

Identity and Otherness: An Analysis of Tragedy Effect in *Othello* from the Perspective of Terry Eagleton's Tragedy Theory

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ABSTRACT: Eagleton applies Marxist research methods, Freudian theory, and sociological perspectives, while combining anthropological, theological, and ethical methods to re-examine the theory of tragedy. The idea of tragic effects is the most important part of Eagleton's view on tragedy. He emphasizes that pity comes from the personal feelings of human nature, that is identity, the common essence between people. Fear is a reaction to altruism, based on the selfish nature of human nature, resulting in exclusion and conflict. The balance between the common essence of humanity and human selfishness leads to aesthetic pleasure when reading tragic works. The aesthetic pleasure is closely related to moral ethics which can purify morality, ultimately elevating it to the sublime of tragedy and externalizing it into human moral behavior. This process of shaping self-virtues not only improves the moral cultivation of others, but also enhances their moral character. It is also beneficial for the construction of the moral order of the entire society. Therefore, this article will analyze Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* from the perspective of Eagleton's theory of tragic effects, and further explore how the different tragic effects produced in the ambiguous dialectical relationship between identity and otherness closely connect the audiences and the protagonist, through forming a collusive relationship to help understand Eagleton's theory of tragedy and *Othello*.

Keywords: *Othello*; Eagleton; Nature; Other nature; Tragic pleasure;

I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is widely recognized as one of the most famous playwrights in the world, and his plays have been translated into various major languages, setting an insurmountable monument in the magnificent literary world. His plays serve as a mirror of historical truth and reflect his profound insight into complex human nature. The rich and profound ideas contained therein belong not only to his era, but also to all eras. Shakespeare lived during the Renaissance period, where culture and thought flourished unprecedentedly. The emergence of humanism led to intense turbulence in the harsh reality of capitalism. Shakespeare used his own works to reflect and criticize the turmoil and corruption of society. *Othello*, as one of the four great tragedies, not only tells the tragic love songs between generals and nobles, but also reflects human weaknesses and social reality as a human tragedy which deeply shocks the audience. It tells a story about a high and gentle lover who is the Moorish general with a humble background, fall in love with the noble white lady. Although Othello is brave and courageous in military affairs, his hidden weaknesses in personality, as well as the sinister

intentions of his subordinate Iago, still make the happiness and honor he has finally obtained that disappear like a mirror in the water. The characters in the play have intense conflicts, the plot is intertwined, and the fate of tragic characters is gripping, reflecting Shakespeare's profound understanding of human nature. It is precisely because of this, the masterpiece became one of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare's heyday and has been widely circulated to this day. Shakespeare showcases the pain and misfortune that people may suffer due to wrong choices in his plays, which not only enhances the tragedy of the play, but also further stimulates the aesthetic pleasure of pity and fear of the tragic receiver. This helps to enhance emotional resonance between people and better understand the humanistic care and emotional attitude conveyed by the playwright, thereby purifying the human soul and enhancing the noble side of human nature through suppressing the evil side of human nature. Therefore, in-depth study of the tragic significance in Shakespeare's plays has important ethical, aesthetic, and practical value.

II. PITY ORIGINATING FROM IDENTITY

Aristotle's interpretation of tragedy has always been the standard for later generations to judge tragedy. He believes that in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited (1898: 45). Therefore, Aristotle made strict requirements for tragic characters and plot, viewing pity and fear as manifestations of human fragility, and emphasizing the provision of a public treatment for those who are at risk of emotional fragility by excluding overly weak emotions such as pity and fear. Eagleton bravely questioned Aristotle's interpretation of pity and fear, proposing that Aristotle's creed is homeopathy. He suggests that it may be, as the philosophical egoists argue, that I feel for your trouble only because I can imagine having the same affliction myself; but there is a difference between feeling for and feeling. I do not have to feel your pain, in the sense of mimetically recreating it within myself, to feel for you. There is a difference between feeling sorry for you and feeling your sorrow (2003: 156). In his view, pity is not about imitation and understanding their feelings through empathy, but rather a personal feeling from one's own nature, starting from one's own emotions and experiences, and experiencing the feelings of others through one's own identity. Therefore, you can sympathize with the pain of others, or consider it as their deserved retribution, and be masochistic and unwilling to stop enjoying this feeling. Only in this way can you understand and appreciate the tragic protagonist's painful experience. This masochistic tendency is reflected in watching tragedies. The strict superego will blame people for not being able to prevent the disaster from happening, resulting in feelings of guilt, unease, guilt, and so on.

As the plot advanced, the tragic audience has a better understanding of the true nature of Iago, and also knows

Iago's despicability and shamelessness earlier than Othello. However, the tragic audiences are unable to stop the fact of Iago's evil plan, let alone tell Othello the truth. They can only watch Othello gradually loses his own judgment and walks towards the abyss under Iago's intentional guidance. The God of Fate played a joke on Othello, who was once in a high position and had a happy love life. Due to a meaningless lie which is lighter than a feather, Othello lost his hard-earned honor and status, as well as his beautiful and loyal lover. Although Othello's status and honor are far beyond the reach of ordinary people, under the careful arrangement of playwrights, the audience can feel Othello's inner pain and confusion. His struggles and helplessness also enable the audiences to see the infinite power of fate and the emptiness of life, thus awakening a common emotion in our hearts. Unfortunately, it falls on the brave and unparalleled Othello. Even if the disaster that

happened to him may not happen to ordinary people, the audiences will still feel pity for him. There is also the pure and beautiful Desdemona, who is so brave and fearless. She chooses to be obsessed with love without hesitation. Her love for Othello is as brilliant as poetry, but her life is as brief as summer flowers. Her disappearance is regrettable and regretful. Her innocence and beauty touch the heart of the audiences, bringing them a heartwarming emotional experience. Looking at the overall play, the structure of *Othello* is intertwined and progresses layer by layer. During this process, the relationship between the audiences and the characters in the play changes from estrangement to intimacy, naturally forming a symbiotic relationship. The audiences cannot help but feel worried about the fate of the tragic characters. Othello struggles hard in the carefully woven web of lies by Iago and cannot escape. Even Desdemona's confession of loyalty does not change Othello's decision, but the audiences who are concerned about Desdemona's safety will hope that Othello can be changed by Desdemona and that he can trust her innocence. However, at the end of the story, Othello disregards Desdemona's plea due to his trust in Iago, and ultimately mercilessly kills her. He then commits suicide after knowing the truth. At this moment, the reading expectations of the audiences have been completely shattered. Two innocent tragic characters lost their originally happy lives and paid the price of their lives due to the mockery of fate's impermanence and the deliberate framing of villains. The disappointment and regret brought about by the shattered expectations of the audiences further deepens their sympathy for the main characters. David Hume once proposed that the direct survey of another's pleasure naturally gives us pleasure, and therefore produces pain when compar'd with our own. His pain, consider'd in itself, is painful to us, but augments the idea of our own happiness, and gives us pleasure(1985:424). Therefore, according to Eagleton, the audiences can use this imaginative empathy when watching tragedy, starting from one's own natural identity, that is, starting from one's own emotions, using one's own nature to experience the feelings of the characters, and sympathizing with the tragic experiences of the tragic characters. However, at the same time, Eagleton always emphasizes that the audiences should pay attention to the distance between themselves and the tragic protagonist, and emphasizes that the object of pity cannot be regarded as completely equivalent to oneself. It means that because tragic works can to some extent align with our understanding ability and personal experience, they have a strong attraction to us and can be accepted and observed by us. The distance between tragic art works and us should not be too far. On the other hand, tragic art works are also distant to us, because if we introduce too many practical attitudes, it will affect the tragic effect of tragic works. Therefore, tragic works should maintain an appropriate distance from our personal experience, and should not be too close to us. Eagleton believes that releasing emotions is painful in itself, but the act of releasing these emotions is joyful. Tragedy characters in tragedy do not feel happy due to the release of tragic emotions, only the tragedy recipients who are detached from the situation will feel happy because negative emotions are released. If the emotions of the audiences are exactly the same as those of the tragic protagonist, pity will become self pity, and as a result, it will lose its judgment on fairness and justice, which is not conducive to the construction of the entire social ethics and morality, and is not conducive to the rational realization of human justice and freedom. Therefore, the following text will discuss the significant significance of public order and good customs in constructing their tragic views and exerting the ideological criticism of tragedy.

III. FEAR ORIGINATING FROM OTHERNESS

In Eagleton's view, pity is a private emotion, and fear, as a tragic emotion, is intricately linked to pity. Unlike pity, fear is not closely related to the identity of the tragic receiver. It is a public emotion, and fear is a force that pulls us back into the real world. The public sentiment referred to here involves the laws and ethical standards for maintaining social stability and fairness and justice. But there is no insurmountable obstacle

between the two. According to Eagleton's inference, the contradictory emotions of pain and happiness stem from the fact that the audiences cannot escape their selfish nature when experiencing the feelings of others based on their nature. Personal sympathy for others is not entirely a spontaneous imitation process, and in this process, they will also undergo a moral judgment of the other they are facing, in order to determine whether sympathy should be given. As Eagleton said, We see men and women chastised by the Law for their illicit desire, a censure which with admirable economy satisfies our sense of justice, our respect for authority and our impulse to sadism. But since we also identify with these malcontents, we feel the bitterness of their longing, a sympathy which morally speaking is pity, and psychoanalytically speaking is masochism. We share their seditious passion, while reaping pleasure from castigating ourselves for such delinquent delight. Pity brings us libidinally close to them, while fear pushes them away in the name of the Law (2003:176). Therefore, in this process, we need to divide ourselves into two parts. Part of it starts from one's own nature to integrate into others and feel their pain, arousing sympathy and compassion towards others through empathetic imagination. The other part is to rationally and objectively preserve its own ethical and moral standards from the perspective of the law, in order to make its own judgments on the outcome of tragic events and the fate of tragic characters. That is to say, in the process of experiencing tragedy, we cannot rely solely on our innate emotions and self feelings, but also on the power of law and morality, and make rational judgments based on objective facts.

The tragedy *Othello* is full of contradictions and conflicts, which contain a series of ethical and moral contradictions and conflicts related to friendship, love, family relationships, etc. The tragic characters constantly seek solutions in these conflicts and contradictions, and in this process, they will inevitably produce tragic effects. In an ethical environment where white people severely discriminate against black people, it is almost impossible for a black person to enter the world of white aristocrats. However, the Moorish Othello become a renowned general with remarkable military achievements in Venice. His skin color and bloodline are destined him to be discriminated against, but his outstanding military achievements earn him a high social status. The birth of inferiority and the aura of a general inevitably make Othello anxious and make incorrect ethical judgments. His love with the noble Desdemona is not blessed by everyone for his achievements. The unchangeable skin color and race become the wounds that keep oozing out from deep within him, like a cocoon tightly binding Othello. Later, he become trapped in the cocoon and is pushed into the abyss by the hidden racial inferiority and white supremacy in his heart. Iago, jealous of Othello's talent and status, attempting to strip him of everything. In order to satisfy his selfish desires, he set up a game to destroy Othello and cunningly lured him into it. Love makes people gullible and also makes them easily deceived. Undoubtedly, Othello deeply loves his wife Desdemona. However, when Iago hints that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair, he is dealt a heavy blow and even loses his ability to judge. Eagleton indicates that Othello is on the one hand too literal and gullible a reader, implicitly crediting Iago's lying words (1986: 66). His suspicion grows more and more severe, to the point where he become a puppet of jealousy and anger, killing the purest wife and love, and becoming a tyrant of love. Othello's ethical choices challenges the ethical values of the tragic receiver. As a husband, Othello does not give his wife enough trust, nor does he communicate wholeheartedly and candidly with her. With just one word, he convicts his beloved Desdemona, and this passionate and so-called pure love is truly paranoid and terrifying. If Othello could give his wife enough trust and tolerance, and give Desdemona and Cassio the opportunity to clarify the truth, perhaps he would not have made such an absolutely cruel and wrong ethical choice, nor would he have mercilessly killed his wife and pushed himself into the abyss of hell. However, the fairness and justice expected by the audiences ultimately failed to be realized, and the innocent Desdemona loses her beautiful love and even life due to a light and ethereal lie. As a husband, Othello does not fulfill the indispensable ethical requirement of mutual trust, respect, and tolerance in his marital relationship. Instead, he

excessively pursues or even deifies love, leading to a twisted and extreme heart. All of this made the audiences feel frustrated, powerless, and fearful of Othello who ignores the law and ethics.

Bradley points out that Iago is the main source of the convulsion in *Othello*(1992:26). As the major villain in the drama, Iago is a thoroughly sadistic maniac who racks his brains to pursue unattainable power. He enjoys the pleasure of manipulating the fate of others, using his wife who he shares with day and night as a tool for venting his desires, and his friends who share hardships as a tool for revenge. At the same time, he is also the actor who is best at disguise, the screenwriter who is best at writing the plot, the director who is best at manipulating people's hearts and controlling the rhythm. He successfully disguises himself as the most reliable and honest person in the eyes of those around him. Othello trusts him very much, Cassio would listen to his advice on reinstatement, and even Desdemona, who deep down believes Iago is very vulgar, would seek his help when misunderstood by her husband. Unfortunately, such a seemingly talented, mature and reliable companion, but inside resides a completely hypocritical, greedy, and inhumane demon. He wears a finely disguised mask, and his feigned enthusiasm and loyalty covers his dirty soul. Although the tragic characters are deceived by him and does not discover his ugly nature, the receivers of the tragedy are already aware of Iago's cunning and hypocrisy, so the distance between him and Iago become even more distant, and make very negative judgments about his behavior. Iago uses calculating plans to provoke the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. He deliberately uses ambiguous words and hints to stir up Othello's unease and pain. He continues to work harder, using the handkerchief that Desdemona accidentally dropped as evidence to prove her infidelity. His words hints at Desdemona's impurity and promiscuity, and uses them to stimulate Othello's sensitive and fragile nerves. In the end, Othello lost his sanity, kills his beloved wife. Iago's shameless behavior undoubtedly challenges the ethical values of the tragic receiver. Iago enjoys the pleasure of manipulating the fate of others and is obsessed with pursuing absolute power that he does not possess. Iago's absolute evil, his violation of superiors and disregard for public order and good customs, make the audiences feel uneasy and afraid of Iago's ethical choices, which leads to a very negative emotional experience in the heart of the audiences, which further triggers the audiences to feel fear towards the cruelty of human nature and emotional numbness.

Othello's tragedy is caused by both external and internal factors, and he also experiences painful torment and pays the price of death. The receivers of a tragedy experience a perplexed understanding of the tragedy of fate, an inability to salvage it, and a deep sense of their own weakness and insignificance, like an invisible, huge web that brings an overwhelming and threatened sense of fear to the audiences. Fortunately, Iago's scheme is ultimately exposed, and the characters in the play, like the tragic receiver, see clearly the evil and despicability in Iago's heart, and he also receives the punishment he deserved. Although in the process of experiencing tragedy, tragedy recipients feel fear due to their disregard for the law, social authority is ultimately upheld, which satisfies their inner sense of justice. The happiness that tragedy recipients receive in the sorrow of others comes from a sense of security protected by social contracts. The realization of fairness and justice leads to a kind of sadistic happiness in their hearts. And this kind of happiness is closely linked to fear. Shakespeare fully exposes the destructive consequences brought about by the evil nature, triggering pity and fear from the audiences in the process. Finally, by restructuring the chaotic ethical order, people believe that justice will eventually overcome evil, light will eventually defeat all evil and darkness, and the unscrupulous evil will eventually perish on their own. And this obviously helps to promote the construction of self virtues, promote the goal of comprehensive human development, and ultimately contribute to the construction of social moral order.

IV. PLEASURE ORIGINATING FROM BALANCE

Eagleton particularly emphasizes that the common essence of humanity is based on the materialistic

foundation of the body, because this common essence is similar to each other, so that people can have common emotions and produce aesthetic emotions such as pity. While the self interested nature of human nature leads to feelings of rejection and conflict, such as fear. But the common essence of humanity will balance egoism in nature, thereby generating compassion and sympathy for the disasters and pains of others. As Eagleton said, the tragic emotions, such as pity and fear, will bring aesthetic pleasure, which is what he calls pleasure. Othello is a representative of humanists in Shakespeare's era, who firmly believes in the nobility and greatness of humanity, and that the happiness that comes with hard work and happiness is worth waiting for. Grene comments that Desdemona is associated with images of heavenly beauty, is invested with symbolic significance (1996:106). Desdemona is the symbol of beauty and perfectness in his heart, and the embodiment of the noble virtue he pursues. When reading this tragic work, the receivers of the tragedy will witness a hero who is originally brave and upright leading to a dead end, and then experience negative emotions such as grief, pity, and fear.

Othello's feelings of inferiority and suspicion in the face of love, even if he already holds a high position, will still be regarded as an outsider by the mainstream white society due to his background. These personality flaws and unfair experiences have made this hero no longer unattainable, thereby bringing him closer to the tragic protagonist. The audiences gradually begin to worry about Othello's fate and understood the social background he faced. The audiences could sense his inner unease and inferiority. With a deeper understanding of Othello, the audiences are worried about his self doubt, resentful of his trust and jealousy, and angry about the discrimination and unfounded framing he suffered. At the end of the play, no matter how reluctant and unwilling the audiences may be, even if the tears left gather into a sea, there is no way to change the fate of the protagonist, and the ending is still the most unacceptable. Although Othello kills his wife due to jealousy and suspicion, his painful torment, victim identity, and tragic ending still evoke sympathy and pity from the tragic receivers. Not to mention the innocent Desdemona, she is so pure and beautiful. Her love is unreserved and passionate, and at the last moment of her life is still telling the story of her infatuation and unrequited love. However, due to a scam and a lie, died in the hands of her beloved. How can such a tragic ending not leave a deep impression and regret. Winston makes an explanation that, for drama to work, we have to be morally engaged, to care in either a positive or negative sense about the people being fictionally represented and what is happening to them (2005: 57). As tragic recipients, we also begin to desperately reflect on and contrast our own lives. Through imaginative empathy, we can empathize with the trauma and pain of the characters in the play.

The aesthetic pleasure generated by tragedy is both pity and fear. The reason why we face tragic facts and art can develop this emotion is due to the commonality of the entire human species, as well as the universal perception of suffering. In tragic art, both emotions of pity and fear originate from people's imagination, and they interact with each other. People feel pity when watching tragedies because they are afraid that bad luck will also come to them. The receiver of a tragedy may feel pity for the misfortune suffered by the tragic character, and may also develop further fear due to the fear that disasters and misfortunes will also fall on themselves. Eagleton argues that we reap moral and intellectual fulfilment from seeing the balance of cosmic justice harmoniously restored, though we also enjoy identifying with the rogues and rebels who disrupt it. Moreover, there is pleasure to be had from symbolically rehearsing and so disarming our own deaths, which fictional representations of death allow us to do (2003:169). When a tragic character is punished for the law, they will feel fulfilled due to the realization of justice, under the control of moral standards and social laws. Though torturing Iago cannot revive Desdemona or restore Othello's ruined life, Othello encourages the audience to accept the legitimacy of this proposed course of action: it is a gesture, however inadequate, toward repairing the damaged moral order (Greenblatt, 2004). At the same time, they will also associate themselves with the selfish

factor of their nature, worrying about their own safety and fate, and thus develop a sense of fear. Iago's malicious harm to Othello and Desdemona has become a foregone conclusion, and the lost lives can no longer be retrieved. The receiver of tragedy, while feeling regretful and pitiful, also feels satisfied because Iago has been punished. At the same time, seeing a great hero destroyed due to being persecuted by treacherous villains also makes tragic recipients feel fearful. Othello is a quick witted and seasoned warrior. He is not an ordinary person, but he can also make mistakes like an ordinary person. The cost of his mistakes is too devastating, making it impossible for the audiences to purely criticize his ruthlessness and cruelty towards Desdemona. Kind and sweet Desdemona is misunderstood by her husband and ultimately been killed. From beginning to end, she is innocent. Although she is killed by Othello, Iago is responsible for her death. Due to Iago fabricating the sexual relationship between Cassio and Desdemona, Othello believes that his wife is unfaithful to him. She is a victim of the Iago conspiracy. Before her death, she has no opportunity to defend herself. From this perspective, Desdemona is even more pitiful and tragic. When people see painful or destructive events happening to someone who is so beautiful that they should not be affected by them, they feel fear, afraid of how much pain and disaster it will cause when suffering strikes ordinary people like us. When an ordinary person suffers pain or disaster solely due to some mistakes or fragility in their nature, although it may not have serious consequences under normal circumstances, fatal weaknesses in their personality can lead to abnormal situations. Therefore, we are concerned that we may suffer misfortune like Othello due to weaknesses in their personality. In addition, due to the masochistic nature in our nature, we feel pain and happiness due to the suppression of the law by tragic characters, as well as the painful cost they pay. Moreover, because the masochistic nature in our nature is implemented by social laws, it allows the inner superego to obtain a satisfying tragic pleasure, while also experiencing pain and happiness. Its emotional characteristics are pity and fear.

V. CONCLUSION

As Paul Allen defines tragedy as a story with an unhappy ending that is memorial and uplifting moving compared to simple sad (2001: 224). The tragedy contains an upward force, and the tragic protagonist's beautiful soul, noble qualities, and tragic fate form a strong contrast, which can inspire people's deep sympathy and high praise. At the same time, in tragic conflicts, although the evil side destroys the beautiful existence, its shameless, despicable, and dark behavior highlights the protagonist's clarity, courage, and fearlessness, making people more resentful and disgusted towards the evil existence. Eagleton comments that tragedy gives pleasure because the purging of excessive emotion is enjoyable in itself; because we take pleasure in mimesis as such, even representations of disasters; because tragic art shapes suffering into a significant pattern, containing it while rendering it agreeably intelligible; or because it puts our own petty troubles in chastening perspective. We revel in the steadfastness of the human spirit in the face of mind-wrenching calamity, or find an epistemophilic satisfaction, however morose, in learning the truth and knowing the worst (2003:169). Inspired by pity and fear, tragedy provides a harmless way for the audiences to maintain a balance between physiology and psychology. As Nussbaum pointed out, literature can endow people with the power of imagination to imagine and understand the lives of marginalized and oppressed individuals. Imagination can integrate us into the lives of excluded individuals, allowing us to reflect on the world as observers, and to vent harmful elements of pity and fear and purify selfish elements, Ultimately achieving psychological and emotional balance and obtaining a noble sense of happiness (1995: 7-10).

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