

# The Subversion and Reconstruction of Classical Drama Forms by Postmodern Drama

Huiru Wang\*

*Xi'an Translation University, Xi'an, 710105, China*

*\*Corresponding author: 13853026249@163.com*

**Abstract:** *Postmodern drama, as an important dramatic form of the second half of the 20th century, inherits and transcends the artistic expressions of modernism, marking the development of dramatic art towards a freer, more diverse, and experimental direction. Postmodern drama not only subverts classical dramatic forms in terms of structure, language, and theme but also profoundly reconstructs the cultural significance of traditional drama. This paper explores the origins and core ideas of postmodern drama and its relationship with modernist drama. It analyzes its subversive expressions in classical dramatic forms, such as the deconstruction of traditional narrative structures, the multidimensional portrayal of characters, and the critique of power structures and ideologies. Furthermore, this paper examines the reconstruction of classical dramatic forms and cultural significance in postmodern drama, focusing on the reconfiguration of space and time, the re-examination of traditional culture, and the influence of postmodern drama on contemporary audiences.*

**Keywords:** *Postmodern Drama; Classical Drama; Narrative Structure; Character Development; Cultural Reconstruction; Stage Design*

## Introduction

Postmodern drama, as one of the most critical cultural phenomena of the 20th century, is a profound reflection on and challenge to the classical dramatic tradition. Modernist drama, which emphasized critique of reality and exploration of traditional forms in the early 20th century, gradually became inadequate in addressing the diversity and fragmentation characteristic of postmodern society due to its relatively singular and rationalized modes of expression. Postmodern drama emerged as a response, breaking the structural limitations of classical drama and introducing multiple narrative approaches, open endings, and fragmented expressions, thereby redefining the boundaries of dramatic art. The significance of studying postmodern drama lies not only in understanding its unique artistic expressions but also in exploring how it influences the contemporary dramatic ecology and the changes in cultural production mechanisms. The subversion of classical dramatic forms by postmodern drama has promoted innovations in dramatic language and performance styles, while its reconstructive function has enabled traditional drama to engage in dialogue with contemporary culture in entirely new ways.

## 1. The Basic Characteristics and Development of Postmodern Drama

### 1.1 The Origin and Characteristics of Postmodern Drama

Postmodern drama, which emerged as an art form in the mid-20th century, has its origins in the rebellion of modernist drama against traditional theatrical forms and the post-World War II socio-cultural changes. In the context of globalization, informatization, and diversification, postmodern drama gradually broke through the framework of classical drama and challenged the norms of traditional theater. Compared to modernist drama, postmodern drama places greater emphasis on fragmented, non-linear, and self-reflective artistic expressions.

The characteristics of postmodern drama are manifested in the deconstruction of traditional narrative structures, particularly in the free-flowing treatment of time, space, and character settings. For example, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* parodies Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and subverts the authority of classical drama by employing non-linear storytelling and absurdist humor in dialogue, with characters vacillating between existence and nothingness, demonstrating postmodern drama's deconstruction of traditional texts. Additionally, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* features a loose

narrative structure with minimal plot progression, repetitive time cycles, ambiguous space, and uncertain character identities, highlighting postmodern drama's dissolution of traditional theatrical structure.

### ***1.2 The Core Ideas and Aesthetic Tendencies of Postmodern Drama***

The core ideas of postmodern drama reflect a profound skepticism and critique of "absolute truth" and "traditional values." Philosophically, postmodernism rejects meta-narratives and universal truths, emphasizing the relativity, multiplicity, and complexity of socio-cultural phenomena. In drama, this philosophy is expressed through the deconstruction of traditional ethics, morality, history, and art forms. By dismantling classical dramatic structures, postmodern drama attempts to reveal and challenge the power structures and cultural norms embedded in ideologies.

In terms of aesthetic tendencies, postmodern drama pursues diversity and uncertainty in artistic expression. It is characterized not only by changing forms and experimental language but also by the use of parody, satire, collage, and cross-media techniques to create new artistic experiences. For example, directors and actors often use improvisation, presenting multiple perspectives on stage and breaking the linear narrative of traditional theater through cultural hybridity. This aesthetic principle is evident in many postmodern drama works. Irony is also a common technique in postmodern drama, which, through mockery of existing cultural symbols, critiques traditional culture. For instance, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* uses extreme exaggeration and absurd plotlines to satirize political power, blurring the boundary between drama and reality, exemplifying postmodern drama's challenge to established cultural systems.

### ***1.3 The Relationship Between Postmodern Drama and Modernism, and Its Evolution***

Postmodern drama is deeply connected to modernist drama. In the early 20th century, modernist drama contributed significantly to the transformation of dramatic forms by delving into character psychology, innovating expressive language, and critiquing reality. However, modernist structures were often too rigid, emphasizing rationality and clear expression, leading to tendencies toward high formalization and centralization. Postmodern drama inherited the rebellious spirit of modernism toward traditional theater but went beyond the limitations of modernist drama, introducing more free, fragmented, and anti-rational expressions.

Postmodern drama's critique of modernism can be seen in several aspects: first, postmodern drama no longer adheres to the classical linear structure, replacing modernism's dependence on a rigorous time sequence with the free interchange of time and space; second, postmodern drama emphasizes the uncertainty and ambiguity of the "text," rejecting single interpretations and abandoning modernism's demand for textual fixity; third, postmodern drama emphasizes subjectivity and multiple perspectives in its depiction of reality, highlighting the interplay of individual experience and multiculturalism. Through these methods, postmodern drama not only continued the groundbreaking innovations of modernism in form but also furthered the multifaceted development of dramatic art in terms of content<sup>[1]</sup>.

As time progressed, postmodern drama entered a more mature phase and influenced many theatrical genres and cultural arts globally. From the 1970s to the 1990s, postmodern drama flourished not only in European and American theaters but also had a profound impact on the development of theater in regions such as Asia and Latin America.

## **2. The Subversion of Classical Dramatic Forms by Postmodern Drama**

### ***2.1 The Deconstruction of Traditional Narrative Structure and Non-linear Expression***

One of the most prominent features of postmodern drama is its deconstruction of traditional narrative structure. In classical drama, the narrative typically follows a certain chronological order, with a clear beginning, development, climax, and conclusion, forming a continuous and logical timeline. However, postmodern drama disrupts this traditional model through non-linear storytelling, significantly weakening or completely dissolving the continuity of time and space.

In postmodern drama, the narrative sequence can be fragmented, and the progression of the plot no longer follows traditional logical relationships. For example, scenes in the drama might be presented through flashbacks, interpolations, or interwoven parallel narratives. The narrative time and space often become confused, with time repeatedly stretched or compressed, making it difficult to determine the sequence of events. This non-linear narrative style not only creates a psychological sense of unease in

the audience but also forces them to actively participate in the deconstruction of the script, deepening their interpretation of the essence of the story. For instance, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* employs a structurally ambiguous narrative style, making the concept of "waiting" a space for philosophical reflection rather than a simple plot arrangement<sup>[2]</sup>.

Postmodern drama often employs "open-ended conclusions" as a challenge to traditional narrative structures. These endings no longer provide a clear resolution or solution but instead focus on the contradictions and conflicts within the process, making the drama more aligned with the audience's experience of reality, which is characterized by the unknown and ever-changing nature of life.

## ***2.2 The Multidimensionality of Character Creation and the Awakening of Self-Consciousness***

In traditional drama, characters typically have fixed personality traits and clear motivations, and conflicts between characters arise mainly from moral or character-based oppositions. However, in postmodern drama, character creation is no longer one-dimensional; characters exhibit multiplicity and fluidity, often breaking through conventional role definitions and displaying more internal contradictions and complexity.

In postmodern drama, characters often experience an awakening of self-consciousness, questioning and reflecting on their existence, identity, and roles. Their actions are no longer confined to the "must-follow" logic of the plot but are filled with struggles for free will and resistance to concepts like power, culture, and history. For example, in Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, characters frequently question the script and plot, demonstrating deep awareness and reflection on themselves and their surroundings. This mode of character creation results in fluid identities, presenting characters with multiple facets, while the interactions between characters become more complex, filled with unresolved conflicts and tensions. Furthermore, characters in postmodern drama often exist in fragmented situations, and their thinking no longer follows classical rational logic but appears fragmented, jumpy, and contradictory. Their language and actions often carry a self-ironic quality, where their existence reflects both self-awareness and a resistance to societal, historical, and cultural frameworks. This multidimensional character creation breaks the one-dimensionality of traditional dramatic characters, making each character full of infinite possibilities.

## ***2.3 The Critique of Power Structures and Ideologies in Classical Dramatic Forms***

Postmodern drama not only subverts classical drama in terms of form and structure but also challenges the social and cultural frameworks upheld by traditional drama through its critique of power structures and ideologies. In classical drama, character conflicts are often based on inherent power relations within the social structure, such as patriarchy, hierarchy, and moral norms. These conflicts are typically clear-cut, with resolutions often reflecting the restoration of social order or the final fate of the characters.

Postmodern drama, however, deconstructs these traditional power structures, revealing the ideological oppression behind them. In postmodern drama, traditional power relations no longer hold absolute authority, character confrontations become more complex, and the origins of power become blurred. For example, in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the social structure not only shapes the power struggles between characters but also reinforces the collective suppression of individuals and the profound impact of cultural ideology. Postmodern drama uses satire and exaggeration to expose the absurdity and irrationality of these power relationships.

More importantly, postmodern drama emphasizes the participatory role of the audience in the viewing process. It not only focuses on the conflicts between characters but also on the relationship between the audience and the drama. The critical nature of postmodern drama often manifests through breaking the fourth wall, blurring the boundaries between actors and the audience, and forcing the audience to realize that they, to some extent, participate in the construction of power and ideology<sup>[3]</sup>.

# **3. The Recreation of Classical Dramatic Forms and Cultural Significance in Postmodern Drama**

## ***3.1 The Reconstruction of Space and Time and the Breakthrough in Stage Design Expression***

Postmodern drama breaks the boundaries of traditional drama in the expression of space and time, achieving a recreation of classical dramatic forms. In classical drama, the stage often follows a realist

display method, with time and space being clear and continuous, and the plot typically presented in a linear progression. However, postmodern drama reconstructs time and space non-linearly, not only innovating in narrative structure but also making stage design an important medium for emotional expression and intellectual exchange.

In postmodern drama, space is no longer a fixed, physical backdrop but is imbued with symbolic meanings and multiple interpretations. The drama reconfigures space through the splitting of the stage, transformations, and the interweaving of the virtual and the real. For example, in terms of stage design, directors construct multi-layered spaces to materialize the psychological conflicts of characters, blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy. Through stage design, the audience can sense the psychological tension and philosophical reflections reflected in the plot.

The representation of time is equally fluid. Postmodern drama abandons linear time arrangements and adopts fragmented time structures. This non-linear narrative technique not only breaks the sequential order of traditional drama time but also makes time a relative, constantly reconstructed concept. On stage, time may reverse, jump, or even intertwine multiple timelines occurring simultaneously. This fragmentation of time enhances the ambiguity and openness of the work, requiring the audience to interpret the play's meaning through their own understanding and perception.

The stage design in postmodern drama is often highly experimental. Innovations in stage apparatus are not merely physical decorations but breakthroughs in intellectual and emotional expression. Modern technological means, such as projections, lighting, and sound effects, provide vast creative space for stage representation in postmodern drama. Through these technological tools, traditional stage settings are subverted, creating a surreal artistic effect of overlapping realities<sup>[4]</sup>. For example, Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* breaks the traditional limits of stage time and space, using light, minimalist sets, and repetitive actions and music to transform the stage into a comprehensive visual and auditory experience.

### ***3.2 Reexamination and Recreation of Traditional Culture***

Postmodern drama not only subverts classical dramatic forms but also gives new life and meaning to culture through the reexamination and recreation of traditional culture. From the postmodern perspective, the interpretation of culture and history is no longer a singular linear process but is seen as the result of multiple dimensions and intertwined viewpoints. Postmodern drama deconstructs traditional cultural symbols and classic works to reveal the underlying ideologies and cultural forces.

The cultural recreation in postmodern drama manifests in the reinterpreting of classic literary works, historical events, and social customs. By rebelliously interpreting historical figures or deconstructing classic texts in reverse, postmodern drama deconstructs the authority and fixed nature of traditional culture. In this process, traditional cultural elements are reintroduced to the stage, but they are no longer the original cultural symbols; instead, they become carriers that are distorted, reconstructed, or even satirized. For example, Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* completely deconstructs Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The play retains only some of the core elements of the original but completely overturns its narrative method and character creation. The Hamlet in the play is no longer a prince tormented by inner conflict, but a symbol in the historical process, carrying reflections on political violence, ideological oppression, and modern societal crises. The stage is filled with fragmented language, fragmented scenes, and surreal images, presenting strong experimental and critical features. In the context of globalization, postmodern drama not only concerns the recreation of local cultures but also integrates cross-cultural elements, promoting cultural interaction and exchange<sup>[5]</sup>.

### ***3.3 The Impact and Interactivity of Postmodern Drama on Contemporary Audiences***

Another important characteristic of postmodern drama is its profound impact and interactivity with contemporary audiences. In traditional drama, the audience is a passive recipient, primarily observing and understanding the plot and its implications. However, in postmodern drama, the participation of the audience is significantly enhanced. The audience is not merely an observer but becomes a part of the drama's creation and emotional expression. By breaking the fourth wall, postmodern drama allows the audience to directly participate in the interpretation and construction of meaning.

Postmodern drama blurs the boundaries between "reality" and "fiction," making the audience's perception more complex. Actors often speak directly to the audience or interact with them, so the audience is no longer just observing external events but engages in direct communication with the

characters, plot, and stage elements. This interaction not only stimulates the emotional response of the audience but also presents more possibilities and openness in the drama. The audience's participation contributes to the extension and deepening of the play's meaning.

Additionally, the multi-layered and diversified forms of expression and dramatic language used in postmodern drama force the audience to engage in more active interpretation during the appreciation process. This active audience interpretation not only enhances the cultural value of the drama but also transforms it from a singular performance art into a cultural experience full of participation and interaction<sup>[6]</sup>.

Meanwhile, due to the fragmented plot structure and open-ended conclusions often employed in postmodern drama, the audience is required to supplement and continue the plot outside the theater, reflecting on the symbolic significance and philosophical ideas of the play.

## Conclusion

This paper, by analyzing the subversion and recreation of classical dramatic forms in postmodern drama, reveals its profound impact on traditional dramatic art. Postmodern drama not only subverts the inherent patterns of classical drama by deconstructing traditional narrative structures, creating multi-dimensional characters, and critiquing ideologies, but it also demonstrates immense artistic potential in the reconstruction of space and time, breakthroughs in stage design, and the recreation of traditional culture. As postmodern drama continues to evolve, future research can further expand in the following areas: Firstly, an in-depth exploration can be conducted on how postmodern drama interacts with contemporary social change and cultural trends, especially its portrayal of issues such as gender and identity; secondly, further study can be done on the transmedia aspect of postmodern drama, examining how it expands its expressive methods and dissemination pathways through media such as film and digital art; finally, attention should be given to the role of postmodern drama in contemporary audiences' aesthetic and emotional experiences, exploring how new interactive forms and immersive experiences can enhance its artistic effect and social function. Research in these areas can provide deeper insights into the artistic innovation and theoretical development of postmodern drama.

## References

- [1] Ai Sha Sha. *Postmodern Drama Stage, Blooming the Classic Flower of Literature: A Review of He Nian's Director's Version of "Rickshaw Boy"*. *Shanghai Drama*, 2023, (04): 6-8.
- [2] Zhang Jin. *Stage Lighting in the Context of Postmodernist Drama*. *Sichuan Drama*, 2022, (04): 77-81.
- [3] Liu Maosheng, Zhu Huimin. *The Formation and Cross-cultural Dissemination of Chinese and Foreign Classic Dramas*. *Journal of Guizhou University (Arts Edition)*, 2024, 38(03): 71-77+125.
- [4] An Ying. *Cultural Recreation Against Stereotypes: "Turning Red" from a Scattered Perspective*. *Southeast Communication*, 2024, (09): 72-74.
- [5] Hu Zhifeng, Lan Jianhua. *Cultural Inheritance and Innovation in the Context of Chinese Television Art Development*. *Contemporary Television*, 2023, (12): 4-10.
- [6] Yan Weixu. *The "Industrial Revolution" of Drama Staging: Challenges and Responses Driven by Technology*. *China Industrial News*, 2025-01-06(018).