

An Exploration of Innovative Teaching Methods for "The Injustice Done to Dou E" from the Perspective of Implicit Characters

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Abstract. Current high school Chinese language instruction on "The Injustice Done to Dou E" primarily focuses on three aspects: analyzing the main plot, examining core character portrayals, and interpreting the tragic themes. However, it lacks attention and exploration of implicit characters within the text. The implicit characters in "The Injustice Done to Dou E" are integral components of the dramatic narrative, serving as crucial vehicles that guide students beyond binary thinking and elevate the tragedy's message from individual critique to systemic critique. Based on stage empty space theory and narrative character theory, teaching activities designed around the concept of "neighbors and passersby"—including experiential learning through empty spaces, textual evidence gathering, and discussion-based deepening—can help students perceive the psychological oppression formed by invisible gazes through embodied cognition and textual corroboration, thereby cultivating critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation.

Keywords: "The Injustice Done to Dou E", implicit characters, innovative teaching methods.

1. Problem Statement: The Current State of Teaching "The Injustice Done to Dou E"

According to the requirements of the "Chinese Traditional Culture Classics Reading" task group in the "General Senior High School Chinese Curriculum Standards (2025 Edition)," teachers should guide students to closely read outstanding classical literary works, appreciating them from perspectives such as language, structure, and meaning, deeply grasping the embedded traditional Chinese culture, contemporary significance, and humanistic spirit, and recognizing their aesthetic value [1]. Drama education plays a vital role in promoting the essence of traditional culture, requiring educators not merely to transmit knowledge about drama superficially but to actively innovate pedagogical approaches, uncovering students' correct values and key competencies from the multi-layered implicit meanings within texts.

However, current teaching practices on "The Injustice Done to Dou E" often suffer from flatness and homogenization. Instruction typically centers on analysis of major characters and explicit plotlines, overemphasizing Dou E's personal image and spirit of resistance while neglecting the multi-layered narrative tension inherent in traditional drama. Textbooks pay insufficient attention to those "implicit characters who do not appear directly in the plot yet significantly influence its development, who remain unseen yet imbue the stage with vivid color" [2]. As a result, classical drama classrooms fail to effectively stimulate higher-order thinking and critical perspectives, thus hindering the transmission of deeper cultural meanings.

Based on structuralist narratology and the comprehensive exposition by Chinese scholar Shen Dan on narrative structures, characters who do not appear directly in foreground scenes play an indispensable, though hidden, role in advancing the underlying plot and shaping the protagonist's fate [3]. Examining "The Injustice Done to Dou E," we can identify typical implicit characters such as Cai family father and son, Zhang Luer, neighbors, and Dou E's mother. Though never appearing on stage, the Cai family exerts invisible constraints through patriarchal authority and economic rationality, tightly defining the life trajectories of two widows. Figures like Zhang Luer and the neighborhood community, as social products and agents of public opinion, collectively depict a panoramic view of legal breakdown and moral disorder in Yuan Dynasty grassroots society. These

characters' implicit presence not only enriches the aesthetic space of traditional opera but also provides students with a crucial key to transcend narrow, one-dimensional views focused solely on personal grievances, enabling them to shift from individual tragedy toward a structural critique of feudal patriarchal systems.

2. In-depth Textual Analysis: Characteristics and Pedagogical Value of Implicit Characters

In dramatic narrative theory, implicit characters refer to those who do not appear directly on stage or participate in the main plot; they are only briefly mentioned through dialogue or narrative asides by other characters. Taking the selected passage from **The Injustice Done to Dou E** as an example, typical implicit characters include Cai's father and son, Zhang Luer, neighbors, and Dou E's mother. These characters possess three key characteristics: stage absence—they do not appear physically on stage and have no dedicated performances, lines, or stage actions; narrative presence—although not directly involved in the plot, they are deeply embedded within the narrative logic through others' retellings, recollections, or reactions, maintaining close connections with explicit characters and pivotal events; and hidden influence—they affect the development of the plot indirectly and subtly, providing deep narrative justification for the actions of explicitly portrayed characters [4].

Take Cai's father and son as an example. Their roles in the text manifest in several ways. First, they serve as implicit catalysts for the central conflict of the play. The early death of Cai the elder directly leads to Cai's widow seeking debt repayment from Sai Lu Yi, triggering a chain of events involving Zhang Luer and his father. Meanwhile, the premature death of Cai the younger pushes Dou E into the tragic trajectory of widowhood and the burden of carrying on the family line [2]. Second, their absence is artistically rendered through the technique of "writing without writing," significantly expanding the narrative depth beyond the stage. This allows audiences to clearly sense an intangible oppressive force—representing patriarchal norms and traditional constraints—hovering over the female characters on stage [2]. Third, their presence reveals profound insights into familial ethics and social structures. Their absence does not signify the loss of power but rather reflects how institutionalized "male authority" continues to dominate and predefine the life paths of two women through symbolic means [2]. Finally, this subtle influence carries significant pedagogical implications. Exploring these characters helps students move beyond conventional moral judgments, enabling them to analyze how Cai's father and son, despite never appearing on stage, completely shape Dou E's fate. This deeper analysis fosters rational conclusions and enhances students' critical thinking skills, promoting structural and systematic reasoning.

By thoroughly exploring the educational value of such characters, we gain clearer insight into the systemic nature of Yuan Dynasty society. According to Turkish scholar Can Şen's theoretical framework on "narrative characters" in theater, particularly his discussion of off-stage narrative figures, these absent individuals symbolize broader social relations of their time rather than existing merely as isolated moral entities [5]. For instance, Zhang Luer's disappearance from the stage during execution reflects the deeper context of moral chaos and official corruption prevalent in the Yuan era that fostered his evil deeds. Similarly, the neighbors represent an omnipresent network of moral surveillance and public opinion, while their indifference highlights the survival dilemmas inherent in a society of acquaintances. Understanding these complex character traits effectively liberates students from simplistic, stereotypical interpretations of classical Chinese zaju plays. As shown in Table 1, attention to implicit characters not only fulfills the requirements set forth in the **Chinese Language Curriculum Standards for General Senior High Schools (2025 Edition)**—emphasizing agility, depth, and critical thinking—but also enables students to experience the powerful psychological impact of "absence as presence" through the artistic construction of "empty stages." Furthermore, it provides a pathway for students to truly grasp the historical memory and cultural fabric underlying classic works through multi-layered aesthetic evaluation.

Table 1. Matrix Analysis of Specific Hidden Characters in The Injustice to Dou E

Character	Relevant Plot	Integration of Characteristics and Teaching Value
Zhang Lv'er	In Act 3, he does not appear directly on stage. He is mentioned through Dou E's aside: "That Zhang Lv'er put poison in the mutton soup, intending to kill you and take me as his wife. Unexpectedly, my mother-in-law let his father eat it, and he was poisoned to death instead. I was afraid of implicating my mother-in-law, so I falsely confessed to poisoning my father-in-law. Today I am being taken to the execution ground." He is the direct perpetrator of the unjust case.	He is a product of the socio-historical development of the time. This aligns with Can Şen's theory that theatrical narrative characters are symbolic carriers of social relations. Although he never appears on stage, he is deeply embedded in the conflict. His evil is the poisonous fruit nurtured by the corrupt bureaucracy and legal failure of the Yuan dynasty. In teaching, by examining his physical absence on stage during the execution, students can move beyond simplistic binary oppositions of good and evil, recognizing that the tragedy stems from a dark social system, thereby deepening their understanding of the text's critical theme [5].
Dou E's Mother	In Act 3, she does not appear directly on stage. She is mentioned through Dou E's aria: "Mother-in-law, look at Dou E, who has lost her mother since childhood," hinting at Dou E's orphaned background.	As the most completely hidden character in the entire play, she is entirely absent. According to structuralist narratology, she is an important constructor of the protagonist's tragic fate, with her existence manifested through Dou E's lamentations from the sidelines [3]. In terms of teaching value, this blank portrayal establishes the foundation for Dou E's helpless and lonely life, effectively explaining the origins of her resilient character and her yearning for family affection, and enhancing students' sensitivity to textual details [2].
The Cai Father and Son	In Act 3, they do not appear directly. Their background is explained through footnotes: "(Dou E) was married at seventeen, but after only two years, her husband unfortunately passed away, and she lived as a widow with her mother-in-law." This reveals their identity and the reality of the marriage at seventeen and the husband's death two years later.	They represent a typical symbol of "absent power." The power-holders need not appear on stage; they exert invisible control over the foreground characters through patriarchal customs and the agent Cai Po. By guiding students to explore the pressures of lineage and property left by this father and son, they will recognize that Dou E's tragedy is not merely the persecution of individual villains, but the systematic oppression of the patriarchal system, thereby effectively cultivating macro-level sociological critical thinking.
Neighbors and Villagers	In Act 3, they do not appear directly. Their presence is implied through Dou E's arias: "If there is no spiritual power to spread among the people" and "so that all around may see," where terms like "the people" and "all around" hint at the existence of an onlooking crowd.	They are collective and silent, becoming invisible gazes surrounding the stage's empty space. According to the theory of theatrical empty space, these hidden absentees exist in a tension between the virtual and the real. The invisible gazes impose intense emotional and moral judgment on the protagonist [2, 5]. In teaching, focusing on this group encourages students to recognize that collective indifference and silence are also accomplices to tragedy, greatly enriching a systematic appreciation of the structure of dramatic conflict.

3. Teaching Excerpt: Innovative Instructional Design for Implicit Characters Neighbors and Passersby—The Empty Stage Gaze Method

Theoretical Basis: The Theory of the Empty Stage

1. Experience of the Empty Space: Feeling the Invisible Gaze (5 minutes)

Teacher: Now, please push your desks to the back of the classroom and leave a clear space in the center as our stage. I'd like one student to play Dou E, who is about to be executed. She will slowly walk from the back of the classroom to the center of the stage and stand still. All other students should remain seated and silently watch this "woman on the verge of execution."

(The students follow instructions; the entire class falls silent.)

Teacher: (in a low, slow voice) Now, there is only Dou E on stage. But is this space truly empty? No. It's filled with people—neighbors from the Cai family, street vendors, passersby. They are watching everything through windows, door cracks, and courtyard walls. They don't speak or step forward—they simply observe in silence.

(The class remains silent for one minute.)

Teacher: Student playing Dou E, how do you feel right now?

Student: I feel suffocated, as if countless eyes are staring at me, making it hard to breathe.

Teacher: What about the rest of you? As silent observers gazing at Dou E in the center of the stage, what do you feel?

Student: I feel that my gaze itself has power—it's like we're judging her.

2. Textual Evidence: The Power of the Gaze (5 minutes)

Projected Materials: Additional lines referencing neighbors and bystanders

"Worthless words make me laugh till I burst"

"I fear others' gossip"

"I refuse to yield to others, yet they force me to face execution, shackled and bound"

"Hear, all neighbors and relatives: 'Dou E poisoned my father!'"

Teacher: Please read these lines together and reflect: Why is Dou E so afraid of "others' gossip"? Why can Zhang Luer threaten her by invoking "all neighbors and relatives"?

Student: Because rumors among neighbors can ruin a person's reputation.

Student: Even though they don't speak, their gazes act as a moral judgment.

Teacher: Excellent insights.

(Clarity emphasized): The neighbors and passersby are the most unique implicit characters in Act Three. They are spectators whose absence isn't disappearance but transformation into an omnipresent gaze, forming an invisible "panopticon."

3. Discussion and Reflection: Silent Accomplices (4 minutes)

Teacher: Do these neighbors know that Dou E is innocent?

Student: Probably yes, because everyone saw what Zhang Luer did.

Teacher: Then why don't they come forward to testify?

Student: They're afraid of trouble, afraid of retaliation from Zhang Luer, afraid of getting involved with the authorities.

Teacher: So what is their silence?

Student: It's complicity with evil—it makes them accomplices.

Teacher: Exactly. Guan Hanqing deliberately keeps the neighbors offstage precisely to show us: the greatest danger isn't the evil of a few, but the silence of the many. This silent gaze kills more effectively than swords or guns.

4. Conclusion

Incorporating the perspective of implicit characters into the drama teaching of *The Injustice to Dou E* helps students move beyond a singular interpretive framework centered on explicit plotlines and central figures. Implicit groups such as Cai's father and son, Zhang Luer, Dou E's mother, and neighbors and passersby appear throughout the play in an "absent presence," enabling students to grasp the deeper narrative logic of the work and understand how feudal patriarchal systems and social public opinion structurally shape individual destinies, thus achieving a systematic comprehension of the tragedy's root causes [2, 5].

This paper introduces the "empty-space gaze pedagogy" specifically designed for the role of "neighbors and passersby," transforming traditional passive text reading into a contextualized, embodied cognitive experience within a specific spatial setting. Teaching practice shows that students can move beyond isolated character analysis, and through embodied engagement and textual corroboration, identify multiple systemic factors—such as feudal patriarchal institutions, official corruption, and moral disarray in a close-knit society—lying behind the invisible gazes and collective silence [2, 5]. At the same time, they develop deeper empathy toward individual struggles, cultivate awareness of collective silence, and enhance their abilities in deep reading and critical thinking [1].

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