

“Error” Women’s Survival Tragedies in Tennessee William’s Four Tragedies

Yanyu Gao, Wei Ding

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University, Daqing, China

Email: lisagaoyyy@126.com

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Abstract

Four women are selected from Tennessee’s four dramas. The four women all struggle for survival and they are “Error” women according to Aristotle’s “Error” theory. There are two kinds of “Error”. These four women in the plays make one of the mistakes or make two mistakes at the same time. They make mistakes for the purpose of survival. Their tragedy is survival tragedy. The “error” is one essential part of the play’s plot and helps construct the effect of a tragedy.

Keywords

Aristotle’s “Error” Theory, Two Kinds of “Error” Women, Survival Tragedy, Tragedy’s Construction

1. Introduction

Aristotle mentions in Chapter 13, “This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error...” (Aristotle, 2006). “Aristotle puts forward ‘Error’ theory. It emphasizes that ideal tragic characters are those who make mistakes and who have weaknesses ... His falling into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error” (Yang, 2003). “According to Aristotle, there are two kinds of errors. One is misjudgment, such as Oedipus; the other is wrong moral choices, such as Medea” (Yang, 2003).

Birth, living, struggling to live, fail and death are an endless and circular process for humanity. This is survival tragedy. People are given life by birth, not by choice. Making a living is everyone’s need. Only when the flesh body continues to exist can human beings try to get social and spiritual values realized, such as income, dignity, social status, being recognized by society and personal dreams, etc. In the society personal values are confined and determined by many pressures and fortuitous factors. Personal struggle

against social pressure usually ends up with failure, especially when his/her ambition or ideal is beyond the need or limit of the society. The continuation of failure is done generation after generation. Although people know they will fail and cannot get absolute truth no matter how hard they work, they continue to fight, struggle and fail. This is survival tragedy of humanity.

The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desired, Summer and Smoke and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are selected in this paper. According to Aristotle's "Error" theory, there are two kinds of "Error". Heroines in the four tragedies are all "error" women and they make one of the mistakes or make two mistakes at the same time. They are confused and hindered by the obstacles of survival and reality. In order to survive they made some wrong choices and their tragedies are survival tragedies. They have to accept the consequences due to their wrong choices. Two kinds of errors for these women in survival tragedy are misjudgment and wrong moral choices. The four tragedies are all traditional in plot, including three elements: reversal, discovery and calamity according to Aristotle. The four heroines' errors help develop the plot and come to the disastrous effect. Moral or value judgment is not explored in the paper. From the viewpoint of survival, the construction function of error is expounded on the basis of four drama texts.

2. The Error of Misjudgment

Four heroines in the four tragedies all face survival problems. Their errors are the results of struggling for making a living. In *The Glass Menagerie* Laura is shy and a little crippled. She cannot integrate herself into society without normal communication with other persons. Her mother, Amanda, sends her to Business College for studying typing. However, Laura cannot overcome psychological obstacles and gives up. Laura loses the chance to learn a skill for making a living. Amanda designs another way for Laura's future—marrying a man. Obviously learning a skill is more practical and reliable than marrying a man from the perspective of making a living. Laura cannot make a good judgment, but in contrast her mother is wise and practical. "We won't have a business career ... What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position ...—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! ... eating the crust of humility all their life" (Williams, 2000a)! This is what Amanda says to Laura. Amanda knows what dependency means, so she is so anxious about Laura's future and marriage. Amanda hopes that Laura can learn a skill and has the ability to make a living. Her mother realizes that if Laura cannot make a living independently, there is only one way for Laura—marrying a man. Without a skill or a husband to support herself, Laura will have a tragic life. Amanda makes the wise judgment while Laura just escapes reality and indulges herself in the glass menagerie. For the purpose of survival, Amanda designs the marriage for Laura. Upon the request of Amanda, Tom brings Jim home. Without Laura's error, Jim has no reason to appear on the stage as a gentlemen caller and the plot will not develop smoothly. Jim's appearance brightens

Laura and her mother's life. Amanda and Laura have rejoiced too soon when they discover Jim's engagement. The plot reverses and Laura's second way for survival fails. Tom runs away from home and the mother and the daughter lose the only economic support, which is a heavy blow for them. Laura and Amanda, esp. Laura make wrong judgments that bring disastrous effects. She has to take the consequences. To some extent, Laura herself makes her own survival tragedy.

In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma loves John, her childhood sweetheart. They don't become lovers and get married because of big differences in characters and values. Alma is a preacher's daughter. Alma focuses on spiritual matters while John indulges in sensual enjoyment. What's more, Alma has to play the role of the housewife in her family due to her mother's illness. In order to be a housewife, she intentionally imitates an adult woman. She has been deprived of girlhood and becomes a child adult. John and some persons criticize her adult manners. "Don't you know that you have a reputation for putting on airs a little—for gilding the lily a bit" (Williams, 2000b)? John condemns her putting on air. Alma retorts, "She had her breakdown while I was still in high school. And from that time on I have had to manage the Rectory and take over the social and household duties that would ordinarily belong to a minister's wife, not his daughter" (Williams, 2000b). Her mother cannot take the responsibility of a housewife because of her breakdown. Alma has no choice but to play the role of a housewife. As a girl she struggles when she takes the responsibility of an adult woman. "In a way it may have—deprived me of—my youth..." (Williams, 2000b) How can a girl act when she plays the role of a woman? Alma cannot make wise judgments during the progress of growing up. Only when she grows up can Alma analyze herself in a right way and realize that she has been deprived of the girlhood. She becomes precocious because of misjudgment. This error makes John dislike her manners. In Scene Eleven Alma shows love to John and is refused. John and Nellie are engaged. Character error caused by survival pressure makes Alma a tragic woman in life and love.

3. The Error of Wrong Moral Choices

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Margaret, like a deeply anxious cat, plots to get the property from Big Daddy. "Brick, y' know, I've been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life" (Williams, 2000c)! Margaret faces survival dilemma. She does not come from a rich family. She seems averse to being under pecuniary obligations. So she fights for the property right from Big Daddy. However, her husband Brick does not agree with her. "Mae an' Gooper are plannin' to freeze us out of Big Daddy's estate because you drink and I'm childless" (Williams, 2000c). It is hard to say if they can get the property from Big Daddy because Brick indulges in excessive drinking and they have no children. "Skipper and I made love, ... because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you" (Williams, 2000c). Brick does not like to sleep with her due to her error. Margaret discloses Skipper's homosexual tendency and forces him to make love with her, which makes Skipper commit suicide. Brick cannot forgive her due to her error. Margaret's error is the key to the whole plot. Without Margaret's error Brick will not indulge in

excessive drinking and abandon himself. His father intends to give the property to Brick without his abandonment. His father tries to talk with Brick and finds the real reason of his abandonment and his secret. Brick hates Margaret's error and refuses to have a child with her. Disappointedly and hopelessly Margaret takes deceptive measures at the critical moment by announcing her pregnancy. The plot is reversed and the distribution of Daddy's property may be changed. Margaret's error helps the development of the plot and paves the way for the plot's discovery and reverse. Margaret's error helps construct the tragic effect.

4. The Error of Misjudgment and Wrong Moral Choices

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche makes the two mistakes at the same time. Blanche was born into an aristocratic family. Her husband commits suicide and she loses the manor. She comes to a dead end. She has no one to depend on. Friendless and helpless, she becomes degenerate in order to escape reality and the sense of emptiness and depression. "I never had your beautiful self-control" (Williams, 2000d). Blanche says this to her younger sister. This sentence shows her weak self-control and is unable to make wise judgment. "I had many intimacies with strangers. ... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection ..." (Williams, 2000d) She chooses to deprave because she does not know how to face the reality and she cannot bear the agony. Blanche makes love with many men in order to escape the reality and agony and hunts for the sense of protection. "And admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness" (Williams, 2000d)! Her younger sister points Blanche's weaknesses. Blanche pays attention to her beauty and the appearance so much that she indulges in imagination and cannot deal with her life and situation in a practical and wise way. She makes the wrong and absurd judgment by placing hope on men. For instance, when she is raped by Stanley she tries to call not a policeman but a millionaire. Blanche never thinks of depending on herself. Being desperate she wants to find dependency and the chance of survival in Mitch. She wants to start her life all over again and finds the home for her body and soul. Blanche lacks the ability to make wise judgments and cannot respond appropriately to the situation. When she stays in Stanley's home, she finds fault with Stanley and advises her younger sister to leave Stanley. "Don't—Don't hang back with the brutes" (Williams, 2000d)! Blanche's error sends herself on the way to disaster. Hearing this Stanley takes vengeance on Blanche. Blanche's error accelerates the reverse and discovery of the plot and speeds up Blanche's tragedy.

In a word, the function of "Error women" in the tragedy is to help the development of the plot. Four women in the four tragedies all indulge in survival dilemma. In order to survive they make the error of misjudgment or wrong moral choices. Their tragedy is survival tragedy. Their errors further the development of the plot and induce the discovery and reverse of the plot. On the basis of error women, the discovery and reverse of the plot are realized. On the basis of error woman, tragic end takes place and tragic effect is well constructed.

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