The Dramatization in Tony Harrison’s Poetry

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Abstract: Known for his talent in treating controversial social issues, Tony Harrison integrates dramatization into his poetry. The paper examines the dramatization in his poetry and its effectiveness in expressing his concern for the underprivileged and his inner conflicts between his working-class background and the elite education.

Key word: dramatization; Tony Harrison; poetry

一、Foreword

As one of Britain’s leading poet-playwrights, Tony Harrison is noted for his formal brilliance and technique in treating issues of class, race and power. Harrison addresses himself as a poet regardless of the format of his writing, therefore poetry is the locus in the previous study. Focusing on the fusion of his poetry and drama, the paper examines the dramatization in Harrison’s poetry and explores the influence of drama techniques on the poetry in order to widen the research scope.

T. S. Eliot regards drama as “the ideal medium for poetry”, enabling the poet to reach large and miscellaneous audience. Combining the meaningful action with the beauty of musical order, dramatization in poetry could capture two exquisitely precious and different kinds of aesthetic value not easily synthesized in a single form. The next part illustrates specific techniques employed in the dramatization in Harrison’s poetry.

二、The Representation of Action

Action, the essence of drama, is manipulated to depict the character and to advance the plot. The basic difference between dramatic action and non-dramatic action lies on whether it will cause conflict. There are two types of conflicts: one is between the character and the environment or other characters, and the other is the intrapsychic conflict.

In Book Ends, the conflict is made by the suffocating silence and insurmountable gap between the eloquent and the inarticulate. The father is “shocked into sleeplessness” and “scared of bed” on the news of the mother’s death. However, instead of finding comfort from his own son, who is supposed to be the closest and trustworthy man for him at the moment, the father resorts to silence. The bitter situation is not rare since the poem states that “we never could talk much”. The tension is formed initially by the weird silence and then the line “only our silence made us seem a pair” tightens the tension in an ironical way. What causes the heartbreaking situation and tension between the father and the son? On the surface, it is caused by the wide gap of class. The son is a “scholar”, while the father is “worn out on poor pay”. However, the root cause is the son’s internal colonization of high-brow culture which causes the alienation between the father or the family and the son.

As for intrapsychic conflict, a conversation between the vulgar skinhead and the well-educated “1” in poem V is indeed a dramatic monologue of a tortured split self. When the poet asks the skinhead to write down his name, surprisingly, the skinhead replies “the name is mine”, so the skin-head is his alter ego. The poet’s ambivalent attitude toward his education and literature reflects Harrison’s dilemma as well. Two colliding voices in himself tear Harrison into two parts. One part speaks for the underclass where he comes but is alienated from the underclass because of education. The other writes in an upper-class way but is rejected by the upper-class due to his origin. Harrison suffers from the double alienation and is tormented by the anxiety of identity recognition.

三、Monologue or Dialogue

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the monologue is written in the form of a sense of the speaker’s history and psychological insight into his
The technique of monologue is skillfully used in depicting the inner torture by the colliding identities. In ≤, two voices with polarized value judgments can be clearly heard: one is the register of standard English while the other is the register of crude dialect. Apart from the grammatical accuracy, standard English is tactful in the use of the archaic word of “xenophobic” and the borrowed French word of “cri-de-coeur”. The diction shows the identity as an eloquent scholar. In the contrast, those barbaric lines reveal another identity as a vulgar grass-root. The dirty word “cunt” is an abrupt “aggro” to the French word “cri-de-coeur”, which contends furiously the fineness of the elite language. The two tit-for-tat registers form a verbal war which represents the heated inner conflict between the two identities.

Dramatic dialogues are the lines spoken by two or more characters in drama or fiction. Generally speaking, the dramatic dialogues, which are assigned with implied meanings, are carefully designed to stimulate the development of the whole event. We can hear two confronting voices in Heredity: one is questioning while the other is answering. The interrogative part’s tone is suspicious and contemptuous, whose implication is “a man of such a breed like you can never be a poet”. However, facing the sly humiliation, the other man answers in a strategic way: “I had two uncles, Joe and Harry—one was a stammerer, the other dumb.” For one thing, the action declares that “my” poetic talent is drawn from “my” inarticulate parents, whose silence and speechlessness have offered “me” the inner power to be a poet. For another, the action reveals that the talent of articulation is not necessarily related to class. “My” two uncles should have been articulate but was unmercifully deprived of the ability because of poverty, social exploitation and the lack of education. Dialogue sets suspense within the question and answer, which excites further reading and contemplation of the readers. Besides, the contradictory dual structure reflects the confrontation of the upper class and the lower class through the verbal dialogue.

四、Conclusion

From the above, the integration of drama and poetry incubates brilliant art work of Tony Harrison. The dramatization in Harrison’s poetry not only invigorates every element of the poetry, but also reaches large and miscellaneous audience. Two techniques of dramatization in poetry are widely used in Harrison’s poetry: the representation of action, and monologue or dialogue. Each technique has its unique artistic effect but all presents the conflict between Harrison’s working-class background and his grammar school education. As a representative of grass-root intellectual, Harrison reflects on the social reality and speaks for the speechless where he comes.

References:


