

Original Paper

Study of Sublimation in Tragic Drama

Bin Li

The School of Foreign Languages, China University of Petroleum, Beijing, China

Received: October 9, 2024 Accepted: November 2, 2024 Online Published: November 7, 2024

doi:10.22158/jecs.v8n4p30

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v8n4p30>

Abstract

Tragedy, as an important category of drama, has been a hot topic in literature and theater since ancient times. Taking the tragedy theories of Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Sigmund Freud and other Western scholars as a guide and Les Mis érables and The Phantom of the Opera as the main examples, this paper studies the aesthetic sublimation of tragedy. It is found that the elements of music, story, dramatic poetry, dance and performance integrated in a tragic musical can form the grandeur and magnificence of tragedy. The audience gain a sense of beauty and pain, and pleasure and sublimity from the tragic heroes. Tragedy prompts the awakening of human consciousness and the liberation of individuality, calling for social morality, civilization and progress.

Keywords

Tragedy, Sublimation, Musicals, Les Mis érables

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, tragedy has been among heated topics in the fields of poetry and drama. Tragedy is an important style and category of theater. Western scholars have fully explored tragedy from various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and psychology. In tragedy, the protagonists often have beautiful dreams, goals, desires and determination to realize them, but due to contradictions and conflicts in the family, to other roles, the social environment and even their own personalities, their destinies are not under their own control and mastery, they suffer from anxiety, pain and frustration, and go through trials and tribulations, wounds, helplessness, fear, despair and even death. Such contradictions and conflicts are irreconcilable, triggering a series of tragic behaviors and giving rise to various tragic aesthetic images and feelings in the audience. Therefore, sublimation is created in interaction with the audience.

2. Literature Review

Aristotle (1968) defines tragedy as a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a

certain magnitude, the result of which is awful transformation for the better or worse, and accompanied by the appropriate language dressing. The tragic action must be performed by actors rather than by narrative. Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind-grand, and complete in itself-presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions.

Aristotle believed that the function of tragedy was to purge the audience of pity and fear. It allows the audience to release these emotions and experience a sense of immortality without actually facing the dangers in real life. The only cause of tragedy is the failure and ineffectiveness of the individual's will.

Hegel (2009) believed that tragedy was rooted in the conflict between two opposing ethical concepts. Collision between freedom and necessity, the rationality of human beings and the irrationality of the universe, was the root cause of tragedy. The collision between the individual and the general was another root cause of tragedy. The individual strives for his own interests, but his actions may harm the interests of others, and vice versa. There was a conflict between good and evil in every person, also a root cause of tragedy, which exists not only in individuals but also in society as a whole. The collision between fate and human beings was another root cause of tragedy. Fate determines everything, but human beings will not give up their own freedom. The collision between ethical and artistic standards was also a root cause of tragedy. The ethical standard is to achieve justice, while the artistic standard is to achieve beauty.

Arthur Schopenhauer is one of the most important thinkers in German philosophy history. His views on tragedy are mainly based on his aesthetic theory, which emphasizes the infinite striving of will and the essence of the world. Schopenhauer (2009) believed that the world we see and feel is a world of suffering and striving. He considered that human beings were caught in the infinite striving of will, unable to escape their own desires and the constraints of others. Therefore, tragedy was a mirror of reality, reflecting the essence of human life and the world. Aesthetics was a realm that transcended the world of will and suffering. He considered that beauty was a manifestation of the essence of things, which could make us temporarily forget our own suffering and striving. Therefore, tragedy was beautiful because it allowed us to see the essence of life and death, and to experience a kind of immortality. Pity was one of the feelings generated by tragedy. However, it was a double-edged sword, because it not only made us feel the pain of others but also enslaved us. Therefore, we should not only pity others but also liberate ourselves from it. Fate was an inevitable factor in human life. Human beings could not completely control their own lives, but they could still strive for happiness and self-realization. Thus, we should not complain about fate or seek to escape from it, but face it bravely and strive for our own happiness and self-realization.

Sublimation was put forward by Sigmund Freud who stated that the transfer and sublimation of personality is essentially a transfer and sublimation of "Eros". The sublimation in this paper is its development in the process of creation and performance of tragic drama at the musical theater.

Les Misérables and *The Phantom of the Opera* can be good symbols of western musical theatre works.

These mega musical tragedies have been well received by the audience. The main characters of the tragedy, the tragic conflict, the expression of tragedy, the beauty and pain of tragedy, transcendence and access to the aesthetic suggest that the sublimation aesthetic roles of the musical tragedy are mainly as follows: magnificence, sublimity, conviction and morality.

3. Magnificence

Elegance and magnificence are often associated with each other, and they are also known in Chinese theory as feminine and masculine beauty. From the point of view of large and small spatial forms, gracefulness is generally small, while magnificent beauty generally has a huge form. From the point of view of the speed and slowness of time, the speed of time contributes to the formation of magnificent beauty, and the slowness of time forms graceful beauty.

For example, the soothing ballad tunes in the two plays bring the audience a sense of grace, fashion and power. Group dance movements produce a sense of magnificence. Huge power is produced by the magnificent, such as the rock through the air, the waves beat the shore; weak power is produced by the beautiful, such as being free like flying flowers and light like the beauty of the swallow; the nature of the strong is often associated with the magnificent, while the nature of the soft is often integrated with the grace.

In reality, the object of the graceful or magnificent often combines a variety of properties into one. The sublime and the magnificent are connected and different, and intersecting, especially in the huge space of things. How to distinguish them mainly depends on how it is related to people. If it is the same with people, that is magnificent, or hostile to people, that is sublime. Magnificent things bring people a sense of magnificence; sublime things bring people a sense of sublimity. The sense of magnificence is the appreciation of the majestic things homogeneous to people, from pleasure to greater pleasure.

The combined use of music, story, dramatic poetry, dance and performance elements of musical tragedy gives the audience the aesthetic characteristic of magnificence. The fate of the protagonist is not dictated and controlled by himself or herself, and often reacts to the influence of society, economy, and other characters as well as the conflict with them, becoming tragedy and a victim of tragedy, and in this process generating beauty and magnificence. As in *Les Mis érables*, the benevolence, kindness, fatherly and motherly love of the character roles of Jean Valjean, Fantine, and Eponine, as well as Javert's rigidity and firmness of conviction make them unusually tall. Their morality and justice, like the mountains, the sea, and the gods, interact with the audience through the beauty of the art, the stimulation of the senses, and the construction of the myths of tragedy, which in turn leads to the magnificent and grandiose aesthetic imagery, feelings, and experiences.

4. Sublimity

The actions to the goal between the tragic hero and other characters create a contradictory conflict that leads to tragedy. The tragic hero tries to change his or her destiny and wrestles with it, but has to be

governed by it, demonstrating extraordinary power and emotion. The stage and the audience form a myth of tragedy, and the audience are moved to tears with the tragedy, generating sadness, pity, and a sense of pain. The tragic character is transformed into a tragic hero.

Jean Valjean, Fantine, Eponine, and Javert of *Les Misérables* die for love and justice; Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* gives up for love; Kim of *Miss Saigon* commits suicide for love; Maria of *West Side Story* is martyred for Tony; and Quasimodo of *Notre Dame de Paris* dies in love with Esmeralda. The images of the protagonists in these musical tragedies become as exalted as heroes and gods because of love, justice and morality.

As the aesthetic feelings of musical tragedy, pleasure and pain coexist, and beauty and pain coexist. The hero of the tragic myth brings sublimity, greatness, inspiration, exhilaration, and joy. The sense of the sublime is the feeling of pleasure that comes to a person as a result of defeating a horrible enemy, such as death, and is a transition from pain to pleasure. The sense of the sublime is not a mere pleasure like the sense of beauty, but is a pleasure that arises after one has overcome pain in the face of fear, and it is closely linked to one's sense of pride and triumph.

The sublime sense is a mixed aesthetic feeling of deterrence, admiration and praise for the sublime things in nature, society and art. The sublimity is the main embodiment of the spirit of tragedy, the core category of tragic aesthetics. The sacrifice, submission, admiration, praise, beauty and pain, as the sense of the sublime in the musical tragedy, are particularly strong. Characters such as Jean Valjean, Fantine, Eponine, Javert, the Revolutionary, Phantom and Christine are all in conflict with other characters in the circumstances of their social lives; their destinies are out of their control, and tragedy arises from the intense conflicts. No matter how important a role these characters play in the musicals, they all become heroes. Their persistence and firmness show the true goodness, kindness and beauty of human nature, allowing the audience to gain a sense of beauty and pain, and pleasure and sublimity. Musical tragedy also has a worship value because of its sublime aesthetic characteristics, making it more vital.

5. Conviction

Whether the characters of the musical tragedy and the conflict shown by the relationships between the characters are failure or not, the audience feel a strong conviction. The characters of Fantine's torment, Little Cosette's innocence and Eponine's love, etc. are deeply imprinted in the audience's heart through the music, poetry and choreography that tell the stories. When the poor people labor for a day and get nothing, when the good people do not get the support of those around them, when the fighting revolutionaries fight desperately, when the ego has to give up a lot, the conviction of the true beauty of human nature, the glory of human love, the inevitable triumph of good over evil, the light will surely come during the process of watching the play reaches a consensus with the performers on the stage and the creators.

Although the stage depicts a world of darkness and poverty, the audience have a sense of ritual and

conviction, a collective consciousness and the same world of imagery, that is, the greatness of kinship, friendship, love, and the power of conviction brought by justice and righteousness of sublimity, morality and nobility as the light of the sun. The audience's deconstruction and comprehension of all the information of the theater together with the creator of the musical tragedy create this work and construct an aesthetic world. At the same time, the aesthetic perspective of tragedy is used to care for each audience member's life and to inspire each person to walk their own journey with faith in their limited years. The power of faith comes from the actors, the characters they play, the performance of the characters, and the values displayed by the musical's elements and symbols. Faith may come from a word, a score, an action, or even a look in the eyes of the character; it may come from a fragment, a fight scene, or even a small change. The beauty of the comprehensive presentation of musical tragedy, such as gorgeous music and choreography, brings the audience reflection, self-analysis and reflection with self-impression, and accomplishes aesthetic education, conviction enhancement and spiritual sublimation in the theater.

6. Morality

Tragedy causes fear and pity; the feelings of fear and pity that tragedy arouses in the audience is a special pleasure that gives the audience artistic enjoyment and spiritual fulfillment. Characters' actions to achieve their goals lead to good or bad results. Characters' stage actions lead to sharp conflicts. In tragedy, the audience see truth, goodness, beauty and falsehood, evil and ugliness. The noble qualities displayed by the leading characters of tragedy make them heroes and gods in the myth of tragedy, revealing the historical trend that beauty will surely triumph over ugliness, and justice will surely triumph over evil and prompting people's longing for and pursuit of a peaceful, beautiful, prosperous, and love-filled world.

According to Schiller (1985), the sadness of tragedy is not the sadness of real life with forced pressure, but the sadness to reflect morality. The audience are free men, who appreciate with a free heart the power of art that leads from sorrow to morality, which purifies the mind and thus gains aesthetic pleasure and spiritual joy. Tragedy is characterized by the greatness of the personality of the tragic characters and their great misfortune, and the reason why it arouses the emotion of mingling joy and pain is that it raises us to the level of the heroes in the tragedy and makes us see the strong souls and the indestructible courage, which uplifts our spirits and brings us the positive energy of healthy and upward mobility.

The benevolent Godfather Digne, Jean Valjean's atonement, Javert's suicide, Fantine's motherly love, Eponine's love, Christine's kiss and the Phantom's renunciation all give the audience a sense of the greatness of love and high morality. The audience experience a tremendous sense of magnificence, sublimity and conviction in the theater. The various elements of the musical synthesize the beauty of the art and allow the audience to experience the true, the good and the beautiful and the false, the evil and the ugly. In addition to aesthetic imagery and feelings such as pity, sorrow and fear, musical

tragedy also has an aesthetic educational value. The aesthetics of tragedy allows the audience to feel the shock and inspiration of heroism, to experience the moral sublimity, and to be baptized, purified and sublimated by the spirit and soul.

Musical tragedy embodies the independent will and personality of the subject of practice in the face of suffering and destruction, and manifests the tragic spirit of self-determination, self-molding and self-bearing. The spirit of tragedy is the spirit of citizenship. Musical tragedy prompts the awakening of human consciousness and personality liberation; at the same time, it calls for social morality, civilization and progress. Therefore, the moral aesthetic characteristics of musical tragedy contribute to the perfection of the individual, good moral civil society and the progress of human civilization.

7. Conclusion

Tragedy is an important carrier of human culture and aesthetic concepts, and its connotation is rich and profound, involving not only personal destiny and ethical conflicts, but also the overall changes of human society. Tragedy realizes the sublimation of spirit and the creation of beauty by showing the struggle and sacrifice of heroes and characters, and conveys magnificence, sublimity, conviction and morality, which has far-reaching aesthetic significance and educational value. Tragic works such as *Les Misérables* show death and sacrifice end of the main characters through rich artistic techniques and profound characterization, guiding the audience in the pursuit of justice, virtue and peace, which is of great significance to the promotion of social progress and individual perfection. In the future, the study of the sublimation of tragic drama will continue to deepen, providing us with more profound insights into human culture and aesthetics to create a more civilized world.

Fund Project

Culture Building Brand Cultivation Project of China University of Petroleum, Beijing.

References

- Benedict Nightingale, & Martyn Palmer. *Les Misérables: From Stage to Screen*. London: Carlton Books Ltd., 2013.
- Hegel, & Zhu Guangqian. (Trans.). *Vorlesungen Über die ÄsthetikI*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009.
- Hegel, & Zhu Guangqian. (Trans.). *Vorlesungen Über die ÄsthetikII*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009.
- Hegel, & Zhu Guangqian. (Trans.). *Vorlesungen Über die ÄsthetikIII A*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009.
- Hegel, & Zhu Guangqian. (Trans.). *Vorlesungen Über die ÄsthetikIII B*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1986.

- Kant, & Li Qiuling. (Trans.). *Collected Works on Kantian Aesthetics*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2016.
- Lucas, D. W. *Aristotle: Poetics*. London: Oxford, 1968.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198140245.book.1>
- Margaret Vermette, Zhu Mengjue et al. (Trans.). *The Musical World of Boublil and Schönberg*. Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2013.
- Miao Litian, & Cui Yanqiang. (Trans.). *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume IX*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 1994.
- Nietzsche, & Sun Zhouxing. (Trans.). *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016.
- Schiller, Feng Zhi et al. (Trans.). *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1985.
- Schopenhauer, & Shi Chongbai. (Trans.). *Die Welt Als Wille und Vorstellung*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2009.
- William Everett, & Paul Laird. *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2008.