

Analysis of Donald Barthelme's *The Glass Mountain* under Brecht's Dramatic Theory

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Donald Barthelme's *The Glass Mountain* under Brecht's dramatic theory. The paper first gives a brief introduction of Brecht's dramatic theory. It then continues to analyze Barthelme's short story *The Glass Mountain* under Brecht's dramatic theory from the perspective of "play within the play" and the whole "play". The conclusion is that Barthelme's writing concepts and intentions are consistent with Brecht's dramatic theory.

Keywords

Barthelme; *The Glass Mountain*; Brecht; Dramatic theory; Consistency.

1. Introduction

Barthelme is considered as one of the most avant-garde postmodern writers in American literature. His postmodern writing concepts and techniques such as emphasis on form, self-deconstruction tendencies, non-linear narration, fragmentation, collage principle and play on language prevent his readers from getting enchanted by his text. By thinking more and feeling less, his readers have actually become rational and critical thinkers rather than passive receivers of messages from the author. In a word, Barthelme's use of such writing techniques has paradoxically highlighted his political purposes. Coincidentally, to attack a corrupted capitalist society, Brecht's dramatic theory equally emphasizes the importance of staying rational and critical as audiences when watching the performance in the theater. Therefore, Barthelme's writing concepts have, to a large extent, showed his consistence with Brecht's dramatic theory.

2. Body

2.1 Introduction of Brecht's Dramatic Theory

Brecht proposed the alienation theory. To be specific, to alienate is to make a familiar event or person unfamiliar. The alienation effect can be achieved by depriving the well-known, take-it-for-granted and recognizable part of the event or the person's character. In this way, a feeling of shock and freshness comes out. The purpose of the alienation process is to offer thinking opportunities for audiences, a process in which the yet-to-be-comprehended are accumulated until audiences comprehend all. As a matter of fact, Brecht was inspired by previous writers and theorists. "Comedy is alienation, so it is not Brecht who invented alienation effect. The so-called alienation is to handle things in the way of a comedy."

Brecht was worried about drama in his own day. He confessed that when he walked into the theatre, he was much shocked at the mood and spirit of the audiences there. The audiences appear to be extremely nervous. They persisted in watching the performance though exhausted. Like a group of restless people sleeping together, they communicated little with one another. They could not see anything with their eyes wide open. Although they were listening attentively, they could hear nothing. In a word, they were so engrossed in the performance that they seemed to have been enchanted. In

Brecht's opinion, the audience representing the common folks should abandon pure recreation and disillusion themselves with rational and critical attitudes.

Brecht criticizes the "resonance" mode used in traditional drama. In Brecht's opinion, characters while giving performances should stay alert, trying to act his role out instead of being it. "An actor must keep a distance from the role he plays in the drama. The actor must be able to criticize his role. Apart from performing his role out, he must present a different role for the audience to choose from and criticize." For Brecht, it is high time to get rid of the deliberately man-made resonance reached through the mutual efforts made by the audience and the characters in the drama, because the audience can be so enchanted by this resonance mode that their capability of criticizing the characters and events happening in the drama fades away. Therefore, Brecht strives to endow his audience in the theatre with the ability to regain their critical thinking. He hopes that his audience can keep a distance from the characters in the drama and criticize them at their own will. In Brecht's opinion, only in this way can the audience get insights into the characters' performance.

Brecht attaches importance to the introduction of various artistic means such as chorus, caption, cinema etc. Also, he advocates the change of time and space structure of drama. Brecht once claimed, "If we try to put our day's play in the form of a historical one, the audience will certainly find it unique and unfamiliar. And that is the beginning of criticism."

Brecht confessed to the public his understanding about the political function of drama. He claimed, "In our era, we consider drama a means with political tendencies. But wasn't drama also about politics in the past? Previous drama also educates its audience to view the world just as the ruling class does."

2.2 The Application of Brecht's Dramatic Theory in Barthelme's Writing

2.2.1 Analysis from the Perspective of "Play within the Play"

The Glass Mountain by Barthelme is actually a "play within the play". The parodied fairy tale is set in the modern city. "The glass mountain stands at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue", "towering over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building". Based on Brecht's dramatic theory, Barthelme begins his criticism by putting his day's play in the form of a historical one to make the setting unique and unfamiliar.

The narrator "I" is the actor on the stage, trying to climb the mountain questing for something symbolic---a princess. "I" was constantly hindered by the flying eagle, but finally reached the top with the help of the eagle. The actor "I" climbing the glass mountain realizes the role he plays as a young, strong-willed knight, but fails to fulfill and sustain such a traditional role in modern society. At the end of the story, "I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess". Unlike the original hero, the actor "I" in Barthelme's story shows his vastly different behavior and mentality and his uttermost disappointment when winning the princess. So just as what have been mentioned in Brecht's dramatic theory, the actor "I" in *The Glass Mountain* manages to keep a distance from the role he plays, becoming rational and critical.

The citizens at the foot of the mountain can be regarded as the audience. Unlike people wandering in dreams, the citizens are by no means indulged in watching the narrator "I" climbing. They are also quite critical. They have offered their vulgar condemnation, vituperation and even curses to the narrator. Four-letter words such as Shithead, asshole, dumb motherfucker and fart-faced fool rather than encouraging words are offered. In a word, the citizens are by no means enchanted, and they can never reach resonance with the narrator "I".

Off the stage appears the bold description of a disordered and dog-eat-dog society. The chaos is detailed in paragraphs 28, 31, 55, 65 and 69: "In the streets were hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars.", "Someone had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken back among the VWs and Valiants.", "A heap of corpses both of horses and readers ringed the bottom of the mountain, many dying men groaning there.", "My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors." and "My acquaintances ere prising out the gold teeth of not-yet dead knights."

2.2.2 Analysis from the Perspective of the Whole “Play”

Under the guidance of Brecht’s dramatic theory, Barthelme in his short novel *The Glass Mountain* discloses alienation, purposelessness and absurdity of his day to achieve his political purposes. Barthelme in this novel employs many means to implement Brecht’s alienation theory.

First, collage. Interpenetration of all sorts of quotations, false or true, scatters through the story. These citations neither serve as a result or proof for previous sentences, nor do they function as transitions. They stand in the context independently and abruptly. By using collage principle, Barthelme enables his readers to think from non-traditional perspectives. The readers are led to focus more attention on the author’s writing processes and experimenting with words.

Second, parody. *The Glass Mountain* is a parody of a Scandinavia’s fairy tale with the title *The Princess on the Glass Mountain*. In the original story, the hero is a strong young man, trying to reach the top of the mountain with Lynx’s claws. But by using the alienation effect, the hero in Barthelme’s version turned into a sissy, fearful and weak-hearted anti-hero who lacks definite identity and is made a fool of by the spectators. In the fairy tale, the young man saved the beauty and they got married and had a happy life together afterwards. But in Barthelme’s version, when the young man finally reached the top, he threw the princess down the mountain. For modern readers, this character portrayal and ending are really absurd and unimaginable, enabling them to feel less and think more.

Third, catalogues. The alienation effect is also strengthened by using catalogues in the story. The mixed use of different catalogues, such as professional colors, invented knight’s names and the acquaintances’ vulgar remarks, successfully interrupts the sequence of the plot, rendering readers to think more about the author’s intentions. In appearance, the catalogue of the dogshit colors shows the author’s game play on words. In essence, it may show the author’s accusation of the polluted environment in modern society. In appearance, the catalogue of knights evokes the historical feelings. In essence, it may show the author’s irony on fame. By incorporating seemingly useless, unfamiliar raw materials into the text, Barthelme breaks the harmony of plot and put emphasis on clashes instead.

3. Conclusion

The present paper first gives a brief introduction of Brecht’s dramatic theory. Brecht proposed the alienation theory to make familiar events or persons unfamiliar. He appealed that both actors on stage and audiences in the theatre should stay rational and critical, avoiding reaching resonance between them. To achieve better alienation effect, Brecht also advocates the change of time and space structure of drama. To summarize, Brecht’s dramatic theory has its innate political tendencies. The paper then continues to analyze Barthelme’s short story *The Glass Mountain* under Brecht’s dramatic theory. From the perspective of “play within the play”, Barthelme cleverly creates the setting, actors, audiences and off-stage scenes that show consistence with Brecht’s dramatic theory. And from the perspective of the whole “play”, Barthelme successfully achieves the alienation effect proposed by Brecht through collage, parody and catalogues. The conclusion is that Barthelme’s writing concepts and intentions is consistent with Brecht’s dramatic theory.

References

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