

The inevitability, value and significance of the formation of tragic endings in novels

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Abstract:

From ancient times to the present, tragedy has always been one of the most profound forms of expression in literature and art. This article focuses on the inevitability of the formation of tragic endings in novels. Plot setting, characterization environment and historical background are all important reasons for the formation of tragic endings. The tragic ending also has its own significance and value. It offers people aesthetic enjoyment and spiritual inspiration in terms of aesthetics. After presenting the predicament, it enables readers to have a deeper reflection on life. Tragic ending showcases the value and brilliance of human nature at a higher level. Through this study of necessity, it is concluded that tragedy is a philosophical reflection for human beings to gaze at suffering, deconstruct fate and question existence through artistic forms.

Keywords: Tragic ending, tragic value, tragic aesthetics

1 INTRODUCTION

Tragedy, as an important motif in the field of literature, the reasons for the formation of its ending have always been the key focus of people's attention. Throughout the long course of literary development, from the tragic fate of Oedipus in ancient Greek tragedies to the tragic fate of Xianglin's wife depicted by Lu Xun in modern China, who could not escape the tragic fate of feudal ethics, tragic endings have always struck the souls of readers with a powerful and heart-wrenching force. What the tragic ending reveals is not only the destruction of the characters, but also the confirmation of values and the contemplation of human nature. In modern novel creation, the tragic ending also has an expressive tension that cannot be ignored. It reveals the complex relationship between the individual and The Times, character and fate, and constitutes an important part of the ideological connotation of the work.

Against this backdrop, exploring the inevitability of the formation of tragedy in novels not only helps to understand the content and main idea of the works and deepen the understanding of the essence of literary tragedy, but also enables us to use tragedy as a mirror to reflect the eternal thoughts of mankind on fate, life and society in different historical periods. Lu Xun once said, "A good writer will destroy beautiful things for people to see." So, whether the tragic fate of the characters in the novel is due to the individual, others or the background of The Times, the author believes that the tragic fate of the characters in the novel is inevitable in terms of plot setting, character personality and the background of The Times. A tragic fate is inevitable. Even if the protagonist made other choices at that time, the tragic fate could not be changed. Therefore, readers should pay more attention to the significance and value of tragic endings and think more deeply about them.

This article uses the tragic endings of some classic works such as *Family*, *Funeral of A Muslim*, and *Rickshaw Boy* as examples. It approaches from three dimensions: the narrative logic of plot setting, the realistic soil of the characters' environment, and the cultural genes of the era background, and analyzes multiple factors regarding the inevitability of tragic endings, and provides certain theoretical references for the inevitability of tragedy formation and demonstrates the significance and value of tragedies, and whether the tragic ending is also a manifestation of completeness in a certain sense.

2 Plot Setting as Tragic Foundation

The inevitability of a tragic ending cannot be separated from the precise programming of the plot logic. Its core lies in the progressive progression of conflicts and contradictions, which forces the characters to make such choices under the pressure of such events and environments, and ultimately leads to the occurrence of a tragic ending. Under such circumstances, first of all, the plot needs to plant an irreconcilable core contradiction. For instance, in Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi*, Xiangzi's three rises and three falls form a closed-loop tragic logic. After Xiangzi saved up money to buy a new car for the first time, due to the warlord conflicts and the rampant bandits, the soldiers snatched Xiangzi's first car. This was a heavy blow to Xiangzi and the initial manifestation of the conflict. The second time, when Xiangzi saved up enough money again, he encountered Detective Sun, who was shartful and ruthless, and snatched away the savings he had accumulated. These two blows dealt a heavy blow to Xiangzi, making him feel powerless and hopeless (Yan, 2025). Once again, Xiangzi's efforts came to nothing. Every time Xiangzi saved enough money to buy a car, a sudden incident would occur, causing Xiangzi to lose his car and making him lose hope again and again. Under such repeated intensification and struggle of contradictions, through the author's reasonable arrangement, the tragic ending became the inevitable end of the closed loop of contradictions, causing the protagonist to be hit and despair time and again. Under these blows, the plot unfolds gradually, revealing more deeply the darkness of the society at that time, and the tragic ending becomes an inescapable closed loop of fate.

Secondly, the advancement of the plot requires the author to provide reasonable and necessary Settings. The protagonists in novels often experience many things, including hardships, disasters, joys, but often more pain. Following the protagonist's footsteps and slowly watching the development of the story, experiencing the protagonist's life, is a characteristic that most novels have. When readers are reading, they usually have a deeper memory of bad things such as disasters. Therefore, the author often arranges for

some bad things to happen or gives the protagonist some unique Settings. For instance, in *Funeral of A Muslim*, the novel ingeniously structures the story first, designing Chu Yanchao and Xin Yue as teacher and student. However, the so-called "teacher-student romance" was not allowed by the traditional atmosphere at that time, which set an invisible obstacle for the development of the novel's plot. However, Han's mother (adoptive mother: Liang Junbi) also obstructed the interaction between Xin Yue and Chu Yanchao. Then Han Xinyue was found to have heart disease, which planted a thunderbolt that could explode at any time for her future life path. At the crucial moment of the plot, this thunderbolt will emerge, propelling the tragic ending to occur. All these Settings fill the tragic fates of the characters with a heavy sense of pathos (Cui, 2011). Therefore, under these Settings, as the plot progresses further, the emergence of a tragic ending is not surprising. The plot setting is like the "gears of fate". Under the circumstances of numerous contradictions, coincidences and other events that cannot be broken through, the tragic ending becomes a natural product and inevitable result of the plot development, rather than a deliberate act by the creator. This foundation based on realistic logic enables readers to feel the weight of fate and the irreversibility of the tragic ending in the "unexpected yet reasonable" plot development.

3 Tragic Outcomes from Character Traits

The characters' personalities not only determine their behavioral choices, but also, to a certain extent, determine the course of their destinies. Authors often create real and full characters' personalities, and such distinct personalities also enable the protagonists to make behavioral choices that are in line with their personalities and values. Similarly, the flaws or weaknesses in these characters often become important factors in tragic endings. For instance, in Ba Jin's trilogy *Home*, Jue Xin makes people feel that he is a weak person when he first appears as a character. As the eldest grandson of the Gao family, Gao Juexin received a feudal and ethical education under orthodox ideology from a young age. He knew how to shoulder the heavy responsibility of rejuvenating the family and follow the idea of "filial piety" in feudal ethics and morality, which enabled him to submit passively when facing the demands and even oppression of the feudal elders. However, he was also an intellectual who embraced new ideas. In the process of reconciling the sharp contradiction between the new and the old, he had to adhere to "salutism" and "non-resistance", thus developing a timid and submissive character (Xu, 2022). Therefore, when faced with the result of the lottery for the wedding, he chose to be tolerant and retreat, which led to his separation from

his beloved cousin Mei and caused a tragedy for the two of them. Because of her weakness and concession to the feudal system, her daughter-in-law was driven out of the house to give birth in a remote place due to a “blood disaster” during childbirth, and eventually died of difficult labor. Due to his own weakness and compromise with the feudal elders, when his own son Hai ‘er fell ill, he failed to receive timely treatment and was separated from him forever. The “bowing policy” and “non-resistance policy” actually ruined Jue Xin’s life.(Liu,2009)His weak, yielding, compromising and foolish filial nature made the people he loved drift away from him one after another, resulting in an irreparable tragic ending.

Characters’ personalities are important catalysts for tragic endings. By shaping distinct personality traits, the author enables the protagonist to make choices that are in line with his personality when facing difficulties, thereby promoting the occurrence of a tragic ending. Therefore, during the development of the story, in order to conform to the protagonist’s personality traits or because the protagonist has such a personality, he is bound to make such choices, and these choices also drive the plot to continue to develop and advance in a tragic direction.

4 Socio-Historical Foundations of Tragedy

The story of each novel is set in a specific era. Different eras mean different social environments. Maybe it’s the continuous warfare and gunfire, or the oppression of people in the feudal era, or the miserable life of the people in the years of famine. The different historical backgrounds also limit the choices the protagonist could make under the circumstances at that time. This prevents the protagonist from stepping out of the circumstances at that time to make decisions that we consider more rational and correct, and also leads to the inevitability of the tragic ending. Engels said, “The essence of tragedy is the conflict between the inevitable demands of history and the actual impossibility of achieving these demands.” The background of *The Times* is precisely the soil that breeds such conflicts. In terms of political systems, ethical concepts, class structures, etc., the survival boundaries of tragic figures have already been demarcated, and destruction has thus become an inevitable choice in a specific history and era.

In *Camel Xiangzi*, Xiangzi was in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal social structure during the Republic of China period. At that time, the lower-class laborers were squeezed at the very bottom of the entire society. Under the rule of the Beiyang warlords, the exploitation, oppression and violence from the upper class were like a ceiling pressing down on the lower-class people, making it hard for them to breathe. As the most ordinary person at the bottom, Xiangzi could only make a living by pulling a

cart. Xiangzi’s tragedy was rooted in the social environment. He couldn’t break free from the cage given to him by society and gradually declined (Chen, 2025). He is unable to engage in any other activities and has no way to earn money in any other way to change his fate. In the end, he had to sell his car and became a walking corpse. The rickshaw puller Xiangzi could only become a victim of this sick society. He can’t contend with this dark society by his own strength, yet this society has turned him from a “human” into a “ghost” (Shui, 2014). This precisely illustrates the tragic fate of the working people in the semi-colonial and anti-feudal society of China at that time. Even if people at that time wanted to change their situation through hard work and struggle, it was impossible. Xiangzi, as an individual in society, represents a microcosm of a certain group of people at that time. They were unable to resist the social conditions of that era and had to survive in it. Under such a social background, the tragic fate of the group of people represented by Xiangzi was inevitable.

The background of *The Times*, as the backdrop and undertone for the formation of the tragedy, sets up a “losing chessboard” for the characters in terms of system, ethics, class and other dimensions. Every choice made by the little people is carried with the weight of *The Times* and steeped in the suffering of society, and the tragic ending has become the only answer that the characters can offer under the background of *The Times*.

5 Choices vs. Fate

Many readers might wonder if the protagonist had made other choices, or if the author had arranged for the protagonist to make other choices, could the fates of the characters in the book and the ultimate tragic outcome have been changed. The author believes that even if other choices were made under the circumstances at that time, the outcome of the tragic fate itself could not be changed. The pressure from the limitations of *The Times*, the essence of the character, and various contradictions in the environment would still push the protagonist into the same tragic abyss again.

For instance, in *Ordinary World*, if Tian Xiaoxia had not come to the flood site and had not gone to rescue the child in the flood, would it have been possible for her and Sun Shaoping to live happily ever after? The author thought the answer was no. Let’s assume that the male and female protagonists smoothly enter the hall of marriage. Then, if the woman is the child of a high-ranking official and a provincial newspaper reporter who graduated from a university, and the man is a coal miner from a poor family with only a high school education: Can a relationship of incompatible social backgrounds be accepted by the world? (Huang, 2019) Clearly not. The huge social gap

between the two created an insurmountable chasm in front of them. Even if she survived the flood, the class disparity between her and Shaoping, as well as the acceptance of “cross-border love” by *The Times*, did not allow them to be together. Even though Lu Yao himself was a writer who pursued romantic ideals, in the face of such a huge chasm, he had no choice but to make an inevitable compromise (Zhu, 2023). Under such a social background, with such a huge disparity in status, they essentially cannot truly live happily together. Tian Xiaoxia must die and has to die. Her death is not only a compromise of real life to romantic imagination, but also a manifestation of her own character. As an independent woman of the new era, she has the spirit of adventure and the courage to explore the unknown. Her concern for the fate of the lower class and pursuit of the real world in her personality led her to choose the “dangerous” profession of a journalist. Even if she doesn’t participate in the coverage of this flood, she will still be involved in other adventurous events in the future. Eventually, her selfless and dedicated character quality will once again drive her to a tragic ending. Therefore, this is the inevitable risk of idealists and the confinement of modern concepts by the background of *The Times*. Even if the protagonist makes other choices, the tragic ending cannot escape the real world.

Lu Xun once commented on Nala in *A Doll’s House*, saying, “But from a theoretical perspective, whether Nala leaves or not, it is a tragedy. Even if she leaves, it is either a return or a fall.” Lu Xun revealed Nala’s fate. Even though Nala herself had advanced ideas and the courage to break the patriarchal system of the Victorian era, due to her own insignificant power, she still found it difficult to contend with the entire society at that time. Nala’s departure was very likely a tragic ending. So the tragic ending is not caused by the last event, but by the entire society formed by the convergence of countless people and countless small matters, which makes the protagonist unable to escape the shackles of a tragic fate no matter what choice he makes. Therefore, the protagonists in these tragedies actually have no choice. The conflict between their spiritual traits and *The Times* will still lead them along similar fate trajectories.

6 The significance and value of tragedy

After confirming the inevitability of the tragedy through the plot setting, character personalities and the background of *The Times*, it can be found that these seemingly “accidental” destructions and sufferings are actually various contradictions that are bound to exist in the evolution of human society. Therefore, the emergence of a tragic ending also has its own value and significance, embodying the transmission and reflection of the meaning of life and social value.

First, tragedy itself has aesthetic value and significance. Tragedy is an art. In *Funeral of a Muslim*, the artistic image of Han Xinyue’s name “Xinyue” is rich in a tragic connotation. In the novel, the purity and clarity of the “crescent moon” have been diluted. It has become the embodiment of a gentle and tragic beauty. After all, the crescent moon is not a full moon; it hangs in the sky like a white jade, always having an indescribable imperfection (Cui, 2011). This has already cast a layer of aesthetic sorrow over the protagonist’s tragic fate. Han Xinyue suffered from congenital heart disease since childhood, a terminal illness that made her life even more precious. The “fragility of beauty” added a more poignant and sorrowful atmosphere to her final death. The mournful melody carries profound connotations. The beauty extracted from the tragedy is silent, enduring, and even more so, a beauty that people cannot bear to touch in their hearts (Cui, 2011). It enables readers to immerse themselves more deeply in the book. By destroying the beautiful elements, her death sets the tone for the entire book and further promotes the completeness and three-dimensionality of the characters in the book, presenting readers with a more comprehensive and complete image of the characters and the social environment at that time. Tragedy destroys beautiful things, creating a lofty and tragic atmosphere, demonstrating the irresistible nature of fate, and offering people a unique aesthetic enjoyment. The tragic ending embodies an art of beauty.

Second, tragedy reveals the meaning of life. The aesthetic significance of tragedy lies not only in its accusation of suffering and yearning for ideals, but also in that it provides us with a tragic outlook on life through the generation and destruction of tragic personalities, revealing to us the value of existence and the meaning of life (Yin, 1988). In the tragedy, when the protagonist is confronted with difficulties and disasters, all kinds of humanistic brilliance and warmth burst forth. The contrast between such fine qualities and the harsh real environment strikes readers’ hearts even more, enabling people to have deeper thoughts on the meaning and value of life. In “*Ordinary World*”, Tian Xiaoxia, in a flood, resolutely pushed the only wooden board towards a child to save him, but lost her own life. Tian Xiaoxia’s death has a metaphysical significance. Her loss of life in the flood precisely enhanced her personal charm, leaving a more profound impression on readers. On the other hand, Lu Yao concluded his final account of Tian Xiaoxia with the scene where Tian Xiaoxia died while saving someone, undoubtedly making the final elevation of Tian Xiaoxia’s image. Because the author understands that such a perfect female image may not exist in real life, it only exists in the author’s ideal (Zhu, 2023). Her tragic ending embodies the spirit of bravery, kindness and selfless dedication, reflects her own personal charm, and showcases the beauty and warmth of human

nature. Tian Xiaoxia's departure makes the characters of the male and female leads more vivid and enhances the tragic beauty of the work (Huang, 2019). Through the depiction of tragedies, it showcases the unique personal charm and humanistic brilliance of different characters in different eras, highlighting the significance and value of human existence itself.

Finally, tragedies can convey social values. Tragedy is a manifestation of social conditions. The core of its conflict often reveals current social problems and contradictions. These tragedies, while recording suffering, expose and judge it in an artistic way, allowing readers to pay attention to the problems and conflicts in society, forcing the public to focus on the neglected corners and reflect on social issues in the tragic endings of others, and then compare them with today's society. Promote social progress. Tragedy is also a manifestation of the trauma of The Times. By using literary means to record and reflect on history, we can learn from it and draw social forces are positive and virtuous from the lessons. The part of "destruction" in the tragic ending is precisely the part that we need to pay the most attention to and reflect on. Through the contrast of various contradictions, it provides a value point for society and promotes the entire society to pursue the correct value direction. Mr. Chen Shouzhong said in his book *On Tragedy and Comedy*, "The essence of the tragic spirit is tragic grandeur rather than tragedy, it is indignation rather than desolation, it is magnificence rather than sorrow, and it is to inspire fighting spirit rather than to be depressed." The beauty of tragedy belongs to sublimity and masculinity. Precisely because of this, tragedy is the art of battle (Chen, 1983). Therefore, a tragic ending holds a unique significance and value. Through the tragic endings of the characters, it showcases the aesthetic art of tragedy, reveals the meaning of life, and profoundly presents the social environment, conveying the main idea of the work and the author's thoughts. This is precisely the aesthetic significance and value of a tragic ending.

7 Conclusion

From the tragic fates of ancient Greece to the spiritual predicaments of people in modern society, tragedy has always been the shining moonlight in the literary palace, attracting the attention and exploration of countless people from ancient times to the present. The tragic ending provokes deep thought and reflection time and again. The tragic ending of a novel is by no means an accidental accumulation of plots or the author's wild imagination. Instead, it is the narrative logic of the plot setting, the realistic soil of the characters' environment and the cultural

genes of the era background that make the tragic ending inevitable. The inevitability of the tragic ending is the formation of a closed loop of its strict logic.

Therefore, the tragic fate of the protagonist is definite, inevitable and has to exist. Tragic endings also have their own significance and value. Besides offering aesthetic enjoyment, tragedies also showcase the brilliance and greatness of human nature, prompting readers to engage in more profound philosophical reflection on issues such as life and society. Tragedy makes us gaze and focus on the "destruction", and it is precisely these fragments that prompt our entire society to have a deeper reflection and reconstruction, enabling us to awaken the world with pain and guide goodness with beauty. Perhaps many people hope to achieve a happy ending at the end of a story. However, such a happy ending does not necessarily mean completeness. On the contrary, the tragic fate of the protagonist makes the entire story more complete, comprehensive and exciting, more thrilling and thought-provoking. Isn't this another form of completeness?

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