

Original Paper

Hegel's Aesthetic Theory of Tragedy in the Light of the Three Kingdoms

Jiawen Yang^{1*}

¹ Liberal Arts College, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, No.219, Ningliu Road, Nanjing, China

* Jiawen Yang, Liberal Arts College, Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology, No.219, Ningliu Road, Nanjing, China

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Abstract

Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy is divided into three parts: occurrence, development and resolution, in which the root cause of tragedy is conflict, the way of tragedy development is struggle, and the result of tragedy resolution is reconciliation. The ancient Chinese novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms contains conflicting loyalties and righteousness, and is set against the backdrop of war. Its tragic causes and tragic effects are in line with Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy. Therefore, by analysing the ancient Chinese novel, we can gain a deeper understanding of Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy.

Keywords

Hegel, Aesthetic Theory of Tragedy, Three Kingdoms, Ethical Conflict

The history of tragic aesthetics in the West has a long history. Since Aristotle started the theory of tragic aesthetics, scholars have been putting forward their own views on this basis, and Hegel is one of the few theoretical giants who can stand shoulder to shoulder with him. Hegel is the master of the Western aesthetic theory of tragedy, "the first to apply the doctrine of contradiction and conflict to the theory of tragedy, the first to consciously see tragedy as a dialectical process of unity of opposites" (Cheng, 1994), his aesthetic theory of tragedy is constructed on the basis of the philosophy of history, highlighting the "rational core" of his philosophical thought. The "rational kernel" of his philosophical thought - the idea of dialectic. Hegel pointed out that "situations full of conflict are particularly suitable as objects for dramatic art" (Hegel, 1986, p. 260), and therefore he believed that the root of tragedy is conflict, and the fundamental cause of such conflict is often the division and contradiction of the human mind. Hegel argues that although natural disasters can cause damage to property and loss of life,

such occurrences are extremely fortuitous and more likely to provoke fear in the mind, and even if they can cause tragic conflict, it is of the lowest order. The impact of true tragedy is positive, positive, caused by the conflicts arising from the divisions and contradictions of the human mind, and thus resonates strongly with people, culminating in an ethical force that lifts their inner spirit, usually in a relatively one-sided way. It is noteworthy that Hegel always applies the idea of dialectics to tragic conflicts, i.e., all tragedies are not a dichotomous conflict between good and evil, but in fact both sides of the conflict stand on their own ground and have a certain degree of rationality, only that their reasoning conflicts with each other, thus leading to irreparable and tragic consequences. The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the first Chinese novel of epic proportions, presents a multi-layered world of tragedy, the causes, characters and effects of which all reflect moral and ethical contradictions.

1. Hegel's Aesthetic Theory of Tragedy

Hegel always emphasises the use of dialectics in tragedy, in other words, tragedy is the process of the creation, development and resolution of contradictions.

The first is the root of tragedy. Hegel put forward his famous theory of tragic conflict, "the essence of tragedy lies in the actual struggle between the freedom of the subject and objective necessity" (Chen & Li, 1986), that is to say, when abstract concepts, originally harmonious, are divided into concrete things of a different nature, they often produce an inevitable conflict, which leads to tragedy. Thus, as far as the sacrifice of the tragic protagonist is concerned, from the standpoint of the individual, it may be a physical demise, but the ideal he represents still exists in the world order and can form the force that inspires people's inner spirit, which is the real tragedy in Hegel's mind.

Hegel attributes three causes of tragic conflict, the first of which is triggered by purely physical or natural circumstances, specifically natural disasters, disease, etc. He points out that such conflicts do not have tragic significance in themselves, yet they can disrupt the original harmony and lead to a split in the protagonist's mind, ultimately becoming the subject of tragedy.

The second type of conflict is triggered by the origin of the protagonist. Hegel finds this conflict to be more general in the long development of history and so addresses it more carefully, dividing it into three cases: first, the conflict resulting from the contest over rights whose attribution is unclear, "rights closely connected with nature, such as kinship, inheritance, and the like, precisely because such a right is connected with nature (or the situation of origin), it can have a multitude of natural characterizations, but the right, which is the main thing, is only singular (Hegel, 1986, p. 366). The second is the conflict due to the difference between the origin and the hierarchical status of the protagonist, "If a man is qualified to belong to a certain class according to his mental faculties and activities in themselves, and his position of origin becomes an insurmountable obstacle which prevents him from belonging to that class, this is not only a misfortune for our modern man, but is also in essence a grievance" (Hegel, 1986, p. 267). Thirdly, the conflict is due to the subjective lusts of the individual protagonist, and it is worth

noting that it is only when the subjective lusts go against the ethics of society that the conflict is triggered and leads to tragedy.

The third type of conflict is caused by the actions of the characters that lead to a splitting of the mind and spirit, the deepest source of tragedy. The fundamental driving force behind the development of a conflict is its internal cause, and it is therefore the internal cause of the split in the subject's mind that is most likely to lead to tragedy than the previous two external causes of conflict. Hegel divides such conflicts into three categories: the first is when a person does something unconsciously that he or she should not have done, so that the person is not responsible for his or her actions; the second is when a person does something consciously that causes a conflict, so that his or her actions can only be justified if they are "moral"; the third is when a person takes an action that is placed in a "moral context"; The third category is where an action, placed in a particular context, causes a conflict.

Through a specific analysis of Hegel's tragic conflict theory, we can see that these three conflicts show a sequential relationship of importance, mainly because Hegel emphasizes a human-centred view of art, in his view, "artistic beauty is beauty produced and regenerated by the mind, and as much as the mind and its products are higher than nature and its phenomena, artistic beauty is also higher than natural beauty" (Hegel, 1986, p. 4), so that the splitting of the mind and spirit due to the actions of the characters is the deepest source of tragic conflict.

The second is the development of tragedy. Conflict is the source and driving force of the development of things, and struggle is the way in which conflicts are prompted to transform and contribute to the development of things. According to Hegel's dialectical thought, contradiction and conflict are the root cause of tragedy, and struggle is the way in which tragedy develops in the following two ways: the first is the struggle between universal forces such as the state, family and love, where both sides of the struggle have their own justifications for fighting; the second is the struggle between individual characters, such as character, subject differences and so on.

Finally, there is the end of the tragedy. Influenced by Schelling's aesthetic concept of "conflict" and "reconciliation", Hegel sees reconciliation as the end of the tragedy, and the only end of the tragedy. The fundamental reason for this is that Hegel believes that both sides of a tragic conflict have a certain degree of rationality in their respective positions, and that through their continuous struggle, they eventually develop into "eternal justice", which is the so-called "eternal justice" that incorporates the one-sided rational part of each side of the conflict. The end of a tragedy can only be a reconciliation. Hegel points out that there are two ways of reconciliation in tragedy: one is reconciliation between two parties who have suffered devastating damage, and the other is reconciliation through reconciliation by external objective forces or self-reflection.

Looking at Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy, although his philosophical system belongs to objective idealism, he applied the idea of dialectic to the analysis of tragedy, attributed the root of tragedy to contradiction and conflict, and further revealed the essence of tragedy scientifically, which is of great

significance to Marx and Engels in further improving the theory of tragedy.

2. The Spirit of Tragedy in The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

According to Hegel, military conflict is the most appropriate scenario for epic writing, “Conflict in a war situation provides the most suitable epic context, for in war an entire people is mobilised” (Hegel, 1986, p. 266), and thus epic poetry is usually a depiction of a war-ridden era that contains the richest dramatic content and involves large numbers of people. Throughout Chinese history, the Three Kingdoms period was one such dramatic period, divided into three parts: Wei, Shu and Wu, with many heroes and heroines straddling the battlefield and countless minor characters struggling to make ends meet, yet together they wrote this stirring epic poem.

One of the Four Great Books of China, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is an extensive and specific account of the internal struggles of the feudal ruling groups of Wei, Shu and Wu, reflecting the Yellow Turban Rebellion and its suppression around the third century AD, with the main aim of promoting the Confucian principle of “benevolence”, praising rulers of orthodox origin and condemning traitors. The author, Luo Guanzhong, portrays many characters with very different personalities, and these characters, whether of the ruling class in high positions or of the oppressed commoners, all come to a tragic end one by one in the war-ridden arena. From the whole text, we can see that the moral and ethical conflicts caused by the “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trust” of the feudal society are the deepest root cause of the tragedy.

The tragedy of The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is, on the one hand, the conflict between the real world and historical inevitability, as the three families of Wei, Shu and Wu all tried to unify the world, but were unable to do so because of objective historical reasons, and the situation was eventually ended by the Western Jin Dynasty. On the other hand, the tragic fate of the individual characters is evident, first of all in the heroic characters on whom the author devotes most of his writing, such as Zhu Geliang, whose talent for the heavens and the earth was so great that he died of hatred because he “failed to get a clear master”, and Guan Yu, whose loyalty, courage and faithfulness have always been revered by future generations, but whose arrogance and conceited character flaws led him to be killed by design. The next is the smallest but most numerous of the characters, who are either a sword and pencil clerk, working on a case; or a nobody, washing a horse and knife for their lord; or a field hand, running around for a living They just wanted to live their lives in peace, but the flood of history washed away the hopes of most of them.

Tragedy has its own unique aesthetic connotations, and the characters in Romance of the Three Kingdoms are often faced with the difficult situation of “doing what they know they cannot do”, and it is worth considering whether they should choose to live with it or do their duty.

3. Hegelian aesthetic theory as embodied in the tragedy of the Three Kingdoms

China has always been a country with a small peasant economy. In an agricultural society with relatively poor production techniques, the only hope for the common people was to live off the heavens, and in the event of natural or man-made disasters, they could only pray for mercy from God. At this time, individuals with outstanding talent became the “gods” of the people, and so China has had a strong hero complex since ancient times. The Three Kingdoms period coincided with a time of chaos, when the people, suffering from natural and man-made disasters, longed for a saviour to come, and heroes and heroines of all kinds took to the stage of history, staging a tragedy of heroic proportions.

According to Hu Shih, “What is most lacking in Chinese literature is the idea of tragedy, and this superstition of reunion is ironclad evidence of the weakness of the Chinese mind” (Hu, 1918). In fact, we do not see the so-called happy reunion in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, but more conflicts, which add to the tragic connotations of the novel. Therefore, we will explore the Hegelian aesthetic theory inherent in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by analysing the storyline in it.

In the first chapter of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it is told that in the second year of Jianning, on the fourth month of the year, “it suddenly thundered and rained heavily, with hailstones that fell until midnight, destroying countless houses” (Luo, 1979). In the second month of the fourth year of Jianning, “an earthquake struck Luoyang, and the sea overflowed, and all the inhabitants of the coast were swept into the sea by the great waves” (Luo, 1979). In the autumn and July of the first year of Guanghe, “a rainbow appeared in Yutang, and the shores of the Wuyuan Mountains were all broken up” (Luo, 1979). It is in this situation where the people are unable to make ends meet that the unrest is triggered by the people’s failure to secure their basic livelihoods, and hints at the tragic fate of the Han dynasty in its decline. “In the first month of the first year of Zhongping, an epidemic broke out” (Luo, 1979). The people’s lives were threatened and they were forced to look for a way out, when Zhang Jiao, who could “call the wind and the rain”, became the saviour in everyone’s mind. The three worlds were paved over. As in the first of Hegel’s tragic conflict theories, the conflict is triggered by purely physical or natural circumstances, specifically natural disasters and disease. Natural disasters would not have led directly to tragedy, but at the end of the Han dynasty, when treacherous officials were in power, sudden natural disasters increased the burden of the people, thus triggering a conflict between the people, who were eager to survive, and the imperial court, which was unscrupulous and unethical, resulting in the tragic fate of the country’s demise and the suffering of the people.

In feudal society, orthodox origins determined power, and so in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* the author portrays Liu Bei, a descendant of the Han family, as a wise ruler, while calling the majestic Cao Cao a “Cao thief”. As the son of a eunuch, Cao Cao was capable of ruling the world and entrusted important positions to people of humble origins but of high moral character, such as Guan Yu and Zhao Yun, whose love of talent showed the side of a wise ruler. But the wise men of the world preferred to follow the orthodox Liu Bei, and Cao Cao himself killed the only man who could save his life, Hua

Tuo, who died with no medicine. Cao Cao's tragic personal fate is the result of what Hegel calls the second kind of conflict, that is, the conflict arising from the origin of the protagonist, who, not being of orthodox origin, wants to unify the world, which is not in accordance with the "Mandate of Heaven".

However, the most tragic aspect of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is not the tragic fate of the people caused by natural disasters, nor is it the tragic fate of individuals who cannot cross the hierarchy because of their origins, but more the ethical conflict between the many heroes when they face "benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and faith". "The choice to face up to tragedy and to take one's life to one's mission is the basis of the hero's fight for faith and the prerequisite for the realisation of the hero's tragic value" (Zhang & Xue, 2023). *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a heroic epic, and the writing of the death of the heroic figure is an important way of expressing the tragedy of the hero, not only reflecting the characteristics of the tragic shaping of the hero at each stage, but also changing its tragic value because of the changing tragic nature of the hero. The hero's view of life and death determines the value judgement and choice the hero makes in the face of "death". Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy holds that both sides of a tragic conflict have a certain degree of rationality in their respective positions, and that through the constant struggle between them, they eventually develop into "eternal justice". The heroes in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* usually have the spirit of "doing what they know they cannot do", on the one hand because they are often obliged to do so under certain relationships and ethics of the feudal system, but more often because they act voluntarily, fighting for what they believe in, even if it ends in sacrificing themselves. In fact, the hero's "self-sacrifice" may not be a complete end, but perhaps the beginning of a life of death, as Hegel suggests as one of the endings of tragedy—the reconciliation of the two sides of a conflict after devastating damage - and this is reflected in the The heroic characters of the Three Kingdoms

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms contains the connotations and essence of the Five Permutations of Confucianism and is very much in line with the orthodoxy of ancient Chinese society. The orthodox Liu Bei is portrayed by Luo Guanzhong as a wise ruler who cherishes his talents and cares for his people, and is regarded as the "ideal of a wise ruler". At the battle of Chang Ban Po, Liu Bei is chased by Cao Cao, but he still cannot bear to abandon his people, a selfless act that reflects his great spirit of "benevolence". In the battle of Chang Ban Po, Liu Bei not only lost his troops, but also his wife, which is a shame. Liu Bei's reluctance to abandon his people in his flight was a reflection of his "benevolent" philosophy of governance, while the advice of his advisers to his lord to go first was a wise judgement based on the situation, both of which were reasonable, but in the conflicting circumstances of the time, the one-sidedness of each caused irreconcilable conflicts, which could only be resolved by war. The war was the only way to achieve a short-lived reconciliation. Guan Yu was always revered for his loyalty and righteousness, and Liu Bei was both a friend and a ruler to him. Even though he was forced by circumstances to surrender to Cao Cao, he never forgot his sovereign, and once he heard of Liu Bei's whereabouts, he hung up his seal and sealed his gold and went straight to his original master. But

it was the ethical conflict between loyalty and righteousness that cost him his life. When the enemy captured Guan Yu, on the one hand they admired his talent and wanted to keep him alive, but on the other they feared that Guan Yu would not compromise and eventually chose to kill him, leading to the tragic fate of Liu Bei who failed to avenge his death and the eventual fall of Shu. But it is also the flaws in Guan Yu's character that bring him closer to a real human being, and his loyalty and righteousness are passed on to the world. In contrast to the more emotionally charged Guan Yu, Zhuge Liang's "wisdom and trust" ethical conflict is more subtle. "Zhuge Liang, who is "wise and almost demonic", is the pinnacle of "wisdom" in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and his wisdom is unmatched in the novel. "He is also known for his "straw boats and arrows" and "burning the Red Cliff", which led to the defeat of Cao's army and the establishment of a stable situation in three parts of the world. However, Zhuge Liang is a typical representative of the tragic fate of the Three Kingdoms. He went out of the Qishan Mountains in the hope of unifying the world for Shu, and even tried to fight against the Mandate of Heaven, but eventually failed to renew his life and died of hatred. The most profound cause of Zhuge Liang's tragic fate is the ethical conflict between "wisdom and trust", and his dedication to supporting Liu Chan in order to live up to Liu Bei's dying words of trust. During his northern expedition, Liu Zen, the latter's lord, listened to the slander of a villain and recalled Zhuge Liang, fearing that he would overshadow his master, which led to the direct failure of Zhuge Liang's northern expedition and laid the foundation for the fall of Shu. Zhuge Liang's life was dedicated to the state of Shu, and although his insistence on the incongruity of "faith" and "wisdom" cost him his life, it shaped his character as a man of integrity and a man who fought against fate.

As the epic of ancient Chinese fiction, The Romance of the Three Kingdoms is unsurpassed. The connection between the ethical conflicts of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, and the tragic fate of Wei, Shu and Wu, which ultimately leads to their downfall, is worthy of analysis and investigation by applying Hegel's aesthetic theory of tragedy, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the inner meaning of the classical Chinese novel.

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