

Comparative Analysis of the Tragic Characters of Jay Gatsby and Jia Baoyu

Qian Wang, Chi Huang

School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu University of Information Technology, China

ABSTRACT

Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* and Jia Baoyu in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are two famous tragic characters in American and Chinese literary works respectively. By comparing the two figures, this paper probes into the similarities and differences of their personalities and the social reality they reflect. This paper first analyzes the background, character and status of Gatsby and Jia Baoyu respectively, and then compares their similarities and differences, discussing how these similarities and differences reflect their respective social backgrounds. Finally, the article turns to the inspiration of these two tragic figures on the contemporary society.

KEYWORDS

Gatsby; Jia Baoyu; Tragic Characters; Personality Comparison.

1. INTRODUCTION

In literary works, tragic characters often attract readers' attention with their distinct personalities and tragic fates. Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* and Jia Baoyu in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are two typical tragic characters. Gatsby, who was born poor, became rich through unremitting efforts but failed to win the heart of his old love Daisy. His tragedy is the conflict between his persistent pursuit of love and the ruthlessness of reality. He desired to win love and social status through personal struggle, but he ended up miserably because of Daisy's betrayal and his own isolation. Jia Baoyu was born in a prominent noble family, but he held a critical attitude towards feudal ethics and secular values. His tragedy lies in the contradiction between the pursuit of true love and freedom and the bondage of the feudal society. He was eager to get rid of the expectations and bondage of his family for personal emotional satisfaction and spiritual freedom, but he finally fell into deep pain because of the decline of his family and personal helplessness. They represent two different classes of the 20th-century American "Jazz Age" and Chinese feudal Qing Dynasty, but their fate shares with tragedies. Through comparative analysis of these two characters, this paper will explore the similarities and differences of their character and the social reality reflected in the novels.

2. GATSBY'S CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jay Gatsby is born poor but becomes an enviable millionaire due to his tricky intelligence and unremitting struggle. However, his success does not bring him true happiness. He can't give up his persistent pursuit of his old love Daisy, which eventually leads to his tragedy. Gatsby's character can mainly be summarized through the following three aspects:

First, Gatsby is ambitious. Gatsby aspires to be a member of the upper class, and he tries every means to achieve this goal. His ambition is not only reflected in his pursuit of wealth but also his pursuit of

love for Daisy. To pursue his dream, Gatsby left his hometown and made great efforts, finally making his fortune. In addition, He always believed firmly that he could win Daisy's heart, but reality upsets him again and again.

Second, Gatsby is desperately persistent. Gatsby's love for Daisy shows his silly persistence and passion. In order to regain Daisy's attention, Gatsby spared no expense. He bought a mansion on the opposite side of Daisy's home and held a variety of grand parties just to attract Daisy's attention. What's more, Gatsby showed great enthusiasm for Daisy's cousin Nick, from inviting Nick to parties, to riding his seaplane, which aimed at getting Nick to help invite Daisy to tea. Even after Daisy killed the mistress of Tom in the car accident, Gatsby still took the responsibility on his own shoulders to protect Daisy. Even in the face of Nick, who was both a friend and Daisy's cousin, he tried his best to cover up the truth of the car accident.

Third, Gatsby is introverted and sensitive. Although Gatsby shows confidence and determination in social situations, he also has an introverted and sensitive side. He often appeared mysterious and reserved in social situations, because he felt uneasy for his past poverty and social status. This introverted and sensitive nature makes him more cautious and careful in handling interpersonal relationships.

Gatsby's story reflects the social reality of the "Jazz Age" in 20th-century America. This era is an embodiment of hedonism, desire and hypocrisy, and people will do anything to pursue fame and status. As a young man from the bottom, Gatsby is pursuing his American Dream, in which there may be sweet love, lots of money and high positions (Wei Lifang 2010: 76). But in the end, he cannot get rid of the negative influence of this era. His tragic fate is not only his personal failure but also the tragedy of the whole era.

3. JIA BAOYU'S CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jia Baoyu, the hero of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, was born in a prominent noble family. He has a complex, contradictory and multi-faceted personality, which mainly includes the following two aspects:

First, Jia Baoyu is both rebellious and obedient. Jia Baoyu is not willing to follow the feudal ethics, and pursues freedom, equality and true love. However, he has to make compromises and concessions in the face of the real dilemma and pressure. For example, he has to marry Xue Baochai and give up his admiration for Lin Daiyu under the pressure of his family. This contradiction between resistance and compromise makes his character more complex and multi-dimensional.

Second, Jia Baoyu is sensitive and affectionate. Jia Baoyu is full of love and compassion for the people around him as if he can feel the pain and joy of others. His passion and kindness make him have deep feelings with many women, but he also falls into emotional entanglements with them.

The story of Jia Baoyu reflects the evils of feudal society in Chinese Qing Dynasty. This era is characterized by hierarchical, patriarchal feudal ethics and people's thinking is bound in a narrow framework. As a young man with advanced thoughts, Jia Baoyu dares to challenge feudal ethics and secular values, but his resistance is not understood and supported by society.

4. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GATSBY AND JIA BAOYU

4.1. Similarities

4.1.1. Persistent Pursuit of Love and Ideal

Jay Gatsby and Jia Baoyu, two tragic figures from different cultures and eras, show striking similarities in their persistent pursuit of love and ideal.

Gatsby and Daisy had a brief and romantic love affair when they were young, innocent and full of dreams and hopes for the future. For Gatsby, Daisy was not only the first girl he fell in love with, but also the symbol of his perfect love and ideal life. In his view, Daisy's love is a key part of his "American dream." Therefore, he constantly strove to become a rich entrepreneur from a poor officer, all in order to win back Daisy's heart and create an ideal future with her. In addition, although Daisy was no longer the innocent girl in his memory, Gatsby's deep love for her was always the same.

Jia Baoyu, like Gatsby, was obsessive about his love for Lin Daiyu. In *A Dream of the Red Mansions*, there were numerous instances implying that Baoyu was willing to forsake everything for Daiyu, including his family's social standing, wealth, and reputation. A good example was that when they first met, he threw away his precious jade just because Daiyu didn't have any jade. He deeply understood that the affection between him and Daiyu was a rare treasure in the world, and thus he was prepared to make any sacrifice for this bond. Besides, Baoyu's feelings for Daiyu were sincere and direct. He never concealed his admiration and longing for her. He expressed his emotions through various means such as poetry, songs, and actions, allowing Daiyu to feel the sincerity and passion. This candid and straightforward expression of emotions strengthened their relationship, making it even closer and more profound.

It should be pointed out that both the protagonists finally faced failure in their love affairs --Daisy betrayed Gatsby who had taken all the blame for her and Jia Baoyu was forced to marry Xue Baochai, while Lin Daiyu died in despair-- even though they both chose to courageously pursue their true love and ideal.

4.1.2. Tragic Fate and Helpless Struggle

Gatsby and Jia Baoyu also made similar desperate struggles when they confronted with love crisis and social pressure.

Gatsby was born poor but fell in love with Daisy, a rich girl from the upper class. They were forced to separate due to the war and their disparate status. In order to win back Daisy's heart, he spent several years transforming himself from a poor young man into a wealthy magnate. Gatsby accumulated a huge fortune in a short time through illegal means and he became timid and self-conscious, afraid of people mentioning his past. At the same time, his beloved Daisy was no longer the simple-minded girl of the past, but became snobbish and vain. At the end of the novel, when Gatsby was shot by the husband of Tom's mistress while Daisy, the true murderer of Tom's mistress showed her shocking indifference, Gatsby's tragedy reached the climax. To sum up, all his struggles and efforts to pursue love and "American Dream" ended up in vain and even he paid for it with his life. Gatsby's funeral was a direct reflection of his tragic fate, and became a kind of profound irony. To be more specific, only few people including Nick and his father were present at Gatsby's funeral, which was in sharp contrast to the lively scene when he met celebrities and held grand parties, highlighting the indifference and hypocrisy of human and also triggering people's profound thinking about the social reality.

Jia Baoyu, though born in a prominent family, was deeply dissatisfied with feudal etiquette and family bondage. What's more, he also had a strong antipathy towards the traditional imperial examination system and moral norms, and was unwilling to learn the Four Books, the Five Classics and the stereotyped writing, preferring to read and write poetry, in pursuit of inner truth and ideal freedom. Through his rebellion as well as his persistent love for Daiyu, we can see Baoyu was fighting against hierarchy and restrictions in his own way.

However, he had to take deep root in the family that he deeply hated to live, which is actually a tragedy for him. In addition, Baoyu's tragic fate also reflected on his love affair. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu loved and cherished each other deeply. However, due to the restriction of feudal ethics and family interests, they were forced to part. Under the pressure of the family, Jia Baoyu finally married Xue Baochai but he had no true love for her. At the same time, Lin

Daiyu's death was a great hit to him, which plunged him into deep pain and despair. As a result, with the decline of the family and the collapse of love, Jia Baoyu's spiritual world was gradually destroyed. He abandoned his worldly bondage and prosperous life and chose to become a monk. However, his escapism was not the real liberation and detachment, but his helplessness and escape from the real world. His monastic life was full of loneliness and pain, and he could not get rid of his inner contradictions and struggles.

In the process of pursuing their love and ideals, the two protagonists have experienced inner struggles and contradictions. Jia Baoyu was torn between love and family duty; Gatsby was torn between ideal and reality. They were longing for a better life but had to accept the bleak reality, which made their struggle seem more helpless and fruitless.

4.2. Differences

4.2.1. Personal Traits

Although the two heroes both pursued their love and ideals persistently, Gatsby was more determined and persistent compared with Jia Baoyu. Unlike Jia Baoyu who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Gatsby started from scratch and had a clear vision of his goals and was willing to do whatever it took to achieve them, which made him more courageous and decisive in facing difficulties and challenges

In contrast, Jia Baoyu was more sensitive and affectionate than Gatsby. He could deeply feel the emotions and pain of others and was full of love and compassion for those around him. This sensitivity and care for others made him more emotionally delicate. However, his love and care also brought him endless trouble and pain, so that he could not give up the emotional entanglements with other girls rather than Daiyu.

Furthermore, Gatsby was more direct and aggressive in his attitude towards the society. He tried to break the barriers of social class through personal efforts and struggles to achieve his own social status promotion. However, in the end, he failed to break free from the constraints and rules of the society, and his dream was eventually shattered. However, Jia Baoyu was more reserved and even weak. He questioned and challenged the feudal ethics and secular values through his actions and remarks, but did not take any direct confrontational actions. He often vacillated between love, family and personal ideals, unable to find his true self and way out.

4.2.2. Personal Goals and Values

There are significant differences in personal goals and values between Jia Baoyu and Gatsby, which are not only reflected in their respective life backgrounds, but also profoundly show their different understandings of the meaning and value of life.

Gatsby pursued material success and the realization of the "American Dream". He believed that through hard work and struggle, he could change his destiny and achieve the leap of social classes. He constantly tried to accumulate wealth and held luxurious parties in an attempt to attract and win Daisy's heart and thus realize his love dream. However, Jia Baoyu pursued spiritual freedom and detachment, he longed to get rid of feudal ethics and family bondage, and desired for true self and inner peace. He hated official career and refused to be burdened by fame and fortune, hoping to find the meaning of life in poetry and emotional communication.

In Gatsby's values, material wealth was one of the important measures of success. He believed that only with sufficient wealth and high social status could he win the respect and recognition of others and realize his dreams and pursuits. At the same time, Gatsby firmly believed in the importance of personal struggle, and through his own efforts and adventures, he achieved the transformation from poverty to wealth. This value enabled him to maintain strong faith and courage in the face of difficulties and setbacks. But In Jia Baoyu's view, emotions and feelings were much more important

than material things. He despised those who only pursued money and status, thinking that they had lost the truth and goodness of human nature. He valued sincerity and love between people, as well as spiritual abundance and satisfaction.

4.3. Reasons for Their Similarities and Differences

By comparing the similarities and differences between Gatsby and Jia Baoyu, we can have a deeper understanding of the inner world and the social reality reflected by these two characters. However, we still need to probe into the reasons for their major similarities and differences.

For their similarities, there are three reasons why they both suffer tragic fate and love failure. First, both Gatsby and Jia Baoyu had insufficient understanding of the complexity of human nature to some extent. Gatsby idealized Daisy and love too much, ignoring selfishness, hypocrisy and compromise in human nature. He always believed that if he had enough wealth and high social status, he could win back Daisy's heart, but failed to see that Daisy had been changed by reality. Similarly, although Jia Baoyu had a deep understanding of the hypocrisy and decay of the feudal society, he was too romantic and simple-minded when dealing with his personal feelings, and failed to fully understand the complexity and multifaceted nature of human beings. In addition, they both lived in similar environment with strong social restrictions and oppression. American society in the 1920s was full of materialism and class rigidity, and through Gatsby's efforts he was never able to fully escape these constraints. While Jia Baoyu lived in the Qing Dynasty society with strict feudal ethics, his personality and emotions were strictly controlled and suppressed. The restriction and oppression of the social environment not only limited their actions and choices, but also intensified their tragic fate. Last, they both were caught up in the conflict between love and social class. Gatsby was trying to cross the class boundary, but he never really integrated into Daisy's class, nor could he change the choice Daisy made due to practical interests. In the similar way, the love between Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu was also hindered by the family and social class, which could not be recognized and supported by the society.

For the differences of their personal traits and pursuits, there are at least two major reasons. The first is their different cultural backgrounds. Gatsby lived in the 1920s United States, a time full of opportunities and challenges, and also a time when the "American Dream" prevailed. American culture emphasized individual struggle, success and material pursuit, which deeply influenced Gatsby. He believed that through his own efforts and struggles, he could cross social classes and achieved double promotions of wealth and status. However, Jia Baoyu lived in Chinese Qing Dynasty, a society dominated by strict feudal etiquette and radical Confucianism. Traditional Chinese culture emphasized ethics, family responsibilities and social order, and these concepts had a profound impact on Baoyu's character and values. The second reason is that they had disparate personal experiences. Gatsby accumulated huge wealth through illegal means, and the process was full of adventures and challenges. His struggle made him more convinced of the importance of personal struggle, but also made him cherish more his hard-won achievements. This experience shaped his character traits of perseverance and courage. But Jia Baoyu was born in a powerful and extremely wealthy family and he was greatly cherished from an early age and grew up in a rather comfortable environment. This affluent family background provided him with superior living conditions but also fostered his indifferent attitude toward fame and fortune. More importantly, With the death of important characters in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, such as Qin Keqing, Qin Zhong, Jin Chuan and finally Lin Daiyu, Jia Baoyu was forced to confront the fragility of life and the inevitability of death. These events made him start to think deeply about the meaning and value of life, as well as the powerlessness and helplessness of people in the face of death. Baoyu's knowledge of death and the various emotions he had accumulated in the process of facing death either led to his own death or to a complete change. (Cheng Min 2008: 155) This also foreshadows the tragic fate of his later choice to become a monk.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the comparative analysis of Jay Gatsby and Jia Baoyu, we can see the similarities and differences of their characters and the social reality reflected by each of them. Although these two characters come from different times and cultural backgrounds, their tragic fates both reveal the weakness of human nature and the ills of the society. Their stories tell us that the pursuit of true love and ideal is the common goal of human beings, but we should also be alert to the negative influence of the reality and the weakness of human nature. At the same time, we should also cherish the freedom and happiness we have, pursue our dreams and love courageously, and persistently fight for a better world.

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