Comparison of Daiyu's and Clarissa's Tragedies

Jiao-yan YANG and Xue PENG
School of Humanities, Sichuan Agricultural University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

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Abstract. This paper compares and contrasts the tragic characters of Daiyu in *Dream of Red Mansions* and Clarissa in *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, analyzes the superficial and underlying causes for their tragedies and demonstrates that culture and society have impact on the individual destiny.

Introduction

*A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* were drafted nearly in the same period, with the former about in 1750 and the latter in 1747 to 1748. *A Dream of Red Mansions*, one of the four classic novels in the Chinese literature, depicts the decline of a thriving big feudal family with the narration of a love tragedy between Baoyu Jia and Daiyu Lin and it is not confined to their love tragedy. Instead, it goes far beyond it to explore the deep social and cultural causes leading to it, such as feudalism, the feudal marriage routines and ethical relationships. Therefore, the novel offers readers an insight into China’s society at that time. *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, an epistolary novel and a masterpiece by Samuel Richardson, describes the eagerness and the desires of an upstart family to become part of the aristocracy, which leads to the tragedy of Clarissa. Over one hundred letters written by Clarissa in the novel reveals the inferior social status of women at that time, such as the helplessness of women in the face of strength and power of men. The revelation of the novel arouses the concern of the literary world about the social discrimination towards women, thus putting forward the preliminary feminist ideology. The article firstly compares and contrasts the tragic figures of Daiyu and Clarissa, and then probes into the superficial and underlying causes for their tragedies so as to reveal that culture and society have great effect on the individual destiny.

Comparison and Contrasts between Two Tragic Heroines—Daiyu and Clarissa

As tragic heroines in the novels of the similar times, Daiyu and Clarissa share similarities and display their respective uniqueness, which will be elaborated as follows.

Similarities between Daiyu and Clarissa

Daiyu and Clarissa are all beauties in the mind of their contemporaries. At the first meeting in the Red Mansion, everyone is amazed by Daiyu's beauty, which is proved by the facts that everyone present at the first meeting with Daiyu is by her air of natural distinction, by her good breeding despite her young age and that Xifeng praised Daiyu's beauty by saying “this is the first time I've set eyes on such a ravishing beauty. Her whole air is so distinguished!”[1] And Daiyu's beauty is not skin-deep, but her beauty lies in her elegance and her freedom from vulgarity. In the same way, Clarissa's beauty lies not only in her outstanding appearance, but also her refined deportment and her noble virtues. Lovelace, the hero in the novel compliments her as “a sweet auburn beauty, a first beauty among beauties when her sweeter friend (with such a commixture of serene gracefulness, of natural elegance, of native sweetness, yet conscious, though not arrogant, dignity, every feature glowing with intelligence) is not in company.”[2] Her appearance attractions are shown by her illustriously fair skin, her starry-shining eyes and the appellation of “the famous and blazing Clarissa” used by her sister who is jealous of her. Besides, she is also praised by Lovelace in his letter to his friend as an angel and a goddess.

Daiyu and Clarissa both pursue pure love but fail to obtain it, which gives rise to their tragic ending. Daiyu is lonely in the Rong mansion with the only bosom friend, Baoyu, from her childhood to her
adolescence. Although the love between her and Baoyu is equal, sincere and free from vulgarity, which are consistent with the standard of modern love, yet she fails to attain the love and the marriage she aspires for. In effect, she feels the unlikelihood of her marrying Baoyu from the very beginning because the “gold and jade match” of Baoyu and Baochai is always mentioned intentionally or unintentionally. Despite that, Daiyu still expresses her love for Baoyu directly and unremittingly. Similarly, Clarissa is after pure love and respectable marriage all her life. But what she attains is imprisonment and forced marriage with the boorish guy chosen by her snobbish families or the impudent fellow, Lovelace, who seduced her to elope and raped her in order to occupy her. Her pursuit of elegant love is doomed owing to the dominance of her family and the impudence of her so-called love.

Daiyu and Clarissa are both persecuted by their family. Daiyu, an orphan living in her grandmother's big family, is treated with hypercritical warmth and essential indifference. For example, Lady Wang treated Daoyu politely, but the politeness is a demonstration of indifference and superiority to Daiyu. Before Daiyu impedes the interests of the big family she lives in, everyone treats her with seeming enthusiasm. Yet when she does, she is the one who is sacrificed. Clarissa is alike in that she inherits the family estate from her late grandfather but she is regarded as a “dutiful daughter” and “a tool to expand family power” [3]. When she is a shortcut for the family to rise to the noble class, she is fully exploited by her family by arranging her marriage with a wealthy but horrible guy who promised to leave all the belongings to her family if they have no heir of their own.

Differences between Daiyu and Clarissa

Daiyu and Clarissa are beautiful in different ways. Daiyu is sensitive and suspicious so that she displays a kind of delicate beauty whereas Clarissa is innocent, insistent and virtuous so that her attractions, far beyond the skin-deep appearance, are unfolded by her noble virtues such as her insistence of her principles, and her forgiveness. It is worth mentioning that Daiyu is especially gorgeous in the eyes of her beloved Baoyu, but not in the eyes of the servants in Rong Mansion who think Daiyu is a hard person to serve, who is always fussing about some trifles to their mind. But quite differently, Clarissa is even an appealing angle to the mind of her hostile and jealous sister.

Daiyu and Clarissa pursue their love in different ways. Daiyu knows deep down that she is in love with Baoyu from the very beginning but Clarissa initially has no idea of her love for Lovelace, and she even denies it. Daiyu always expresses her love for Baoyu by quarrelling with him over trifles and forgiving him after he apologizes again and again. When it is impossible for her to marry Baoyu, she accepts the brutal fact obediently and silently, opting to die as extrication. On the contrary, Clarissa gradually realizes her love for Lovelace under the Lovelace's temptation and her family's suppression. When she is not allowed to love and marry Lovelace, she is bold enough to elope with Lovelace as a rebel against her family. And when even Lovelace cannot meet her pursuit of her yearning love and marriage, she is courageous enough to reject and leave him. Without the company of her love, she bravely lives on her own, refusing the assistance of others and still holding a good wish to pursue her love in heaven even before her death.

Daiyu and Clarissa are prosecuted by their respective families in different ways. Daiyu is ignored when it comes to the choice of Baoyu's spouse. And her family just decides the option without informing the persons concerned. Once the alternative is made, violation of the arranged marriage is not tolerated under any circumstances, then all the persons concerned accept the arrangement obediently whether they like or not. But Clarissa is informed by her family of her potential husband and her families take turns exerting pressure on her in order to make her accept the arranged marriage. What her family cares about is benefits and interests instead of her happiness and her love. To the surprise and dismay of her family, Clarissa refuses to accept the arranged marriage and insists on her pursuit of pure love.

Daiyu and Clarissa die different death. When Daiyu overhears the conversation between servants to ascertain that Baoyu will marry Baochai, all her hopes are dashed to pieces so that she rejects to cooperate with the doctor and considers the death as extrication. Consequently, she dies regretfully
with her unmet desires for Baoyu's love. And she is so obsessed with her own tragedy that she fails to
console those who care her. On the other hand, Clarissa dies preparedly and peacefully. When she
sense that she is doomed, she sets out to prepare for her death by purchasing coffin and making her
will. Her religious belief comes to her rescue in her last time for she is convinced that her life is
arranged by god so that she should accept it, thus being forgiven by god. And she does not forget to
comfort those alive by forgiving their wrongdoings to her and telling them that her death is like the
wedding with Christ.

Causes for Daiyu’s and Clarissa’s Tragedy

Daiyu and Clarissa are two significant tragic figures in Chinese and English literature respectively,
whose tragedies are caused by considerable factors combined. Specifically speaking, the causes can
be divided as superficial and underlying ones, which will be narrated in detail in the following.

Superficial Reasons

Their personalities lead to their tragedy. Daiyu is fragile ever since she is born, which makes her
sensitive, inconstant and gloomy. The very personality of her causes her to quarrel with Baoyu and
other cousins from time to time, which deprives her of Lady Wang's likes. Meanwhile, she is not
consistent with the values held by her contemporaries that man should study hard and pass the
imperial examination to obtain fame and fortune, which especially induces the dislikes of the
seniority who hope that Baoyu can recast the family's glory. On one hand, she is rebellious against the
feudalism. On the other hand, she still seeks protection from the representative of the feudalism like
Lady Dowager. On one hand, she enjoys the sweet talk with Baoyu. But on the hand she feels
offended by that. Her inconstancy partially leads to her tragedy. In contrast, Clarissa is independent,
well-educated, and is influenced by Humanism so that she years for freedom and pursuit of her own
happiness. As a result, she is so disobedient and rebellious that she refuses to sacrifice her own
happiness for the greed of her family and adhere to her principles always. There are also some defects
about her personality. She is too naive, proud and vain to think that she can influence and even change
people around her with her virtues, which leads to her tragedy.

The heritages that Daiyu and Clarissa inherit from her parents and her grandfather respectively do
not help them live a better life, but induce the exploitation of others. Daiyu is the only child of her
parents, so she inherits all the possessions of their parents. Her father assumes an important position
in the prosperous province and he definitely gathers a big fortune. And her mother, as the only
daughter of Lady Dowager, must have an abundant dowry. In the book Daiyu never lives a rich life
and seems not to know that she has an abundant heritage. Therefore it is predicted that all her heritage
has been occupied by her so-called relatives. Clarissa inherits the real estate, which she can have as
her dowry. In order to prevent the losses of the property, her families, especially her father and brother
tried all they can to control her marriage despite her own will. In other words, the fortune they inherit
does not bring them happiness.

Their rebellion is not acceptable to their contemporaries. Daiyu demonstrates her defiance against
the feudalism, such as never persuading Baoyu to study “Bagu”, a kind of essay required to be written
in the Imperial Exam. Her rebellious behaviors often offended the seniority of the family, partially
inducing her failure to be the wife of Baoyu. Clarissa fights against the arranged marriage and tries to
pursue her freedom, but her rebellion does not bring her the marriage she pursues. Instead she is
seduced, cheated and raped by her so-called Mr. Right.

Underlying Reasons

Daiyu and Clarissa live in a male-oriented and male-dominated society, which is the root of their
tragedy. Chinese attach great importance to the clan based on blood relationships. In the case of Daiyu
whose parents are both dead, it is common for the chief of Lin Clan to arrange for Daiyu's parents a
foster son who is chosen from the members of the clan and will inherit the majority of the properties
of Daiyu's parents. Then the adopted son takes care of Daiyu and arranges the future life for Daiyu.
But in the novel things do not take place like that, for Daiyu has no visitors from her father's side when she lives in Rong Mansion. It can be predicted that Daiyu's father must insist that her daughter inherit all the family belongings. Without the support of the clan, it is hard for Daiyu to get a good marriage. It is no surprise that Daiyu fails in the competition with Baochai for the marriage with Baoyu. Clarissa is in an unfavorable situation in comparison to her brother. Both her parents want her brother to possess all her family properties, including the part given to Clarissa by her grandfather. And she is treated as a commodity which is used to transact for the sake of the family. As a result, her rights, her happiness and her freedom are given little consideration, which inevitably leads to her tragedy.

Daiyu and Clarissa are influenced by some belief. Daiyu is greatly influenced by Confucianism which advocates that love begins out of affection, but should be controlled with the courtesy. And it is also advocated that marriage should be "the command of parents, the words of a match-maker", and the relation of the contract concluded between the two families for some interests. And under the influence of Confucianism, Daiyu cannot dare to express her love in public although she loves Baoyu deep down. Otherwise, she will be considered as flighty and despised by others. Besides, without the supportive clan of the family, it is impossible for her to the candicate for Baoyu's wife in the mind of the seniority of the Jia and Rong family. Clarissa is influenced by Christianity who advocates that everything happens for a reason and all things are arranged by God for a good reason, so what humans should do is tolerate them and purify one's soul in order to go to heaven afterwards. That's why it is relatively easy for her to accept the bad things happening to her and the death approaching her. She is even eager to die to join in her ideal husband in heaven.

Daiyu and Clarissa are both living in an instable society. The society Daiyu lives in is experiencing the transfer of feudalism from its prosperity to its decline. The big feudal family still wants to maintain their glory by all means so that the marriage objects for the family members should bring the maximum benefits for the clan. Of course, the top priority for their option must be the fortune, fame and power of the family in which the marriage objects are in. Their dread of losing the comfort they have enjoyed since they are born drives them to adhere to the marriage routines more intensely. As a result, Daiyu, who cannot bring any profits for the family, must be neglected when the marriage object is considered. Consequently, Daiyu is doomed to be a tragic figure of that instable society. Clarissa lives in a time when Capitalism is developing quickly. The development of Capitalism generates a group of newly-rising families who are eager to come to power. Clarissa's family is one of the kind. It is not surprising that her families spare no efforts to sell her for a good price. The arranged marriage for her comes naturally for the interests of the family. Clarissa inevitably becomes the sacrifice in order to bring the maximus interests of her greedy family.

Summary

Daiyu in A Dream of Red Mansions and Clarissa in Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady represent the tragedy of their times. Their beauty, inside or outside, has eventually conquered their beloved, but their beauty does not guarantee their marriage with their beloved due to the brutal reality. They are betrayed by their snobbish relatives. They refuse to compromise at the cost of their lives. The two novels are created almost in the same period. The tragedies of Daiyu and Clarissa are an unavoidable result of the times they live in.

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References

