

The Double-Sided Mirror of Power: On the Intervention of Power in Love in A Midsummer Night's Dream and Wuthering Heights

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Abstract. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Wuthering Heights* belong to different stages of literary development, both conduct in-depth explorations of the dialectical relationship between "power and love". Employing Foucault's power theory, Gilbert and Gubar's feminist criticism theory, and combining with Greenblatt's perspective of cultural poetics, this study reveals through a comparative analysis of the two texts that the two works present different paths of power intervening in love relationships and their ultimate impacts. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* constructs an explicit, reconcilable power paradigm that results in order maintenance, and its influence is temporary and rectifiable. In contrast, the power depicted in *Wuthering Heights* is characterized by being self-reinforcing, systemically nested, and ultimately deconstructive; it distorts human nature and twists loving relationships into irreconcilable enmity. The former conveys the optimistic sentiment of rational power reconciliation in the Renaissance period, while the latter reflects the negative perception of class and gender issues in its era. Together, they form a dual narrative of the interaction between power and love in literature.

Keywords: Power, Love, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Wuthering Heights*, Comparative Literature

1. Introduction

The symbiotic connection between power and love constitutes a highly tense creative theme in the literary tradition. The regulation, guidance, distortion, and destruction of erotic desire by power form the underlying logic of countless texts. The cheerful tone of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the melancholy style of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* together represent two extreme expressions of this theme. One unfolds its narrative against the backdrop of the misty fairy forest in Athens, presenting how misplaced marriages caused by the conflict between patriarchal norms and fairy rules are resolved in a comedic manner; the other takes the howling wind on the moors as its narrative keynote, depicting the grudges and affections bred by class oppression that lead to a tragic end for two generations. Denis de Rougemont's classic argument in *Love in the Western World* provides us with a broader perspective: "The conflict between love and power is

essentially the core manifestation of the eternal tension between individual freedom and social norms, passionate impulses and the demands of order" [1].

This paper will adopt a comparative research method to explore the expressive ways of the two works, deconstruct the mechanism, subsequent manifestations, and inherent essence of power intervening in love, and reflect the distinct temporal consciousness and humanistic perspectives behind the works.

2. Textual analysis: the dialectical relationship between power systems and love resistance

Before conducting textual analysis, we first cite Foucault's view on power: Repression is merely a superficial phenomenon; its underlying principle is the construction of reality, the scope of knowledge, and objectified subjective roles. This indicates that power transcends the boundaries of prohibitive norms and serves as a constitutive force permeating social interactions, influencing people's emotional perceptions and behavioral patterns [2].

With Foucault's theory, we can gain insight into the operating logic of power. Observing the text of *Wuthering Heights*, power shapes Heathcliff into a avenger and triggers Catherine's self-fragmentation; examining the entire play of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, power causes chaos in emotional relationships but ultimately promotes the harmony of social structure in the ending. Gilbert and Gubar, two feminist researchers, point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that under patriarchal oppression, female characters frequently encounter dilemmas, and their resistance often manifests as "mental disturbance" or self-alienation [3]. This analytical approach is of great significance for understanding the relationship between Hermia and Catherine. Stephen Greenblatt, a new historicist scholar, takes "negotiation" as the core paradigm for analyzing the relationship between art and power, which inspires us to recognize the artistic reconstruction of power relations in 16th-century England in Shakespeare's plays [4].

2.1. A Midsummer Night's Dream: adjustable domination and humor

The theme of power in the play is divided into two distinct dimensions: secular patriarchal control and supernatural fairy magic. Both mechanisms influence the development of love, and their nature is externally imposed and unsustainable, eventually being integrated by a higher-dimensional power mechanism or rational framework.

Egeus' exclusive control over Hermia's marriage, combined with Theseus' power protection, constitutes a typical example of patriarchal rule. Hermia expresses her resistance in a legal, rational, and open manner. As scholar Louis Montrose notes, Hermia's resistance to her father Egeus' patriarchal power is not only for the autonomy of love but also symbolizes a challenge to the foundation of Athenian society. This challenge is not intended to change the existing order but to seek a special exception within the existing system. Compared with Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, Hermia, relying on the legal protection of the right of Athenian virgins to choose their spouses, plans her escape route in advance, adopting a proactive and positive way of resistance [5].

Greenblatt points out that the magical power of Oberon, the Fairy King, is a more practical intervention. His impromptu plans are like decrees of absolute power, arbitrarily controlling the love of mortals and causing continuous chaos. This is actually "a dramatic metaphor for the alluring yet tyrannical monarchical power of the Elizabethan era" [6]; Jan Kott, on the other hand, argues that this act tears off the veil of romance and exposes "a brutal mechanism that turns individuals into instruments of desire and completely erodes their humanity" [7].

The fundamental difference lies in that the chaos caused by the abuse of power is neither permanent nor irreversible. Magic can be dispelled, misunderstandings can be resolved, and Duke Theseus personally intervenes to pardon the couple, adjust the existing laws, and promote reconciliation among all parties. Through this, power achieves self-improvement and transcendence: the structure itself creates a crisis but also provides a solution. Social order can be strengthened, and love itself can withstand the test.

2.2. Wuthering Heights: structural domination and destructive alienation

Power is not only a part of the structure but also becomes a persistent issue through internalization. This problem mainly stems from the system of class exploitation and patriarchal inheritance, and then transforms into the root of resentment in the characters' hearts, completely distorting the true nature of love.

Heathcliff, labeled as a "dirty Gypsy orphan", is taken into Wuthering Heights by Old Earnshaw, which directly challenges the class divide and sows the seeds of conflict. After the father's death, someone immediately exercises paternal power, reducing Heathcliff to a servant and depriving him of the opportunity to study and pursue Catherine. Terry Eagleton points out: Heathcliff is a concrete embodiment of class hatred and racial alienation. His return completely collapses the oppressive family structure. Due to the suppression of the ruling class, his original aspirations are frustrated, and the final result is revenge rather than reconciliation.

Catherine's experience reflects the contradictory nature of power in both shaping and destroying personal identity. She has a passionate love for Heathcliff because "he is closer to my true self than I am", but the class symbols of civilized society always exert a strong attraction on her. She claims that "marrying Heathcliff would lower my status", which starkly reveals the cruel reality of power internalization. This leads to her self-fragmentation. Gilbert and Gubar explain that this self-fragmentation "is actually the forced fragmentation of women's spiritual worlds by patriarchal culture". Faced with the same constraints, Hermia finds a way out, while Catherine is helpless and ultimately crushed by the tension of self-confrontation.

Heathcliff's revenge campaign marks the final stage of the transformation of love under the distortion of power. Relying on capitalist wealth and power, he systematically undermines the foundations of the Earnshaw and Linton families. His love eventually turns into destructive possession and manipulation. At this point, love loses its vitality and completely becomes a dispensable item in the game of power. The union of Young Catherine and Hareton in the next generation is the only salvation, indicating the possibility of undamaged new love amid the ruins of declining authority. However, this still cannot eliminate the long-lasting suffering endured by the older generation.

3. Comparison and conclusion: a comparative variation between the bright forest and the gloomy moors

Through the in-depth textual interpretation and theoretical examination above, the fundamental differences between the two works in presenting the theme of "power and love" are clearly distinguishable. Using opposite narrative tones, scene aesthetics, and final conclusions, the two works jointly explore the ideas of power ethics, the predicament of human nature, and the contradictions of love. Their contrast goes far beyond the difference between tragic and comedic genres; it is actually a confrontation between two value orientations and an artistic expression of two extreme forms of power controlling emotions.

3.1. The binary opposition of power nature

From the perspective of external tools to analyze the operation of power, whether it is the patriarchal power represented by Egeus and Theseus in human society or the fairy power symbolized by Oberon in the fairy world, they are essentially quantifiable functional tools external to individuals. Theseus' ruling power is manifested through issuing pardons and blessings, while Egeus' patriarchal power is expressed by citing the laws of the Athenian city-state. Power also materializes in the form of magic such as "love-in-idleness juice". Greenblatt explains that this magical authority is a metonymy in drama for the alluring yet tyrannical monarchical power of the Elizabethan era; this power can be manipulated and withdrawn, and although it gives rise to problems, it also comes with its own solutions. Its operation is like a well-designed theatrical machinery—even if it causes the collapse of the plot logic, the playwright (Shakespeare) always retains the control to reverse the situation. The power structure shows an obvious sense of alienation in interpersonal relationships: Hermia knows how to resist by legal means, and Lysander plans to escape. Even though they are affected by magic, their inherent purity remains intact, and their self-awareness is instantly reconstructed once the magic is lifted.

Taking *Wuthering Heights* as the research object, this kind of power achieves comprehensive spatial penetration, structural institutionalization, and eventual transformation into psychological oppression. It does not exist as a specific object owned by the characters but as a restrictive network jointly constructed by the class structure symbolized by the Earnshaw and Linton families, the patriarchal inheritance system, and the rigid social norms of the Victorian era. Old Earnshaw's favoritism, Hindley's oppression, and Catherine's longing for the "civilized" life at Thrushcross Grange constitute the warp and weft of this network. Heathcliff, as the target of power oppression, is a portrayal of how power completely distorts human personality. Eagleton's explanation shows that his image "carries the hostility of the oppressed class and racial differences"; without using external tools, he essentially transforms into an oppressive authority, seizing control of wealth and becoming the master of family authority, treating the younger generation with the same oppressive methods he once endured. In this context, power is no longer an external tool but becomes an inseparable intrinsic attribute of the characters. Under this alienating mechanism, love gradually collapses, and the line between love and hatred ultimately becomes blurred.

3.2. Consequences of intervention

The core difference in the nature of power—rooted in order integration and the fragmentation of human character patterns—leads to opposite outcomes of power intervention in the two works. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, power intervention brings comedic outcomes, achieving conflict resolution and order reconstruction. The night of chaos in the forest is like a necessary "ritual of transgression". Through this, Demetrius' unrequited love for Hermia is corrected, the two pairs of Athenian lovers form stable partnerships, and the power conflict between Oberon and Titania in the fairy world is also resolved. All conflicts are eliminated in the noble palace and grand wedding feast. The chaos is merely a misunderstanding and a prelude to a longer-lasting order. Power's attempt to manipulate love fails, highlighting the tenacity and sincerity of love, which is also affirmed in the celebration.

Wuthering Heights demonstrates the irreversible alienation of human nature and the destructive consequences brought about by power intervention. The intervention of the class structure and patriarchal system is not a temporary accidental event but a deadly poison that penetrates the soul. Catherine's choice leads to her internal fragmentation; her tragedy does not stem from external

magical interference but from an irreconcilable psychological split. Gilbert and Gubar once analyzed that this "self-fragmentation is actually a microcosmic manifestation of schizophrenia in women under the patriarchal system". Heathcliff transforms from a symbol of love into a weapon of hatred. The consequence of power intervention is not reconciliation after turbulence but severe distortion of human nature and the collapse of interpersonal networks. The two ultimately fail to resolve their estrangement, and their emotions are reduced to ruins. The only hope comes from the younger generation: amid the ruins of the old system, the relationship between Young Catherine and Hareton is like tender green shoots just emerging from the ground, and this new hope forms a sharp contrast with the heavy tragedy behind it.

3.3. Symbolism of the ending

The endings of the two works achieve the highest degree of narrative resonance. The play concludes with a combination of three grand weddings and a farce performance, serving as a ritualized celebration for the goal of social integration. People from all social strata, including the duke, nobles, craftsmen, and lovers, gather together to celebrate the return of order and the happy outcome of love. The wedding bells proclaim the victory of core social values, and power finally submits to love and harmony and serves them.

In the ending of the novel *Wuthering Heights*, two adjacent lonely graves stand silently on the moor, and Lockwood stares at them in confusion. The two young protagonists, Young Catherine and Hareton, leave *Wuthering Heights* and head to Thrushcross Grange. This seems to offer a glimmer of hope to break out of the cycle of hatred, but this hope is faint and unstable. Lingering under the shadow of the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine, this ending cannot be regarded as a cause for celebration; instead, it is a profound criticism and reflection. It exposes the exploitative power model hidden beneath the social system and explores whether true redemption can be achieved after enduring such heavy trauma. The answer in the ending remains vacant, leaving only lingering contemplation and the mournful wind in the wilderness.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the intervention of power in love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Wuthering Heights* through literature analysis. The two works jointly reveal a profound dialectic of power and love: the form of power determines the ultimate fate of love and even human nature. Shakespeare's comedy is not a simple evasion of the reality of power but constructs a utopian vision where power can be tamed by reason, tolerance, and a higher-order order. In this vision, chaos is temporary, intervention is reversible, and its ultimate goal is to consolidate a more inclusive and harmonious community. In contrast, Brontë's tragedy carries out the disenchantment of power criticism. It coldly points out that when power is deeply embedded in the social structure (class, gender, economy) and internalized as the psychological motivation of individuals, it possesses destructive productivity, capable of alienating the most passionate love into the most paranoid hatred. The trauma it causes is often intergenerationally transmitted and difficult to fully heal.

This paper only conducts analysis based on Foucault's theory and fails to fully integrate other relevant theories, such as psychoanalytic theory and Marxist class analysis, which may limit the dimensions of textual interpretation to a certain extent. Secondly, in the selection of research objects, to conduct a focused and in-depth comparison, this study only focuses on two core texts and fails to incorporate relevant works of the same era or other periods into a broader reference framework,

which may lack breadth in terms of historical and literary context. Future research can conduct more in-depth comparisons based on this by integrating other theories.

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