

Literature Review on the Study of Modernity in Tragic Aesthetics

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Abstract: Tragic aesthetics, a field of study encompassing profound explorations of human suffering and volition, has played a crucial role in the development of human artistic and cultural expressions from ancient Greek times to the present day. With the continuous evolution and advancement of modern society, the concept of modernity has gradually intertwined with the ideal and aesthetics of tragedy. Modernity introduces new ideas, values, and aesthetic perspectives that have progressively influenced the realm of tragic art and aesthetics. This paper focuses on the manifestations of modernity in the evolution of Tragic Aesthetics theory. Employing a literature research approach, it microscopically summarizes the research related to the modernity of Tragic Aesthetics and macroscopically traces the historical development of modern Tragic theory. After summarizing and analyzing relevant works and literature, the paper concludes that research on the modernity of Tragic Aesthetics is relatively scarce, and the understanding of the relationship between modernity and Tragic Aesthetics in the available literature often remains superficial and preliminary. Therefore, there is still significant research space in this area.

Keywords: modern tragedy, modernity, tragic aesthetics

1. Introduction

Tragic aesthetics, as an ancient and intricate field of study, carries the profound exploration of human suffering and dilemmas. From the times of ancient Greece to the present day, it has played a crucial role in the development of human artistic and cultural endeavors. With the continuous evolution and development of modern society, tragic aesthetics has gradually intertwined with modern thought and aesthetics. Modernity brings forth new ideas, values, and aesthetic perspectives, increasingly influencing the realm of tragic art and aesthetics.

In contemporary society, the centrality of individual free will and the pursuit of meaning takes center stage, prompting deeper contemplation of societal structures, individuals, and self-existence. This has led to a fresh interpretation of the significance and value of tragic aesthetics within the context of modernity. Tragic works in modern society reflect the suffering, dilemmas, and struggles of individuals, delving into questions concerning the existence and meaning of the real world. This offers a profound understanding of human existence and the complexities of human nature.

However, modern tragic aesthetics also face novel challenges. The impact of modernity requires tragic works to more keenly grasp the aesthetic preferences of audiences while raising the bar for

the form and themes of tragedies. In this complex and ever-changing era, research on modern tragic aesthetics demands the continuous expansion of new perspectives and viewpoints.

This paper employs a methodology of literature review to synthesize and summarize the viewpoints of various scholars from diverse observational perspectives. Through the approach of literature review, the paper further seeks to comprehend the characteristics, significance, and challenges of modern tragic aesthetics within the contemporary societal context.

2. The Conceptual Generation and Definition of Tragic Aesthetics and Modernity

2.1. Tragic Aesthetics

Tragic aesthetics is an age-old theme in art and philosophy, and this wine of Dionysus has always tempted philosophers and scholars to delve into its intricacies. To study its related content, one must first clarify what constitutes tragic aesthetics. Thus, this paper provides the following definition: Tragic Aesthetics is an exploration within the field of aesthetics that treats tragedy as an aesthetic form and explores the inherent aesthetic value it embodies.

2.2. Modernity

Modernity is a complex and composite concept, even today lacking a precise and distinct definition. Typically, in the context of modernity, the reference is to social modernity based on the modern industrial revolution and the bourgeoisie. It is the product of economic and social transformation, advocating science and reason. However, the modernity discussed in this paper pertains to its aesthetic and literary aspect, namely aesthetic modernity. It is the result of reflecting upon social modernity., infused with a profound sense of negation and rebellious fervor. It embraces a critical enthusiasm akin to Dadaism in its opposition and transcendence of societal modernity.

Having elucidated the concepts of tragic aesthetics and modernity as discussed above, attention is now redirected to the topic of this literature review: “Modernity in Tragic Aesthetics.” This paper delves into tragic aesthetics from the perspective of aesthetic modernity. By examining the historical development of modern tragic theory, it investigates the critiques and changes wrought by tragic aesthetics within the framework of modernity.

3. Research on Modern Tragedy and the Modernity of Tragic Aesthetics

Following the 19th century, the rapid development of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism accelerated societal structural transformations and shifts in social consciousness, propelling the world into a historical era known as modernity. During this period, traditional tragedy evolved into modern tragedy, causing a profound shift in the core of tragic aesthetics, all set against the backdrop of modernity’s impact—a departure from the perspectives of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who began to diverge from Hegel and Aristotle. In this section, this paper will select relevant literature from both domestic and international sources that delve into the study of modern tragedy and the modernity of tragic aesthetics. By summarizing their viewpoints and analyzing their limitations, this paper aims to present a comprehensive theoretical development and research framework for modern tragedy and its aesthetics.

3.1. Evolution of Tragic Aesthetics Concepts

3.1.1. Research on Schopenhauer’s Tragic Theory

Arthur Schopenhauer, a representative figure of the German philosophical school of voluntarism, was often overlooked by academia for a considerable period of time. Even today, there are

criticisms of his philosophies, and people often neglect his significance in both philosophy and art history. Within the context of drama, Schopenhauer's tragic theory played a pioneering and foundational role. Subsequent philosophers and literary theorists such as Nietzsche and Wang Guowei continued to develop and expand upon his theories. Schopenhauer's insights into suffering and tragedy continue to guide theatrical and literary creation, establishing a fundamental logic for modern tragedy creation.

From Schopenhauer's perspective, the entire world is a phenomenon, with only the will representing the ultimate reality [1]. All life and matter are merely reflections of this will, an ever-surging and never-ending torrent of desires driven by its essence: the impulse for survival. Given that the nature of desire is rooted in the impulse for survival, this impulse never ceases until death, resulting in boundless desires. These boundless desires are the catalyst for human suffering, as per Schopenhauer's analysis. Furthermore, he believed that survival itself is the source of suffering, asserting that from birth, humans are already immersed in an endless sea of suffering.

The purpose of tragedy, according to Schopenhauer, is to dissolve this fundamental suffering, making individuals aware of the suffering created by the will [1]. Through tragedy, people are encouraged to relinquish the will to live, to voluntarily withdraw from life and the world, ultimately culminating in a state of selflessness.

Currently, research on Schopenhauer's theory of tragedy is relatively scarce in China. This paper selects Gao Sichun's "A Discussion on the Modernity of Wang Guowei's Tragic Aesthetic Thought" from Jiangnan University to explore the manifestation of Schopenhauer's philosophy of suffering in the creation of tragic works [2]. Although this article primarily delves into Wang Guowei's tragic aesthetics, it also extensively expounds on Schopenhauer's ideas. As previously mentioned, Wang Guowei's conception of tragic aesthetics directly inherits and develops from Schopenhauer's philosophy, so studying Wang Guowei inevitably involves delving into Schopenhauer.

Using Wang Guowei's "Commentary on Dream of the Red Chamber" as the focal point, he posits that the origin of tragedy lies in "the desire of life," while its function is to provide "emancipation" [3]. In "Commentary on Dream of the Red Chamber" Wang Guowei contends that all characters are situated in a state of "ordinary individuals, ordinary circumstances, and things that are compelled to be inevitability [3]." This concept bears striking resemblance to the notion of "tragedy in everyday life" propagated by modern drama influenced by Schopenhauer. This sense of being compelled into ordinary life serves as a distinct marker of modern consciousness in the author's view. Building upon this foundation, Wang Guowei further theorizes that the resolution of this suffering occurs through the path of liberation [3]. The most effective form of emancipation is akin to Jia Baoyu's self-discipline—attained through profound enlightenment after enduring misery—an idea that aligns with Schopenhauer's comprehensive notion of the relinquishment of existence.

In this article, the author undertakes a comparison between Western and Chinese philosophical ideas and literary works. This comparison reveals the embodiment of Schopenhauer's tragic philosophy within "Dream of the Red Chamber," and notably, this alignment occurs perfectly even without Cao Xueqin's direct exposure to Schopenhauer's theory. This highlights the universal value of Schopenhauer's philosophy and further elucidates its significance within the context of tragic aesthetics. Nevertheless, the author's exposition of Schopenhauer's theory lacks a discussion of its core, the impetus of the will to live. Furthermore, while the title of the paper suggests an examination of the modernity of Wang Guowei's tragic aesthetics, the discussion on modernity remains limited, mainly focusing on the contemporary context of Chinese society at that time. This limitation fails to explore the broader universal modernity value of both Wang Guowei's and Schopenhauer's ideas, revealing a certain historical constraint.

3.1.2. Research on Nietzsche's Tragic Theory

Nietzsche's theory of tragedy inherits and further develops Schopenhauer's concepts in a pivotal manner, playing a significant transitional role. His tragic theory is prominently expounded in "The Birth of Tragedy [4]."

While Nietzsche also acknowledges the perspective that life entails suffering, he contrasts with Schopenhauer in his contemplation of the will to life. Nietzsche views life's will as the foundation of all things, with the aesthetic subject of tragedy being the ceaselessly surging torrent of life's will. Tragic characters are merely illusions derived from the individualization of life's will. Through their destruction alongside the phenomenal world, spectators catch a glimpse of the eternal pulse of will, where the moment of destruction melds with the perpetual nature of life's will. In doing so, they foresee a supreme, artistic primal happiness within the embrace of life's will. This constitutes the essence of tragic pleasure in Nietzsche's view. Unlike Schopenhauer's notion of a comprehensive relinquishment before the will to live, Nietzsche asserts the need to confront and return to life's will, thereby attaining the highest ecstasy. This core viewpoint shapes Nietzsche's tragic aesthetics. His other tragic theories vehemently oppose traditional tragedy. He fervently advocated for the revival of the Dionysian spirit, opposing the tragic art rooted in rational and scientific thinking, rejecting art's moralizing influence, and challenging the application of dialectics. Perhaps, as he himself asserted, his philosophy aimed at overthrowing all existing truths.

In the article "The Metaphysical Will to Life and the Artistic Utopia—Interpretation of the Modernity of Tragic Aesthetics in 'The Birth of Tragedy'." The author believes that Nietzsche fundamentally reconstructed tragedy with an elevated and passionate philosophy of life [5]. Nietzsche's aestheticized life's will transforms into a metaphysical concept—a novel metaphysical idol, despite this not being his original intention [5]. The negation and deconstruction of the idol of scientific rationality in "The Birth of Tragedy" reveal that science and ethics cannot liberate individuals from the tragic existential dilemmas rooted in fate that characterize modern human existence—this signifies a form of modernity reflection and breakthrough.

The author of this paper comprehensively presents Nietzsche's tragic aesthetics and attributes his concept of life's will to a new metaphysical idol that replaces scientific rationality. At the same time, the author also recognizes that Nietzsche's pursuit of tragic aesthetics in the intoxicated realm of Dionysus contains reflections of modernity. Unfortunately, the author did not further explore which specific aspect of modernity serves as a reflection and in what direction it seeks to break through. This omission results in the paper's consideration of the modernity of tragic aesthetics being incomplete, and somewhat regrettable.

3.2. The Death of Tragedy Thesis and Reconstruction of Tragic Concepts

3.2.1. Research on the Death of Tragedy Thesis

In the previous sections, this paper briefly discussed the foundational theories of modern tragic aesthetics in the 19th century proposed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In the subsequent half-century, the theoretical framework of tragic aesthetics did not undergo significant changes or innovations. Instead, more changes occurred in specific dramatic creations and the practical development of ideas derived from Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's concepts. Next paragraph will present some representative examples that highlight these developments.

Liberal Tragedy focuses on discussing societal structures and the inescapable dilemmas brought about by liberal values in their tragic works. The heroic figures of traditional tragedies are transformed into ordinary people. Similarly, Private Tragedy follows a similar approach, though it emphasizes the struggles and pain faced by common individuals in their lives and emotions.

Absurdist drama, on the other hand, takes the departure from tradition to the extreme. Rooted in the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, these plays discard conventional structures, language, and plot logic. Instead, they employ symbols and symbolism to express the absurdity of human existence and the meaningless of reality. These dramatic genres build upon the foundations of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, challenging and subverting the traditional content and forms of theater.

The rejection and rebellion against tradition led to significant scholarly debates. As early as 1929, Croce proposed the “death of tragedy” thesis, arguing that modern science had extinguished the spirit of tragedy. However, foreign scholar Sidney Zink countered Croce’s perspective in his 1958 paper “The Novel as a Medium of Modern Tragedy [6].” Zink’s core argument was that novels could serve as an intermediary to embody the spirit of tragedy. He believed that modern novels successfully portrayed modern tragic protagonists. Compared to stage dramas, novels offer more space and time to explore characters’ inner conflicts and philosophical thoughts, merging ideas and emotions to enhance the work’s artistry and emotional impact. Zink emphasized that modern tragic protagonists were often reflective individuals, driven to understand themselves and the world through contemplation. Their thoughts and pain were inseparable, intertwining abstract thinking with intense emotions. This tragedy manifested in their doubts and struggles about existence, deepening their suffering. The novel, as a literary form, adeptly depicted these protagonists’ inner worlds, showcasing their contemplations and anguish about life and the essence of the universe. In contrast, theatrical forms struggled to convey such abstract thinking and internal conflicts since drama emphasizes physical expression and emotional display. The abstract writing style and language of novels allowed them to easily present characters’ inner thoughts, going beyond emotions and actions. The broad perspective and diversity of novels facilitated the combination of abstract ideas with dramatic plots, effectively showcasing the features of modern tragedy. It’s evident that this article, grounded in a modern perspective of tragic aesthetics and spirit, argues that the spirit of tragedy has transformed into the novel form. Rather than refuting the death of tragedy, the article seeks to vindicate the modern tragic spirit, suggesting that even if traditional stage tragedy forms vanish, the tragic spirit and aesthetics will always find new manifestations suitable for the times. This anticipation of the existence of tragic spirit and its transformation in mediums is forward-thinking, and today, people increasingly recognize its prescience.

Ultimately, in 1961, George Steiner’s publication of “The Death of Tragedy” marked the beginning of a significant academic debate [7]. In her paper “Has Tragedy Died? A Debate between George Steiner and Williams and Eagleton.” Hu Yilin thoroughly examines the course of this debate [8]. She believes that Steiner’s perspective primarily emphasizes the preservation and continuation of Western cultural tradition. Steiner advocates for modern authors, who face intellectual emptiness and emotional numbness, to return to pre-17th-century traditional tragedies. This viewpoint is indeed commendable. However, in comparison to the ideas of scholars like Williams and Eagleton regarding tragedy, Steiner’s concept of tragedy seems somewhat limited. His view of tragedy arises from Western literary tradition and promotes traditional tragedies while overlooking the societal environment and experiences that led to the development of modern tragedies. He isolates tragic art from social reality, leading to a narrow consideration of tragic creation and resulting in his declaration that modern tragedy has perished.

3.2.2. Research on Raymond Williams’ “Modern Tragedy”

The culmination of this debate was reached through the contributions of Raymond Williams, a pioneering scholar in Western modern tragedy theory and cultural theory. In 1965, he published “Modern Tragedy”, a book that systematically elucidated the concept and implications of tragedy within the modern context [9]. Williams refuted Steiner’s claim of the death of tragedy, presenting tragedy as a direct experience and a theoretical conflict. His approach positioned tragedy as an

academic inquiry. Williams emphasized that the essence of modern tragedy lay in incorporating everyday experiences and personal feelings into its contemplation. In the paper “On Raymond Williams’ View of Modern Tragedy”, the author suggests that Williams’ conception of modern tragedy arose from his critique of the death of tragedy thesis and was influenced by his own experience of modernity [10]. Williams, from the very foundation, clarified the definition of tragedy, connecting drama with various domains of thought, and examining broad literary themes within the context of tragedy. This approach facilitated a dialectical view of the historical development of tragedy and offered new dimensions for addressing diverse crises in the modern context, thereby carrying significant guiding implications.

In the paper “The Fragmentation and Reconstructive Cohesion of Tragedy: A Study of Raymond Williams’ Tragedy Theory”, Yang Huihui divides Williams’ tragedy theory research into three parts: The first part traces the historical development of tragedy, where each turn and evolution of modern tragedy creates new gaps between it and traditional tragedy [11]. The second part, built upon the fragmentation of tragedy, explores Williams’ efforts to reconstruct modern tragedy. The third part evaluates the significance of Williams’ tragedy theory. The author contends that the inherent modernity of Williams’ tragedy theory lies in his idealized construction of a social community. However, due to inherent paradoxical relations within his conception, the theoretical foundation and practical basis of his envisioned community lack coherence. This ultimately leads to the collapse of this idealized community and dissolves the inherent modernity of his theory. Nevertheless, Williams’ tragedy theory can still offer other meanings in contemporary society. For instance, his critique of the “death of tragedy” thesis allows for the possibility of reinventing tragic literature. Furthermore, the enduring universal significance of tragedy as the eternal tone of real life attests to the value of Williams’ tragedy theory.

In another paper, “The Concerto of Dissolution and Construction: The Modernity of Williams’ ‘Modern Tragedy’”, Gao Hongmei highlights that the infiltration of modernity into literary and cultural realms introduces a new binary analytical framework [12]. The prioritization of individual expression over group expression is seen as a distinction between tradition and modernity. Williams’ novel interpretation of tragedy reflects individualization, with an academic value orientation centered around the individual. This approach aligns with the modern principle of prioritizing the individual, rebelling against the traditional confinement of group-centered perspectives within modern scholarly perspectives.

4. Conclusion

Through the historical review of the transformation of modern tragedy and the literary research on modern tragic theories, it is evident that research on the modernity of tragic aesthetics is relatively scarce. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the examination of specific theories within the realm of modern tragic aesthetics. Notably, the research on Raymond Williams’ “Modern Tragedy” has achieved a more comprehensive level of development. However, the exploration of the evolution of tragic aesthetics within the broader context of linear historical perspectives remains largely uncharted. Furthermore, discussions concerning the relationship between tragic aesthetics and modernity have often remained superficial.

The research potential in this area remains substantial. In addition to analyzing external impacts on tragic aesthetics and concepts brought about by factors such as industrialization, technological advancements, and shifts in societal structures, one can also approach the subject from the perspective of aesthetic modernity. This involves establishing connections between tragic aesthetics and contemporary philosophical and cultural trends, such as modernism, existentialism, and posthumanism. By doing so, it becomes possible to explore how these intellectual currents have guided self-revolution and renewal within the domain of tragedy and even the broader artistic

sphere.

Simultaneously, the changing landscape of tragic mediums in response to the challenges posed by modernity can serve as a valuable research angle. Studying the spirit of tragedy embedded within various artistic forms, including literature, film, and even electronic gaming, across different time periods, offers an avenue to elucidate the transformation of tragic art within a modern context.

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