

美国文化论辑

STUDIES ON AMERICAN CULTURE

(第一辑)

四川大学外文系 编

主编 朱通伯

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目 录

世界是个大舞台 罗义蕴(1)

莎士比亚谈时间与空间 (10)

莎士比亚谈真、善、美 (27)

莎士比亚谈友谊与爱情 (45)

莎剧中人民的命运与民族的苦难 (58)

莎剧中的悲喜交错 (71)

莎士比亚的悲剧与喜剧要点 (84)

哲理悲剧《汉姆莱特》 (94)

苔丝狄蒙娜的灾难 (102)

奥尼尔的悲剧世界 (115)

《天边外》的悲剧心理 (125)

悲剧玩笑——评《奇异的插曲》 (136)

女英雄或反女英雄? ——评《悲悼》 (146)

论家庭的悲剧——比较巴金与奥尼尔的当代悲剧意识 (153)

酒神的狂喜——评《榆树下的欲望》与川剧《欲海狂潮》 (163)

输入与反馈——莎剧在川大课堂 (169)

美国英语教学研究 向晓华(176)

美国ESL 学生的学习风格 (178)

美国语言测试的发展.....	(191)
美国ESL教学:交际法与以学生为中心相结合	(206)
交际任务对语言教学大纲设制的影响.....	(225)
外语学习的基本特点.....	(241)
外语学习的研究方向.....	(259)

交际与翻译——管窥尤金·奈达的翻译理论 ... 李国林(272)

语言的交际功能.....	(273)
交际的要素和翻译.....	(282)
附:中外译史述略	(299)

作者简介

(335)

STUDIES ON AMERICAN CULTURE

(Volume One)

CONTENTS

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE	Luo Yiyun (1)
Time and Space in Shakespeare	(10)
Truth, Kindness and Beauty in Shakespeare	(27)
Friendship and Love in Shakespeare	(45)
People's Lot and Nation's Miseries in Shakespeare (58)
Tragic and Comic Essence in Shakespeare	(71)
Laughters and Tears in Shakespeare	(84)
<i>Hamlet</i> , A Philosophical Tragedy	(94)
Inevitable Catastrophe for Desdemona	(102)
O'Neill's Modern Tragic View	(115)
Tragic Essence in <i>Beyond the Horizon</i>	(125)
Tragic Joke—Comments on <i>Strange Interlude</i> ...	(136)
Heroine or Anti-Heroine?—Comments on <i>Mourning Becomes Electra</i>	(146)
Tragedy of the Family—A Comparative Study of Modern Tragic Essence Between Ba Jing and Eugene O'Neill	(153)
Dionysian Rapture—Comments on <i>Desire under the Elms and Storms of the Desire Sea</i> in Sichuan Opera	(163)

Feedforward and Feedback—How Shakespeare is Taught in Sichuan University	(169)
RESEARCHES IN ESL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN USA	Xiang Xiaohua (176)
ESL Students in USA; Their Learning Styles Preferences	(178)
Advances in Languages Testing in USA	(191)
Incorporating a Communicative and Student-Centered Component ESL Teaching	(206)
Communicative Tasks, Influence on Languages Curriculum Development	(225)
Fundamental Characters of Foreign Language Learning	(241)
Research Direction in Foreign Language Learning	(259)
COMMUNICATION AND TRANSLATING—A Glimpse at the Translation Theory of Eugene A Nida ...	Li Guolin (272)
Communicative Functions of Language	(273)
Elements of Communication and Translating	(282)
Appendix: A Survey of Translation History in China and Foreign Countries	(299)
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	(335)

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

世界是个大舞台(系列论文)

——Critical Opinions on Shakespeare and Eugene O'Neill

评莎士比亚与奥尼尔

罗义蕴

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Luo Yiyun

Preface 序

In the long run of human history, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, there are two most outstanding playwrights who use the same language to create their arts. One was born in the 16th century in a small town of an English riverside, the other was born in America's biggest metropolis before the turn of this century; one gives a clarion call to humanism, the other gives a psychological search to the heart of darkness; one writes in blank verse and soliloquy, the other writes in coarse dialect and poetic aside; one takes the kings and princes as his heroes, the other takes the stoker and farmers as his protagonists; one is regarded as king of English literature of all times, the other is unquestionably modern America's greatest playwright, and the only one ever to receive Nobel prize.

They are William Shakespeare (1564—1616) and Eugene O'Neill (1888—1953).

As their greatest achievements lie in common in the literary genre of tragedy, putting them together to make a research is a study of English and American culture, a study of English and American literature, a study of human nature in universality, and a study of theatrical technique in uniqueness.

I. The Classical World and the Modern World

Shakespeare lived at a time of great political changes, economic changes, religious changes, and cultural changes. That is Renaissance. It is the golden age of literature, the spring of

hope. But Eugene O'Neill lived to see the two great world wars, the large-scale man slaughtering, the shaken religious belief and the sharp contrast between "the have" and "the have not". However, it is also a flourishing time of American literature. Many American authors attempt to depict modern man's perplexity and sublimity.

In this critical series, I put the two into the context of their times and compare them under the same themes in their arts, such as love, revenge, war, religion and family crises.

II. Personal Education Background

Shakespeare was born and died at Stratford-Upon-Avon, a place very near Oxford. But he never entered the then known university. It is generally assumed that William attended a grammar school and probably received a good education in the Latin language; there is evidence that some of Stratford merchants were, or could be, well-read and well-educated.

From 1582—1592 Shakespeare's life is a blank. By 1592, Shakespeare was already successfully embarked as a dramatist in London. He is known to have been an actor as well as a playwright, but tradition associated him with small parts, Adam in *As You Like It* and the Ghost in *Hamlet*. He was certainly one of the most successful English writers of his time. There is no evidence that Shakespeare did not write the plays attributed to him and no reason why he should not have done so. ^①

Eugene O'Neill was the son of a celebrated romantic actor in a travelling theatre company, best known for his role as the Count of Monte Christo. Eugene happened to be born in New

York while his father was performing there. He spent his childhood on trains, in hotels or backstage in theatres. When he got older, he was sent to catholic boarding schools, which he hated. In 1906 he entered Princeton University but he only stayed there for one year. He became a seaman, and for five years he travelled all over the world, working at all sorts of hard jobs in many different countries. He called the experiences of life his "real education" and decided to become a playwright in the winter of 1912, when he entered a hospital in America with tuberculosis. ®

Both of them attributed their achievements to their theatre experience and life experience, instead of diplomas and fortunes. Therefore to make a comparative study of these two playwrights is both interesting and worthwhile.

III. Point of View

As a great humanist in Renaissance, Shakespeare regards man as a masterpiece of God, "noble in reason, infinite in faculty"® Although in his plays, he depicts human avarice (as in *Timon of Athens*), ambition (*Macbeth*), jealousy (*Leontes in Winter's Tale*), all evils (King Claudius in *Hamlet*), yet he still believes man can find a harmonious universe through mercy, through conversion, through the younger generation, or through arts and love. On the other hand, O'Neill tries to discover the root of human desires and frustration. He shows most of the characters in his plays to seek meaning and purpose in their lives but all meet with tragic defeat. He strikes the note, "A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his struggle is his success! He is an example of "the spiritual signifi-

cance which life attains when it aims high enough, when individual fights all the hostile forces within and without himself to achieve a future of nobler value."⁴

The two playwrights' philosophy on man and nature is quite different but it provides the clue to understand their arts, as well as to understand "Tradition and Individual Talent"⁵

IV. Technical Literary Strategy

If you ask whether Shakespeare is a realist or a romantist, you can hardly choose an answer. He can be both or even more, because he sometimes writes about dream, subconsciousness or vision. He can be quite modern as a surrealist or expressionist, or psycho-logical writer. Eugene O'Neill is angry for being misunderstood by his critics to be called as naturalist, expressionist, or a lying moral romantist or sordid realist. He is a daring experimentalist as once he noted "to make myself a melting pot for these methods, seeing some virtues for my ends in each of them, and thereby if there is enough real fire in me boil down to my own technique,"⁶

In my essays I compare the two playwrights' technical strategy, both literary and theatrical.

V. Diction

Shakespeare uses Early Modern English, with some structures, spellings, meanings, pronunciations different from late modern English since the 18th century. In my essays many quotations from Shakespeare are interpreted in the original sense, or in different layers of meanings, such as the word "conscience" in

five different meanings. As I have mentioned in the first paragraph, Shakespeare's characters speak according to their roles; The kings and nobles speak often in blank verse, the common speak in prose form, the inner heart thinking is spoken in soliloquy. Being a playwright and poet, Shakespeare is most talented in using figures of speech besides the widest extent of his vocabulary.

Eugene O'Neill is a master of modern American English. His characters speak according to their role and their social status. The intellectuals speak standard English (as characters in *Strange Interlude*), the Black speak Negro English (as *The Emperor Jones*), the sailors, farmers and stoker speak ungrammatical English but still tangible (as Yank in *the Hair Ape*). O'Neill uses a lot of symbolic language, stage directions, asides to achieve dramatic effect. He is also a master of conversational style and a master of American slangs. So to examine the two writers' works is to study the diction used by people of all walks of life. It not only gives us a wide range of English vocabulary, but also gives us pleasure and wonder of the English language itself.

VI. Music

Music is one of the six elements in tragedy advocated by Aristotle. It is often used at the most touching moment in a play. The drum and fife are for martial music, the tabor and the pipe are for peaceful merriment.^⑩ Shakespeare dots his drama with many lyrical songs, such as Desdemona's Willow Song:

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,

Sing all a green willow;
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow;
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmured her moans.
Sing willow, willow, willow;
Her salt tears fell from her and soften'd the
Stone —

— *Othello*, Act IV scene 3.

If the stone can be soften'd, let alone the heart. Music has the power to arouse and to stir.

Eugene O'Neill has a musical soul. His tragedies can be interpreted in the music structure and music term, such as sonata form, Bach's counterpoint, chorus or duet. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the song *Shenandoah* is repeated several times suggesting different mood of the protagonist and also it pushes forward the plot:

"Oh, Shenandoah, I long to hear you
A-way, my rolling river
Oh, Shenandoah, I can't get near you
Way-ay, I'm bound away
Across the wide Missours."

When the song is heard in the last time, Lavinia bids the gardener and singer, "You go now and close the shutters and nail them tight... And tell Hannah to throw out all the flowers." "If a life is without sunshine, without flowers, without love, without songs, it is a doomed tragedy.

The two tragedians are quite aware of the music quality in their plays. It is important for critics to notice and hear.

Conclusion

Shakespeare and Eugene O'Neill are conscious symphonic artists. Their plays have elaborate structure and rich meaning. Like music, there exists no adequate word in any language. But beauty has a catching power. What I try to interpret is within my limited scope of appreciation as a Chinese viewer. Besides, two articles in parallel comparison are especially added to display modern Chinese writer's concern about tragedy and the transplanting of tragedy.

Notes

- ①. *Longman Companion to English Literature*, ed. Christopher Gillie, *Shakespeare Biography*, P. 784
- ②. *A Brief Introduction to Modern American Literature*, by Elizabeth Booz, Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, Lecture 10, Eugene O'Neill, P. 169
- ③. *Hamlet*, Act III, scene 1
- ④. *A Drama of Souls*, P. 13, from "The Extraordinary Story of Eugene O'Neill" by Mary Mullet.
- ⑤. Title of a famous critical essay by T. S. Eliot
- ⑥. *A Drama of Souls*, P. 28, from *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* by Barret Clark, 1926, New York
- ⑦. *From Much Ado About Nothing*, Act I, scene 3.