reaction of a learned audience in large part determines the value or worth of any given text. And in the viewpoint of Socrates, the best way for people to live is to focus on the pursuit of virtue rather than the pursuit of material wealth. He stresses that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and "ethical virtue is the only thing that matters".

Shakespeare's works are based on the educational content of the Bible and interpret the teachings of the Bible, thereby having a purifying effect on the human heart. The neglect of traditional morality is the biggest flaw in Lawrence's novels, and whether it is Shakespeare or Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, their novels all aim to elevate morality. Just as Shakespeare's plays demonstrate the importance of moral elevation from various perspectives, through the portrayal and endings of different characters, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky also value the awakening of human nature and the elevation of morality in their novels. Tolstoy's *Resurrection* portrays the awakening of human nature in repentance, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* explores human nature, sin, and redemption. These classic literary works are of great benefit to the improvement of morality.

Yet, Lawrence's novel creation is not aimed at improving human morality, and deviates from the meaning that literature should have. Shakespeare's plays are interpretations of the Bible through vivid dramas. Tolstoy declares that "Heaven is in your hearts," but Lawrence loses his faith in God, as can be seen from the following poem titled "Retort to Jesus":

And whoever forces himself to love anybody

begets a murderer in his own body. (Lawrence, 1994, p.544)

Thus, it is hard to gain moral elevation and spiritual purification from reading Lawrence's novels.

3 Conclusion

In summary, Lawrence's criticism of writers such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov is biased. Lawrence criticizes material and mechanical civilization and focuses on the soundness of national spirit in his own works, which is a positive aspect. However, due to his ideological misconceptions, his works ignore traditional morality, and thus fail to play a positive role in improving public morality and boosting public spirit.

About the Author

Dong Wang (1969-04), male, Han, Born place: Zhengzhou City, Henan Province, Title: Lecturer, Master of English Language and Literature, Research Direction: British and American Literature; English language.

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