

The Female Tragedy of "The Red and the Black" from the Perspective of Tragic Theory in "Poetics": Taking Madame de Renal as an Example

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ABSTRACT

"The Red and the Black" is a critical realist masterpiece by French author Stendard, and the tragic fate of the female characters in the book is thought-provoking. Poetics is the pioneering work of Western aesthetics, where Aristotle, with philosophical wisdom, established the first relatively reasonable and complete aesthetic theory system in the West. By applying Aristotle's theories of tragedy such as discovery, twist, and fault, the article delves deeply into the tragedy of the female character Madame de Renal in The Red and the Black from the perspective of a systematic theory of tragedy.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle; Poetics; Tragic theory; The red and the black; Women

1 Introduction

Aristotle, a renowned philosopher, thinker and theorist of ancient Greece, gave a complete definition and explanation of tragedy in Poetics, providing correct direction and theoretical support for the creation of tragedy in later generations. The Red and the Black, a masterpiece of critical realism created by the French writer Stendale, has become a timeless masterpiece with its highly artistic language, profound ideological content and captivating plot.

Since its publication, The Red and the Black have been interpreted from various perspectives by many scholars, and the cause of the tragedy of Madame de Renal, the main female character in the book, has been a subject of much debate in the academic circle. Most scholars believe that the tragedy is caused by her own character, social environment, ideological trends or the influence of the male protagonist Julien. However, few have noticed that Stendard, as a well-educated man from the middle class, would consciously or unconsciously follow the existing literary theories when writing. This article attempts to re-examine Madame de Renal's female tragedy from the perspective of a systematic theory of tragedy.

2 The embodiment of Poetics' theory of tragedy in Madame de Renal

Aristotle presented the first relatively complete definition of tragedy in the history of drama in Chapter VI of Poetics: "Tragedy is the imitation of a serious, complete, and of a certain length of action, its medium is a language that has been 'decorated' and is used in different forms in different parts of the play, and its imitation is through the actions of the characters, not the narration, by evoking compassion and fear to release these emotions."

Tragedy mimics not only a complete action but also an event that evokes fear and pity. Such events are best or better achieved if they occur unexpectedly but still show causality. Such events are more astonishing than those that occur naturally or occasionally, because even an accidental event, if it appears to be driven by a motive, can arouse intense astonishment, such as the fall of the statue of Micus in Argos, which killed one of the people who were watching it and caused the death of Micus. This is evidence that such events do not seem to occur out of the blue. So this kind of plot must be excellent.

2.1 Metaphorical words

Stendard used a lot of metaphorical words in The Red and the Black based on his personal writing style and the needs of the story. The most famous metaphor is the title "Red" and "black" of the novel. Regarding the title of the novel, "red" is generally not only regarded as a symbol of the army, but also represents the passionate and bloody love between Julien and Madame de Renal, and Julien's eagerness to cross the huge social class differences is destined to end their love in a bloody way. "Black" not only represents the power of the church, but also symbolizes Julien's final black fate of going to the guillotine. Julien's final statement in court, "I am but a peasant against my own humble fate," pushed the contradiction between "red" and "black" to the extreme. This is a metaphor for the irreconcilable contradiction between ideals and reality.

Furthermore, although the novel is a love story, we can confirm that the central discourse of The Red and the Black is still class struggle, so love becomes a metaphor to reveal and criticize the reality of capitalist society.

2.2 Sudden turns

Since there is a clear distinction between simple and complex actions that the plot imitates, there are also simple and complex plots. A "complex action" refers to an action in which there is a discovery or a sudden turn, or an action accompanied by both.

Sudden shift refers to the development of an action moving from one direction to the opposite. We believe that such a change must conform to the principle of what is possible or what is necessary.

Just as Julien had opened his heart and truly accepted his relationship with Madame de Renier, and everything was going in a good direction, a tirade letter appeared, forcing Julien to leave, and the plot of the story turned from one direction to the opposite, and the pleasant and warm atmosphere suddenly became tense and solemn. "This realization and discovery at a critical moment brings about a sudden change, and the result can only be and must be a change in the direction of the plot."¹⁹

In this work, the image of Mrs. Drainer shows remarkable complexity. Both Monsieur de Renal and the members of Viriere's high society regarded her as a naive, kind and even somewhat foolish noblewoman, a perception that Julien firmly held in his early days as a tutor at the mayor's home. This widespread misconception, however, overlooks the crucial sociological fact that, according to Bouredie's "habitation" theory, although Madame de Renard's education and religious beliefs shaped her outward innocent and kind character traits, she was essentially a typical noblewoman, and her coldness and strategy in times of crisis were the outburst of her true class habituation. She was not only well-versed in the social skills of the noble class, but also internalized the class consciousness that was characteristic of that class - including contempt for the lower class and absolute protection of her own class interests. By deconstructing the image of Madame de Renard, Stendard actually completed a sociological diagnosis of the "dual personality" of the French aristocracy during the restoration period, which needed to disguise their beliefs to adapt to The Times while maintaining their class privileges.

This deep-seated personality trait was fully manifested when faced with the crisis of whistleblowing letters. Whether it was for the sake of maintaining emotional relationships or for the sake of preserving her social status and material wealth, Mrs. Drainer demonstrated exceptional crisis management skills. Not only did she plan meticulously, but she also prepared a box of gold, silver and jewels as a fallback option in case of failure. It is only then that the canvas of innocence, which has always been before the reader and Julien, is finally torn open, revealing to the reader the multi-faceted image of the character and allowing us to see a different side of this noble woman. It is notable that this character is not an abrupt narrative twist, but is achieved through the author's carefully designed foreshadowing - Stendard, at the beginning of the text, gradually hints to the reader the potential wisdom and strategy of Madame Drainer through progressive detail descriptions.

The appearance of the tip-off letter is not abrupt either. When Julien rejects her courtship, the seed of resentment is planted in her heart. After Monsieur Varno's provocation, she reveals her discovery of Julien's affair with Madame de Drial. This act is both the result of her own personal feelings and Monsieur Varno's persuasion and inducement, which is in perfect accordance with the principle of possible or inevitable.

2.3 Discovery

Discovery refers to the transition from ignorance to knowledge, that is, when a person in a favorable or unfavorable situation realizes that the other person is their relative or enemy. The best discovery should come from the event itself. Such a discovery can be astonishing because of a series of events that come together according to the principle of likelihood. Only such discoveries are not artificially marked or forced by necklaces, but are deduced through reasoning.

The sudden death of Mrs. Drainer three days after her death, which appeared to be a physiological death due to excessive grief, was full of unexpectedness. However, a closer examination of Stendard's creative intentions reveals that this is by no means a simple physiological cause. Stendard uses a lot of cause-and-effect loops in his book to design the plot, so that the plot is completed in an imperceptible loop, and only when the reader reads to this point will they have an Epiphany when they think of the previous text.

Madame de Renal, in her early years, regarded her love with Julien as a taboo, as a violation of her faith, and thus often tortured herself, such as kneeling before the cross until her knees bled. The endless mental torture suggested the chronic strangling of the young woman's life by her faith. Even when she was in love with Julien, she had a budding awakening of female subjectivity, but Julien's sudden departure and years of social discipline that eventually led her to commit the absurd act of forcing her daughter into a convent on her deathbed marked her complete recognition of the social roots of her tragedy and the replication of her own tragedy. It proved that noble women could not be completely free from social discipline under the social conditions of the time, and wrote about the lethality of social discipline.

The reader, through her death, strings together all the details of the previous text and realizes that her death was not accidental but the inevitable result of social discipline, which is precisely what Aristotle called a discovery through reasoning. The reader is both horrified by the power of religion to alienate people, and at the same time feels powerless to

pity the victims in the book, which leads to enlightenment within herself. This is the tragic effect that Aristotle advocated. Stendhal, in light of her own era and personal writing style, pushed Aristotle's theory of tragedy to a new height.

2.4 The fault theory

Aristotle thought that the structure of the most perfect tragedy should be complex, but it should not show a good person moving from a favorable situation to a unfavorable one, nor a bad person moving from a unfavorable situation to a favorable one, nor a very evil person moving from a favorable situation to a unfavorable one, because this does not cause fear or pity. Between the two, there is another kind of people who do not possess perfect virtue, nor perfect justice, and who suffer misfortune not because of their own sin or evil, but because of some kind of error. That is the "fault theory."

During her passionate love affair with Julien, Madame de Renier, disregarding the order of interests, pushed Julien, the carpenter's son, into the honor guard that received the king, making Julien stand out and also bringing criticism upon herself, the most obvious mistake in a well-behaved life, but she did not think she had done anything wrong. However, not long after the incident, her youngest child suddenly fell seriously ill, and the faithless Madame de Renal nearly broke down, thinking that it was all because of her infidelity with Julien and the wrath of the gods, and that she was in great pain and almost insane. Even Julien said, "This is a woman of extraordinary talent, but because she knows me, she has fallen into an extremely unfortunate situation." But this was just the beginning of her unfortunate life, followed by her husband's suspicion, her lover's betrayal, and her tragic death, all directly related to her.

Madame de Renal was a socially ideal woman, both from the perspective of her time and in the eyes of the present. She loved her children and was willing to sacrifice everything for them, taking care of and educating them in every detail. She can also treat her husband, who doesn't love her and whom she doesn't love, with respect and courtesy. Her emotional entanglement with Julien was essentially the inevitable outpouring of repressed female emotions under the oppression of patriarchy and husband's authority. "After going through intense inner conflicts, she chose to abandon the bondage imposed on her by the patriarchal society and fight back as she would," it was not a heinous crime, nor should it be simply classified as a moral condemnation.

She ended up tragically not because of her own evil, but because of her wrongdoings. When her relationship with Julien was discovered by Monsieur Drainer and the situation was beyond redemption, Julien was forced to enter the Besancon Seminary. At this time, for Madame Drainer, the crisis of survival had been relieved, and Monsieur Drainer continued to maintain the appearance of love for her for the sake of the inheritance, but her heart was constantly tormented by longing. This torment led her astray, and in the end, upon hearing about Julien and Mademoiselle Mathilde, under the coercion and inducement of the church, she made the wrong choice: the wise woman wrote the original letter of accusation, ruining Julien and herself.

3 Conclusion

Stendhal, by focusing on the social reality of his time and integrating the tragic theory research of his predecessors, created Madame de Renal, a woman with a distinct personality in the history of world literature. The tragedy of Madame de Renal seems to be dominated by personal reasons. In fact, the persecution of women by society at that time could not be ignored, and her actions of pursuing love and being true to herself were undoubtedly a heavy blow to the asceticism practiced by religion at that time. From the perspective of poetic tragedy theory, Madame de Renier both inherited Aristotle's tragic spirit and broke away from the classical tragic view that character determines fate, expanding the factors that cause tragedy to a certain extent and becoming a typical tragic figure of universal social significance since the 19th century. Stendhal presents the theory of tragedy through a complete story, allowing people to directly feel the tragic error without personal experience, constantly reminding people to be on guard against the latent dangers in practice, and inspiring us to go beyond the tragedy in life activities through the wisdom of practice. This image also has profound implications for us to view many of the issues concerning women in today's society.

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