

# Studies of Different Views of Love and Marriage Based on the “Four Elements” of Literary Criticism

—Taking *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Jane Eyre* as Examples

Jiayi Mao, Lingling Lou

School of English Language, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

Email: 2545277674@qq.com

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## Abstract

In today’s world, cultural exchange and comparison are becoming increasingly frequent, and literature research is also becoming more in-depth. *Jane Eyre*, and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, as exemplary works of Chinese and Western novels, have naturally become key objects of cultural dissemination to the foreign people. In 1953, American literary theorist Abrams proposed the “Four Elements Theory” in “Mirror and Lamp: Romantic Literary Theory and Critical Tradition”: author, work, universe, and audience. In this article, the author will introduce this theory for the appreciation of the two masterpieces above, trying to find out the different views of love and marriage between domestic and foreign in ancient times.

## Keywords

Four Elements Theory, Comparison, Views of Love and Marriage, Culture Differences

## 1. Introduction

As the world enters the era of globalization, economic globalization cooperation continues to strengthen, culture becomes more diverse, and people’s attitudes towards culture, as well as the similarities and differences and relationships between different cultures, are also changing (Qv, 2023). Through cross-cultural literary research, it is helpful to promote the realization of Mr. Fei Xiaotong’s concept of “the beauty of each, the beauty of beautiful people, the unity of beauty, and the unity of all cultures”. (Le, 2008) Under such circumstances, the need for cross-cultural exchange activities has put forward higher requirements for

the analysis and research of excellent literary works both domestically and internationally. Currently, many scholars in China have analyzed the vastly different views on marriage and love in Chinese and foreign works from many different perspectives, such as utilitarian marriage and feminism.

American literary theorist Abrams proposed the “Four Elements Theory”: author, work, universe, and audience. The relationship between these four elements is not isolated or static, but interdependent, penetrating, and interacting with each other, and together they form an organic activity system. As the author firmly believes: it is the different cultural backgrounds that share extremely different characteristics. This article will focus on two famous Chinese and foreign novels (*Dreams of Red Mansions* and *Jane Eyre*) to explore the different views of marriage and love transmitted between the lines.

The main content of this article is to study the view of love and marriage from the perspective of the “Four Elements Theory”. This paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter will briefly introduce the background of the urgent need for deeper analysis of novel masterpieces worldwide, and the author hopes to appreciate the two novels from a perspective that is different from the former scholars, to provide some guidance and experience for further research in the future. The second part is the literature review, which provides an overview of the development history and research status of the “Four Elements Theory” from domestic and foreign scholars. The third chapter is the definition and content of the theory. The fourth chapter is case analysis. The author will select representative scenes or lines from two books, and then analyze them from the interactive relationship among four aspects. The fifth chapter is the conclusion, which states that after a series of analyses, “Four Elements Theory” is very suitable for guiding the appreciation of novels that reflects a specific period, it is the different cultural background that shapes completely different characteristics among people at a certain time, author wants to imitate the true situation in his novel so that the audience can easily get know the core of the book.

## 2. Literature Review on Views of Love and Marriage

Using “Love and Marriage Views” as a keyword search on CNKI, 203 journals, 28 master’s theses, and 1 doctoral thesis were obtained.

From the perspective of research time, the earliest literature can be traced back to 1979, and most of the literature was published after 2011, indicating that research on the concept of marriage and love has the characteristics of short development time and fast development. After reviewing relevant research literature on CNKI, it was found that domestic literature has a certain number of foundations.

1) An analysis of the views on marriage and love in domestic and foreign art works. Or analyze and organize the completely different views on marriage and love in the works, and explore the reasons for their formation (Yan, 2016; Qi, 2014, etc.). By explaining the love and marriage of women, reflects the social

status of women at that time and reflects the author's views on women (Ma, 2022; Lin, 2021, etc.). Or demonstrate personalized thinking of inheritance and innovation in sexual relationships, which has significant practical significance in guiding the younger generation's love choices and establishing a correct view of love and marriage (Sun, 2022; Cao, 2015, etc.).

2) Compare and analyze different views on marriage and love in domestic and foreign art works, and analyze the reasons for their formation from different analytical theories or perspectives (Dai, 2021; Chen, 2022; Zhang, 2015, etc.).

In terms of foreign research, the search results on the Google Image website show that there is currently no foreign research literature focusing on Chinese views on marriage and love, only literature that analyzes or compares domestic literary works (Sundari, 2015, Iwakami, 1987). From this, it can be seen that foreign research on domestic literature has a small scale and shallow depth, which also indirectly reflects the objective fact that cultural propaganda needs to be strengthened urgently. In summary, existing research literature on the concept of marriage and love in domestic literature has conducted beneficial explorations from different perspectives, forming rich theoretical resources. Of course, any research has limitations and imperfections. From the perspective of existing research methods and content, there are still some shortcomings in existing research, which are manifested in the following aspects:

From the perspective of research methods, most of the existing literature related to domestic literary views on marriage and love adopts the methods of literature research and induction. No research is conducted under the guidance of the "four elements theory" of literary criticism, and the interconnection between the "author work universe audience" of the work has not been highlighted.

From the perspective of research content, literature research on domestic literary views on marriage and love can be analyzed through current situations or explored in depth from specific perspectives. However, there is very little literature that comprehensively analyzes various elements from a global perspective.

### 3. The "Four Elements" of Literary Criticism

It is the world in which the author lives nurtures unique artistic and cultural characteristics of the time. Art originates from life, and art is beyond life. As a spiritual culture, novels are at the core of culture, but they are limited by material and institutional cultures (Zheng, 2021).

American scholar Abrams mentioned in his book "Mirror and Lamp" that "literary works are composed of four elements: the world, the author, the reader, and the work." Sometimes when we study works from hundreds of years ago, it is inevitable that problems may arise during the understanding process. Therefore, we need to apply the theory of the four elements of literature to scientifically appreciate the above four aspects, and ultimately achieve a precise grasp of the main theme of the work (Feng & Du, 2023).

From the above review, it can be concluded that certain works of art are born

under a certain social background, so only by fully understanding the background in which the work is located can we better understand the author's writing intention and the theme they want to express. It must have been when the development of ideas and material levels were not synchronized, which would have caused tragedies in various aspects of life.

The author of this article will focus on classic literary works, exploring the vastly different views on love and marriage between China and the West in terms of language, behavior, personality, etc., and finding the reasons for these phenomena, to provide some suggestions for future mate selection for everyone.

## **4. Analysis of the Protagonists' Views on Love and Marriage in Two Works**

### **4.1. The A Dream of Red Mansions**

#### **4.1.1. Lin Daiyu**

Her mist-wreathed brows at first seemed to frown, yet were not frowning; Her passionate eyes at first seemed to smile, yet were not merry. Habit had given a melancholy cast to her tender face; Nature had bestowed a sickly constitution on her delicate frame. Often the eyes swam with glistening tears; often the breath came in gentle gasps. In stillness she made one think of a graceful flower reflected in the water; in motion, she called to mind tender willow shoots caressed by the wind. She had more chambers in her heart than the martyred Bi Gan; and suffered a tithe more pain in it than the beautiful Xi Shi (Yang & Dai, 2019).

The situation set when Baoyu and Daiyu first met, is Bao's first impression of his fairy sister, which can be called a classic. Through the description of Lin's appearance, actions, and demeanor, which writes about her sentimentality, weakness, and illness.

After this description, the image of a sick young lady jumped onto the paper. She was born into a scholarly family, but because of changes in her family, she had to rely on others, but that kind of scholar's dignity had not been erased; Her poor health and her suspicious and stubborn personality also suggest that she has few close friends and that her old age is desolate. This morbid beauty is not widely accepted, and it is also destined to be abandoned and forgotten.

#### **4.1.2. Jia Baoyu**

Oft-times he sought out what would make him sad;  
Sometimes an idiot seemed and sometimes mad.  
Though outwardly a handsome sausage-skin,  
He proved to have but sorry meat within.  
A harum-scarum, to all duty blind,  
A doltish mule, to study disinclined;  
His acts outlandish and his nature queer;  
Yet not a whit cared he how folk might jeer!  
Prosperous, he could not play his part with grace,

Nor, poor, bear hardship with a smiling face.  
 So shamefully the precious hours he'd waste  
 That both indoors and out he was disgraced.  
 For uselessness the world's prize he might bear;  
 His gracelessness in history has no peer.  
 Let gilded youths who every dainty sample  
 Not imitate this rascal's dire example! (Yang & Dai, 2019)

This posterity's evaluation of Baoyu can be said to have written all the world's complaints about the hero: he is ignorant and not keen on fame; different from others in character, living only for himself is a waste in the eyes of others; he has a beautiful face and likes to play with women; although the thought is independent and progressive, he still cannot completely break away from the feudal system, because of the dependent economy. Although the words in the word are extremely ironic, it is written from the perspective of contemporary people. Baoyu is a character image with the nature of the author's autobiography, which is also a true portrayal of the contradictory hearts of some progressive people when the world is chaotic.

#### 4.1.3. Conversation between Protagonists

After a quarrel between Bao and Dai, a few days later, Baoyu took the initiative to apologize. He called Daiyu "Good sister" many times. Daiyu had ignored Baoyu many times, but she couldn't help crying, "You don't have to coax me. After that, I didn't dare to get close to you, you can consider that I have died." Baoyu laughed and said, "Where are you going?" Lin Daiyu said, "I'll go home." Baoyu said with a smile, "I went with you." Lin Daiyu said, "I'm dead." Baoyu said, "If you die, I'll be a monk."

This dialogue between Bao and Dai is in ancient Chinese, it is very close to modern conversation, and the expression is very popular: Bao took the initiative to apologize after a misunderstanding. Instead of behaving badly to Daiyu, he chose to play a joke and directly expressed his love to Dai. He didn't think apologizing to a woman was a disgrace, and he placed the woman on an equal footing with himself. It was precisely because of his unique handling and true nature that Daiyu quickly forgave him, and their relationship was effectively eased. Moreover, Baoyu did not delve deeply into Daiyu's disregard for her behavior or use the corrupt and vulgar customs of ancient times to criticize her. Instead, she reflected on the position of others and showed full understanding, which was very precious in the authoritarian and corrupt ancient times.

#### 4.1.4. Summary

We can see that the hero and heroine are a pair of people who cherish each other and understand each other. Baoyu is different from ordinary people and cannot be understood by others, but because of his distinguished origin, he can do whatever he wants; living in the feudal period from prosperity to decline, he was strictly hierarchical, but he preferred Daiyu. He didn't want to make his political

achievements through marriage, which shows that his love is very pure; Although Daiyu depends on others, she will feel too small only when she is hurt by the scenery. In her daily life, she lives at her heart. In the face of Baoyu with true temperament, she regards him as her only confidant, but they can't escape the influence of the environment after all. The two people are separated forever, and love has become the "culprit" who lets Daiyu leave the world. To sum up, the newly germinated progressive thought cannot compete with the old thought, and the compromises of the progressives themselves have strangled their love in the cradle.

## 4.2. The *Jane Eyre*

### 4.2.1. Jane Eyre

"You wicked and cruel boy," I shouted. "Why do you want to hurt me." I touched my head. There was blood on it. "Look what you have done!" I cried. The unbearable pain overwhelmed my fear of him, and I fought against him regardless of everything. I was locked up in the red house by Mrs. Reed. This is the first time in my life that I have rebelled against John Reed (Bronte, 1993).

The above clip is excerpted from the first chapter of *Jane Eyre*, which describes the conflict between Jane and her cousin. Although she has to rely on them to live, she dares to rise and resist, which shows that she is the representative of progressive women in the new era.

### 4.2.2. Mr. Rochester

He stopped and glanced over my usual simple clothes. I was wearing a black Merino wool cloak and a black otter skin hat, which were far less sophisticated than my wife's servant clothes. He seemed to have difficulty identifying my identity, so I helped him.

"I am a private tutor."

"Ah, governess!" he repeated, "Damn it, I forgot about this too! Governess!"

My attire once again became the subject of his scrutiny...

I helped him to get back onto his horse, and he rode away without thanking me. (Bronte, 1993)

This is the scene when men and women meet for the first time. The hostess helped strangers mount the horse, which shows that the hostess is kind and willing to help others; but the man didn't even say a word of thanks, showing his arrogance and unwillingness to communicate with others. The sentences he said to himself also imply his identity, as the owner of Thornfield. After experiencing the betrayal of his feelings, he began to close himself, depressed. It was the appearance of the mistress that made his life live again.

### 4.2.3. Classic Clip

"Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? -a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do

you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! -- I have as much soul as you, --and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; --it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, --as we are!"

From this passage, it is not difficult to see that the hostess is a girl with self-esteem, self-love, and independent personality. Facing the person she loves, she doesn't lose herself but hopes to be with him on the premise of mutual equality and respect for each other. This is the difference between her and the women of her time, and also her real charm; Money, power, and status are really important, but never belittle yourself, because you never know how excellent you are.

#### 4.2.4. Summary

On the surface, Rochester is a gloomy and cold person, but in fact, he is an affectionate and kind person. He is unwilling to share his secret with Jane, which shows that his heart is closed; He doesn't want to tell Jane the fact that he was married, which shows that he is arbitrary; He dismisses the worries about the rich and the poor, which shows that he is an infatuated person. Although he had no feelings with a crazy woman, he tried his best to save her in the fire, which showed his kindness; Later, the disabled man refused Jane's confession, which showed that he had a strong self-esteem. He is a tragic figure bound by family dogma, but later he challenges the dogma. He is a person who becomes braver because of love. The heroine, Jane, is a strong, aggressive, and independent female image. Her behavior and language give her lover courage and new ideas, so they can get married.

### 5. Comparative Analysis of the Views on Marriage and Love between the East and the West

Different views of love are greatly influenced by ideological concepts and regional differences. Generally speaking, love in ancient China generally pays attention to "matching families". Marriage is more an alliance between families, and rarely because of love; under the influence of new ideas, the West has gradually stepped out of the "forced marriage", paying attention to gender equality and pursuing personality liberation. They think that love is the combination of two similar souls, so there is little oppression of backward ideas such as "family, age, and ethics". In addition, Chinese people tend to compromise or do everything they can to make up for the family's reputation and status in a flawed marriage; The West believes that if there is a problem in marriage, then they can separate directly without any concern. In the process of love, Chinese people like to use some special images to implicitly express their love, and only after experiencing many things together, can they carefully consider marriage, so the pe-

riod is very long; However, Westerners' love is based on passion, and most of them have been identified for life in just a few days. However, whether in the East or the West, lovers are willing to sacrifice everything for love and cherish their partners.

### **5.1. China: Love Is Bound and Involuntarily**

Lin Daiyu has obtained material satisfaction in her grandmother's home, but the fact that she is "dependent on others" torments her arrogance all the time. Although she met Jia Baoyu who loved her and protected her in Jia's mansion, she never dared to express her love. In this way, she is a poor and pathetic person: she is the precious niece of her grandmother and has a high status in the family; however, she has been in a passive position because of her economic independence and her rebellious character. In addition, influenced by her parents, she is full of knowledge, but she is tactful and cowardly about love. Although Baoyu has always protected her and even turned against her elders, it still can't change the tragic ending. However, there is no doubt that Daiyu has always been flashing the modern progressive thought of pursuing emancipation of personality, equality between men and women, and freedom of marriage.

The hero and heroine not only knew each other in their previous lives but also were brothers and sisters after reincarnation. Although they fell in love with each other, they experienced many events, such as Princess Yuan's mothering, Grandma Liu's entering the Grand View Garden, and Baoyu was beaten, and the period lasted for several years. The writer uses more passages to express the sentimental feelings, but the emotional expression is very implicit; When there is a crisis in the relationship, even if you want to remedy it, everything is in vain in the face of thousands of years of feudal thought. The sons and daughters of the aristocratic family bear the expectations of the family. Through an emotionless marriage, they have a foothold in society, fight for love, and will only be despised; In addition, in ancient China, marriage stresses "the order of parents and the words of matchmakers". Marriage without the blessing of parents is doomed to be unhappy. Moreover, the authority of parents does not allow challenges, so elopement success is even less.

### **5.2. Western: Love Is Equal and Independent**

Jane is humble and unsightly, but she never feels inferior. She has a rebellious spirit and is not afraid of power, so she escapes the abuse of her aunt's family; she is constantly striving for self-improvement and has a strong desire to survive. During her time at Lowood College, she studied hard and became a teacher at Thornfield Manor. In the face of Rochester, who was born into a noble family, she expressed her love neither humbly nor arrogantly and did not lose herself in love. In the face of facts, she chose to believe in the man, left alone, and finally gained complete love.

Love can destroy or change a person. In the love between Jane and Mr.



Rochester, Jane has some characteristics of modern progressive women: self-love, self-improvement, independence, and unwillingness to the status quo. She unconsciously changed the indifferent man and showed the little-known side of the man. In daily life, they have strengthened each other's hearts, which is the magic of love. However, on the contrary, Rochester's marriage with his ex-wife was a fraud from the beginning, and then the plot like tearing up the wedding dress and setting the manor on fire, the crazy woman has been addicted to her world and never really thought about each other. Selfishness cast her tragic ending, and marriage is also her grave.

After the Renaissance, the West advocated human freedom, so there were not so many forced marriages. Even if the parents did not agree with this marriage, then a lover would choose to elope because the concept of being equal to each other in the West was not so strong; In addition, Westerners pursue "love first", and their way of expressing love will be more direct, to avoid many misunderstandings and speed up the process of feelings; The most important thing is that when they encounter difficulties, they will not have a lot of ideological baggage, so they can boldly implement their ideas, but will become braver until they complete the challenge.

## 6. Conclusion

During the research process, the author found that the character designs of the female protagonists in these two works are very similar: they both lost their parents and grew up lonely and were dependent on others, but faced with love, their endings were vastly different. According to the "Four Elements" of Literary Criticism, this is closely related to the period in the work. The writing background of *Jane Eyre* is the social stratification and low status of women in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. At that time, upper-class men in British society often had wealth and power, while women were expected to take care of their families and children at home. Author Charlotte Bronte hopes to present readers with a fictional, independent, and strong female image through this book, while also calling on readers to pay attention to the status and rights of women. In addition, Charlotte Bronte also borrowed some cultural phenomena and values from the society of that time during her writing process, such as marriage, family, responsibility, morality, etc., which became important components of the novel. Therefore, *Jane Eyre* is not only a love story, but also a work that reflects the social reality and cultural style of the time.

*A Dream of Red Mansions* was created in the late feudal society of China in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This novel comprehensively and profoundly reflects the era characteristics of the rise and fall of feudal society. It does not depict a love story of "bridal chamber, candles, and golden rankings"; but rather about the tragic love and marriage between the feudal aristocratic youth Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, and Xue Baochai. The great social significance of the novel lies in its not isolated depiction of this love tragedy, but in its focus on this love and marriage tragedy,

depicting the rise and fall of the four representative families of Jia, Wang, Shi, and Xue at that time. It exposes the various darkness and evil in the later stage of feudal society, as well as the insurmountable internal contradictions. It strongly criticizes the corrupt feudal ruling class and the impending collapse of the feudal system, making readers feel that it will inevitably lead to its downfall. At the same time, the novel also expresses new vague ideals by praising aristocratic rebels.

According to the “Four Elements” of Literary Criticism, it is the different cultural background, beliefs, forms of marriage, gender role cognition, and romantic culture that shape the extremely different views of love and marriage. Novel, as one of the typical forms of art, reflects a lot of cultural factors. By analyzing the views of love and marriage, the author hopes to provide some guidance for the later researchers about Cross-Cultural Communication and Comparative Literature.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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