

Exploration of the Moral Education Function in Classical Literary Works

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Abstract: As an essential component of human cultural heritage, classical literature plays a crucial role in moral education. This paper aims to explore the moral education functions inherent in classical literary works, focusing on how these works convey and reinforce moral values through their content, plots, and character development. The study begins by defining the scope of classical literature and providing an overview of the theoretical foundations of moral education, highlighting the importance of classical literature in this context. Through a detailed analysis of moral themes and their specific functions in classical literature, this paper reveals the profound impact of classical literature on societal moral views. Furthermore, the study examines the application of classical literature in contemporary moral education, including its modern interpretations and educational value, as well as how it can be integrated with modern moral education practices.

Keywords: classical literature, moral education, societal moral views, educational application, modern interpretation

Introduction

With the progress and changes in society, the study of classical literature should extend beyond its artistic value and historical background to include its role in moral education. Investigating the moral education functions of classical literature not only helps us understand the moral concepts of ancient societies but also provides valuable insights and lessons for modern moral education. The significance of this research lies in uncovering how classical literature, through moral themes, character development, and plot construction, serves to educate and regulate societal behavior. Additionally, the study explores the application value of classical literature in contemporary education, assisting modern educators in effectively utilizing classical literary resources to promote students' moral development.

1. Overview of Moral Education in Classical Literature

1.1 Definition and Classification of Classical Literature

Classical literature typically refers to literary works with long-standing historical significance and notable cultural impact. These works are not only significant in their own time but have also continued to influence the development of literature throughout history. The definition of classical literature can be delineated from three dimensions: historical inheritance, linguistic style, and cultural background. First, classical literature usually has a long historical lineage, such as the status of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in Western literature, and the influence of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Water Margin* in Chinese literature. Second, classical literary works often adopt specific linguistic styles, such as the epic form in ancient Greek literature, the prose style of ancient Rome, or the rhythmic patterns in ancient Chinese poetry. Finally, the cultural, social, and political contexts reflected in the creation of classical literature have profoundly influenced the themes and forms of these works.

From a classification perspective, classical literature can be divided into major categories such as epic literature, dramatic literature, poetic literature, and prose literature. Epic literature, such as Homer's *Epic* and *The Investiture of the Gods*, employs grand narratives and epic structures to depict heroic deeds and historical backgrounds of societies. Dramatic literature, including Shakespearean tragedies and ancient Greek tragedies, focuses on moral conflicts and ethical dilemmas faced by characters, conveying moral

education themes through stage performances. Poetic literature, such as the works of Du Fu and Li Bai, expresses moral ideals and humanistic concerns through beautiful language and rich symbolism. Prose literature includes philosophical essays and ethical treatises, which explore social ethical issues through rational thought and moral philosophy.^[1]

1.2 The Theoretical Foundations of Moral Education

The theoretical foundations of moral education mainly stem from the interdisciplinary research of ethics and pedagogy, encompassing aspects such as moral theory, moral development stage theory, and moral education methods. Classic theories in ethics, such as virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarianism, provide the philosophical foundation for moral education. Virtue ethics focuses on the cultivation of personal virtues, guiding behavior through intrinsic moral qualities; deontological ethics emphasizes the normativity and moral obligations of behavior, asserting that certain actions are moral duties regardless of their outcomes; utilitarianism, on the other hand, concentrates on the consequences of actions, advocating for the maximization of overall social happiness.

In terms of moral development stage theory, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development outlines stages of moral judgment, including the pre-conventional stage, conventional stage, and post-conventional stage. This theory emphasizes the progression of moral judgment from concrete behavioral norms to higher-level ethical principles, offering a developmental perspective on moral education. Additionally, constructivist theory in pedagogy emphasizes that students construct moral knowledge through interaction and experience, positioning teachers not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as facilitators of moral development.

1.3 The Importance of Classical Literary Works in Moral Education

The importance of classical literary works in moral education lies in their unique cultural heritage, profound moral themes, and diverse educational methods. Firstly, classical literature, as a cultural heritage, carries rich moral concepts and ethical norms. These works, through vivid storytelling and distinctive character development, showcase the moral ideals and social norms of different historical periods. For instance, *The Analects* convey Confucian moral ethics through the words and actions of Confucius, while *The Divine Comedy* illustrates Christian moral views through Dante's journey.

Secondly, the moral themes in classical literature are often universal and timeless, addressing core values such as justice, benevolence, loyalty, and courage. By deeply analyzing these themes, readers can not only understand the moral concepts of ancient societies but also apply them to moral practices in modern society. For example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* explores the conflict between revenge and justice, while *Dream of the Red Chamber* depicts the complex relationships between family, love, and social ethics.

Finally, the educational methods associated with classical literature are diverse, including literary analysis, role-playing, and ethical discussions. These methods enable students to better understand and absorb the content of moral education. Through the study of classical literature, students can enhance their literary appreciation skills while developing moral judgment and ethical reasoning in interactive settings. The diversity of these educational methods ensures that classical literature continues to hold irreplaceable value in modern moral education, providing students with abundant resources and insights for their moral development.^[2]

2. Analysis of the Moral Education Function in Classical Literary Works

2.1 Moral Themes in Classical Literary Works

The moral themes in classical literary works not only deeply reflect the ethical concepts of their time but also provide abundant resources for moral education in subsequent generations. These works explore core ethical values such as justice, loyalty, honesty, courage, and benevolence through vivid narrative techniques and complex character development, offering rich material and insights for moral education.

In ancient Greek literature, Homer's epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are important texts for exploring moral themes. *The Iliad* focuses on the heroism displayed during the Trojan War, highlighting the ancient Greek society's profound emphasis on personal honor and responsibility through the character Achilles and his moral dilemmas in balancing personal honor with the expectations of comrades and society. Achilles' struggles in the face of the harsh realities of war reflect the Greek ethical views on

loyalty and honor. The Odyssey, on the other hand, uses Ulysses' long journey home to emphasize the moral significance of wisdom, bravery, and familial loyalty. Ulysses' actions in overcoming various challenges demonstrate the importance of wisdom and perseverance, reinforcing an understanding of individual responsibilities to family and society.

In Chinese classical literature, moral themes also hold significant influence. The Analects of Confucius, as a Confucian classic, articulates ethical norms such as benevolence, propriety, and wisdom through the words and actions of Confucius. The Confucian concept of "ren" (benevolence) embodies the pursuit of caring for others and social harmony, while "li" (propriety) emphasizes the importance of behavioral norms and social order. Dream of the Red Chamber explores the complex relationship between personal morality and social norms through the character development and emotional entanglements of Jia Baoyu. His experiences reflect the conflicts between personal emotions and social responsibilities, revealing the impact of social changes on individual moral perceptions.

Additionally, the moral themes in classical literature address broader ethical issues such as justice, fairness, and loyalty. The Christian ethical concepts in The Pilgrim's Progress emphasize the importance of faith and redemption, with the protagonist Christian's journey symbolizing the persistence in truth and morality. In Hamlet, Prince Hamlet's struggle between revenge and morality highlights the complexities of human nature and ethical decision-making.^[3]

2.2 Specific Manifestations of the Moral Education Function

The moral education function of classical literary works is manifested on multiple levels, including the transmission of values, the cultivation of moral judgment, and the demonstration of ethical behavior. These functions are not only reflected in the content and form of the works but also deeply influence readers' moral cognition through character development and plot progression.

Firstly, classical literary works convey specific values through the depiction of characters' behavioral choices and moral conflicts. For example, in Dante's Divine Comedy, the structure of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise not only presents Christian ethical views but also vividly illustrates the concepts of sin and redemption through the depiction of punishment and salvation. This work educates readers on fundamental ethical and moral principles, shaping a deep understanding of good and evil. Similarly, Water Margin portrays the moral ideals of social justice and personal honor through the stories of the Liangshan heroes, who resist oppression and seek justice.

Secondly, classical literary works cultivate readers' moral judgment abilities through complex character development and plot progression. Characters in literature often face moral dilemmas, requiring them to make difficult choices between personal desires and social responsibilities. For instance, in Hamlet, the protagonist's struggle between revenge and morality profoundly demonstrates the complexities of personal emotions and ethical conflicts. Hamlet's considerations of his duty to avenge his father versus his moral reservations stimulate readers' reflections on the ethical decision-making process. This moral conflict not only highlights the complexity of ethical judgment but also encourages readers to scrutinize the morality of personal actions more rigorously.

Finally, classical literature provides readers with specific behavioral norms and practical examples through demonstrations of moral behavior. The heroic actions in epic poetry, the ethical reflections in philosophical essays, and the moral teachings in poetry all offer guidance and moral exemplars for readers. For example, Achilles in The Iliad, despite facing challenges to both personal honor and collective responsibility, provides a practical example of moral choice through his bravery and ultimate self-awareness. Similarly, the writings of ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato's Republic, explore standards of ideal moral behavior through the construction of an ideal society. Confucius' teachings in The Analects, through discussions of ethics and behavioral norms, provide a moral guide for readers to follow.

2.3 The Impact of Classical Literature on Societal Moral Views

Classical literary works have played a profound and complex role in shaping societal moral views. This impact is primarily reflected in the shaping of social ethical norms, the promotion of moral education, and the formation of cultural identity.

Firstly, classical literary works have significantly influenced social ethical norms through systematic exploration of ethical themes. For instance, The Analects as a Confucian classic, not only formed the core of ethical norms in ancient Chinese society but also had a lasting influence on Chinese cultural

traditions and moral education systems. Confucius' teachings on benevolence, propriety, and wisdom, deeply rooted in Chinese culture through the dissemination of *The Analects*, shaped the moral customs and social behavior codes of the Chinese nation. Similarly, Homer's Greek epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* profoundly shaped the moral standards and behavior norms of ancient Greek society through their portrayals of heroism and honor.^[4]

Secondly, the application of classical literary works in moral education has promoted the dissemination and acceptance of moral concepts. In ancient societies, educational systems often used classical literary works as primary materials for moral education. These works were not only subjects of academic study but were also widely applied in moral education. Ancient Greek dramas, such as Sophocles' *Electra*, and Roman ethical essays, such as Seneca's *Moral Letters*, were used in educational systems to promote the understanding and acceptance of moral concepts in Greek and Roman societies.

Finally, classical literary works have played a key role in forming cultural identity, providing a shared ethical framework and cultural foundation for society members. These works are not only important carriers of cultural heritage but also form the common basis for societal members in moral and cultural identity. For example, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, through its depiction of Qing dynasty family ethics and social customs, not only reflects the moral views of that society but also provides later generations with crucial insights into the social ethos and ethical norms of ancient China. The relationships and social interactions depicted in *Dream of the Red Chamber* deeply illustrate the ethical norms and values of that era, significantly influencing the formation of cultural identity in later generations.

3. Application of Classical Literature in Contemporary Moral Education

3.1 Modern Interpretation and Educational Value of Classical Literature

Classical literature continues to hold profound value in contemporary education. Its modern interpretation not only aids in uncovering the moral concepts within their historical contexts but also helps explore their relevance in today's social environment. Through the modern interpretation of classical literary works, educators can gain a deeper understanding of the potential functions and educational value of these works in moral education.

Firstly, the moral themes and values in classical literary works remain significant sources of inspiration in modern society. By interpreting the concepts of honor in *The Iliad*, benevolence in *The Analects*, and the notions of sin and punishment in *The Divine Comedy* in a modern context, students can better comprehend how these ancient ideas align with the moral demands of contemporary society. For example, the spirit of heroism in ancient Greek literature can be translated into a modern emphasis on personal responsibility and societal contribution; the teachings on propriety and benevolence in *The Analects* can guide individuals in maintaining moral conduct and ethical behavior in complex social relationships.

Secondly, modern interpretation involves not only the re-analysis of classical literary texts but also their integration with contemporary moral issues. For instance, in the context of modern society's emphasis on integrity and justice, analyzing the moral and ethical descriptions in *Dream of the Red Chamber* can reveal how to maintain moral consistency and a sense of social responsibility in today's world. Additionally, the modern interpretation of classical literature should incorporate a cross-cultural perspective, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of its moral education function within the context of globalization.

Finally, modern interpretation of classical literature also entails innovative applications in educational methods. Modern educators can incorporate interactive teaching methods and situational simulations to actively engage students in learning classical literary works and extracting the essence of moral education. For example, recreating the moral conflicts in *Hamlet* through role-playing can help students more intuitively grasp and reflect on the complexities and impacts of ethical decision-making.

3.2 Integration of Classical Literature with Modern Moral Education

The integration of classical literature with modern moral education is not only about preserving traditional educational content but also about innovating educational methods and content. Incorporating classical literature into the modern moral education system can effectively enhance students' moral literacy and overall abilities.^[5]

Firstly, classical literary works can serve as core materials in moral education, offering profound moral insights through their rich moral themes and ethical narratives. By integrating classical literary works with modern moral education standards in curriculum design, students can learn to understand classical texts while acquiring the moral skills and values needed in contemporary society. For example, introducing classic texts such as *The Analects* and *The Odyssey* in high school or university courses, and analyzing their moral conflicts and ethical decisions, can help students understand and internalize modern societal expectations regarding integrity, responsibility, and courage.

Secondly, the integration of classical literature with modern moral education requires innovative teaching methods and strategies. For instance, using project-based learning and situational simulations, students can apply the moral lessons of classical literary works to specific social issues and real-life scenarios. Through role-playing and dramatic reenactments, students can gain a deeper understanding of the moral concepts in classical texts and develop the ability to solve practical problems in a real-world context.

Moreover, modern moral education can promote interdisciplinary education by integrating the moral concepts found in classical literature. Introducing the ethical values of classical literature into the teaching of subjects such as sociology, psychology, and history can help students form a comprehensive moral understanding through multi-perspective and multi-level analysis. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the content of moral education but also enhances students' overall competencies and critical thinking abilities.^[6]

Finally, the application of classical literature in modern moral education must also consider the transmission of cultural heritage and the globalization of values. By combining classical literature with international moral education standards, moral exchanges and understanding between different cultures can be promoted. For example, comparing moral concepts in Eastern and Western classical literature can help students understand ethical values within different cultural contexts and foster moral awareness from a global perspective.

Conclusion

This paper, through an in-depth analysis of the moral education function in classical literary works, has found that classical literature plays a significant role in conveying and reinforcing moral values. Classical literary works actively influence societal moral views by shaping moral themes, presenting moral conflicts, and providing behavioral exemplars, thus having a profound educational impact throughout history. In contemporary times, classical literature still holds important educational value, and its moral education function can be effectively realized through modern interpretation and teaching methods. Future research could explore the moral education function of classical literature within different cultural contexts to expand the global perspective of the study and develop innovative teaching methods that better integrate classical literature into modern moral education practices.

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