

Analysis of Ethical Conflict Tension in Milton's Paradise Lost under the Theory of Hegel's Tragedy

Xiangting Zeng

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, Hubei, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: John Milton's epic masterpiece *Paradise Lost* is based on the Bible, the Old Testament and the Book of Genesis, in which a profound moral and ethical battle is shown through the conflict between the subjective world and the objective world, which demonstrates the tension of conflict and reconciliation between various ethical entities. The characters, plot, and social background of the story also lead to an inevitable tragedy, as if a fixed ending had been set in advance.

Hegel's theory of tragedy, with its profound conflictual thinking and unique aesthetic and artistic insights, provides a powerful theoretical tool for us to interpret literary works. This paper takes Hegel's theory of tragedy as the theoretical basis, links the deep humanitarian ethical dichotomy and tragic contradiction in *Paradise Lost*, and explores the embodiment of the concept of "absolute spirit" implied therein, and carries out in-depth analyses and excavations in four aspects, namely, the relationship between human beings and society, between human beings and human beings, between human beings and the self, and between human beings and nature, in order to experience Hegel's theory of tragedy. In this way, we can experience the tension of ethical conflict in Hegel's theory of tragedy and the reasons behind it, and combine the text with the social background of Milton's creation to understand the Puritan ethical outlook of the times and the epochal nature of the era's characteristics.

Keywords: Hegel; Tragic Theory; Ethical Conflict; Puritanism; Absolute Spirit

Online publication: August 26, 2025

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Selected Topic

This paper takes Hegel's theory of tragedy, especially the content of the discourse on the reconciliation of ethical entity conflict and the absolute spirit as the basis and framework, and analyses it in the light of the text and connotation of *Paradise Lost*.

1.1.1. Ethical Conflict and Absolute Spirit in Hegel's Tragedy Theory

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, one of the representatives of German idealist philosophy in the 19th century, the theory of tragedy is the core component of his aesthetic thought. His theory clarifies the content and meaning of "tragedy", and emphasises that "The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and damaging the equally justified power of the other". At the same time,

discussing the outcome associated with tragedy - the triumph of eternal justice. The Hegel's doctrine of tragedy is an exquisite form of justification for the moral order. In this theory of tragedy, the socio-ethical conflict is promised to reach a state of reconciliation, where the preferences, arbitrariness, and individual rationality of the subjects, as the two parties to the conflict, are abstracted from the tragic procedure set by Hegel^[1]. It is only when the general situation of the world encounters the specific norms of "qualification" that action and conflict can be "opportunistically" fostered in such a situation.

The theory of tragedy can also be traced back to Hegel's concept of "absolute spirit". As an important viewpoint of Hegel's objective idealist philosophical system, it represents the spiritual entity that is the common essence and foundation of all things in the universe, and combines dialectical thought with tragic interpretation to show the struggle and realisation of "Ethical Substance". To a certain extent, it achieves "rescue reason from critique and reestablish it in some sense and to recover a doctrine of ideas"^[2].

Taking this as the theoretical basis, this paper focuses on the great tension brought by the ethical contradictions in the work, and explores the inevitable reasons behind the formation of the tragedy and the embodiment of the "absolute spirit".

1.1.2. The Social and Humanistic Background of Milton's Paradise Lost

Paradise Lost, the 17th century Christian epic, was written in an era full of contradictions, when the old and the new were changing^[3]. It was a time of breakthrough in the development of capitalism in England, and the feudal tyranny of the king hindered the emergence of new ideas. The author, John Milton, as a Puritan and a revolutionary, expressed his inner thoughts and feelings through literature during this period of transition. In this poem, the author rearranged and presented the storyline of Satan's rebellion, the creation of the world, and the escape from the Garden of Eden based on the archetypes of the Bible, Old Testament and Genesis, and wrote the intertwining and contrasting relationships of sin and punishment, life and death, love and hate in an epic style. It proposes first, in brief, the whole subject: Man's disobedience, and the loss thereupon of Paradise.

Based on the background and authorship of Paradise Lost, it is not difficult to appreciate the traces of Puritanism, capitalism and modern science in the text, and its reflection of ethical conflicts is a reflection of the reality of the seventeenth century, and the contradiction between the old and the new is completely different from that of the Bible's period of time, and it is worthwhile to explore the differences between the two, especially Milton's new editing^[4].

1.2. Research Status and Literature Review

The research on Hegel's theory of tragedy has been more, with its keywords about more than 100 academic papers and 200 academic journals, the research theme is mostly based on comparative studies and literary criticism, the theory of the analysis of the specific text of the article is also more, but most of the theory-based analysis of contemporaneous or later generations of the text, the analysis of the text of the creation of the time before the situation is less. In the author's opinion, Hegel's theory is developed from many ideas of his predecessors, and the texts of his predecessors can also contain relevant ideological factors^[5]. Therefore, analysing literary creation with the theory of later generations is justifiable and advanced. There are slightly more researchers on Hegel's ethics than on tragedy, with about 500 articles, most of them focusing on the theoretical construction of ethics with philosophy and aesthetics. The number of major studies that refer to ethics and tragedy together is drastically reduced, with only about 100 related papers.

Milton's Paradise Lost has been analysed more thoroughly, from characters, tragedy, ethics, social transmutation, marriage and other aspects. However, there are only several articles that take the "Absolute Spirit" as the main object of study, in which the philosophical concepts of Milton's Long Poem are analysed and investigated. Milton's long poems, exploring the rational consciousness of man.

Therefore, the object of this paper has a certain researchability and innovative value, exploring the particularity and ethical tension of some seventeenth-century literature on the basis of the study of Hegel's theory.

2. Relationship between man and society: the negative regeneration of the conflict between religiosity and public order and morality

Although *Paradise Lost* is a continuation of the Biblical setting, and the time of the narrative is set in the period of Genesis, the characters and ethical choices in the book contain a microcosm of the social background under the rule of authoritarian power and a discussion of human nature. In particular, the revolutionary consciousness reflected in the character of Satan and the constraining effect of social norms on individual behaviour reflected in Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit show the social pressures and dilemmas that individuals may face in their pursuit of freedom and happiness^[6]. Such conflicts and contradictions have triggered the thinking of a stable society, reflecting the transcendent power of the absolute spirit in Hegel's theory in the tragedy, which drives the characters to seek reconciliation and transcendence in the conflicts, and demonstrates the re-establishment of social contradictions and relationships.

2.1. Conflict between the old and the new in Puritanism and revolutionary views

As a Puritan, Milton's thoughts are undoubtedly reflected in his characterisation and ideas. *Paradise Lost* is different from the usual characterisation in that it takes "Satan", a complex and negative character, as one of the main protagonists to shock the revolutionary spirit of the divine right of kings in the universal society^[7].

In the first volume, after Satan wakes up from hell, he makes a speech, "I should be much for open war, O peers / As not behind in hate, if what was urged / Main reason to persuade immediate war" The archangel expresses his strong dissatisfaction with God's "secure throne" and "imperial dignity" and the passing of power to his only son. "Satan's anger and even pain from the social inheritance and despotism gave rise to a great sense of revolution and resistance. He therefore chose to break the existing inheritance system out of his own moral and ethical choices, and turned to a violent revolution in pursuit of the so-called "moral righteousness". He therefore chose to break with the existing inheritance system out of his own moral and ethical choices, and turned to violent revolution in pursuit of the so-called "moral justice". This revolutionary sentiment is also corroborated by a point mentioned in Aristotle's *Politics* when analysing the causes of revolutions, that is, "when others who are partly similar or identical to oneself take advantage of one's own, the heart is filled with a feeling of injustice and restlessness, and attempts to achieve the same state of equality"^[8].

What is more evident is that the "God" of the Bible is far more authoritative than the God of *Paradise Lost*, and the projection of this into the seventeenth-century period of the work's composition shows that this serves as an allusion to absolute authority, and expresses the attack of the new ideas of the society on the feudal system. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan can directly rise up and express "war", and carry out rebellion and early "revolution" in the form of violence. Such ethical choices fully reflect the new social and ethical choices and Protestant choices under the abuses of humanism and the bourgeois revolution. The conflict between the old and the new is reflected and dramatically demonstrated in Satan's emotions and actions, which are extremely tense.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that Satan's revolutionary ideas arising from his personal loss and grief are not enough to develop into a political wave, so he puts forward the "prophecy" of the restoration of the heavenly realm and the birth of a new world, and gives a bright conception that is enough to persuade the public through the shell of religion, and it can be seen here that Satan is not just a seeker of religion, but more from practical considerations. It is more out of practical considerations, and Hegel's analysis of the tragic action coincides with: "Religious life does not come out in the form of quiet and inactive piety but, on the contrary, in the form of active intervention in and active pursuit of all kinds of real interests and relations". At the same time, the generals in this paper, unlike the group of characters (e.g., songsters, attendants, etc.) In the ancient Greek theatre, who were generally very prone to fall on their swords, engaged in a multi-dimensional discussion about war or not, based more on their own interests, applauding Satan's courageous endeavours at the end of the council, and having fun afterwards according to their own preferences. The form of the "meeting" also clearly reflects the self-awareness and rationality of the social crowd^[9].

2.2. The contradiction between social order and individual behavioural desires.

Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit to a certain extent reflects the contradiction between the established rules of society, public order and morals and the individual's behaviour and primitive desires, when the social value and personal value can not achieve a stable unity, the ethical and moral standards will be changed^[10].

The first human ancestor was tempted by Satan and was expelled from the Garden of Eden because of the difficulty in controlling his personal desires, and this action marked the break between man and the ideal social state. The actions of Adam and Eve not only affected themselves as individuals, but also changed the destiny of the whole human group because they were the ancestors of mankind, which the author believes also heralds the re-establishment and repair of the social and ethical order. Through the new social division of labour and labour arrangement, a new way of living is established, and the desires prohibited in the Garden of Eden are used as a way of reproducing the next generation, so as to establish a social group. This conflict also reflects the responsibility and consequences of individual behaviour within the framework of social ethics, as well as the tension between individual freedom and social responsibility^[11].

3. Relationship between man and man (God): the conflict between free will and predestination, the conflict between the status of the sexes

3.1. The conflict between God and others reveals the profound opposition between individual will and the order of the universe.

Throughout the text, the most notable conflict is the multiple confrontations and the long process of confrontation between the angel Satan and the leading sovereign, God. The confrontation is a direct clash between good and evil and the established order, reflecting the polarised split between the two ethical entities. Both Satan and God represent two one-sided ethical bodies, with complete ethical correctness and personal will from a personal point of view. The archangel Satan represents the extreme expansion of personal will, daring to challenge the cosmic order and moral law represented by God. This conflict demonstrates perfectly the tension between free will and the universal ethical law^[12]. God is controlling the development of everything according to his arbitrary "predestination", and has absolute control and predetermination over everything, but the awakening of Satan's free will breaks the predetermination, and Satan, through his personal action, lures Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, destroying God's "Garden of Eden" setting, and triggering a conflict between God's free will and the universal ethical law. The "Garden of Eden" setting of God is destroyed through Satan's personal actions, triggering an even more intense confrontation. The ending of Satan is tragic to a certain extent. Although he has unlimited energy and courageous energy, in the end he still goes to defeat. This also signifies the finiteness of individual will and individual awakening, as well as the need to reconcile conflicts within the framework of the absolute spirit, i.e., a right kind of justice and thought^[13].

Similarly, the ethical choice of Adam and Eve's behaviour as representatives of the human group directly reflects the weakness and complexity of human nature. They are tempted to steal the forbidden fruit, an act that both challenges the will of authority and flaunts individual free will. Similar to the end of Satan, this arbitrary exercise of free will and defiance of authority brought disastrous consequences, plunging them all into pain and remorse. This conflict demonstrates the opposition and contradiction between freedom and constraint, desire and responsibility in human nature.

3.2. The conflict between Adam and Eve shows the ethical choice of gender and labour relations.

There is also a conflict between rationality and sensibility in human relations as reflected in the division of labour. The social status and ethical choices of men and women are also concentrated on Adam and Eve in this paper. Before Satan tempts him to eat the forbidden fruit, there is a scene in which Adam and Eve disagree on the division of labour and make a choice^[14]. Eve proposed "Let us divide the labour now not very effective", at this time Adam's answer to it was "because there is nothing more lovely for a woman than to consider the housekeeping and promote her husband's work" "what you say is persuasive (impregn'd with reason to my seeming), but I would rather not make such a momentous decision without further reflection." This can be seen Eve is a certain degree of independent consciousness awakening, and this violation

and conflict is also an important reason for its tragedy. In the background of the Bible, it is clearly mentioned that Eve is only Adam's rib, which belongs to the male Adam's appendage from the viewpoint of creation, and it is also mentioned in the text that "to be strong and live a happy life, but first of all, you need to obey him", and "obey" is the conventional ethical relationship between the sexes of Adam and Eve. Obedience" is the conventional ethical relationship between Adam and Eve, but Eve thinks about the efficiency of labour, and then proposes the "division of labour", which implies independence and equality^[15].

Eve's ethical choice here also reflects the requirements of the concept of vocation in the Protestant ethic of the 17th century, which states that "every human being, without distinction, has been assigned a vocation by God". Because she has assumed a duty, she puts in the effort required to make her labour more effective. In the text, Eve shows negative emotions such as worry and fear about her lesser and less efficient labour, and when Adam persuades her to act together on the grounds of "the danger of temptation", which she knows from Raphael, she still insists on her own views and "gently withdrew her hand from her husband's hand", demonstrating free will. "This is an expression of the awakening of free will and reflection on the relationship between the sexes"^[16].

In the human relationship between Eve and Adam, Eve is undoubtedly more emotional than Adam's rationality. It is precisely because of the irrationality brought about by sensibility that Eve gives up listening to Raphael when he gives advice and just "walks into the flower garden on the side", and still steps into the temptation when Adam explicitly mentions the danger, which leads to the fall. The character is awakened to rationality and independence, but she is overconfident and proud of her "faith, love, and virtue" and becomes the first to fall to Satan's temptation. It is worth noting that some studies have tended to interpret Eve as having an additional layer of "Calvinism", with a deep sense of personal wariness and an "abominable crisis of trust", so that she seizes the opportunity of her labour to collect the fruits of her individualism. This idea can also be related to the socio-economic situation of the time. It shows "work is really a service, a cult, one form of the service or worship of God." This idea can also be linked to the socio-economic aspects of land rent and taxation at the time, as evidence. The author believes that this analysis has a certain social research, but from the text statement and Eve's emotional rather than rational state, the author is more inclined to think this character has a certain degree of awakening and the pursuit of knowledge and civilisation, only in pride, irrationality and other reasons inevitably degenerate in the tragic end, to show that the rationality and sensibility of the ethical dilemma of mankind^[17].

4. Relationship between mind and self: the dynamic dialectic of desire and morality

In his theory of tragedy, Hegel places great emphasis on the division, opposition and reconciliation within the ethical entity. The inner struggle, contradiction and complexity of the characters make them compelled to move towards an inevitable tragedy. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are expelled from the Garden of Eden through the awakening of their own rationality and the choice of temptation, etc. Under Hegel's theoretical framework, this inner conflict is an inevitable stage in the development of the subject's self-consciousness, and it is a process in which the Absolute Spirit progressively realises self-knowledge and self-transcendence through the dialectical movement of the individual's self-consciousness^[18].

From innocence to temptation to corruption, Adam and Eve show the co-existence of good and evil in human nature in a more complete and dynamic way. This inner conflict is not only an exploration of individual moral choices, but also a profound reflection on the nature of human nature, echoing Hegel's concept of individual self-knowledge in moral conflict^[19]. They long for knowledge and freedom, but are also afraid of going against God's will and suffering the consequences. This inner conflict demonstrates the contradictory tension between desire and reason, freedom and responsibility in the human ego. In the end, they chose to fulfil their desires and pursue freedom, but paid a heavy price for it.

Among them, the character of Adam is the one with more obvious dynamic changes. Volumes V to VIII are written about the communication between the angel Raphael and Adam, telling him in advance the "potential temptation" and the story of Satan, from which Adam's step-by-step in-depth questioning can be seen in his rational logic. Adam's pursuit of

freedom of self “but God makes the will free reason is free, but we need to beware”, he is in order to better personal life, family life and efforts and labour, fully in line with the logic of his actions and the reality of needs. At the same time, such a character is extremely subservient to religious behaviour, he “brings out the freshest fruits He “brought forth the freshest fruits of the fruit “, which is a clear manifestation of religious rituals and respect, faith and obedience to God^[20].

Adam’s thoughts about his own mind, his self-relationship, are reflected in the text. He understands his rational element, analyses events at a higher level, and clearly discovers that even though he understands that Eve’s sensuality can have a turbulent element, he still cannot control the madness of “how perfect she is” when he approaches her. Raphael’s suggestion that Adam’s feelings for Eve should be in compliance with the “great command” from God and should not be “swayed by passionate love” is a straightforward demonstration of the contradiction between Adam’s rationality and his sensibility. It is because Adam was unable to overcome his sensibility with reason, and was finally swayed by his sensibility, so that his desire for love overrode his rational analysis, and he ate the forbidden fruit after Eve, which triggered the tragedy^[21].

God’s “sin and punishment” for Adam and Eve also embodies forgiveness and redemption for the conflicted individuals. Human beings were expelled from Paradise because they gained rationality and cognition, but at the same time, it is this rationality that enables them to understand good and evil, reflecting the inherent contradiction between individual rationality and passion. There is also great tension between Adam and Eve’s moral responsibility for their own behaviour and their destiny as God’s creatures, which is ultimately united in the establishment of a better world and human society.

5. Relationship between man and nature: the confrontation between modern science and obscurantism

The imagery of the “Garden of Eden” in the text is like a harmonious greenhouse and a balanced and beautiful natural environment set by God, but human behaviour has broken this harmony. The fall of Adam and Eve was not only a corruption of personal morality, but also a destruction of the natural order of the Garden of Eden. This destruction was not only reflected in the change of their own destiny, but also affected the balance and harmony of the entire natural world. This conflict reveals the close connection and interdependence between human beings and nature, as well as the responsibility and accountability of human beings for the natural environment^[22].

It is also worth mentioning that the book maps out the development of modern natural science breaking through obscurity, and there are also scholars who do research on the science fiction elements in *Paradise Lost*, including the new universe (self-consistent cosmology + space travel), the new inhabitants (extraterrestrial creatures + monsters + fanatical scientists), and the new technology (the concept of virtual reality) .

The eighth volume of the exchange between Adam and Raphael, when asked “the stars seem to converge on the infinite space I often feel strange in the wise and simple nature”, its curiosity and doubt about the operation of the celestial bodies shows the search for natural science. The 16th century Copernicus’s *Theory of the Operation of the Heavenly Bodies* and Newton’s mechanics in the 17th century greatly promoted the development of social and natural sciences, and it was the way of “explaining nature by science” that made “rationality” more accepted and respected by the public, and Adam’s doubts about the operation of the heavenly bodies also had a great rational aspect. Adam’s question about the operation of the heavenly bodies was also very progressive in terms of rationality. However, the contradiction between natural science and religion undoubtedly intensified the ethical conflict, and the character Adam did not doubt the authority of God’s operation and provoked new disputes because of the budding of natural science.

It is true that Hegel, as an idealist researcher in the 19th century, has gone through the Renaissance, naturalism, the Enlightenment and other eras of accumulation of his thoughts on human nature, human nature, pay more attention to the plurality of man himself, and the concepts of capitalism and religious beliefs are very different from that of Milton

in the 17th century, but his high level of generalisation and in-depth thinking about tragedy and the theoretical causes of aesthetics can well explain the former's conception of tragedy. However, his high generalisation and in-depth reflection on the theoretical causes of tragedy and aesthetics can well explain the "unconscious" cognition of the previous creations, and promote the analysis and in-depth exploration of tragedy criticism.

To sum up, *Paradise Lost* demonstrates the opposition and conflict of ethical choices in multiple relationships, and several sets of irreconcilable and one-sided contradictions together constitute the tragic ending of the characters, which is difficult to save and extremely tense. At the same time, just as Hegel believed in the "triumph of eternal justice" in his discourse on tragedy, Milton did not finish the epic with a downcast and negative attitude, but maintained a high level of enthusiasm at the end, believing in the bright future of mankind and the ability to reach a new level under the ideal belief, which foretells the possibility of redemption. This also serves as a reappearance of the author's puritanical thought, and once again reaches a fit with Hegel's thought, showing the embodiment of the Absolute Spirit's gradual realisation of its purpose through the development of history. Through the analysis of the above four relationships, we will deeply appreciate the tension of ethical conflict in Hegel's theory of tragedy and the causes behind it, and appreciate the Puritan ethical view of the times and the epochal nature of the times in the light of the text and the social background of Milton's creation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Dumont L, 1983, A modified view of our origins: the Christian beginnings of modern individualism. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 17(1): 1-26.
- [2] Buss A, 2000, The evolution of Western individualism. *Religion*, 30(1): 1-25.
- [3] Milton J, Vaughan R, Doré G, *Paradise lost*. London: Simmons.
- [4] Fish S E, 1998, *Surprised by sin: The reader in Paradise Lost*. Harvard University Press.
- [5] Lewis C S, 2006, *A preface to paradise lost*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist.
- [6] Roche M W, 2006, Introduction to Hegel's Theory of tragedy. *PhaenEx*, 1(2): 11-20.
- [7] Finlayson J G, 1999, Conflict and Reconciliation in Hegel's Theory of the Tragic. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 37(3): 493-520.
- [8] Bristow W F, 2007, *Hegel and the transformation of philosophical critique*. Oxford University Press.
- [9] Hegel G W F, Inwood M, 2007, *Hegel: philosophy of mind: translated with introduction and commentary*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Zeng W, 2022, Criticism of Literary Ethics: From Methodological Exploration to Theoretical Construction. *Journal of Central South University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*.
- [11] Cui B H, Zhang Z Y, 2014, editors, *Introduction to the History of Foreign Literature, European and American Volume*, Nankai University Press.
- [12] Cui M T, 2015, On the Justified Rationality and Choice of Adam in *Paradise Lost* . *Journal of Central South University (Social Science Edition)*.
- [13] Wang X H, 2017, The theme of the long poem from the image of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education*.
- [14] Jiang W W, 2012, Eve's Rebellion and Fall from the Confrontation of Sensibility and Reason. *Journal of Beijing Institute of Printing*.

- [15] Luo S M, 2021, Poetic Narrative and Ethical Transformation of Paradise Lost. Journal of Jiangsu Institute of Technology.
- [16] Chen Z E, Wu L Y, 2021, The Protestant Ethical Controversy and Capitalist Allegory in Paradise Lost. Culture and Poetics, (01): 236-252.
- [17] Wang L, 2017, Analysing the similarities and differences between the image of Satan in Paradise Lost and the Bible. Chinese Literary Artist, (10): 71.
- [18] Avram S, 2021, Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost and Satan in the Bible (in English). Medieval and Renaissance Studies, (02): 139-158.
- [19] Li Q, 2023, Free Will, Evil, Divine Grace, and the Fall - On the Doctrine of Divine Righteousness in Milton's Paradise Lost. Beauty and Age (Next), (12): 31-35.
- [20] Xie Y H, 2021, On Hegel's view of tragedy. Guangxi University.
- [21] Yu S F, 2023, Research on the novel "One day is longer than a hundred years" under the perspective of Hegel's tragic conflict theory. Jilin University.
- [22] Ma X Z, 2016, Dwelling in the face of poetry and thought - Milton's long poem and Hegel's philosophy. Oriental Forum, (03): 31-35.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.