

Comparative Study on the Aesthetic Characteristics of The Nightingale and the Rose and The Narrow Door from the Perspective of Aestheticism

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Abstract:

Based on the aesthetic background of aestheticism, this paper studies the common and different aesthetic characteristics of the two works. By using the method of comparative research, this paper compares the characteristics of Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* and Gide's *The Narrow Door* from the direction of tragedy, and analyzes the differences in story content, expression techniques, and emotional expression, to achieve a unique interpretation of beauty. Although the two have their emphasis on the expression technique and theme, they both embody strong aesthetic characteristics and a profound reflection on life, love, and faith. Through the comparative study of these two works, one can deeply explore their similarities and differences in tragedy, aesthetic view, and emotional expression, and reveal the unique interpretation and pursuit of beauty of the two writers under the background of aestheticism. Through the comparative study of this paper, can see that the two works have aesthetic characteristics, critical characteristics, death art characteristics, and faith complexes. Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* also has a scathing quality, while Andre's "The Narrow Door" embodies a contradictory quality.

Keywords: Nightingale and Rose; Narrow door; aestheticism; aesthetics, idiosyncrasies.

1. Introduction

Wilde, the representative of aestheticism, brought together the ideological resources that could be condensed from reality and history and united them with the artistic resources of pre-Raphaelites, Rococo art, new Romanticism, aestheticism, decadence, symbolism, etc. The combination of Epicureanism, Platonism, Thomism, Renaissance humanism, and even classical German philosophy and classical German literature has cast its own artistic supremacy and artistic utopian ideals.

The influence of French writer Andre Gide's thought comes from a variety of sources. In his creative career, he has been influenced by aestheticism, symbolism, and naturalism, and at the same time revealed some characteristics of existentialism. He pioneered the literature of the absurd and laid the foundation for the development of later literature. The reason for the formation of such a multi-faceted and complex creative style comes from Gide's lonely childhood. He received two contradictory educations from childhood: his mother only wanted him to be a smooth and ignorant child, and his father taught him to be rational in everything. This seems to be a seed of "contradiction",

which has taken root and sprouted in Gide's heart since then and has become the biggest characteristic of his spiritual world.

The Nightingale and the Rose and *The Narrow Door* are two representative works in Western literature. Under the guidance of aestheticism, these two works show different aesthetic characteristics through tragic plots, unique expression techniques, and deep emotional expression. *The Nightingale and the Rose* by Oscar Wilde reveals the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of human nature with its vitriolic satire and criticism. *Gide's The Narrow Door* explores the complex relationship between faith and morality through contradiction and conflict.

Although the two have their emphasis on the expression technique and theme, they both embody strong aesthetic characteristics and a profound reflection on life, love, and faith. Through the comparative study of these two works, one can deeply explore their similarities and differences in tragedy, aesthetic view, and emotional expression, and reveal the unique interpretation and pursuit of the beauty of the two writers under the background of aestheticism.

2. Aestheticism and Criticism

As an important trend of thought in literature and art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aestheticism advocated “art for art’s sake”, emphasizing the aesthetic sense of form and sensory pleasure rather than ethics or social utility. Aestheticism pursues the delicacy of language, the beauty of image, and the intensity of emotion in literary works. The aesthetic characteristics of aestheticism have been fully demonstrated in *The Nightingale and the Rose* and *The Narrow Door*, but both of them express beauty, but also integrate the profound criticism of reality, forming a unique aesthetic tension.

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde constructed a fairy tale world full of romance and tragedy through exquisite language and beautiful imagery. To fulfill the young student’s love, the nightingale dyed the rose red with her lifeblood [1]. This extreme act of sacrifice is extremely moving in the framework of aestheticism, the spirit of the nightingale in pursuit of pure beauty and love at all costs, and this spirit is highly compatible with the idea of aestheticism in pursuit of perfect form. In the end, however, Nightingale’s sacrifice was rewarded with the student’s indifference, fickleness, and crushed wreckage. It can be said that in the climax of the emotional accumulation to the final eruption, Wilde’s purpose is to destroy the good things in front of the reader, so that the reader in strong grief, feels a kind of tragic pleasure, the reality of the cruel tragedy of the beauty shocking [2]. It reveals Wilde’s profound criticism of human cruelty and social reality. Here, aestheticism is not only the pursuit of beauty but also becomes a tool of irony, reflecting the cruelty and absurdity of the secular world through the ultimate beauty. Compared with *The Nightingale and the Rose*, *The Narrow Door* more subtly embodies the fusion of aestheticism and criticism. Gide shows the pursuit of aestheticism through the heroine Alyssa’s insistence on spiritual purity. Alyssa chose a “narrow door” road of separation of spirit and body, gave up the pursuit of love and happiness, and finally went to loneliness and death. In this process, Alyssa’s choice seems to be the pursuit of a supreme spiritual beauty, but this beauty is based on self-repression and denial. In fact, a large part of the obstacle to the love between Alyssa and Jerome comes from the “asceticism” advocated by religion, that is, the suppression of one’s own desires. The virtuous hope to enter heaven through the narrow door, and they regard moral self-perfection and complete self-purification as the only realm for the union and happiness of two people. In their view, the happiness of the two of them cannot be achieved in any way, only through the absolute purity of body and mind, can they go to the holy heaven [3]. Through Alyssa’s tragic fate, Gide

questioned the Puritans’ imprisonment of desire-ism and aestheticism, pointing out the devastating consequences that such extreme pursuits could bring. At the same time, Gide also reflected deeply on religious belief and the nature of human nature through Alyssa’s belief struggle and ultimate spiritual detachment, showing a complex criticism.

Although both works embody the aesthetic qualities of aestheticism, they show different critical emphases. Through romanticizing love and sacrifice, *The Nightingale and the Rose* implies the nothingness and collapse of beautiful things in reality and criticizes people’s blind pursuit of beautiful things as well as the indifference and selfishness of human nature. *The Narrow Door*, on the other hand, is more inclined to explore the conflict between the spiritual world and real life. Alyssa’s tragic choice, reveals the irreconcilable contradiction between aesthetic ideals and reality and criticizes asceticism and the dehumanization and self-destruction tendency of this pursuit.

Although the two works have different forms of expression in aestheticism and criticism, they both reveal the complex and contradictory relationship between human nature, belief, and social reality through extreme beauty and profound criticism. This combination of aesthetic and critical aesthetic characteristics not only makes the two works reach a high degree of unity at the art level but also makes them have a unique value in the depth of thought. Through these two works, one can see that aestheticism is not only the pursuit of beauty but also a profound tool for cultural reflection, revealing the tension between beauty and reality.

3. The Art and Belief Complex of Death

The two works analyzed in this paper show profound death art and belief complexes in the expression of aesthetic characteristics. This characteristic not only runs through the narrative structure of the work and the fate of the characters but also manifests in the ideological connotation of the work.

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the art of death is particularly prominent. The nightingale in the story fulfills the love of young students, at the cost of their own lives, with the blood of the heart red a white rose. This death scene full of dedication fully embodies the ultimate pursuit of aestheticism, that is, to realize the eternal and sublime of art through death. The death of the nightingale not only symbolizes the supreme state of art but also the ultimate exploration of the nature of life. Nightingale’s kindness and selflessness, noble and beautiful, let death become a continuation of life, not the end of life [4]. The beauty

of the soul and the beauty of death at this time achieve a high degree of unity, reaching a degree of near perfection. Her death seems to have endowed the rose with a supreme beauty, making it a symbol of love, but also revealing the fragility of love and the emptiness of humanity. This technique of expressing aesthetic meaning through death highlights Wilde's deep understanding and expression of the complex relationship between life and art. Wilde tried to find new beliefs for people in the field of art, and he believed that only by going to the 'temple of beauty' can people truly be liberated. In his novels, he dispelled the darkness and terror of death in an aesthetically beautiful way and freed people from the fear of death. No matter whether the characters in the novel die for love or for belief, they all convey a strong aesthetic feeling of combining love and death, which reflects Wilde's unique aesthetic taste as an aesthete and shows a painful and wonderful artistic conception [5].

In contrast, the art of death in *The Narrow Door* is more restrained and profound. Gide shows an internalized art of death through the inner struggle and death of the heroine Alyssa. Alyssa pursues spiritual purity and the supremacy of faith, for which she chooses self-repression and the denial of physical desire. Her death was not a spectacular sacrifice, but an obscure way to end her own painful and contradictory life. Alyssa's death is not directly depicted but gradually unfolds through the conflict of beliefs and inner entanglements. This kind of death hidden in the heart reflects Gide's deep thinking of the human spiritual world and his persistent pursuit of faith. Her death symbolizes the complete abandonment of the secular life and the ultimate spiritual transcendence and belief.

The belief complex plays an important role in both works. The faith shown by the Nightingale in *The Nightingale and the Rose* is not religious, but an obsession with love and the ultimate pursuit of beauty. Although her belief that good love can be achieved through her sacrifice is ultimately proved to be false, Nightingale's behavior gives the belief a profound tragic color. This persistence of faith and the eventual disillusion reflects Wilde's pessimistic attitude towards the disillusion of human faith and ideals. In *The Narrow Door*, the belief complex is more direct and complex. The subconscious revealed by the author Gide, that is, the paradise lost complex, on the one hand, it is difficult to resist the temptation of the world, on the other hand, he yearned for pure love like Adam and Eve when they lived in paradise, and the final remaining is only loneliness [6].

Alyssa's faith is a Christian faith, and she has spent her life seeking the purity of her soul and the salvation of God. Her attachment to her faith led to her isolation from worldly life, and she even chose to give up love and hap-

piness. This extreme pursuit of faith eventually led her to her death. Alyssa's belief is not a simple religious belief, but a harsh demand and pursuit of her soul.

Jerome was able to see where the light was coming from at first, so he couldn't help but walk toward the light, but his footsteps gradually became blind, the light made him dizzy, and his vision began to blur, and later he was just looking for the light with strong inertia, but he had already stopped thinking about where the light came from [7]. Through their love story, Gide explores the conflict between faith and real life and the profound impact of this conflict on the spiritual world of individuals.

There are both similarities and significant differences in the expression of death art and belief complex. The former, through vivid symbolism and extreme artistic expression, emphasizes the inseparability of death and beauty, just as the nightingale will never know that the rose it has bought with its life has been crushed by the young man throwing down the carriage. But he must have died happy and unrepentant. It is death that fulfills his beautiful yearning for love, and it is death that covers up the betrayal of kindness [8]. The latter explores the deep relationship between faith and life through introspective narration and attachment to faith. In terms of expression form and ideological connotation, they show different artistic pursuits under aestheticism and deep thinking of the human spiritual world.

4. The Characteristics of Wilde's Works

Oscar Wilde's literary works are known for their unique style of bitter satire, and *The Nightingale and the Rose* is a typical embodiment of this style. Vitriol is not a simple mockery or attack, but through sharp language and exquisite conception reveals the absurdity and hypocrisy hidden under the beautiful surface, showing Wilde's sharpness and sharpness. In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, Wilde brings this acerbic quality to life through the self-sacrifice of the nightingale and the callous indifference of the student.

The plot of Nightingale dying for love seems to be full of romanticism on the surface, but in fact, Wilde incorporated a sharp criticism of the hypocrisy of human nature and the frivolity of love into it.

First of all, Wilde reveals the cruel opposition between romantic ideal and reality through the sacrifice of the nightingale. Nightingale is a symbol of idealism and the supreme spirit of art, she is convinced that love is noble and pure, willing to die for it. However, Wilde did not give this ideal of a happy ending, on the contrary, he showed the ideal in the face of reality through the indiffer-

ence of students and the ruthlessness of reality. The death of the nightingale did not bring the bloom of love, but in exchange for the fragmentation of the rose, this strong contrast makes the reader feel the romantic beauty at the same time, but also feel a profound sadness. This is the embodiment of Wilde's acerbic character: under the cloak of beauty hides the cold mockery and questioning of the secular world. "Bitter" irony is a thorn rose shining in the garden of humor, full of very intense broken beauty, and belongs to the aesthetic category of humor [9].

Second, Wilde's "vitriol" is also reflected in the mockery of social values. The plot of a professor's daughter who abandons the red rose, a symbol of love, because of a pair of jewelry, directly attacks people's blind pursuit of material things and vanity. Through this detail, Wilde satirizes the worship of material wealth and the contempt for true emotions in society at that time. He uses the dialogue and actions of the characters in the story to expose the falsity of this value. Students' sweethearts represent those who pursue superficial glory while ignoring the inner truth, and students' attitudes toward love change after suffering a blow, which also reflects the sad reality that people lose themselves in the material world and abandon their ideals. Wilde also showed his characteristic acerbic touch in his portrayal of his characters. From the infatuation at the beginning to the indifference at the end, the students show the multifaceted nature and complexity of human nature. Wilde does not portray the student as a mere victim but reveals the selfish and ephemeral side of love through his reaction. When the rose loses its value, the student immediately abandons and decides to devote himself to "useful" learning. This behavior appears to be a rational choice, but in fact, it is a betrayal of true feelings, and the side highlights how ridiculous the choice made by the ignorant student, reflecting a kind of black humor. Through this meticulous description, the utilitarian side of human nature is sharply revealed, and readers are also asked to reflect on the delicate relationship between love and interest.

In short, Wilde's "vitriol" is not only reflected in the sharp language and the irony of the plot but also the profound insight and criticism of human nature, society, and values. Through the contrast and conflict between ideal and reality, emotion and material, *The Nightingale and the Rose* shows Wilde's calm examination and merciless lash to the secular world. This scathing style not only enhances the critical power of the work, but also adds a cold depth under the surface of aestheticism, making the work in the pursuit of beauty, but also shows the uncompromising and profound reflection on reality.

5. Gide's Contradictions and Conflicts

Gide, as an important representative of French literature in the 20th century, often shows profound contradictions and conflicts in his works, which is particularly prominent in *The Narrow Door*. Sheng Chenghua has explored the unity of Gide contradictions, and the contradictions and intricacies form the harmony and balance in his works [10]. This paper analyzes Gide's contradictions and conflicts in *The Narrow Door* from the perspectives of faith and emotion, reason and desire, and individual and society.

Firstly, the contradiction between belief and emotion in *The Narrow Gate* is one of the core conflicts in Gide's works. The heroine, Alyssa, struggles with faith and emotion throughout the story. She loved her cousin Jerome deeply, but she chose to suppress her emotions under religious beliefs, and finally gave up her love with Jerome to pursue the so-called "purity". She died, in the fierce struggle of two contradictory thoughts, because she had chosen a way in thought, but could not do it in action, and this opposition between thought and action completely broke her body and mind [11]. Through the role of Alyssa, Gide deeply reveals the suppression of personal emotions by religious belief, as well as the inner contradictions and sufferings brought about by this repression. Her pain came from an inner struggle, she did not know if God could achieve her happiness but she had to believe. However, the desire for love makes it difficult for her to achieve a state of inner peace [11]. Alyssa's choice is not only an adherence to faith but also a departure from human feelings, which runs through her life and eventually leads to her tragic end.

Secondly, the conflict between reason and desire is also deeply expressed in *The Narrow Door*. Through the relationship between Alyssa and Jerome, Gide shows the struggle between reason and desire in the depths of the human heart. Alyssa's rational choice is to pursue religious purity and suppress her desires and love, while Jerome symbolizes the natural human emotions and desires, and he longs to spend his life with Alyssa. However, Alyssa's rationality makes her constantly escape from this natural emotional pursuit, which makes her always unable to achieve true peace in her deep heart. Through this conflict, Gide reveals the irreconcilable contradiction between reason and desire and reflects his deep understanding of the complexity of human nature.

Third, the contradiction between the individual and the society is also clearly reflected in *The Narrow Door*. Through the opposition between Alyssa and social norms, Gide shows the conflict between the individual pursuit of self-ideal and social expectations. Alyssa chose to take the "narrow door", that is, to give up personal happiness and

pursue a purity and spiritual ideal beyond the mundane. Her choice is a struggle against societal norms that generally justify the pursuit of happiness and the fulfillment of personal desires. However, Alyssa's choice reflects her rejection of secular values, and the determination and contradiction she shows in this choice reflect Gide's deep thinking about the conflict between individual freedom and social expectations.

In addition, the contradictions and conflicts in *The Narrow Door* are not only reflected in the inner world of the characters but also reflected in Gide's writing style and narrative mode. There is a symmetrical contradiction theme running through his works, which sets up the edifice of Gide's contradictory symmetry aesthetics. His works interpret people's choices in front of morality and show the path of failure and destruction in the form of contradiction and symmetry [10]. Gide often adopts a calm and restrained narrative, but underneath this surface calmness, there are deep emotional conflicts and spiritual contradictions. He reveals the inner complexity and contradiction of the characters through delicate psychological descriptions and symbolic imagery. Alyssa's letters and diaries, as well as her conversations with Jerome, are important tools Gide uses to show this inner conflict. The relationship between Alyssa and Jerome embodies the deep opposition between divinity and humanity. In Jerome's eyes, Alyssa always exudes a divine glow. Her every move shows the restraint of her emotions and personal desires, and her unwavering determination to pursue her ideals, and nothing can shake her faith. Her divinity was on full display. In contrast, Jerome is a person who yearns for love, and in the face of the rejection of the pious Alyssa, he appears somewhat weak, fully demonstrating the fragility of human nature. Alyssa's strong faith stands in stark contrast to Jerome's vulnerability, a contradiction that ultimately leads to tragedy. Through these narratives, readers can feel the inner struggles and contradictions of the characters, and this contradiction is the core of the complexity of human nature that Gide wants to explore.

In general, Gide expressed the internal and external conflicts as well as the conflicts of spirit and flesh through the depiction of multiple contradictions between belief and emotion, rationality and desire, individual and society in *The Narrow Door*, and deeply revealed the conflicts and complexities in human nature. These contradictions not only constitute the tragic elements of *The Narrow Door* but also reflect Gide's profound insight into the inner world of human beings. Through *The Narrow Door*, Gide exhorts people to face their hearts and accept the most real and unbearable thoughts in their hearts. He shows the reader a world of constant struggle between ideal and reality, desire and abstinence. This struggle is the most

moving part of his works, and the contradictory aesthetics are tightly wrapped around the reader's mind like a spider web.

6. Conclusion

Through the comparative study of the aesthetic characteristics of *The Nightingale and the Rose* and *The Narrow Door*, one can see the complex and profound artistic characteristics of the two works under the background of aestheticism. Both of them not only reflect the common aestheticism in aesthetic expression, but also present a unique interpretation of human nature, love, and faith through the exploration of criticism, death art, and belief complex.

The Nightingale and the Rose reveal the cruelty and fragility of aestheticism in real life through its acerbic satire and criticism of idealized love. With his unique artistic language, Wilde describes a kind of aestheticism with strong critical aesthetic characteristics, which makes his works reveal the hypocrisy of society and also show the ultimate pursuit of aestheticism.

In contrast, *The Narrow Door* expresses the struggle of the human soul between belief and desire through the description of contradictions and conflicts. The aesthetic characteristics of Gide in his works pay more attention to the inner contradictions and sufferings of human nature, as well as the profound discussion of faith. This kind of contradiction not only enriches the connotation of aestheticism but also makes *Narrow Gate* more hierarchical and complicated in artistic expression. To sum up, through comparative analysis, it can be seen that although *The Nightingale and the Rose* and *The Narrow Door* have their characteristics in expression techniques and emotional expression, under the influence of aestheticism, both show their unique artistic value and ideological depth. Both of them reveal the complex truth of human nature in the tragic narrative, which not only retains the core characteristics of aestheticism but also expands the boundary of aestheticism through their respective artistic exploration.

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