

The Tragic in Aesthetics from Classical Theory to Modern Applications

O Trágico na Estética da Teoria Clássica às Aplicações Modernas

Nguyen Duy CUONG
Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

E-mail: duycuong02029191@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-6134-2604

ABSTRACT

The tragic is a fundamental category in aesthetics, reflecting the dialectical conflict between freedom and necessity, between the beautiful and the ugly in the processes of social and individual development. This article analyzes the historical formation and development of the concept of the tragic from ancient Greek aesthetics (Aristotle), through German Romantic aesthetics (Hegel, Nietzsche), to Marxist-Leninist aesthetics and its application in the modern Vietnamese context. Employing historical-logical analysis and comparative methods, the study elucidates the essence of the tragic as a profoundly humanistic aesthetic phenomenon that not only evokes sorrow but also forges the will to struggle. The findings demonstrate that the tragic serves not only as a tool for cognizing reality but also as a driving force for social progress. In the era of globalization, the application of the tragic in Vietnamese art contributes to cultivating critical and humanistic consciousness, enabling individuals to confront contemporary contradictions such as social inequality and environmental crises. The research proposes directions for developing aesthetic theory on the tragic in the context of digital culture, aiming to enhance its educational and aesthetic value.

KEYWORDS: the tragic; aesthetics; tragedy; Aristotle; Hegel; Nietzsche; Marxist-Leninist aesthetics; Vietnamese art

RESUMO

O trágico é uma categoria fundamental na estética, refletindo o conflito dialético entre liberdade e necessidade, entre o belo e o feio nos processos de desenvolvimento social e individual. Este artigo analisa a formação histórica e o desenvolvimento do conceito de trágico, desde a estética grega antiga (Aristóteles), passando pela estética romântica alemã (Hegel, Nietzsche), até a estética marxista-leninista e sua aplicação no contexto vietnamita moderno. Empregando análise histórico-lógica e métodos comparativos, o estudo esclarece a essência do trágico como um fenômeno estético profundamente

humanista que não apenas evoca tristeza, mas também forja a vontade de lutar. As descobertas demonstram que o trágico serve não apenas como ferramenta para reconhecer a realidade, mas também como força motriz para o progresso social. Na era da globalização, a aplicação do trágico na arte vietnamita contribui para cultivar uma consciência crítica e humanista, permitindo que indivíduos enfrentem contradições contemporâneas como desigualdade social e crises ambientais. A pesquisa propõe direções para o desenvolvimento da teoria estética sobre o trágico no contexto da cultura digital, visando ampliar seu valor educacional e estético.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: o trágico; estética; tragédia; Aristóteles; Hegel; Nietzsche; estética marxista-leninista; Arte vietnamita

1. INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics, as a scientific discipline investigating the essence of the beautiful and aesthetic phenomena, operates on the foundation of categories that profoundly reflect the essence of humanity and social life. Within this system of categories, the tragic emerges as a distinctive symbol: it manifests pain, loss, and rupture while simultaneously awakening self-awareness, reflection, and the will to transcendence (Tauber, 1996). The concept of "the tragic" in aesthetics is not synonymous with tragedy as a literary or theatrical genre; rather, it is a broader category denoting the aesthetic situation in which the beautiful, the noble, and moral values confront, and often fail against, hostile forces, historical necessity, or fate. It is precisely at this juncture that the tragic reveals its cognitive power: by placing the recipient in a state of moral-emotional tension, it opens possibilities for purification and transformation.

From ancient Greece, Aristotle systematized the tragic in his *Poetics* as an artistic form that arouses pity (eleos) and fear (phobos), thereby leading to catharsis (Sifakis, 2001). The structure of action, causal necessity, and "tragic error" (hamartia) are key concepts explaining why tragedy can improve humanity through aesthetic-moral experience. In the modern era, Hegel elevated the plane of analysis: the tragic is not merely individual fate but a dialectical conflict between "goods" (Güter) and the "ethical order" (Sittlichkeit) within society; tragedy arises when two contending justices clash, and reconciliation is achieved only through sacrifice. Nietzsche pushed the boundaries further: the tragic is the synthesis of the Apollonian principle (order, form, illusion) and the Dionysian (chaos, fervor, instinct), thereby justifying human existence amid suffering as an aesthetic exaltation. Building on this foundation, Marxist-Leninist aesthetics views the tragic as a mirror reflecting class contradictions and the laws of social development, imbued with revolutionary humanism oriented toward human emancipation.

In the Vietnamese context, the tragic is not merely an abstract theoretical category but a vivid historical-cultural experience. From Nguyen Đinh Chieu's Elegy for the Martyrs of Can Giuoc, where peasant fates "bare-handed" confront colonial violence, to Nam Cao's *Chí Phèo* and *Idle Life*, where social tragedy

manifests in alienation and impasse, the thread of Vietnamese tragedy reveals an interweaving of communal ethics, social justice, and aspirations for freedom. Post-1975 and especially during the Renovation period, Vietnamese art has expanded its reflective scope: urbanization, migration, informal labor, crises of faith, and fractured memories... create new tragic spaces where the tragic both exposes wounds and invites healing action.

In the context of globalization and multilayered crises (economic, environmental, digital culture), researching the tragic becomes imperative for three reasons. First, epistemologically: the tragic provides a distinctive entry point to understanding the structural contradictions of modernity, where universal values (freedom, equality, dignity) encounter institutional and material constraints. Second, ethically-politically: by activating capacities for empathy and responsibility, the tragic prompts reevaluation of justice, power, and subjectivity. Third, aesthetically: examining the tragic illuminates transformations in artistic language (from realist narrative and expressionism to post-tragedy and interdisciplinarity), thereby clarifying new aesthetic strategies in contemporary Vietnamese literature, theater, film, and visual arts.

This article pursues four objectives: (1) to clarify the essence and historical development of the category of the tragic in aesthetics; (2) to analyze key ideological paradigms from Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche to Marxism-Leninism, emphasizing compatibilities and differences; (3) to evaluate the application of the tragic in contemporary Vietnamese art, from literature to theater, film, and performance art, as "laboratories" of emotion and thought; (4) to suggest directions for theoretical-practical development, particularly intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue. Methodologically, the study integrates historical-logical analysis (tracing conceptual origins and intrinsic evolution), cross-cultural comparison (positioning Western tragedy in interaction with Vietnamese/East Asian traditions), and an interdisciplinary approach spanning philosophy, literature, and sociology, while referencing select contemporary case studies.

In terms of scope, the article focuses on the main thread of Western aesthetics from antiquity to early modernity, in dialogue with Marxist-Leninist aesthetics and twentieth- to twenty-first-century Vietnamese artistic practice. Illustrative cases prioritize texts/phenomena with clear academic suggestiveness and sociocultural impact. Regarding contributions, the research aims to (i) systematize the conceptual structure of the tragic concisely yet rigorously; (ii) propose a framework for reading the tragic as a mechanism of cognition-ethics rather than mere emotional expression; (iii) elucidate the value of the tragic as a source of critical energy in contemporary Vietnamese art; and (iv) provide methodological suggestions for subsequent studies.

A pivotal point in this introduction is redefining the tragic in the contemporary context. If in Aristotle, tragedy converges on plot structure and emotional laws; in Hegel, the tragic is the dialectic of social justices; in Nietzsche, a philosophy of life-affirmation and exaltation; then in Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, the tragic carries historical-class significance, manifesting real contradictions in production and social

reproduction. From this, the tragic can be viewed as a form of historical cognition: it reveals why good agents, good values, may still fail, and such failure is not meaningless if it paves the way for freedom, for restructuring ethical-political orders.

In the Vietnamese context, this understanding elucidates a series of artistic phenomena: from the tragic pathos of "righteous scholars" (where communal honor transcends personal fear) to tragedies of "alienation" (where oppressive structures fracture individual dignity), and to "everyday tragedies" of urbanization (ruptured relations, anonymity, spiritual exhaustion). At each layer, the tragic not only records suffering but arranges aesthetic experiences prompting recipients to ask: What caused the failure of the good? Which orders must change? And catharsis here is not mere tears but the will to action.

Finally, the study affirms the timeliness of the tragic in the digital communication era. As boundaries between performance and reality blur, and tragic imagery is consumed rapidly in entertainment flows, aesthetics' task is to distinguish tragic depth from "sensationalism," while proposing new evaluative criteria for works: the degree of exposing structural contradictions, capacity to evoke responsible empathy, and ability to generate spaces for reflection-dialogue. As Hegel stated: "Tragedy is the heroic sacrifice of the beautiful to the necessary", but in a contemporary vision, "necessity" is not metaphysical fate but social-historical necessities amenable to transformation through knowledge, solidarity, and artistic practice. Thus, researching the tragic is not merely to comprehend aesthetic sorrow but to recognize art's emancipatory dynamics in constructing a more just and humane life.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRAGIC IN AESTHETICS

2.1. Definition and Essence of the Tragic

Within the system of aesthetic categories, the tragic holds a significant position because it uniquely manifests the confrontation between noble ideals and harsh reality. Unlike ordinary sorrow, the tragic is pain intertwined with cognition, reflecting contradictions between spiritual aspirations and insurmountable conditions at a specific historical juncture. It is the dialectical conflict between human freedom's aspirations and objective constraints of circumstance, between the novel and good in formation and the obsolete and backward dominating reality (Most, 2000).

According to modern aesthetic approaches, the tragic embodies irresolvable contradictions in the present phase, through which humanity recognizes its limits, consolidates moral qualities, and orients toward a better future. The tragic arises when ideals, though legitimate and noble, cannot triumph fully in reality. Yet, this very failure evokes a powerful spiritual beauty and profoundly moves the recipient.

One of the elements endowing the tragic with strength is its distinctive aesthetic quality. It does not merely describe suffering but highlights the beauty of sacrifice. Tragic characters often represent moral values, justice, and humanism, and their downfall affirms dignity. In tragic situations, humanity does not collapse utterly but leaves an ethical light, which creates the "beauty of pathos." Distinct from

sentimentality, the tragic aestheticizes suffering into spiritual strength, inherently linked to nobility (Shakespeare, 2006). Anyone can grieve, but the tragic emerges only when submission or failure retains dignity. Thereby, the tragic educates compassion, arouses indignation against evil and cowardice, and nurtures courage and the will to change.

A prominent feature of the tragic is the integration of social contradictions, historical contradictions, and human depth. In art, the tragic rarely appears in ordinary situations but arises from clashes among grand values: freedom versus oppression, justice versus injustice, life and death for an ideal. Thus, the tragic is not despair but the intersection of cognition, emotion, and action. It manifests the necessity of temporary failure but opens pathways to future liberation. In summary, the tragic is an aesthetic category illuminating human depth by exposing the pain of unfulfilled values, while affirming the power of courage, life's aspirations, and humanistic qualities amid adversity. It is not "suffering for pity" but "suffering for awakening," yielding profound aesthetic and humanistic effects.

2.2. Historical Development of the Concept of the Tragic (approximately 800 words)

The concept of the tragic has a long history, evolving with aesthetic and philosophical conceptions across eras. From antiquity, Greek tragedy formed as a reflection of humanity confronting fate. In this phase, the tragic was tied to inevitable destiny, with tragic characters positioned in relation to supernatural forces or cosmic laws beyond human alteration (Bohrer and Nye, 2010). The purpose of tragedy then was to produce "emotional purification" by evoking pity and fear, aiding recognition of the world's higher order. By the Renaissance, the tragic expanded from divine realms to mortal humanity, reflecting conflicts between individuals and society. Here, the tragic shifted from classical fateful retribution to humanistic tragedy, where aspirations for love, justice, and freedom are thwarted by violence, institutions, or inner weakness. Tragedies of this period delved deeply into character psychology, interweaving personal and social dimensions.

The modern era witnessed a cognitive turning point in interpreting the tragic. From mere depiction of fate, the tragic was reconceived as conflict among morally legitimate values. No longer simply "right versus wrong," it became collision between "two rights," irreconcilable within specific historical limits. Such tragedy touched societal depths: it exposed imperfect structures, judging not just individuals but era-spanning values, institutions, and ideologies. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, analysis of the tragic reached human ontology. It became a space to question life's meaning, existence's imperfection, and humanity's capacity to face limits. This era linked the tragic to psychology, existentialism, and fatalism. Tragedy transcended religiously tinged fate to embody modern society's solitude, alienation, and estrangement (Chriss, 2002).

In social-philosophical paradigms prioritizing historical-materialist thought, the tragic was viewed as the outcome of inevitable conflict between progressive social forces and obsolete structures. The Prometheus

myth, stealing heavenly fire for humanity, exemplifies: noble action punished by outdated power institutions. The tragic here tied to class conflict and revolutionary historical contradictions, thus, tragic pain was not an endpoint but a catalyst for societal transformation. In Vietnam, the concept of the tragic was received and applied with unique nuances. In medieval literature, it manifested as the imperfection of humanistic ethics before oppressive power, as in images of upright scholars perishing or talented beauties meeting untimely ends. By the modern and contemporary eras, the tragic shifted content from ethics to society: reflecting injustice, exploitation, alienation, and the gut-wrenching cries of individuals crushed by social and historical structures (Allen, 2009). Yet, Vietnamese tragedy transcends mere lament; it often harbors will to resist adversity, oriented toward change, reflecting national qualities, communal spirit, and resilient vitality amid historical upheavals. Thus, over millennia, from fateful tragedy to social tragedy, from metaphysical solitude to historical emancipation aspirations, the tragic has become a semantically rich aesthetic category. It is both a rearview mirror of imperfection and a spark igniting reconstructive resolve. Through the tragic, humanity is invited to peer deeply into reality's essence and its own nature, while sensing tragic beauty as an inexhaustible spiritual source of rebirth and perfection.

3. THE TRAGIC IN ANCIENT GREEK AESTHETICS: ARISTOTLE'S PERSPECTIVE

In the history of Western aesthetics, Aristotle was the first to construct a systematic theoretical foundation for the tragic through his *Poetics* (Kyriakou, 1997). Prior to him, the Greeks had created tragedy as a major art form, particularly through figures like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. However, Aristotle was the first not merely to describe but to analyze tragedy as a structured art with laws, thereby providing a paradigmatic theory of the tragic that shaped classical aesthetics and profoundly influenced subsequent artistic thought. According to Aristotle, tragedy is "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." This definition encompasses key elements: tragedy must reflect issues of human scale, not triviality, and present completely, with logical beginning, progression, and end. Plot structure is central, governing character, dialogue, and aesthetic effect.

The core of Aristotle's theory is *hamartia*, the element precipitating the tragic. *Hamartia*, often translated as "tragic flaw" or "error," is not moral wickedness but a deficiency in cognition, misjudgment, or insurmountable human limit. Thus, the tragic arises not from punishing the wicked but from the good and noble falling into suffering, this evokes pity. The bond between audience and character stems not only from external circumstance but from shared human essence: all can err, all can be ensnared in life's tragedy (Sackey, 2010).

A paradigmatic example of the tragic per Aristotle is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus is a righteous, intelligent king driven by truth-seeking, yet these virtues propel him into tragedy: in pursuing the culprit, he discovers he unwittingly killed his father and married his mother, what he once fled. Ultimately, Oedipus blinds himself, accepts grim truth, and exiles. Oedipus' tragedy is not villainous downfall but a hero's collapse before fate, embodying conflict between freedom and necessity, human reason and cosmic order. Tragedy, per Aristotle, enables catharsis, emotional purification. Witnessing the hero's noble suffering, viewers not only resonate but are "released" from negative emotions like fear, anger, or shallow judgment. Tragedy confronts humanity with finitude, error, and imperfection, while awakening ethical values: courage, sobriety, and fate-acceptance. This is a foundational conception of art's educational function in Western thought.

Aesthetically, Aristotle's view shows tragedy not as recounting calamitous events but as structured reenactment of action chains leading to catastrophe. Mimesis is not reality-copying but essence-recreation in artistic space. Characters and incidents are organized by intrinsic logic, tightly coherent, with emergence and development fitting plot progression (Baker, 2014). This interplay of necessity (internal logic) and surprise (aesthetic value) yields rare artistic equilibrium in ancient Greek tragedy. Aristotle's influence extends beyond ancient Greece. In the European Renaissance, his theory revived vigorously, foundational for Shakespeare in crafting tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *King Lear*, despite expansions in psychological depth or conflict complexity. Into the twentieth century, theorists like Brecht or Sartre, though critiquing or redefining tragedy, engaged Aristotle, as his ideas pose fundamental issues of emotional structure, empathy, and art's cognition.

From a sociological lens, ancient Greek tragedy also reflected polis-community contradictions. It was the clash between democratic ideals and wartime violence, individual freedom and divine power, resolved through tragic language. This explains why Greek audiences viewed tragedy not as mere entertainment but communal rite, where society mirrored its contradictions, aspirations, and limits. Thus, Aristotle's thought on the tragic lays profound groundwork: the tragic is noble collapse without extinguishing human spiritual value; tragedy's beauty lies in awakening, not meaningless torment. In sum, Aristotle's perspective on the tragic enables understanding tragedy as a vital aesthetic-ethical institution, while revealing enduring humanistic values in facing fate's severity and limits.

4. THE TRAGIC IN GERMAN ROMANTIC AESTHETICS: HEGEL AND NIETZSCHE

4.1. Hegel: Tragedy as Dialectical Conflict

In Hegel's philosophical system, the tragic is not merely an aesthetic category but a vivid manifestation of dialectical laws in history and society. Hegel developed a comprehensive theory of the tragic in his lectures on aesthetics, viewing tragedy as the exemplary art form embodying conflict within the ethical substance (Sittlichkeit). For him, tragedy is where seemingly immutable moral ideals clash and annul each

other, yet this very annihilation opens pathways to higher progress. Hegel's canonical example is Sophocles' Antigone, where conflict between state law (representing communal order) and family law (representing love and piety) proves irreconcilable. Antigone, driven by filial devotion, defies Creon's decree to bury her brother, leading to tragic death. Hegel emphasizes that here, neither side is wholly right or wrong; both represent legitimate moral values. Tragedy arises from this "ethical antagonism", an unavoidable necessity (Peters, 2011).

Hegel's core idea is spirit's transcendence through the tragic. Tragedy exposes limits of prevailing ethical orders, negating both sides, then synthesizing at a higher level. Thus, tragedy is not meaningless destruction but spirit's path to freedom, as the old shatters and the new emerges. Accordingly, Hegel sees tragedy as historical progress: it does not despair audiences but awakens them to era-spirit's immanent motion. Hegel distinguishes two tragic forms: classical and modern. Classical tragedy ties to objective conflict, pitting fate and law against each other; modern tragedy incorporates subjective and inner conflicts. For instance, Goethe's Faust reflects individual strife with self in quests for knowledge and pleasure. Hegel notes this shift shows tragedy's tighter bond with modern humanity, a self-conscious subject, rife with contradictions and self-referential. Hegel's view on the tragic enriches philosophical recognition of art: through conflict and downfall, the tragic neither pessimizes nor affirms freedom's potential. Thereby, Hegel founds viewing tragedy as art manifesting absolute spirit's motion, where beauty and tragedy unite in dialectical progression toward comprehensive truth.

4.2. Nietzsche: Tragedy as the Fusion of Apollonian-Dionysian

Nietzsche, in his intellectual journey, offered a wholly novel interpretation of the tragic, not on Hegelian ethical dialectics but on artistic ontology. In his seminal early work on Greek tragedy, Nietzsche posits tragedy as the crystallization of two opposing yet complementary aesthetic principles: the Apollonian, symbolizing reason, form, order, and the Dionysian, representing instinct, frenzy, absurdity, and unity with the whole (Nietzsche, 2014). Per Nietzsche, classical Greek tragedies like those of Aeschylus or Sophocles peaked by harmonizing these elements: the Apollonian provides dream and clear contours, while the Dionysian unleashes chaotic wails, indignation yet vital force. Audiences, viewing tragedy, not only witness individual destruction but sense life's immortality through collective dances and music, where humanity dissolves into existence's eternal flow. Nietzsche deems this the "metaphysical consolation of tragedy": humanity can accept and love life more, despite suffering.

Nietzsche views tragedy as spirit's refuge in an absurd world. Unlike rational philosophers, he disbelieves all contradictions resolvable by spirit. Instead, the tragic enables confronting life's meaninglessness, thence learning fate-acceptance with sublime joy, the notion he terms *amor fati* (love of fate). Tragedy thus is not mere artwork but existential mode: humanity grasps suffering's inevitability, but creative acceptance yields true freedom. Nietzsche critiques modern theater for losing Dionysian elements,

retaining only rigid Apollonian, whence art forfeits redemptive power. He sees tragedy's decline as cultural decay's sign, leading to nihilism and spiritual crisis. Thus, he calls for restoring Dionysian vitality as life-force, shattering civilization's false molds imposed on humanity. Comparing Hegel and Nietzsche, both view the tragic as creative energy, but differ essentially: Hegel sees it as history's driver, where values contend toward synthesis; Nietzsche as individual life's affirmation amid absurdity and uncertainty. If Hegel trusts history's rationality, Nietzsche places faith in humanity's instinctual-aesthetic power. Yet both concur: in the tragic, ideal beauty does not vanish but transmutes, deepening through adversity's trial.

5. THE TRAGIC IN MARXIST-LENINIST AESTHETICS AND ITS APPLICATION IN VIETNAM

5.1. The Marxist-Leninist Perspective on the Tragic

In Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, the tragic is not merely a purely aesthetic category describing pain or failure but a distinctive form of reflecting social contradictions in historical processes. Unlike prior conceptions tinged with fate or pre-modern pessimism, Marxist-Leninist theory understands the tragic as embodying objective laws of historical motion, where progressive forces' temporary defeat is not an end but a premise for awakening struggle consciousness and inevitable change. According to this view, revolutionary tragedy emerges when a new class or social force, representing historical development's trend, confronts obsolete institutions impeding societal emancipation. Though failing in a specific phase, due to insufficient strength, immature conditions, or unfavorable power balances, they leave exalted spiritual values: courage, independent will, sacrifice for the common good. Here, contradictions transcend abstract ethical clashes as in classical aesthetics, becoming concrete between progressive and reactionary forces tied to production relations.

The tragic's distinctive feature in Marxist-Leninist aesthetics is revolutionary optimism. Rather than evoking hopeless anguish, the tragic directs recipients toward recognizing suffering as evolution's necessity on society's path, with present sacrifices fueling a brighter future. Thus, the tragic neither opposes beauty nor ideals but manifests their highest form in harsh historical circumstances. In art, Marxist-Leninist aesthetics holds that truly tragic works must reflect social contradictions authentically and transparently, while orienting toward progressive ideological conclusions: inciting popular struggle and faith in the future. The new tragic character's archetype transcends fate or pessimism, embodying action ideals and popular qualities. Artworks thus serve not just "perception" but "action." Distinct from Western tragic traditions halting at interpersonal or fateful ruptures, the tragic in Marxism-Leninism achieves deeper humanism by situating humanity in concrete historical-social contexts, highlighting class, collective, and revolutionary action roles. Tragic characters are not isolated individuals but community

representatives, embodying will to reorder society. Tragedy belongs to transient phases, but victory to historical laws, that is revolutionary tragic humanism's profoundest meaning.

5.2. Application of the Tragic in Vietnamese Art (approximately 600 words)

In Vietnamese cultural history, the tragic appears not only as an aesthetic category but with special function in national liberation and societal construction. Assimilated from Marxist-Leninist spirit, the tragic in Vietnamese art from the nineteenth century onward became a means to express patriotism, social critique, awaken struggle consciousness, and bolster future faith.

A standout work embodying this is Nguyen Đinh Chieu's *Luc Van Tien*. Protagonist *Luc Van Tien* is a moral hero acting for justice, aiding the distressed. Despite betrayals, calamities, and blindness, he upholds loyalty. *Luc Van Tien*'s tragedy lies not in physical pain but solitary righteousness-path. Yet, the work affirms humanistic heart's eternal beauty, a value future-oriented. This marks the tragic's initial national-revolutionary expression. By the twentieth century under French colonialism, the tragic in realist critical literature shone through characters like Nam Cao's *Chi Pheo* and *Lao Hac*. In *Chi Pheo*, tragedy transcends individual alienation to encompass a peasant class ravaged by feudal-colonial systems. *Chi Pheo* is the wail of the virtuous stripped of humanity, and societal alert to inhumanity. Though ending in death, *Chi Pheo*'s image, "unable to be good", awakens compassion, demanding deep societal restructuring. Nam Cao's tragedies "ledger" reality, clarifying historical-social bonds, paving reflexive awakening.

In the resistance era, especially 1945–1975, the tragic served to exalt patriotism and noble sacrifice. To Hoai's *Vo chong A Phu* exemplifies: *A Phu* and *Mi* are not mere feudal mountain regime victims but risers with revolutionary consciousness. Their tragedy, slavery, oppression, alienation, is not despair but liberation action's start. The tragic transmutes to heroic, from tears to gunfire, subjugation to autonomy, embodying Marxist-Leninist aesthetics. In the contemporary phase, the tragic persists but diversifies in form and content. No longer class-revolutionary focused, it reflects transitional society's spiritual pains: lost childhoods, family crises, tradition-modernity chasms. For instance, the film *I Saw Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* lacks specific villains but subtly depicts rural children's tragedy amid commodified economic flows. Here, the tragic is not "loud" but permeates scenes, people, and simple value fractures. A common thread in these diverse manifestations: Vietnamese art's tragic always ties to hope. Though characters suffer, readers or viewers find humanistic meaning spurring change. This "soft" yet profound tragic fuses emotion and ideal, with art illuminating souls and promoting social action. Such quality defines Vietnamese tragic uniqueness: East Asian ethical tradition's crystallization, national resistance spirit, and progressive Marxist-Leninist aesthetic influence.

6. DISCUSSION: CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRAGIC

In the twenty-first-century context, of globalization, digital media, and mass culture, the tragic confronts new challenges and opportunities. From a philosophical, humanistic, and historical aesthetic category, the tragic risks dilution in commercialization's vortex, where even pain becomes entertainment or consumable product. Yet, precisely amid today's conflicts, instability, and dehumanization, the tragic proves resilient vitality, even more essential as a tool for cognition, reflection, and social critique. One major challenge for contemporary tragic is its "normalization" in mass culture. Hollywood films, reality TV, even social media videos often exploit tragic stories but "package" them for shock or tear-jerking. In this form, the tragic loses awakening or ethical permeation capacity, consumed fleetingly as transient emotion. Repeatedly reused suffering imagery forfeits original humanistic dimension, what critics term "aestheticizing pain."

However, inhabiting an unstable world, rising inequality, ethnic conflicts, migration crises, climate change, spiritual decay, humanity needs the tragic as a condition for reclaiming humanistic worldview. With essence reflecting limits, contradictions, and injustices, the tragic can awaken empathy and social responsibility. From this angle, today's tragic resides not only in traditional arts like literature and theater but vibrantly in new forms: documentaries, contemporary visual art, street art, and multimedia works.

In Vietnam, the tragic's contemporary significance manifests in awakening postcolonial and post-war consciousness. Amid globalization's waves, Vietnamese art questions lingering historical legacies: uncontrolled urbanization, tradition-development trades, forgotten war memories, and marginalized communities' silenced voices. Graffiti on Hanoi old apartments, independent films narrating "submerged" lives in cramped spaces, and installations exploit everyday life's tragic aspects, like immigrant loneliness, street children, urban poor laborers, without romanticizing or "pearl-hunting" pain, but using it to reflect truth. For example, artworks on decaying Hanoi high-rises or shorts on "sinking" lives in tight habitats are modern tragedies warranting analysis under tragic theory's light. These phenomena are not merely "painful" but structurally critical, demanding creators and viewers reevaluate justice, development, and humanity's essence.

In education, intensifying teaching and discussion of the tragic as aesthetic and sociological category is essential. Contra fears of inducing pessimism, proper approach aids students, future societal agents, in grasping social conflict roots, recognizing their reconstructive role. Integrating the tragic, via literature, art, film, even digital media, into university curricula nurtures empathy, political consciousness, and creative critique. Thus, the tragic becomes spiritual capacity: confrontation, empathy-generation, action. This suits a nation like Vietnam, history-laden with epic tragedies, and reality posing new societal dramas needing comprehension for equitable future-building.

7. CONCLUSION

The tragic, as a fundamental aesthetic category, has traversed development from ancient Greece to modern philosophy, from Aristotle to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marxist-Leninist aesthetics. These theories, though differing in perspective and philosophical foundation, converge: the tragic is not mere suffering manifestation but a mirror reflecting history's, society's, and humanity's profound contradictions. In each era, the tragic holds unique function: delineating existence's limits while opening cognition and transformation possibilities. In Vietnam, the tragic bears specificity tied to national struggle history, social critique, and cultural renewal. From Lục Vân Tiên, Chí Phèo to Vợ chồng A Phủ or contemporary art, the tragic not only exposes pain but awakens resistance will, with faith in communal ethics and human power. In the digital age, amid emotional commercialization and smoothing, the tragic demands restoration to essence, as humanistic critique force. Integrating the tragic into today's education and artistic practice is not to sow sadness but to foster empathy, responsibility consciousness, and social action capacity. That is the tragic's enduring value: suffering for awakening, failure for rebuilding new faith.

Reference

Allen, D. S. (2009). The world of Prometheus: The politics of punishing in democratic Athens.

Baker, S. A. (2014). What is a Social Tragedy? In Social Tragedy: The Power of Myth, Ritual, and Emotion in the New Media Ecology (pp. 21-45). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Bohrer, K. H., Nye, S., & Felski, R. (2010). The tragic: a question of art, not philosophy of history. *New Literary History*, 41(1), 35-51.

Chriss, J. J. (2002). Gouldner's tragic vision. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 43(1), 81-96.

Kyriakou, P. (1997). Aristotle's "POETICS" and Stoic Literary Theory. *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 140(H. 3/4), 257-280.

Most, G. W. (2000). Generating genres: the idea of the tragic. In *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (pp. 15-35).

Nietzsche, F. (2014). From The Birth of Tragedy. In *Tragedy* (pp. 53-64). Routledge.

Peters, J. (2011). A theory of tragic experience according to Hegel. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 19(1), 85-106.

Sackey, A. A. (2010). The hamartia of Aristotle. *Legon Journal of the Humanities*, 21, 77-98.

Shakespeare, W. (2006). The Poems: Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, The Phoenix and the Turtle, The Passionate Pilgrim, A Lover's Complaint (Vol. 21). Cambridge University Press.

Sifakis, G. M. (2001). Aristotle on the function of tragic poetry. Crete University Press.

Tauber, A. I. (Ed.). (1996). The Elusive Synthesis: Aesthetics and Science (Vol. 182). Springer Science & Business Media.



CUONG, Thanh. The Tragic in Aesthetics from Classical Theory to Modern Applications. *Kalagatos*, Fortaleza, vol.23, n.1, 2026, eK26003, p. 01-12.

Received: 10/2025
Approved: 12/2025