

# The human nature of Shakespeare's tragedy in the Renaissance

Ke xianfei

Mogilev State University, Mogilev 212000, Belarus

Keke3957@outlook.com

**Abstract:** Shakespeare's tragic works are imbued with profound philosophical depth, with his most significant contribution being the exploration of "human nature's complexity." This insight became particularly evident in the late Renaissance period. The analysis focuses on how "the clash between desire and reason leads to the collapse of social order," guiding readers to deeply contemplate ethical dilemmas. Unlike the early Renaissance's universal glorification of "desire," individuals at this stage had broken free from religious constraints, demonstrating strong self-awareness. When desire oversteps rational boundaries, it may trigger moral crises. This binary opposition between good and evil originates from the dualistic theory within Western logocentrism. The fates of many tragic characters in Shakespeare's works follow this logical framework, which serves as a preconceived narrative structure that showcases his unique artistic mastery and intellectual depth.

**Key words:** Shakespeare; Renaissance; Human nature analysis; Humanism

## 1. Introduction

The Renaissance movement originated in the 14th century, with Petrarch's humanist philosophy serving as its defining hallmark. Its development unfolded through three distinct phases: the early period (15th century) focused on "liberating human desires"; the middle period (early 16th century) delved into exploring human nature and potential; and the late period (late 16th century) emphasized the diversity of human character. This historical trajectory endowed Shakespeare's tragic works with a unique contemporary context. Early humanists like Boccaccio proposed "the legitimacy of desire" in his masterpiece *The Decameron*<sup>[1]</sup>. Shakespeare astutely observed that as the Renaissance progressed, a "failure of reason to restrain desire" gradually emerged, which he transformed into a pivotal theme for exploring the balance between reason and desire. In the early Renaissance, Rabelais advocated "unbridled passion" in *The Giant's Tale*, viewing the free expression of desires as a key to breaking religious constraints<sup>[2]</sup>. By the late 16th century, the rampant "desire supremacy" concept began destabilizing social moral systems. Through dramatic reflection, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* exposed ambition's erosion of human nature, while *Hamlet* portrayed the conflict between rationality and action, profoundly revealing the dangers inherent in early humanism's excessive focus on individual desires.

### 1.1 The redefinition of "man" in the Renaissance

In the historical transition from medieval theology to Renaissance humanism, Shakespeare's exploration of human nature received significant cultural support. In his tragic works, Shakespeare primarily highlights the complexity of human nature and meticulously analyzes it within the social context of the late Renaissance. His core focus lies in revealing the inherent tension between desire and reason, exposing the contradictions arising from this conflict and its profound impact<sup>[3]</sup>. During the early Renaissance, humanity gradually broke free from religious constraints, reestablishing the value of individual consciousness and autonomous choice. When human desires exceed rational limits, they inevitably spiral into the extreme of "evil." This duality of good and evil can be traced back to the dualistic thinking paradigm of Western logocentrism. The tragic characters in Shakespeare's works exemplify this fatalistic pattern, whose life trajectories vividly demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of imbalance between desire and reason, thereby prompting profound reflections on the essence of human nature and the boundaries of human conduct.

Shakespeare, a leading figure of humanist literature, centered his works on exploring human nature. His four great tragedies—《*Hamlet*》《*Othello*》《*King Lear*》and 《*Macbeth*》—depict complex character traits that reveal humanity's duality of good and evil, intertwining joy with sorrow, and blending truth with illusion<sup>[4]</sup>. These masterpieces not only capture the awakening of individual consciousness but also highlight the significance of rational thinking and the crucial role of free will, fully embodying the essence of humanist philosophy. Shakespeare consistently focused on individual existence as his primary subject, delving into the nature of humanity, ethical norms, and the profound connections between humans and the universe. Through meticulous portrayals of human characteristics, he both emphasized the beautiful aspects of humanity and exposed its flaws, vividly demonstrating the tension between good and evil while expressing deep concern for human existence. His works strive to elucidate the fundamental nature of humanity, advocate positive values, reject negative elements, and reflect a strong spirit of humanistic care and profound humanist thought.

## 1.2 Shakespeare as the Peak of the Humanist Transition

The pinnacle of Shakespeare's dramatic achievements can be traced to the historical transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (the stage of bourgeois emergence). This pivotal shift was marked by humanist thought gradually replacing theological concepts, reflecting profound reevaluation of traditional religious authority. The transformation not only exposed theology's hindrance to human development and cultural evolution but also demonstrated the extensive influence of humanist ideas across literature, philosophy, music, and other fields. During the medieval era, feudal ideologies like religious regulations, theological doctrines, and asceticism severely restricted individual freedom. Christian culture further reinforced its theology-centered characteristics, long constraining artistic creation. Medieval Christian ideology dominated European social culture and daily life<sup>[5]</sup>. As feudal systems and state structures matured, artistic works began featuring cross-ethnic common themes—— patriotism and heroism. The hierarchical social structure limited artistic creation and literary activities across different classes, giving rise to various literary genres including religious literature, heroic epics, chivalric romances, and urban literature.

## 2. The Affirmation of Desire in Early Humanism

### 2.1 From the confinement of divine power to the liberation of desire

The Renaissance witnessed a profound transformation in intellectual thought, characterized by the shift from the medieval “dualistic opposition between gods and humans” to a cognitive framework that acknowledged the conflict between human desires and rationality. While this paradigm shift created complex social contradictions, it also gave rise to humanist philosophy. In its early stages, humanists championed “desire liberation,” challenging the religious constraints of the Middle Ages. Through literary works that celebrated individual consciousness, they captured the defining spirit of their era<sup>[6]</sup>. Humanist thinkers widely held that “human desire” served as the key catalyst for self-transcendence, reflecting society's heightened recognition and reevaluation of personal value during this period.

As a seminal literary work of the Renaissance, 《*Gargantua and Pantagruel*》epitomizes Rabelais' distinctive creative vision and philosophical principles. This masterpiece embodies profound humanist spirit, challenging the constraints of religious theology while asserting humanity's central role in cosmic order. It positions individual happiness as the ultimate measure of human worth and identifies personal fulfillment as the defining characteristic of “giants”. Rabelais advocates for “human desires” as legitimate aspirations, viewing this mindset as catalyst for societal progress. Through this framework, he established a human-centered value system that marked the transition from theism to secularism<sup>[7]</sup>. Nevertheless, Rabelais never neglected holistic development. As Engels noted, Renaissance figures possessed extraordinary intellect, emotional depth, distinct

personalities, and rich intellectual–artistic cultivation. Human liberation transcends mere desire satisfaction, encompassing cognition, emotion, and volition. While Renaissance humanism spurred deeper exploration of self and the world, it still exhibited notable limitations. To achieve comprehensive human development, systematic approaches must address multiple dimensions to attain freedom and happiness. This process requires emphasizing the core concept of “human-centeredness” —respecting and affirming human agency and inherent value—to propel society forward while maintaining harmony.

The literary works of the early Renaissance exhibited distinct humanist characteristics. Figures like Petrarch and Boccaccio, through classics such as *《Canzoniere》* and *《Decameron》*, delved into and celebrated the value of human desires and emotions—a profound reflection and breakthrough from the medieval theological constraints that suppressed human nature. They regarded desire as an essential component of human essence, believing it contained latent energy driving individual development. Advocating respect for and proper guidance of desires, this open-minded attitude stood in stark contrast to the prevailing religious discipline of the time. This not only laid the foundation for modern intellectual enlightenment but also ushered in a new chapter of spiritual freedom exploration<sup>[8]</sup>. During the early Renaissance, vitality and innovative spirit flourished. Humanist writers extensively explored human nature in literature, creating works that promoted personal growth and social progress. These masterpieces demonstrated excellent artistic quality, carried rich historical and cultural significance, and exerted considerable influence on subsequent developments.

Engels observed that humanists were distinguished by their profound intellectual depth, rich inner world, and exceptional personal charisma, all supported by extensive knowledge systems and sophisticated artistic achievements. This reveals that human liberation encompasses multiple dimensions, extending far beyond merely meeting basic survival needs. While Renaissance humanist thought inspired people to contemplate existential meaning and external realities, it still had certain limitations. To achieve comprehensive human development, we must approach from multiple angles and continuously explore to attain true freedom and happiness. It is essential to preserve the Renaissance’s core concept of “human-centeredness,” emphasizing individual value and dignity, thereby endowing social development with enduring vitality.

## 2.2 Chaucer’s Writing of Desire

In “Troilus and Cressida,” Shakespeare employs a love narrative to showcase the Renaissance’s revolutionary understanding of emotions and desires. Troilus breaks free from classical literary conventions of refined romance, with his breakthrough rooted in profound exploration of personal feelings and awakening subconscious desires. The author refrains from moral judgment on Cressida’s betrayal, instead presenting it as an exemplar of human “emotional volatility,” demonstrating the playwright’s precise grasp of emotional complexity<sup>[9]</sup>. This character epitomizes society’s understanding of human nature within its historical context. Humanist thought recognized the legitimacy of personal desires and emotions, though they were often constrained by religious doctrines. Advocates of this school promoted the expression of passions and love to align with human nature while critiquing religious regulations’ suppression of free will. Within this cultural milieu, writers expressed demands for human liberation through literary creation, exposing how religious authority-imposed control over spiritual autonomy.

## 3. Shakespeare’s tragic expression of “imbalanced desire”

### 3.1 The destructiveness of the absence of reason

During the late Renaissance, humanism gradually evolved into a new cognitive framework centered on the relationship between reason and desire, shaping the image of ideal humanists. Shakespeare’s works vividly reflect this intellectual progression. His early plays emphasized the legitimacy of desires, mid-career works explored the integration of desire with reason while

analyzing the tension between personal cravings and social responsibilities, while later works delved deeper into the multifaceted connections between desire, rationality, and individual accountability. What makes Shakespeare unique is his keen perception of societal transformations and ideological shifts. Through literary artistry, he profoundly captured the era's characteristics and human nature, provoking readers' 'deep reflection and expanding cultural connotations'<sup>[10]</sup>. By meticulously examining human nature and vividly presenting it, Shakespeare continuously deepened humanity's understanding of itself and the external world, thereby contributing to the construction and maturation of the humanist theoretical system. The developmental trajectory from the mid-to late-Renaissance clearly reveals patterns behind ideological evolution. Research indicates that human greatness extends beyond instinctual needs to include creative capacity for transforming the world. Ideal Renaissance participants should strive to find the middle ground between reason and desire. This conceptual shift not only brought fresh perspectives to scientific inquiry and artistic creation but also exerted profound impacts on social development.

As one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, *Macbeth* holds a significant place in literary history. This play features concise language and a profoundly tragic atmosphere, showcasing unique charm through its tightly structured plot and intense narrative. By employing dramatic conflicts to explore human contradictions, it stands as a classic work examining moral degradation. Although based on historical records from Holinshed, the story diverges from traditional historical accounts. Instead, it uses concise expression and clear narrative threads to highlight the crisis facing Macbeth and his wife, ultimately achieving a concentrated thematic essence and maximizing emotional intensity.

The play masterfully portrays characters' 'emotional and psychological transformations, vividly illustrating how power erodes human nature. From its artistic conception to narrative structure, the work contains intense internal tension in its tragic theme. By weaving supernatural imagery into its plot development, it not only propels the storyline but also resonates emotionally with audiences. The social environment profoundly influences personal growth, with Macbeth's downfall becoming a classic manifestation of humanity's distortion under historical circumstances'<sup>[11]</sup>. Through a humanistic lens, Shakespeare explores the protagonist's psychological journey—from moral elevation to ambition-driven descent into depravity—in *Macbeth*. The play reveals how societal oppression leads to complete collapse of willpower, ultimately distorting human nature through this cyclical pattern.

### 3.2 The shift from ambition to ambition

Macbeth's tragic fate was shaped by multiple external forces: Lady Macbeth's ambition, the witches' 'prophecy, and King Duncan's misplaced trust. His own flaws proved equally critical. Driven by an insatiable thirst for power, Macbeth demonstrated military brilliance and masterful strategic planning that only intensified his greed. Compounded by flawed religious beliefs and wavering moral convictions, he gradually became ensnared in the trap of usurping the throne. The character embodies a paradoxical blend of noble aspirations and corrupt desires, mirroring humanity's eternal struggle between virtue and vice. As the story unfolds, justice fades into obscurity while corruption reigns supreme, ultimately forging a tyrant who brings ruin to his kingdom. This narrative reveals how opposing forces of light and darkness within human nature coexist yet inevitably spiral toward their most extreme manifestations.

This work portrays a protagonist with giant-like qualities who consolidates royal power through unlawful means to expand authority. Ultimately, he becomes a victim of his own excessive pursuit of power. Aristotle observed that tragic figures often embody dual nature—while upholding justice, they may inadvertently suffer tragic hardships and punishments due to unintentional mistakes.

### 3.3 The Three-Stage Degeneration of Macbeth: From Ambition to Tyranny

Macbeth initially served as a key military advisor to King Duncan, his every move influenced by



witches ‘prophecies and his wife’s temptations. When he was ennobled as Lord Cawdor, the first prophecy had already come true. After executing the regicide plot, the second prophecy materialized. Upon ascending the throne, he implemented oppressive policies and massacred innocents to consolidate his power yet failed to foresee the Scottish nobility’s rebellion or respond to this threat. Ultimately, overwhelmed by internal strife and external pressures, he collapsed completely. This process not only demonstrates an extreme case of human transformation but also reveals the inherent difficulty in eradicating the darker aspects of human nature. The once resolute Macbeth, with his exceptional talent and intelligence, gradually became a tyrant who slaughtered without mercy under prolonged adverse conditions. This vividly illustrates the universal phenomenon of personal traits being distorted within specific social environments and its profound significance.

### 3.4 The balanced demands of late humanism

The Renaissance liberated individuals from religious constraints, providing opportunities to break free from the spiritual shackles of Christian doctrines. In a social environment advocating individual liberation and freedom, the inherent contradictions within moral concepts gradually became key factors triggering social unrest. Through his profound literary insight, Shakespeare explored various facets of human nature, offering crucial references for the formation of modern ideological systems. Throughout his dramatic creations, he consistently focused on the complex attributes of humanity, demonstrating unique perspectives and profound insights into human nature at different stages. This developmental trajectory reveals his deepening and precise grasp of human essence<sup>[12]</sup>. The characters in Shakespeare’s works reveal the spiritual dilemmas individuals face through their inner conflicts and behavioral characteristics. While deeply contemplating human nature—Hamlet’s indecision, Othello’s sudden transformation, King Lear’s vulnerability, and Macbeth’s moral decay—these portrayals, seemingly reflecting pessimism, actually convey the author’s hope that humanity can redeem itself and reshape its character.

The essence of ideal humanism lies in the concept of “balance” within a rational framework. This encompasses not only the organic integration of individual desires and rational thinking, but also the harmonious coexistence between humans and society, as well as humans and nature. When exploring the nature of humanity, later humanist scholars often adopt multifaceted and in-depth analyses. They strive to enhance human nature through dynamic social processes, thereby driving societal progress and achieving comprehensive advancement.

## 4. Conclusions

Unlike the early Renaissance romanticism epitomized by Petrarch, Shakespeare’s tragic works delve into the complexities of human nature. These creations provided crucial philosophical foundations for modern humanist thought, as he sought to reveal humanity’s essential attributes, dissect the inherent contradictions between good and evil, and advocate for a value system that promotes virtue while suppressing vice. This fully demonstrates his humanistic spirit. As individual liberation deepens, traditional feudal concepts will inevitably be dismantled within cultural contexts, giving rise to new ideological trends and cultural forms. In this process, emerging social groups become core forces driving cultural innovation, propelling value systems toward diversification and inclusiveness. This progression represents both an inevitable historical trajectory and the result of contingent factors, ensuring continuous momentum for human civilization’s advancement. Humanity’s quest for self-understanding will never cease. This chapter explores how Renaissance humanism awakened human consciousness through its developmental path “from celebrating humanity to dissecting it,” tracing the historical trajectory and significance of human nature studies during this period. Within this broader context, Shakespeare’s literary works not only highlight the uniqueness of humanistic spirit but also elevate people’s cognitive awareness of themselves.

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