

The Core Secrets of Crafting the "Dramatic Poetic Realm" in The Romance of the Western Chamber

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Abstract: This article takes The Romance of the Western Chamber as the research object, and makes a specific analysis on how to construct its dramatic poetic environment. The methods of creating drama are embodied in two aspects: "the ups and downs and the differences are interesting", "the potential energy is full of drama flavor", and the methods of creating poetry are embodied in the two aspects of "the combination of poetry and painting" and "the fullness of image adds spiritual rhyme", which form a dramatic poetic environment. At the end of the article, combining with many problems existing in the current drama creation, the author puts forward several constructive suggestions from the perspective of constructing the drama poetic environment in The Romance of the Western Chamber.

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"The Romance of the Western Chamber" is a classic drama created by Wang Shifu, a renowned playwright of China's Yuan Dynasty. It has been celebrated for centuries as a work that "perfectly embodies the artistic unity of poetic form, style, and aesthetic conception pursued by Chinese opera, while simultaneously achieving cohesion in its dramatic plot structure." [1] This masterpiece has captivated scholars for centuries, with most focusing on its "poetic" qualities while overlooking its "dramatic" dimensions. Moreover, analyses that consider both its "poetic" and "dramatic" dimensions are even rarer. To address this gap, this article will employ the novel theory of "dramatic poetic realm" to explore and summarize Wang Shifu's methods and creative wisdom in constructing the dramatic poetic situation in "The Romance of the Western Chamber", taking into account both the "dramatic" and "poetic" dimensions of the play. This article not only provides a new perspective for interpreting "The Romance of the Western Chamber" but also offers valuable insights for contemporary dramatic creation.

The concept of "dramatic poetic situation" was first proposed by Chinese scholar Professor Wang Yuli and is defined as follows: The dramatic poetic situation is "an organic whole formed by the combination of dramatic situations and poetic situations" [2], where both dramatic and poetic qualities are essential and indispensable. The dramatic dimension endows a work with the formal characteristic of "using action as the fundamental means to express character," [3] while also embodying the intrinsic unity of objectivity and subjectivity behind all dramatic actions. This dimension

creates a gripping aesthetic effect of continuous emotional fluctuations, surprises, and suspense. Meanwhile, the poetic dimension elevates the work into a profound artistic realm imbued with beauty, philosophical depth, transcendence, and a seamless interplay between the metaphysical and the physical. In fact, from the perspective of theoretical construction, there is still room for further enrichment and improvement of the "dramatic poetic situation." It is necessary not only to combine the history of dramatic theory and aesthetics from both China and abroad to provide a deeper understanding and analysis of the concepts of "dramaticity," "poeticity," and "dramatic situation," but also to extract the wisdom and methods of different playwrights in constructing the "dramatic poetic situation" from a large number of classic work cases from the perspective of artistic creation, so as to draw more powerful and comprehensive conclusions about its characteristics, types, constructive principles, and functional effects. While a detailed discussion of these topics lies beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that enduring dramatic classics owe their timelessness to their ability to "continuously expand dramatic situations while embedding a profound and lasting poetic essence." [4] Importantly, achieving the "dramatic poetic realm" does not simply mean incorporating poetic verses into plays, nor does it exclude conversational dialogues based on daily life. Rather, it is an aesthetic framework that transcends specific genres or dramatic forms. It is both inclusive and flexible, serving as a guiding standard for both dramatic creation and critical appreciation. Chinese opera, with its deep roots in ancient Chinese poetic traditions, suggestive aesthetics, and

inherently poetic lyrics, shares a particularly close connection with the concept of the "dramatic poetic realm." After clarifying the concept of "dramatic poetic realm," the article will analyze how the work enhances dramaticity and poeticity and excellently achieves the construction of the dramatic poetic realm from four aspects:

1 THE ART OF EMOTIONAL CONTRAST

The Romance of the Western Chamber is a quintessential scholar-beauty play, a popular genre in classical Chinese opera. The storyline centers on the emotional development between Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng, without relying on mysterious events, intense battles, or supernatural elements. Even a tense moment such as Sun Feihu's siege of the temple is kept off-stage. So, how does this play manage to stand out within such a well-worn framework and deliver a compelling and highly watchable drama? Wang Shifu's first strategy lies in his use of contrasts in emotions and actions, along with sudden twists in situations. The so-called "difference" (which can also be called opposition or comparison) refers to the connection and matching of two diametrically opposite or contradictory and abnormal emotions, feelings, and actions of the characters themselves, allowing the audience to gain dramatic experiences in the ups and downs of emotions and the misalignment of motives and actions. These contrasts are often accompanied by sudden turns, which Aristotle defined as "a change in circumstances to their opposite... from good fortune to bad or bad fortune to good." [5] Such twists create a powerful dramatic effect, blending unexpected outcomes, major reversals, and emotional turbulence, keeping the audience deeply engaged.

From a macro perspective of the overall plot structure of the play: In the first act, Zhang Sheng first arrives at Pujiu Temple and by chance meets Cui Yingying, with the two falling in love at first sight. In the second act, just as their relationship seems to stagnate, Sun Feihu's siege of the temple demanding Yingying breaks the stalemate. Zhang Sheng, with remarkable composure and cleverness, successfully resolves the crisis. The old lady, in view of his life-saving grace to her daughter, hosts a banquet for him, and Zhang Sheng, in his ecstasy, presumptuously considers himself a "son-in-law" when attending the banquet. Up to this point, despite several twists and turns, the basic emotional direction is developing towards "joy." However, this happiness is short-lived. The situation takes a sudden turn when the old lady declares that Yingying has already been promised to Zheng Heng, instructing her to treat Zhang Sheng as a brother instead. The prior expectations dissolve like bubbles, and Zhang Sheng's elation plummets from the peak of "joy" to the depths of "sorrow." In the third act, with Hongniang's help, Cui and Zhang continue their relationship in secret. They secretly exchange letters, meet privately in the Western Chamber, and secretly set a date. Their emotional relationship advances rapidly, and the situation improves

after the old lady reneges on the marriage, allowing the audience to savor the sweetness of their love. However, soon another sudden turn occurs: the old lady detects anomalies and forces Hongniang to reveal the truth through torture. Although she is reproached for betraying trust and forced to acknowledge her daughter's engagement, she ultimately forces Zhang Sheng to go to the capital for the imperial examination, separating the couple. Following their tearful farewell at the long pavilion, the two transition from the recent sweetness of love to the enduring pain of longing. In the fifth act, Zhang Sheng achieves success in the imperial exams and is reunited with Yingying as promised. But the process of union is not smooth sailing. Zheng Heng re-emerges as an obstacle, and just as the plot seems poised to return to "joy," traces of "sorrow" surface once more. Fortunately, the difficulties are ultimately resolved, and after numerous emotional highs and lows, the two become a couple.

From a micro perspective of different dramatic scenes and character actions. There are many dramatic acts and scenes in "The Romance of the Western Chamber." Taking just the first half of the second act of the third book, "The Letter Disturbance," as an example: This act revolves around the conflict between Yingying and Hongniang. At first, Yingying, preoccupied with thoughts of Zhang Sheng, hasn't slept all night, "raising her body after a long while, scratching her head several times, letting out a long sigh," presenting a dispirited and gloomy demeanor. In stark contrast, Hongniang, who has just returned from visiting Zhang Sheng and carries a love letter, is joyful and lively, even slightly smug. She bursts into Yingying's boudoir, teasing her by saying, "You're so lazy, lazy!" The sharp contrast between their attitudes—the icy gloom of Yingying and the fiery exuberance of Hongniang—not only highlights their opposing moods but also builds suspense, leaving the audience eager to see what happens next. Unexpectedly, Hongniang, fully aware of Yingying's temperament, refrains from directly handing her the letter, concerned that Yingying might "put on an act." Instead, she places it on the dressing box, leaving it for Yingying to find on her own. Seeing the envelope, Yingying immediately sheds her previous laziness and hurriedly opens it to "read intently." The stark shift in her demeanor vividly reflects her deep concern and longing for Zhang Sheng. However, she soon begins to "pretend," angrily scolding Hongniang, who sees through her mistress's false bravado and deliberately provokes her in return, threatening to "take this letter to report to the lady." This instantly disarms Yingying, causing her to relent. This is the most dramatic scene in this act. Yingying's action is obviously pretending to be angry, with her real motive being to test whether Hongniang has leaked information to the old lady. The disparity between her outward behavior and her internal motives once again creates a "difference" between appearance and reality. This contrast, along with the subtle yet intense interplay between Yingying and Hongniang, not only reveals the nuanced emotional undercurrents of the characters but also reflects Yingying's struggles. As a young woman pursuing love under the constraints of a rigid feudal

society, she must tread carefully and remain vigilant. The scene masterfully combines dramatic tension with underlying social critique. Through their conflicting actions and contrasting personalities, Yingying and Hongniang come to life in a way that is both emotionally engaging and thought-provoking.

In short, Wang Shifu excels at creating contrasts—like the antelope's horns hanging delicately in balance—both in the overall design of plot sequences and in the detailed depiction of character actions within specific scenes. These contrasts include sorrow and joy, bitterness and sweetness, ice and fire, cold and heat, illusion and reality, stillness and movement, among others. The contrast and comparison of emotions and feelings, and their rises and falls often lead to sudden turns in situations, causing the audience to constantly generate expectations and suspense in the twists and turns. The dramatic actions and reactions that characters emit to each other in "differences" also allow their respective personalities to be revealed. Together, these techniques transform the otherwise conventional "scholar and beauty" trope into a work of uniquely compelling dramatic art.

2 THE POWER OF "STORED ENERGY" AND THE DEPTH OF DRAMATIC TENSION

The second key technique that *The Romance of the Western Chamber* employs to achieve dramatic impact is "stored energy." As mentioned earlier, Wang Shifu creates an effect of ups and downs and reversals in the overall plot layout of the play by creating contrasts in emotions and moods. The turning points in these emotional arcs often coincide with the sudden shifts in the story. To make the emotional penetration and dramaticity of sudden turn scenes reach their strongest, the technique of "stored energy" is indispensable. It's like opening the gates of a reservoir: only by accumulating enough water and releasing it all at once can an overwhelming and unstoppable force be unleashed. In the play, this is reflected in how Wang Shifu first builds up and intensifies a specific emotion, layer by layer, gradually raising the audience's expectations to their peak. Once the emotional momentum is fully charged, he introduces a sudden shift in the opposite direction, plunging the characters from the heights of one emotion to the depths of another, thereby achieving the greatest possible dramatic and emotional resonance.

Broadly speaking, Wang Shifu employs three major "stored energy" arcs in the play: the first runs from the opening to *The Broken Engagement* (Lai Hun), the second from *The Broken Engagement* to *The Interrogation of Hongniang* (Kao Hong), and the third from *The Interrogation of Hongniang* to the final *Reunion* (Tuan Yuan). Taking the first arc as an example: from Zhang Sheng's chance encounter with Yingying during his nocturnal stroll at Pujiu Temple to the events leading up to *The Broken Engagement*, the

relationship between the two characters undergoes a rapid transformation, progressing from strangers to an almost-betrothed couple in just seven acts. To make this development feel natural and convincing, Wang Shifu introduces a series of dramatic events that push the relationship forward, such as Zhang Sheng borrowing a room from the abbot to stay close to Yingying, composing poems to her over the temple wall, and using his parents' memorial service as an excuse to meet her. However, these events alone lack sufficient tension, as the love affair between Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng takes place within the rigid confines of a feudal society. The restraint and intervention from the old lady has always been a heavy pressure that this young couple must bear on their path to pursuing free love. For the plot to move forward, and for Lady Cui's staunch traditionalism to waver, a more significant external force is required—this is where the bandit Sun Feihu's siege of the temple comes into play. Faced with the imminent crisis, even the usually strong old lady is at a loss, even promising that whoever can save Yingying will marry her daughter. At this time, Zhang Sheng steps forward. He uses delaying tactics to have the old monk negotiate with Sun Feihu about the marriage three days later, while writing a letter to request General Du to come and lift the siege. After this crisis, Zhang Sheng has sufficient reason to develop his relationship with Yingying openly under the old lady's eyes, and the latter, in order to fulfill her promise, once hosted a grand banquet for Zhang Sheng. Wang Shifu carefully builds up to this moment, using Zhang Sheng's growing joy and optimism to gradually heighten the audience's anticipation. Just when their expectations reach a peak, the playwright delivers a sudden reversal: without warning, Lady Cui breaks her promise in *The Broken Engagement*, turning the situation from one of triumph to one of despair. The joy and relief of the previous moment are extinguished in an instant, leaving Zhang Sheng, Yingying, and Hongniang in shock. The abrupt shift from triumph to crisis creates a potent blend of emotional tension and suspense.

It can be said that without the writer's constant "energy storage," there would be no strong dramatic effect in sudden turn scenes. At the same time, the audience, having just experienced a psychological freefall, is left with a fresh wave of questions: How will Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng overcome the renewed obstacles in their path? Can their love survive in the face of heightened external pressure? How will they outmaneuver Lady Cui? The wheels of drama keep turning, and a new cycle of "stored energy" begins to build. In any excellent play, the writer will not exert equal effort on every scene, but rather distinguish between transitional scenes and major scenes. In transitional scenes, it is necessary to fully "store energy," make adequate preparations, and accumulate enough expectations. Only by letting the previously stored energy explode and then suddenly turn in major scenes can the "dramatic flavor" be more intense.

3 INFUSING POETRY INTO SONGS FOR DEEP EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Wang Shifu not only excels at creating dramatic tension within seemingly ordinary themes but also infuses his work with a profound poetic essence, achieving a seamless blend of poetry, painting, and drama on stage. The Romance of the Western Chamber frequently integrates the spirit of classical poetry and lyrics into its language with remarkable precision. Many of the characters' arias are not only suited for performance but can also be read and appreciated as poetry in their own right, offering a richly poetic and picturesque aesthetic experience. Zhang Geng praised the play as "a model of refining spoken language into poetry." [6] For example, the opening aria [Tianxiale] in Act 1, Book 1, borrows from Li Bai's Watching the Lushan Waterfall; [Xianli ü-Bashenggan Zhou] in Act 1, Book 2, adapts Li Zhongyuan's Remembering the Prince; [Duanzhenghao] in Act 3, Book 4, draws upon Fan Zhongyan's Su Mu Zhe; and Zhang Sheng's aria [Ersha] in Act 2, Book 5, references Bai Juyi's Song of Everlasting Regret. Such examples are numerous. While infusing poetry into songs certainly heightens the poetic quality of the work, Wang Shifu's brilliance lies in borrowing from classical poems without resorting to rigid imitation or plagiarism. Instead, he transforms the old into something new by weaving poetic lyrics tightly into the characters' emotions, personalities, and specific contexts.

For instance, when Zhang Sheng fervently sings, "I only suspect it is the Milky Way falling from the nine heavens... flowing into the Eastern Ocean, threading this path... once even drifting on a raft to the sun and moon," he is standing at a vantage point, gazing out at the majestic, turbulent Yellow River. As a young scholar brimming with literary ambition and about to take the imperial examination, these sentiments flow naturally from his surroundings and reflect his lofty aspirations. Although the two songs [Youhulu] and [Tianxiale] do not directly write about Zhang Sheng with a single word or sentence, his character, temperament, emotions, and thoughts are all melted into the beautiful scenery and situation. Similarly, when Yingying sings in "Temple Alarm," "The wind sways the incense smoke, not rolling up the curtain, the rain beats the pear blossoms, deeply closing the door..." it also has subtle new changes compared to the emotional expression in Li Chongyuan's "Remembering the Prince · Spring Words." While the source poem expresses the traditional themes of springtime melancholy and longing, Wang Shifu infuses it with a nuanced dramatic context, transforming it into an outward expression of Yingying's deep inner thoughts. Her aria, prompted by her budding relationship with Zhang Sheng, emerges as an outpouring of her longing and concern for him. This emotional depth is possible because their relationship has been carefully developed over the course of the first act. The poignant interplay of setting and sentiment heightens the aria's poetic quality. Moreover, Wang Shifu does not merely

borrow from classical works; he enriches them with new linguistic creativity that reflects the character's personality and context. For example, in Yingying's aria, she laments her fragile state, describing herself as "wan and damaged," with "her silk robe loose and falling." The imagery transitions seamlessly from her physical frailty to her emotional sorrow, creating a vivid and finely detailed picture. These words not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also reveal her conflicted emotions: the pursuit of love weighed down by anxiety and melancholy. The elegant and poignant language mirrors her noble bearing while encapsulating the inner turmoil of her struggle against societal constraints, making the emotional impact all the more profound.

The language in "The Romance of the Western Chamber" is not only poetic but also highly characterizing and action-oriented, achieving "the fusion and balance of poetic language and dramatic language" [7]. The writer Wang Shifu does not pursue beauty and elegance at the expense of authenticity; instead, he adapts his language to suit each character's personality, status, and situation, balancing opulence with simplicity. Even the most exquisite lines spoken by Zhang Sheng and Yingying are infused with emotional depth, laying bare the hidden ripples of their inner worlds. From the examples analyzed above, the audience can appreciate both the beauty of the scenery and the richness of the characters' emotions, while also gaining insight into the nuanced depths of their inner selves. The poetic beauty emerges from the interplay between surface and substance, reality and imagination, and outward expression and inner reflection.

4 RICH IMAGERY ADDS SPIRITUAL CHARM

If suspenseful twists, dramatic events, and intense conflicts generate can dramatic tension, then profound imagery evokes a poetic experience that inspires deep reflection. Crafting unique and evocative imagery is another method Wang Shifu employs in The Romance of the Western Chamber to construct a dramatic poetic atmosphere. Imagery is defined as "objective phenomena imbued with subjective emotions, or subjective emotions expressed through objective phenomena". The play features a rich array of imagery, forming a cohesive and symbolic group that includes recurring motifs such as the "bright moon," "falling flowers," "partitioning walls," "ancient zither," and "Buddhist incense." In Act 4 of Book 2, "Zither Heart," Wang Shifu skillfully intertwines the two prominent images of the "moon" and the "zither," using them to evoke a deeply poetic resonance.

Due to the old lady's betrayal of her promise, Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng's relationship is once again thrust into a precarious situation, forcing them to sustain their connection in secrecy. In "Zither Heart," the first dialogue between Yingying and Hongniang centers on the moon. When Hongniang says, "What a bright moon," Yingying immediately laments with sorrow: "Moon, you are full, but

what about us?" and "The wind and moon are at the edge of the sky, but there are no good things in the human world." While Hongniang observes only the surface-level completeness of the moon as an objective phenomenon, Yingying transforms it into a medium for emotional expression. Despite the moon's fullness, her love remains uncertain and unfulfilled. She cannot share the joy of moonlit togetherness with her lover, leaving only the melancholic sighs of longing, tinged with frustration and sorrow. The stark contrast between the couple's separation and the moon's serene wholeness intensifies the emotional resonance. Later, Yingying compares herself to Chang'e: "I think of Chang'e, who rises in the west and sets in the east, who has no one to share with... Therefore, she is surrounded in the Guanghan Palace." For centuries, the moon has been closely associated with femininity. Fu Daobin observed that "the moon is the embodiment of women and mothers ... reflecting the world of women's disappointments and sorrows" The moon not only supports Yingying's yearning for Zhang Sheng but is also her incarnation. The desolate loneliness of Chang'e in the mythological moon palace, separated from her husband by a vast distance, highly corresponds to Yingying's current lonely situation and melancholy mood.

Subsequently, the image of the "zither" begins to dominate. With Hongniang's subtle cue, Zhang Sheng begins to play the zither. The melodious notes, brimming with his emotions, transcend physical barriers and weave through the moonlit night. Yingying responds to the music with four successive arias, expressing her unrestrained joy and resonance with the zither's sound. Immediately after, Zhang Sheng changes to play "The Phoenix Seeks Its Mate." When Sima Xiangru originally presented this tune to Zhuo Wenjun, it not only expressed his deep love for her but also implicitly contained the bold and passionate desire to meet her privately at night and elope. Coincidentally, the union of Zhang Sheng and Yingying is precisely a free love under the heavy pressure of external feudal ethical concepts. Playing this tune in this situation and scene is not only an externalization of Zhang Sheng's tumultuous feelings but also conveys his brave motive to emulate Sima Xiangru and privately unite with Yingying. Faced with the old lady's stubborn obstruction, the two who are not in the same space "break through" from the suffocating reality with the zither as a medium, constructing a virtual and highly poetic emotional space with elegant and beautiful notes, completing the interactive connection of hearts through intangible and wordless zither sounds. This further reveals the universal truth that sincere love will inevitably triumph over all decaying feudal concepts, thus achieving the fusion of physical beauty and metaphysical philosophy. Moreover, as the "Book of Rites" says: "A scholar will not part with his zither or lute without reason, Both Zhang Sheng, as a member of the scholar-gentry, and Yingying, born into nobility, naturally align with the refined art of the zither. Their musical exchange adds a layer of elegance and depth, elevating the scene's aesthetic and emotional significance.

If the twists and turns of Cui and Zhang's love and their conflict with the old lady are not lacking in dramaticity, then the writer also observes everything on stage with the eyes of the soul, strengthening the atmosphere and connecting to poeticity by creating a large number of unique and exquisite images. This allows the entire play transcend mere narrative, blooming into an emotionally and intellectually rich exploration of love, life, and philosophy. In doing so, it invites the audience into a heightened aesthetic experience and a deeper realm of contemplation, successfully constructing a poetic realm of drama.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that Wang Shifu, by means of contrasting comparisons, juxtaposing cold and heat, sudden turns and fluctuations, cleverly setting dangerous situations, infusing poetry into drama, and meticulously crafting imagery, makes "The Romance of the Western Chamber" exhibit strong dramaticity and poeticity not only in its overall structural design but also in the creation of dramatic atmosphere in many scenes, and even down to the words and actions of the characters. Although the author has explored these two aspects separately from different angles, it does not mean that they are split or opposing relationships, but rather they merge and converge in many situations and sublimate into a dramatic poetic realm. The love ideal of "all those with feelings become couples" conveyed in the work and the overall theme of boldly pursuing autonomous marriage and love, like a strong light, illuminate the ignorance deep in people's souls during the feudal period, and have brought spiritual shock to countless readers for hundreds of years. Importantly, Wang Shifu avoided didacticism. Instead, he embedded these themes within the complex emotional relationships among Zhang Sheng, Yingying, Hongniang, and the old lady. By crafting these characters within a poetic and dramatic context, he endowed them with individuality and rich layers of meaning. The result is a work that combines aesthetic beauty with profound philosophical insights, illustrating the transformative power of love and freedom. Therefore, today's drama creators need to continuously improve their own sensitivity, experiential power, aesthetic ability, and empathetic ability, avoid short-sighted vision and the mentality of seeking quick success and instant benefits, and should be good at capturing and refining poetic details with sensual transcendence from real life like Wang Shifu, and continuously dig deeper into the "inner" world of characters.

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