

Ancient Greek Tragic Elements in *By the Bog of Cats*...

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By the Bog of Cats... is the representative work of Irish playwright Marina Carr. Carr tells a story of abandonment and revenge in Ireland at the end of the 20th century, based on the ancient Greek tragedy Medea. *By the Bog of Cats*... not only places the original world view in the modern embodiment of life but also matches the modern drama creation with the ancient poetics theory, reflecting the strong characteristics of ancient Greek tragedy. Starting from the plot structure, destiny motif, and creative skills, this paper aims to analyze *By the Bog of Cats*...'s inheritance and echo of ancient Greek tragedy, and show its strong historical discourse and sense of responsibility for the times.

Keywords: *By the Bog of Cats*..., Marina Carr, Greek tragedy

Introduction

The 20th-century Irish drama is not lacking in the influence and benefit of ancient Greek drama, the Irish have long suffered from British colonial oppression, with the development of the Celtic Twilight movement, a group of playwrights will focus on ancient Greek literature, and strive to rewrite the ancient Greek tragedy differently, to realize the fusion and sublimation of the spirit of the Irish nation and the pursuit of personalized art. For example, William Butler Yeats, through the rewriting of the image of Oedipus, expressed his hope for the Irish people to get rid of the political shadow. Marina Carr even followed this tradition by incorporating elements of ancient Greek tragedy into her dramatic works.

Marina Carr is one of the most famous playwrights of the Celtic Tiger period in Ireland. She grew up in the center of Ireland, and her writing was deeply influenced by the local dialect and primitive folk customs, she wrote a trilogy of tragedies based on this region, including *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996), and *By the Bog of Cats*... (1998). The final installment of the trilogy, *By the Bog of Cats*... premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1998 and has since toured many countries around the world. Set in the mysterious Bog of Cats in the Irish Midlands countryside, the play is framed by the ancient Greek tragedian Euripides' *Medea*, and tells the story of Hester's abandonment and thus her revenge. Hester was abandoned by her mother when she was a child, and again by her husband, Carthage, when she was middle-aged. Carthage is about to marry Caroline, the daughter of Xavier, a large farmer, and the three of them attempt to expel Hester from the Bog of Cats. With infinite love for the land and deep despair, Hester takes revenge on Carthage by burning down the house and farm she built with him, then killing her only daughter with Carthage and committing suicide. In the play, Carr creates an obscure and deep aesthetic effect by constructing local metaphors with distinctive characteristics of the Irish

Midlands, while overlapping the plot structure of ancient Greek tragedy, the motif of destiny, and creative techniques.

Intertextuality of Plot Structure

Intertextuality is a literary theory that emerged from the cultural trend of Western modernism, emphasizing that no single text is completely independent, and that meaning can only be generated in the process of cross-referencing and cross-referencing with other texts. Therefore, examining individual texts in a broad cultural context allows the reader to understand the meaning of the text better. Carr uses the storyline of *Medea* as the overall structural framework.

First of all, the first scene of *Medea* forms a typical plot intertext with the sixth scene of the first act of *By the Bog of Cats...* In *Medea*, Scene 1 begins with Medea telling the chorus of her tragic experience and bitterness at being abandoned by Iason, and pointing out that she is about to take revenge on Iason, and the Song Captain promises to help Medea keep her secret. Then King Creon of Colchis comes on stage and warns Medea to leave Colchis with her two sons, and sarcastically criticizes Medea's betrayal of her motherland to help Iason gain the throne. Medea's character is so strong that she fights against the expulsion and sarcasm, not only firmly stating that she will never submit to their expulsion, but also bravely pointing out that her betrayal of her country is due to the temptation of Iason, and denounced love as a recipe for disaster.

The corresponding episodes in *By the Bog of Cats...* are Hester's argument with her husband Carthage about the eviction and Hester's argument with the farmer Xavier about her mother Josie Swane. On the one hand, in *Medea*, the argument about eviction is between Chrissy and Medea, while in *By the Bog of Cats...*, Carr arranges for Hester to meet Carthage before talking to Xavier. Even though Carthage brings Hester the pain of yet another abandonment, and Hester is angry and resentful, Hester still has illusions and subconsciously chooses to stay after a scolding, constantly praying Carthage not to banish him, so his resistance is far less rigid than that of Medea. On the other hand, unlike *Medea*, in which Kris mocks Medea's betrayal of her country, Xavier's sarcasm against Hester in *By the Bog of Cats...* focuses mainly on Hester's mother, Josie Swain, who was a disgrace. Although Hester was abandoned by her mother at a young age, she still has a beautiful imagination of her mother in her heart, and this imagination based on her childhood memories is not real. Obviously, the tough Medea, who occupies the active position, turns into Hester, who has been passive and vulnerable in *By the Bog of Cats...*, and Carr utilizes irony to profoundly reveal the shrinking of the spiritual world of modern Irish society, and also lays the foundation for Hester to choose to commit suicide later on in her struggles and sufferings.

Secondly, the second scene of *Medea* focuses on Medea's conversation with Iason, where the two argue about Iason's negativity and killing his brother. Medea stalls for time to help Iason escape kills her brother, cuts up his body, and throws it in the mountains and fields to keep her father and the pursuing errand boys busy collecting the body. Medea kills her brother to secure the money gained and her safety. And this plot is changed considerably in *By the Bog of Cats...* In the conversation between Hester and the ghost of her brother Joseph in Act III, we can see that Hester likewise killed her brother Joseph with Carthage, but not entirely from a desire for money, but because of Joseph's smugness in referring to his mother with her favoritism towards Joseph. Hester's mixed emotions of missing her mother and hating her for abandoning her even spawned her jealousy of her brother, causing her to kill him. While insisting that her mother will return, she curses her mother with vicious

words. When confronted with her brother's ghost, her first thought is not of guilt, but of resentment that her brother sang the song her mother wrote to her. In contrast, Medea's brutal murder of her brother is due to her deep love for Iason, and Medea's hatred and vengeance for Iason are similarly rooted in her betrayal of her love. On the other hand, Hester's conflicts with most of the human characters are related to her mother, who remains Hester's spiritual support, despite the fact that she is described by Xavier, the informant, as slutty and unsavory, and by the ghost of her brother, Joseph, as irresponsible in abandoning him. The intertextuality here is intended to further reveal Hester's absurd sense of dependence on her mother by analogizing Hester's almost pathological obsession with her mother through the intense pursuit of Medea's love for love at any cost.

Finally, in the fourth and fifth scenes of *Medea*, Medea succeeds in her revenge by violent and bloody means. She sends the Princess the poisoned robe and crown that she has, causing her to be poisoned and the King to go to his death with her in grief. Afterwards, Medea kills her two sons and leaves with the royal dragon. In the third act of *By the Bog of Cats...*, which is intertextual, Hester burns down the house and estate he built with Carthage, kills his daughter Josie, and kills himself. In contrast to Medea's almost idealized approach to revenge, Hester's path is destined to be destructive. From the beginning, she is an abandoned the Other with no refuge or identity in the land, and she is unable to fight back fiercely because she does not have the help and shelter that Medea generally receives from the outside world. Her feeble voice: "I'm goin' nowhere. This here is my house and my garden and my stretch of the bog and no wan's runnin' me out of here" (Carr, 2000, p. 268). "Ah, how can I love the Bog of Cats, everythin' I'm connected to is here. I'd rather die" (Carr, 2000, p. 273). Ultimately, this is accompanied by suicide and death. The intertext here then shows the sense of powerlessness and fatalism brought by the 20th-century Irish society with the fate of the decidedly different heroines and their choices.

The Extension of the Motif of Fate

Motif is a recurring basic human behavior in literature, and since the ancient Greek period, fate has been an important element of literary creation, carrying unique signals and meanings. In Ancient Greek, "fate" often refers to something nebulous and elusive, yet real, like a thread that manipulates everyone's life according to a set course. In ancient Greece, due to the backwardness of science and technology, people's knowledge of nature was very low, so the ancient Greeks referred to the unchangeable events brought about by nature as fate. Ancient Greeks believed that fate is incredibly mysterious but does exist, fate dominates everything, from weak mortals to powerful heroes, and then has supreme greatness of the gods and kings, they rebel against fate but ultimately still fall into the fate of the puppet, it seems that no matter what kind of efforts made by people and the gods, but also can not escape from the fate of the arrangement in the end. This fate brought a sense of powerlessness to the ancient Greeks, and when the characters in Greek tragedy were caught between the universes of free will and fatalism, they strongly felt the existence of a divine universe that they could not approach. Fate as a motif is reflected in much ancient Greek literature, and moderns can still find soul resonance and spiritual connection with ancient Greece. Carr has acknowledged in interviews that there is an air of fatalism that permeates the play from beginning to end, saying, "I think that's one of the big issues that the play raises, which is the confrontation between fate and free will Hester, however, knows full well that she already has a destiny that she can't change, and she still fights it to the end of her life" (Carr, 2010, p. 183).

Symbolism of the Black Swan

In the first act of *By the Bog of Cats...*: “Hester Swane trails the corpse of a black swan after her, leaving a trail of blood in the snow. The Ghost Fancier stands there watching her” (Carr, 2000, p. 265). The first appearance of the black swan renders a layer of pathos throughout the play. According to Hester herself, the black swan is Hester’s childhood playmate and middle-aged spiritual companion, bringing warmth to her who lacks mother’s love and is lonely inside. So when Hester found the black swan frozen to death in the hole, she buried it next to her caravan. In addition, Hester’s last name, Swane, is synonymous with Swan, symbolizing that the Black Swan and Hester’s destinies are linked together. When Hester was first born, his mother, Josie Swane, had said, “will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less” (Carr, 2000, p. 275). True to form, the black swan was found dead in the dawn, and Hester eventually took his own life in the dusk of that day.

The Oracle of the Catwoman

Oracle refers to the ancient Greek period when people asked questions to the gods and received answers; oracles could be used to answer people’s questions and give them guidance and were an important way for people to communicate with the gods. Oracles are inviolable, such as Achilles who was allegorized to either live a long life in obscurity or die an honorable death on the battlefield. He eventually dies in battle by being shot in the heel, the only weak point in his body. Oedipus was paralyzed by the fable that he would kill his father and marry his mother, and even though he actively tried to circumvent it, he did not escape the fable. In the early morning hours, The Catwoman had met Hester and allegorized, “Dreamt ya were a black train motorin’ through the Bog of Cats and, oh, the scorch off of this train and it blastin’ by and all the bog was dark in your wake, and I had to run from the burn. Hester Swane, you’ll bring this place down by evenin’” (Carr, 2000, p. 273). Although Hester approached Carthage or Caroline on several occasions in an attempt to counsel or plead with them to spare himself, it did not change the decision of Carthage and the others. So eventually Hester was firmly on the path of destroying everything and self-destructing. The irrevocable betrayal and expulsion make Hester feel a strong sense of powerlessness, which is similar to the oppressive feeling brought by the deterministic universe of ancient Greece. Whether it is Hester or the other prophesied people in ancient Greece, they constantly fight back against fate on the premise that it is impossible to challenge fate, showing the free will of human beings to fight against fate.

In addition, as the person who issues the “oracle” in the 20th-century Irish Burger Plain, The Catwoman does not have any god or heroic spirit, she is “a woman in her late fifties, stained a streaky brown from the bog, a coat of cat fur that reaches to the ground, studded with cats’ eyes and cats’ paws. She is blind and carries a stick” (Carr, 2000, p. 271). Its grotesque dress and vulgar speech and behavior further deconstruct the solemn atmosphere of ancient Greek tragedy.

The Imitation of Writing Techniques

Aristotle’s *Poetics* has had a profound and significant impact on later artistic creation, and the creation of *By the Bog of Cats...* has been a notable emulation and echo of his theory of tragedy.

Plot

Based on a comprehensive summary of ancient artistic practice, Aristotle profoundly elaborated the characteristics of tragedy. He believed that the art of tragedy consists of six components: plot, character, thought, language, music, and spectacle. The most important of them is the plot, i.e., the arrangement of events. The main components of the plot are peripeteia and discovery, of which the peripeteia factor is the most important. The term peripeteia refers to the fact that “a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity” (Aristotle, 1894, p. 54).

In *Medea*, Euripides opens the story by placing him amid adversity, Medea has a well-formed plan of revenge in mind and knows the consequences of it, and the reader knows from the beginning that Medea will ultimately succeed in her revenge. Therefore it is not the sudden turn of plot and discovery that surprises the audience in this story. On the other hand, *By the Bog of Cats...* makes up for Euripides’ shortcomings in the plot because of another clue, “Hester’s Mother Josie Swane”, which runs throughout the play. In the opening scene, Hester’s mother, Josie Swane, is the pillar of her spirit and belongs to her heart, and as Hester argues with different people around her mother’s conversation with the Catwoman, Xavier, the big farmer, and her brother Joseph, the audience slowly perceives that the Big Josie in Hester’s imagination has been completely subverted. The Catwoman’s veiled hints that Josie Swane abandoned Hester, “Sure the night ya were born she took ya over to the black swan’s lair, auld Black Wing ya’ve just buried there, and laid ya in the nest alongside her” (Carr, 2000, p. 275). From Xavier’s blunt sarcasm about Josie Swane being drunk all the time and never caring about Hester; and then to Hester’s imaginary brother Joseph, who has snatched his mother, telling that he is also abandoned by his mother, the three abrupt transitions have little by little constructed a complete image of the derelict mother, and even more step by step, destroying Hester’s psychological line of defense.

Discovery refers to the shift from not knowing to knowing, whereby characters in good or bad times discover that they are related to each other or are enemies. Hester’s beautiful imagination of her mother is shattered in the conversation with her brother Joseph’s ghost, from “not knowing” to “knowing” about her mother’s misdeeds, she realizes that her mother will not come back to Burgwon in the end and that all her waiting is in vain, and the mother-daughter relationship in Hester’s heart turns from a spiritual pillar full of belonging to a soul-destroying one. The mother-daughter relationship in Hester’s heart turns from a pillar of belonging into a fatal blow that destroys her soul, ultimately resulting in a heartbreakingly bitter ending. Suffering is the true sign of the protagonist’s misfortune, and the disillusionment with her mother makes Hester realize once and for all that she has been completely abandoned. Abandoned by her mother at the age of seven, Hester spends her entire life waiting, even naming her daughter after her mother. And knowing the truth, Hester does not want her daughter to replicate her life trajectory in a new round of indefinite waiting, so full of grief and disillusionment, she understands her daughter’s life and commits suicide herself.

Catharsis

Aristotle’s theory of catharsis aims to illustrate the effect of tragedy, which, he believes, can evoke feelings of pity and fear and purify such feelings, thus achieving some kind of moral education. In this case, pity is due to the possibility of suffering such a situation for oneself or others around one, and fear is due to the pain and uneasiness one feels in anticipation of the coming calamity. Although in Aristotle’s time, pity and fear often

brought people a sense of pleasure, with the development of the times, modern tragedy is closer to the scenes and characters of life, the characters on the stage of the tragedy, and the audience under the stage are ordinary people, and most of the content of the performance is trivial things in daily life, so the audience naturally no longer need to feel the pleasure of the extreme pain but to be able to integrate themselves into it.

By the Bog of Cats...demonstrates the existential plight of the Irish Traveling community on the edge of mainstream society on the Bog of Cats. On the one hand, the expulsion of Hester's surface is manifested in the deprivation of her geographic space for survival. Hester's only house is swindled away by Xavier and Carthage, who represent the mainstream middle class, and she loses her shelter and identity, and can only live in a dilapidated caravan to get by. Just like the Irish who lost the right to own land during the British colonial rule, this embodies the cultural identity crisis shared by the nation. On the other hand, the deeper deportation of Hester is reflected in the deprivation of his psychological space for survival. Hester and her daughter are subjected to much ridicule because of their Traveling community identity. Mrs. Kilbride, the mother of Carthage, once said to Hester's daughter, "Ya got some of it right. Ya got the 'Josie' part right, but ya got the 'Kilbride' part wrong, because you're not a Kilbride. You're a Swane. Can ya spell Swane? Of course ya can't. You're Hester Swane's little bastard. You're not a Kilbride and never will be" (Carr, 2000, p. 279). Mrs. Kilbride treats her family's involvement with the Travelling community as a stain, and even more so sees her granddaughter Josie, who bleeds the blood of the Travelling community, as a presence that tarnishes her family, which is in effect the discursive hegemony of the dominant group over the non-dominant group. By mapping the tragic situation of the homeless groups such as Hester, who have no place to live in both geographic and psychological space, the play focuses on the marginalized groups, arousing the audience's sympathy and concern for them, and further promoting equal dialogue between the mainstream and non-mainstream groups.

Conclusion

Marina Carr shifted her vision to the ancient times of Ancient Greece, drew inspiration from the ancient Greek tragic text *Medea*, found a new way out of the simple worldview of Ancient Greece, and integrated the theory of Ancient Greek tragedy into her creations, to break through the boundaries of the original realism and revitalize the literary tradition of the Irish in their search for a national identity.

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