

# A Comparative Study of Jokanaan and Xuanzang From *Salome* and *Journey to the West*

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This paper is a comparative study of Jokanaan and Xuanzang from *Salome* written by Oscar Wilde and *Journey to the West* by WU Cheng'en. Totally, three similarities and three differences are involved in this essay, covering similarities in religious background, handsome appearance, and love-related plots and differences in conflict resolution, development of character conflicts, and the endings.

*Keywords:* Jokanaan, Xuanzang, *Salome*, *Journey to the West*

## Introduction

Jokanaan is a character from *Salome*, a famous tragedy by Oscar Wilde. Known as a holy prophet, Jokanaan resolutely refused Salome who desires to kiss him and eventually was beheaded under her command. The princess kisses lips of the chopped-off head.

Xuanzang is a character from *Journey to the West*, a romantic Chinese novel by WU Cheng'en. Serving as a Buddhist monk, Xuanzang travels confirmedly toward the west with three disciples in order to obtain Buddhist sacred texts and finally succeeds.

Coming from two influential literature works, both two characters have drawn attention of Chinese scholars. Studies around them are widely spread and scholars have already discovered the association between *Salome* and some classic Chinese literature characters, while relatively few of them involve the comparison and connection between them. Thus, a comparative study of two characters is worth unfolding.

This essay is an attempt to compare Jokanaan and Xuanzang. For the record, though both characters have their original forms in the physical world, the discussions involved in this essay only concern about images from two literature works, *Salome* and *Journey to the West*.

## Similarities

With distinct cultural background—aesthetic movement in Europe in 19th century and ancient Chinese romanticism in 16th century—the two characters share three similarities, which are expounded in the following part.

### Religious Background

First and foremost, both Jokanaan and Xuanzang are religiously devout. Jokanaan is a prophet who firmly believes in the Lord God, while Xuanzang is a monk devoting to Buddhism. Their religious backgrounds play an important role in two literature works, which largely contribute to their personalities and are closely related

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to the plot development.

Jokanaan is introduced in the play accompanied with his praise of Lord God, “After me shall come another mightier than I... When he cometh the solitary places shall be glad. They shall blossom like the rose” (Wilde, 1893, pp. 3-4). As his first presence (only with his words), these compliments lay the spiritual foundation of Jokanaan which is firmly associated with his faith to God. During his conversations with Salome, he proudly describes himself as “the chosen of the Lord”, refusing a further talk with her. Later part of the play suggests that Jokanaan is imprisoned by Herod for his criticism of Herod and Herodias. Being forced to dwell in the cistern which is known to be “a poisonous place”, he never challenges his belief to the Lord God until death.

For Xuanzang, being brought up in a temple, he adheres to Buddhism, growing up to be a prestigious and decent monk. With the aspiration of moralizing public, Xuanzang determines to obtain Buddhism sacred texts from India, which is known to be one hundred and eight thousand li far away from Chang’an. With strong resolution and deep devotion to the virtues of Buddhism, Xuanzang goes through 81 extreme sufferings within the fourteen-year journey.

### **Handsome Appearance**

Secondly, Jokanaan and Xuanzang are both described to be handsome and attractive men. This similarity is tightly related with the development of plots when they are being loved and pursued.

From the Salome’s words, “there is nothing in the world so white as thy body... so black as thy hair... so red as thy mouth” (Wilde, 1893, pp. 13-14), Jokanaan appears to be a handsome man. To some extent, his admirable look directly leads to his being pursued by Salome and the ensuing plots which compose the greatest conflict in the tragedy.

Xuanzang is also a man with distinguished features, which is mentioned in several parts of the novel. Once his appearance is described in such a poem, for instance, “White teeth as if made of silver, a square-cut mouth with lips of red. The top of the head flat, the forehead broad and ample; fine eyes, a clear brow, and a long jaw” (Fair, 1955, p. 767).<sup>1</sup> His exceptional sight inevitably leads to the attractiveness to both female mortals and demons. In addition, his brilliant appearance forms a distinct contrast with the ugly looks of his three disciples, which is a dramatic detail in this novel.

### **Love-Related Plots**

The third point is the similar love-related plots happening to two characters. This similarity specifies to be their being loved and pursued, while results to both of their rejection.

In *Salome*, the princess shows her intensive love towards Jokanaan, mainly for his beauty. With her voice filled with desire, “Suffer me to touch thy body... Suffer me to touch thy hair... Suffer me to kiss thy mouth” (Wilde, 1893, pp. 13-14), Salome pours out her burning desire to Jokanaan. As for Jokanaan, he rejects with scold and even insult.

Alike plot is also available in *Journey to the West*, which takes place in several occasions. Take one of them as an example, Xuanzang is adored by the Queen of women’s kingdom who eagers to marry him for his brilliant look and exalted status. Due to his strong determination to the West, Xuanzang escapes from the Queen by playing tricks, avoiding harming the Queen. Similar type of love-related plots appear six times in the novel, most of which are associated with demons, who dream to take a shortcut to be immortal by marrying Xuanzang.

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<sup>1</sup> WU Cheng’en, *Journey to the West* (translated by Collinson Fair, 1955).

## **Differences**

Three main differences are summarized in the following part.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Firstly, Jokanaan and Xuanzang respond differently when they confront sinister treatment against their will, whether mentally or physically.

Jokanaan judges more and behaves less, reacting with tough preachment. Before his presence, he is described in such words from other characters, “He is always saying ridiculous things”, “Sometimes he says things that are affright one, but it is impossible to understand what he says” (Wilde, 1893, p. 4), serving as indicators of his absurd judgment.

Without knowing the identity of Salome at their first meet, Jokanaan urges that “I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is. Bid her be gone. It is not to her that I would speak.” (Wilde, 1893, p. 12), full of contempt and arrogance. After realizing that Salome is the daughter of Herodias and the princess of Judaea, he even scolds in a more furious tone, “Back! Daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord” (Wilde, 1893, p. 12). Furthermore, he attributes the sin of Salome to the incest of Herodias which is far from convincible and reasonable (LIU & FANG, 2007).

Compared with Jokanaan, Xuanzang presents to have more tolerance and kindness. The frequent encounters with demons and monsters inevitably lead to his sufferings, during which, however, he consistently advocates relief and forgiveness rather than rebuke and violence. Destruction and kill are never his first choice, especially to mortals, despite their wickedness and fierceness. For example, once trapped in the lair of scorpion demon which appears to be a luring woman, Xuanzang is forced to marry the demon. Instead of argument or preachment, he handed a piece of steamed bread to the demon with mild words, behaving in a relatively tender way.

In the face of similar situation, Jokanaan and Xuanzang react in absolutely different ways. Rigid and unreasonable behavior of the former directly leads to his death, while the latter survives from the misfortunes in a temperate and peaceful way, indicating his wisdom.

### **Development of Character Conflicts**

Secondly, character conflicts around Jokanaan or Xuanzang develop in different ways. In general, conflict between Jokanaan and Salome proceeds in a fierce and rapid way, while that between Xuanzang and demons develops more gently with deliberate pace.

In *Salome* the play, conflict around Jokanaan is mainly promoted by conversations. To be specific, Salome expresses her desire towards Jokanaan in a rather direct way, “I am amorous of thy body, Jokanaan!” (Wilde, 1893, p. 13). In turn, the response of Jokanaan is straightforward as well, “Back! Daughter of Babylon! By woman came evil into the world, Speak not to me, I will not listen to thee” (Wilde, 1893, p. 13), rejecting the pursuit immediately even with insulting words. The princess then moves her extravagant compliment to Jokanaan’s hair and mouth, only to get more severe and strong abuse, “Thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed” (Wilde, 1893, p. 16).

The suicide of the young Syrian is another indicator of the fierceness of this conflict. Deeply attracted by Salome, he is persuaded by her flirty words to pick Jokanaan out of prison and finally slays himself because of the princess’ provoking words showing her intensive desire towards Jokanaan (QIAO, 2016).

As for Xuanzang, plots develop much more peacefully and mildly. Rather than conversations, more details are applied to depict the atmosphere and mental activity. Take his encounter with Apricot Immortal as an example. The latter does not show up and reveal her desire immediately. Instead, at the beginning of the scene, Xuanzang was abducted by tree spirits disguised as old scholars. While Xuanzang was delightedly discussing poetry with them, Apricot Immortal, whose true form is an apricot tree, appearing to be an intelligent poetess. The author composed several fantastic poems as modifications, slackening the development of plots. By praising literary talent of Xuanzang and Apricot Immortal, other spirits intend to show they are highly matched to support their marriage, which is actually their inner goal.

Here is a brief chart for the words and expressions used in these conflicts (see Table 1):

Table 1

*Different Words and Expressions in Character Conflicts*

Jokanaan & Salome	Xuanzang & Apricot Immortal
Salome: I'm amorous of thy body. It is of thy hair that I am enamoured. It is thy mouth that I desire. Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.	Xuanzang: 不敢答应 (dared not to reply) 止不住眼中堕泪 (tears flowed unquenchably)
Jokanaan: Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! Profane not the temple of the Lord God. Cursed be thou! Daughter of an incestuous mother, be thou accursed! Thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed.	Apricot Immortal: 挨挨扎扎 (moving closer and closer) 渐坐近前, 悄声细语 (pressing herself against him and whispering to him) 与他揩泪 (wiped away his tears) 佳客勿得烦恼, 我与你倚玉偎香, 耍子去来。(Don't be so upset, noble guest. You and I are going to taste the pleasures of love.)

### Endings

Thirdly, even with some similarities, the ending of Jokanaan and that of Xuanzang are entirely different.

Firmly believing in his own doctrine, Jokanaan is beheaded by Salome, the princess who is cursed to be devil by Jokanaan. The Lord who Jokanaan constantly claimed that will save the world does not even save this pious disciple from being executed, which is fairly satiric.

For Xuanzang, the ending is much more satisfying. Having reached the Spirit Mount, he is granted as the Buddha of Sandalwood Merit, awarded with Buddhist sacred texts, realizing his initial purpose. Xuanzang brings these sacred texts back to China, advocating virtues and vices, worshipped by local people.

### Conclusion

This essay is a comparative study of Jokanaan and Xuanzang, covering their similarities in religious background, handsome appearance, and love-related plots as well as three differences in their conflict resolution, development of character conflicts, and the endings. Since both Jokanaan and Xuanzang play relatively important and influential roles in literature area, this essay is an attempt to build a bridge between the two characters. More connections and details remain to be explored and discovered.

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