

Trans-cultural comparison of Death Philosophy in “Five Bells”

Qihui Wu*

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai,
200237, China

Abstract

The essay compares European, Chinese and Australian cultures of death by the analysis of main characters' attitudes toward death in an effort to explore Jones's philosophical thoughts on it. From the aspect of thematology in comparative literature, along with philosophical bases and historical sources about death among different cultures, the findings are that Modern Western death philosophy favors Irrationalism; Chinese death philosophy originates from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism; as for Australian culture on death, it belongs to Western death philosophy, but its colonial history exerts a profound influence on aboriginal views of death.

Keywords

Trans-cultural Comparison, “Five Bells”, Death Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Gail Jones (1955-), an outstanding Australian writer, lectures in literature, cinema and culture studies at West Sydney University. Her fields of research include cinema studies, literary theory, narrative, contemporary literature and Australian literature, and her novels involve various subjects, including sculpture painting and music. Jones excels at trans-cultural writing, thus multiculturalism and globalization feature prominently in her works. In the context of cosmopolitan Australia, she takes a global perspective and has great insight into diverse cultures.

The novel *Five Bells* is representative of Jones's work, which incorporates several profound themes and her deep understanding of life. It relates to the stories of four characters with different national backgrounds—Ellie, James DeMello, Pei Xing and Catherine—who gathered in Circular Quay and witnessed a kidnap by chance. Ellie and James, who were lovers at the age of fourteen, made an appointment in Sydney because James was trapped in depression and hoped to get comfort from Ellie. As for Pei Xing, an immigrant from China, she came across her former guard who once abused her during the Cultural Revolution. There is no revenge but forgiveness between two Chinese females. The last main character is an Irish tourist, Catherine. She went on holiday in Australia but was still lost in sorrow for her brother's death. This novel focuses on the past events of the four characters and the four different stories all talk about a common topic—death. It represents four different attitudes toward death and elaborates on their views of death. On top of that, Jones made relatively objective descriptions and comments on some historical and political events in this novel.

Gail Jones's works have such features as time disruption and trauma aesthetic, centralizing on the philosophy of death, love secrets and relations of language and pattern. She also mentions historical events and cultural exchange, so quite a few scholars in Australian literary studies show interest in her writing. Nowadays, there are a host of critical articles and theses on Jones's works, in particular her novel *Sixty Lights*, *Sorry* and *Black Mirror*.

Foreign scholars mostly studied Jones's writing skills, such as photographic records and disarray of time and space. The essay “Gail Jones's ‘light-writing’: Memory and the Photo-graph”

(Lyn Jacobs, 2006: 191-208) turned the spotlight to photography and the metaphors of light, shadow and mirror in Jones's fiction. Also, she noted that the linguistic and visual codes are of great help to share perceptions and to connect the past and the present. Some other scholars regarded Jones's novels as trauma literature. "It is a nod to Kenneth Slessor's poem of the same name" (Robert Dixon, 2012: 1-16). He also pointed out that *Five Bells* included Jones's study on the theory of urbanism and psychogeography, cosmopolitanism and global translation.

In China, however, the bulk of scholars show interest in Jones's "Sixty Lights" and "Sorry". Wang Labao, Huang Jie and Zhan Chunjuan all conduct some research on her novel *Sorry*. Wang Labao(2018: 124-160) claimed that the novel showed Jones's anti-colonialism and sympathy to Australian aborigines from the perspective of narrative; Huang Jie(2018: 135-152) contended that Jones focused on Australian national trauma in the process of cultural integration; Zhan Chunjuan(2020: 149-159) labeled *Sorry* as a reconciliation novel, which explored Australian ethical dilemma. Zhang Chengcheng(2021: 144-150) emphasized that "Sixty Lights" studied identity recognition and the special identity of cosmopolitan in terms of the mobility of identity.

2. Different Attitudes toward Death

2.1. James's Irrational Attitude

Italians have passions for life as well as a fear of death. Death comes as a terrible blow to them. James, an Italian boy, had been living in the nightmare of death and ultimately collapsed.

The first time James witnessed death was at the age of nine when he watched Ellie's father killing a chicken, which had been popped off its head but suddenly lurched away in a directionless run. The ghostly thing shocked and terrified James. He felt like extricated and burst into tears after his fight with the headless chicken. Actually at that moment James was so desperately scared as to get out of control. His reaction was similar to a kind of acute stress response.

The second trauma caused by death came from his mother. Staring at his mother's body in the hospital, James endured extreme agony in spite of his silence. He wanted badly to rebut the priest in anger while listening to his chattering prayer since it was impossible to resurrect his mother in medicine, as everyone knows. Then the death of Amy, James's student, became the final straw that broke his back. Amy was drowned at sea by chance when James led his class to go camping. Although Amy's parents understood drowning was an accident and forgave James, he still felt an overwhelming sense of guilt because he was partly responsible for Amy's drowning. As soon as he was released by the authorities, he fled away from the town. He drove a car "too fast and manically" along the road(*Five Bells*, 122). At that time, James felt heavily depressed and tried to break the thrall. Since then, James lived in depression and darkness and attempted to find solace of a kind in alcohol.

2.2. Pei Xing's Passive Attitude

Chinese are obedient, accustomed to bowing their head to Fate in silence. They have no alternative but to succumb to death which no one can be exempt from. Pei Xing, an old woman from China, conceded defeat in the threat of death after some ups and downs in life.

Pei Xing was threatened by death for the first time when she saw Comrade Lu, her teacher, badly beaten by a crowd of Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. She chose to retreat for fear that any complicity would arise between her and Comrade Lu, which possibly involved her in another denunciation. Consequently, she escaped from the bloody scene.

Unfortunately, she was unable to evade Red Guards' capture and was trapped in prison, where she was subjected to systematic torture and maltreatment. No rebellion, no retaliation. She simply hid herself in the inside world of Doctor Zhivago, which served as a spiritual support for

her during the dark period. Nevertheless, it was Pei Xing's submission to the Red Guards that got her out of prison. Then, many years later, Pei Xing moved to Australia where she surprisingly met Dong Hua, her former prison guard who had ever abused and insulted her. Pei Xing had thought that she could escape China to forget those miserable days, thus she tried to refuse Dong Hua and hide herself once again but, at last, was in vain. Even Pei Xing did not dare to drive her away or rise against her when Dong Hua visited her several times without invitation. Finally, Pei Xing was forced to forgive Dong Hua. In fact, her forgiveness represents a kind of surrender owing to her cowardice.

2.3. Ellie's Positive Attitude

Optimism is an obvious mark of Australians, who are full of hope and believe in a redemptive future. Ellie, as an Aborigine, remained unchanged and self-possessed in response to death. Although she expressed sadness or shows low spirits for a short time, it is easy for her to return to normal.

Ellie's early experience with death is also the headless chicken. She looked much more calm even like a bystander compared with James because this little girl just regarded the messy situation as a drama with a little bit of excitement. Perhaps she didn't form a distinct perception of death due to her young age, but it can be deduced that Ellie grew up secure and strong with a joyful disposition.

Then She heard of her father's death at university. It was quite astounding that the only thing she did was go back to attend his funeral in the knowledge that he died of a heart attack. Ellie found his death a no-nonsense departure since he passed away quietly and quickly without any trouble or disturbance. Nevertheless, it was unreasonable and abnormal that Ellie lamented the death of her father. Until she encountered a kangaroo struck by a bus, her grief and sadness were triggered, resulting from her association with her father's death. No one cried for the kangaroo except Ellie in the traffic accident where the driver drag its body to the side of the road and restarted the journey; the other passengers thought of it as a common incident with no concern for a living creature. It is a similar case where no one wept for her father given that she had not truly mourned for him meanwhile her mother remarried before long.

3. Conclusion

Five Bells is such a novel that is set in Sydney, a cosmopolitan city, with a profound theme of death. The essay compares different national beliefs of death in this novel in an effort to explore Jones's philosophy of death and tries to figure out a healthy attitude toward death.

First and foremost, Jones describes an Italian boy, clever but vulnerable. She offers a tremendous visual impact, like bright colors and dramatic scenes, to highlight Italian great sensitivity and enthusiasm. She argued that Italians, who superficially have a strong passion for life, probably fail to overcome their psychological barriers, like fear of death. Despite his exposure to Australian culture, James did not absorb Aborigine optimism, not to mention their relentless pursuit of enjoyment. The differences between Western culture and Australian culture are disclosed and suggest that Jones criticizes European overstatement about irrational factors of death. Secondly, as for her thoughts on Chinese views of death, Jones describes a typical Chinese in the context of a historical event, the Cultural Revolution which is synonymous with suffering and darkness in Chinese perception. She shows the irresistible force of death through the sharp contrast between a country's power and an individual's strength. Clearly, an individual cannot fight against a country as a human cannot defeat death, in consequence, the Chinese bow their head to Fate. That being said, submission to death is not equivalent to ending one's life because Chinese people lay stress on their social value; in other words, they cherish their life and expect their death to be meaningful and influential. This is the greatest difference

between Western death philosophy and Chinese death philosophy and this is why Pei Xing survived in adversity, instead of committing suicide. Hence, Jones had an one-sided opinion about Chinese death philosophy, who just underlined escape and surrender in the Chinese story. At last, Jones explains a healthy attitude toward death in an Aborigine's story. She contends that optimism is key to confronting the threat of death. It is notable that the role of Ellie is not only a lively and strong Australian girl but also she is seen as a savior of James who believes that Ellie could help him to get rid of his torment and misfortune. On top of that, Jones differentiates Ellie from those cold bystanders with unconcern. Ellie truly mourned death whereas she neither was hammered by death nor succumbed to death. As a result, Jones appreciates Ellie's behaviors and approves of the Australian view of death.

To conclude, Gail Jones shares her reflection on death and makes a comparison of different views of death developed by multiculturalism. Thanks to her broader perspective, *Five Bells* sparkles public reflection on national views of life and death now that there is still a long way for humans to hold a healthy attitude toward death.

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