

# On the Tragedy of Cao Yu's *Yuanye*

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**Abstract.** In the realm of aesthetics, tragedy is known as "the highest stage and crown", and its artistry is difficult to describe in simple words, as it mostly touches our senses and reveals the supreme value of beauty. Cao Yu wrote his play *Yuanye* against the backdrop of rural feudal society. The thesis will be based on Aristotle's theory of tragedy and will talk about its tragic nature from three aspects. Firstly, Cao Yu has created many vivid and tragic minor characters; secondly, the realism and tragedy of the plot details build up multiple dramatic conflicts, amplifying the tragedy and giving the audience strong sensory stimulation to achieve resonance; finally, its profound theme of revenge is a manifestation of the inferiority of the Chinese peasants under the feudal society - the absurd tradition of "The son must pay his father's debts", which amplifies the tragic effect of the whole play.

## 1. Introduction

The formation and development of humanity itself is like a journey through tragedy, and its history is a history tinged with tragedy, with an evolving sense of tragedy in humanity itself. <sup>[1]</sup> Inevitably, we go through trials and tribulations in life, and when these are presented in a more complete and systematic way, such as in drama and poetry, a tragic culture emerges.

*Yuanye* is the only play by Cao Yu that presents a rural theme, and it is also one of the most controversial. The play condemns the bad behaviour of those who illegally occupy other people's property with insidious power, and although it celebrates the peasants' spirit of resistance in the face of the nightmarish evil forces, the overall tragedy is very strong.

It portrays the tragic fate of each character through the portrayal of a small character with a distinctive character in the context of the great era, showing the aspirations of the oppressed peasants at the bottom for a better life and their tenacious struggle against the oppressed life, revealing the tragedy of the social era through its multiple dramatic conflicts. The Wilderness not only exposes the darkness of feudal society, but also explores the complex and multifaceted nature of human nature. It is a eulogy of vitality, an affirmation of sensual life and a celebration of primitive wildness.

## 2. Theoretical Origins and Connotations

### 2.1 Theoretical Origins

Aristotle developed his own theory of tragedy on the

basis of the comic poets Aristophanes and Plato. *The Frogs*, Aristophanes' famous work on literary criticism, discusses a series of systematic experiences in the creation of tragedy in ancient Greece and also shows his theoretical outlook on the art of tragedy. Plato, on the other hand, in his *Ideal State*, actively attacked tragedy as irrational because its purpose was to appeal to the audience, to win their sympathy and arouse their lust, etc. Aristotle summed up the above two and synthesised the views of other scholars on the theory of tragedy, critically inherited and discarded them, and came up with his own theory of tragedy.

### 2.2 Theoretical Connotations

#### 2.2.1 Imitation Theory

Aristotle defines tragedy in Chapter 6 of the *Poetics* as "Tragedy is an imitation of a serious, complete action of a certain length." <sup>[2]</sup> He believed that human nature lies in imitation, and that humans learn to imitate from infancy because they derive pleasure from it. According to Davies, tragedy is the equivalent of imitating life, and it is through the actions guided by the soul that we can sense our own soul, and through our every action that we can fully understand ourselves. Tragedy is therefore highly instrumental, its constituent parts having a purpose for any episode, in the service of action. <sup>[3]</sup> In his view, the medium of imitation is language i.e. the lines, words or chanted songs of the characters, which can be used in all parts of the play; the object of imitation is the action of the characters i.e. the specific plot development, which in turn is closely linked to the character traits of the characters; the mode of imitation is the image, through the performance of the characters, which presents a specific stage image; the social function of

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tragedy lies in the purification of The two types of emotion, fear and sympathy.

### 2.2.2 The Central Theory of Plot

For Aristotle, plot is the soul of tragedy and is valued more than character traits. Whereas recent conceptions of tragedy have been based primarily on character theory, Aristotle argues that tragedy relies primarily on storyline and the actions of the characters. Firstly, tragedy aims to imitate human action, not quality; the actions of the characters determine their suffering and desolation, whereas quality is determined by character. It is the characters' actions that lead them to experience all kinds of twists and turns, to gain pleasure and pain, to experience life in all its forms and through all kinds of hardships in a plot that takes nine turns and the dramatic effect is instantly magnified. Secondly, tragedy is meant to arouse fear and pity. When the plot is in its ups and downs, the characters are portrayed in a more profound way and their character traits become extremely obvious. From the specific plot we can see various dramatic conflicts, which bring a great impact to the reader's senses, and various contradictions and oppositions make the direction of the play more and more confusing.

### 2.2.3 The Negligence Theory

Aristotle believes that the root of the conflict lies in the fault of the protagonist of the tragedy - when the protagonist falls into bad luck it is not because he has done evil, but stems from the fact that he has made a mistake.<sup>[4]</sup> The protagonist suffers an undeserved bad luck that will trigger our sympathy, and because he is similar to us, we fear that this bad luck will befall us.

### 2.2.4 Purification Theory

Aristotle believed that tragedy had a purifying effect, and in his *Poetics*, he suggested that tragedy was a way to bring out feelings of pity and fear in people, thus cultivating their sentiments.<sup>[5]</sup> It purifies the human mind, people develop feelings of fear and pity, and when these emotions are released and cathartic, they slowly become calm and the mind is soothed and cleansed which contributes to mental health. The Pythagoreans believed that there were many ways to purify the soul, such as music, religion and philosophy, while Plato believed that the philosopher's inner purification began when he entered this realm. Aristotle based his 'purification' on the theory of tragedy, and instead of emphasizing the role of religion, he focused on moral health, arguing that filtered, strong emotions helped morality and reason, which aptly refuted Plato's theory of the futility of tragedy, corrected his inappropriate view of it, and better developed the theory of tragedy.

## 3. On the Tragedy of *Yuanye*

### 3.1 The Little Man in the Big Time: The Tragic Nature of Characters

The characters in *Yuanye* are few but each one is rich in tragedy. In the feudal society of the time, the lower classes, especially the peasants, were always vulnerable to the inhuman persecution of capital, and people lived in a very oppressive and absurd situation. Without the right to speak, the little people at the bottom are basically the playthings of the rich and powerful, whose fate is always in the hands of others, like puppets, losing their most precious and pure soul.

The main character, Qiu Hu, makes a striking appearance and leaves a deep impression on the reader: his hair is so messy that it looks like hemp, and his face is so big that his eyebrows hang down with a pair of eyes full of anger.<sup>[6]</sup> Cao Yu's portrayal of Qiu Hu, who has just escaped from prison, is just right, with a decadent air of anger, a fierce look in his eyes, a sinewy and hunched back, and an image of a man who has been through a lot of trials and tribulations. "The vast, brooding earth, the autumn cicadas shaking their wings, the giant trees standing in the dusk."<sup>[7]</sup> Cao Yu's rendering of his surroundings adds to the image of Qiu Hu's rugged and savage yet mysterious nature.

When King Jiao Yan learns that Qiu Hu's father owns a nice piece of good land and wants to take it for himself, he brutally buries him alive to death and drags his sister to a brothel to sell her; soon afterwards she dies in humiliation and Qiu Hu himself is falsely accused and sent to prison. Soon afterwards, his sister died in disgrace and he was sent to prison. In his infinite grief, Qiu Hu was burdened with the blood feud of his family. The fire of revenge has been burning in his heart all these years, hoping that one day he will be able to avenge his father and sister's death. These class crimes of King Jiao Yan have kept him in a state of hatred for years. When he learns that Jiao Yanwang has long since become a ghost, it is like a bolt from the blue. Cao Yu uses his delicate brushwork to describe Qiu Hu's state of mind at that moment: "So surprised that he could not speak, so gloomy and painful was he. Anger filled his brain yet he felt a deep sense of helplessness, helplessness followed by renewed anger." But at that moment, an extremely sad and absurd idea jumped into his mind: the father's debt was repaid by the son. How sad it was that the poison of feudal thinking had confused the minds of the people of the time. But in the end, he really did kill Jiao Yan's son and his best brother Jiao Daxing to complete his revenge, and deliberately let Jiao's mother kill Xiao Heizi by mistake, which was a feud of one generation but involved the lives of three generations. He is a good man who cannot escape the condemnation of his heart. Angels and demons keep swimming in his consciousness, struggling desperately between good and evil, in the end he chooses to commit suicide in despair and pain, his revenge is full of bloodshed. Qiu Hu's struggles and distortions are the tragedy of the character's fate.

There is no more sympathetic character than Jiao Da Xing, who is the archetypal widowed son and only mother of a family.<sup>[8]</sup> He is protected by his mother Jiao, who is afraid of dropping him in her hands or melting him in her mouth. Even his wife cheated on him and was cuckolded, and his mother tried desperately not to let the cheater, Jinzi, tell her son. He lived in a family with a strong feudal ideology, lacking the spirit of rebellion and used to submit to obedience. He was unaware of his father's evil deeds; he knelt down to his wife, who had been cheated on, and begged her to come back so that he could forgive her; he accepted his mother's oppression and did his best to help his brother, not realising that they wanted to kill him. Jiao Da Xing is such a simple, kind, cowardly and sad figure.

The heroine, Hua Jinzi, has a beautiful appearance and a sincere heart but still cannot escape her tragic fate. Jiao Daxing is at a loss as to what to do in the face of two women who love him dearly, and is unable to find a balance between them. The classic question posed by Cao Yu: "Who would you save first if your mother and I were to fall into the water at the same time." This has become an enduring and repeatedly banter between couples in later years. She wants to be free from the shackles of feudal marriage, from her aggressive mother Jiao and her cowardly husband. In the end, Jinzi leaves alone, and no one knows where she will end up; the unknown ending deepens the tragedy of the characters.

Most of these tragic figures are anti-feudal in their mission and have a strong sense of rebellion, which is determined by the conditions of their existence and the context of their times. Its sense of rebellion goes beyond the political level to the human and cultural level, reflecting the conflict between man and the existing civilization. In feudal society, human rights basically did not exist, and the law was controlled by capital. Human nature is so distorted that the primitive peasants have great difficulty in resisting the evil forces and the people are living in dire straits. These small people in the big time seek not only political power but also spiritual and cultural liberation. Through this work we can see the tragic nature of human nature in those times - the sadness of the times is saddening.

### **3.2 Yuanye in Conflict - Multiple Dramatic Conflicts Highlight the Tragic Colour of the Plot**

The whole play consists of several dramatic conflicts, each of which intertwines and collides with each other, giving the reader a psychological shock that resonates strongly. Firstly, at the beginning of the play, Qiu Hu enters the audience's view with a conflict, he comes to take revenge. He carries his family's blood feud with him and comes to seek revenge on Jiao Yan Wang, who is the target of his revenge at this time. After escaping from prison, Qiu Hu runs into Bai Fool and finds out from him that the man he wants to avenge, Jiao Yan, has died. On the one hand, he is angry that he was not able to end his life himself, but on the other hand, he has lost the direct target of his revenge, so he has to turn to King Yan's son,

his good brother Da Xing, to take revenge. The story gradually unfolds as he meets the gold.

As the play moves on, he learns that his childhood sweetheart, Jinzi, has actually married Jiao Da Xing, and he becomes even more determined to kill him. As the plot develops, he moves into the home of Jinzi and Da Xing and secretly sets out his revenge plan - to kill Da Xing (or perhaps Da Xing's son, Xiao Heizi). The conflict between Jinzi and Jiao's mother stems from the feudal parents' perverted love for their son, as her mother-in-law thinks Jinzi is a vixen who wants to steal her son. A typical character cannot be created without the refinement of plot details. The discovery of Jinzi's affair with Qiu Hu by Jiao's mother is an important plot point that drives the plot forward, which brings out the biggest character trait of Jiao Daxing - his cowardice and incompetence. Fearing that Daxing will not be able to accept this fact, Jiao's mother tries her best to keep the affair between Jinzi and Qiu Hu under wraps. Qiu Hu is faced with the conflict between the son of his father's killer and his best brother, and decides to tell Da Xing about his affair with Jinzi so that he can make the first move. But to his surprise, Daxing not only does not kill Qiu Hu when he learns that he has been green, but also kneels down to Jinzi in the hope that she will change her mind. This is the result of the domineering parents under the feudal rituals, which is the root cause of Da Xing's cowardly character.

The heaviest plot of the whole play belongs to the death of Little Blackie. The story of the death of his grandson is a story about a blind mother who killed her grandson by her own hand, knowing that Jiao would not spare him. Qiu Hu secretly overhears Jiao's mother telling the magistrate to send someone to arrest him at night, knowing full well that Jiao's mother will do him harm, but he uses Jinzi and Jiao's mother to lend him a knife to kill him, a feud of one generation involving three generations, Little Heizi is innocent, he is just a baby who cannot even speak. The depiction of this plot amplifies the tragedy of the play and adds to the realism of the drama. The multiple conflicts intertwine with each other to enhance the tragedy of the play, and all this is the result of Cao Yu's careful conception.

Qiu Hu's own divided soul is the most tragic of all. He has managed to escape from Jiao's house with the gold, and is finally running together to the place where "gold is paved". But in the end, he cannot escape the condemnation of his conscience and chooses to kill himself, leaving Jinzi to escape alone. The clash of vengeful consciousness and rational civilization leads the hated tiger to the abyss of tragedy. On the one hand, he cannot let go of the hatred in his heart and vows to avenge his family's death, otherwise he will be sorry for his father's and his sister's wronged and tortured souls; on the other hand, his so-called righteous act of revenge deprives innocent people of their lives, destroys the social order and damages the integrity of others. In his heart of hearts, he knows that his actions are indiscriminate and against the morality of society, so he is in a painful struggle with himself, as if he has become a second brutal and inhumane king of hell. After he has finally taken his revenge, society's rational civilisation

pulls him back from his primitive wildness. "The giant hand of culture clawed at him with its sharp claws, bleeding his organs and driving him mad." He finally becomes Qiu Hu himself after fulfilling his mission of revenge as a son and brother, and tragedy is always the destruction of the individual through the one-sidedness of his character and his innocent desires, as Qiu Hu ultimately places himself on the edge of a precipice. *Yuanye* both salutes and pities the primitive wildness of his revenge, and is both an "elegy for civilisation" and an "elegy for barbarism".

### 3.3 Revenge: The Absurd Tradition of 'the Son Paying Father's Debt'

The theme of revenge is evident in the play *Yuanye*, especially in the case of this blood-revenge theme, which is a common theme in literature.<sup>[9]</sup> In foreign countries, such themes are also common, as in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is also nicknamed 'The Prince's Revenge'. There are countless works of this kind, both foreign and domestic, and what these two works have in common is that they were subject to much controversy when they were first released.

When *Yuanye* first came into the public domain, it was criticised and misinterpreted by many people. There were three main reasons for this: firstly, some scholars criticised *Yuanye* as an unrealistic work that was far from reality; secondly, some scholars pointed out that it was too shallow to enter the genre and that the characters were not realistic enough; finally, some scholars thought that Cao Yu had been influenced by Western "modernist" art and that his creative methods were regressive, engaging in the work is "spiritually tainted". For the general public, the stereotype of the theme of revenge is mainly influenced by the "ritual" of Confucianism, which makes us believe that it is right to punish evil and promote good, and that revenge is extremely just and in line with the traditional concept of ethics and morality. It is in line with the traditional concept of ethics and morality. Bad people should be punished and good people should be honoured, and so society has developed a dichotomy between good and evil - either good or evil, and good and evil are inseparable. But the question is how to define good and bad, who should define them, who should decide on the punishment, and what the punishment should be and who should apply it. These are the questions we should consider most. This is the tragedy of *Yuanye*, where the target of Qiu Hu's revenge becomes the son of his enemy, Jiao Daxing, who was originally innocent and should not have suffered the sins of his predecessor but was killed for it, and where the third generation, Xiao Heizi, is a baby who cannot even speak, but whose ultimate fate is to meet his death.

## 4. Conclusion

The play *Yuanye* is a reflection of life in the countryside under feudalism. Looking back to the 1930s, the problems of the peasants became more and more serious,

with bankruptcy and suppression, agrarian revolution, armed struggle and so on, and the emergence of novels on rural themes, the status of the peasant class became more and more important. The tragic scenes of seeing the torture of peasants came back to mind ..... being beaten to the skin. For a long time, therefore, the work *Yuanye* was given a single spiritual connotation and story theme: the conflict between the evil forces of the landlords and the peasants, and the glorification of the peasants' spirit of rebellion, a human rebellion against the sacred rationality of rational culture. Although it is true that in the society of the time the peasants were in a very low social status, constantly oppressed by the landlords, the loss of sovereignty over their lives and the deprivation of the meaning of life. However, in addition to celebrating the spirit of the rebellious peasant, the play reveals more profoundly the problem of the inferiority of the Chinese peasant - the absurd tradition of "the father repays his debts to the son" - and reveals the bad behaviour of using insidious power to illegally occupy other people's property, rather than merely promoting A spirit of revenge and rebellion. The realism and authenticity of the subject matter of *Yuanye* is outstanding, with a wide range of material based on a powerful period background that reflects well the prevailing feudal problems, the distorted thinking of the people and the tragic nature of life at the time.

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