



TRAGEDY  
IN THE  
VICTORIAN NOVEL

—THEORY AND PRACTICE IN  
THE NOVELS OF  
GEORGE ELIOT, THOMAS HARDY  
AND HENRY JAMES,

JEANNETTE KING

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK MELBOURNE

Published by the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
Bentley House, 200 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1978

First published 1978

Printed in Great Britain by  
Western Printing Services Ltd, Bristol

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

King, Jeannette.

Tragedy in the Victorian novel.

Based on the author's thesis, Aberdeen.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. English fiction – 19th century – History and criticism. 2. Tragic, The. 3. Eliot, George, pseud., i.e. Marian Evans, afterwards Cross, 1819–80 – Criticism and interpretation. 4. Hardy, Thomas 1840–1928 – Criticism and interpretation. 5. James, Henry, 1843–1916 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PR878.T7K5 823'.03 77-77762

ISBN 0 521 21670 2

## PREFACE

Critics today, without any apparent sense of incongruity, frequently refer to 'tragic novels'. They do not have the critical inhibitions of their Victorian counterparts, who were more aware of the possible conflict between the ancient concept of tragedy and the relatively new genre of the novel. What, then, do we mean when we yoke together the two terms? Tragedy is now a word used by everyone to refer to many kinds of unfortunate incident. But does it still possess any of the formal implications of the drama from which the term originated?

I have chosen to concentrate my discussion of the relationship between tragedy and the Victorian novel on George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James, because they were consistently preoccupied with the idea of tragedy, both in life and in art. George Eliot's interest in tragic themes, particularly in relation to pathos, is apparent in almost all her novels. In Hardy's case, it is the four later novels which are most clearly experiments with both the idea and the form of tragedy. James's early, shorter works show a tension between 'modern' and traditional concepts of tragedy which is carried forward into the later, major fiction. But in *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Portrait of a Lady* James extends his preoccupation with tragedy until it encompasses form as well as theme.

Hardy, James and Eliot are major novelists, but not the least of their achievements is the light they shed on the whole concept of tragedy. In this respect, their works involve us in a process of redefinition and critical enquiry.

A number of critics have written on the tragic elements in the

work of these novelists. Among the most illuminating are Barbara Hardy on George Eliot, John Paterson on Hardy, and Frederick Crews on Henry James. I am indebted to these and to the many more listed in the Bibliography who touch on related issues.

I owe a more direct debt to Professor Andrew Rutherford of the University of Aberdeen for his invaluable advice during the writing of the thesis from which this book emerged. Finally I would like to express my gratitude to the late T.R. Henn, whose teaching and friendship provided so much encouragement when the ideas for this book were still taking shape.

# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
INTRODUCTION: the critical background	I
I THE TRAGIC PHILOSOPHY: DETERMINISM AND FREE WILL	
(i) Varieties of determinism	16
(ii) 'Character is Fate': degrees of freedom	26
(iii) Tragic responsibility	32
2 FROM TRAGIC DRAMA TO THE TRAGIC NOVEL	
(i) The divorce between tragedy and drama	36
(ii) The classical inheritance	39
(iii) Tragedy redefined	43
3 REALISM AND TRAGEDY	
(i) 'The other side of silence': inarticulacy and decorum	51
(ii) Realism and symbolism	59
(iii) Social tragedy – a contradiction in terms?	64
4 GEORGE ELIOT: PATHOS AND TRAGEDY	
(i) Pathetic tragedy	70
(ii) Pathos and the woman's tragedy	73
(iii) <i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	78
(iv) Excursions into heroic tragedy: <i>The Spanish Gypsy, Felix Holt</i> and <i>Daniel Deronda</i>	84
(v) George Eliot and Thomas Hardy: a contrast	89

5	THOMAS HARDY: TRAGEDY ANCIENT AND MODERN	
(i)	Tragedy as a formal concept in Hardy's novels	97
(ii)	<i>The Return of the Native</i>	102
(iii)	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	107
(iv)	<i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i>	112
(v)	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	120
6	HENRY JAMES: FREEDOM AND FORM — THE TRAGIC CONFLICT AND THE NOVELIST'S DILEMMA	
(i)	Tragedy and the novel	127
(ii)	<i>The American</i>	132
(iii)	<i>The Portrait of a Lady</i>	139
(iv)	<i>The Wings of the Dove</i>	149
	CONCLUSION	158
	Notes	163
	Select bibliography	169
	Index	179

## INTRODUCTION

### THE CRITICAL BACKGROUND

George Eliot's novels are not novels in the ordinary sense of the term – they are really dramas: as the word is understood when applied to *Hamlet* or *The Agamemnon*.

(Anon. review of '*Felix Holt*', *Westminster Review*, 86, 1866, p. 200.)

In this novel [*The Mill on the Floss*] therefore, we have reproduced the grand old element of interest which the Greek drama possessed, the effect of circumstances upon man; but you have, in addition, that analysis of the inner mind, of which *Hamlet* stands in literature the greatest example.

(Anon. review of '*The Mill on the Floss*', *Spectator*, 7 Apr. 1860, p. 331.)

Mr Thomas Hardy's new novel is as pitiless and tragic in its intensity as the old Greek dramas.

(H.W. Massingham, 'Mr. Hardy's New Novel'  
*Daily Chronicle*, 28 Dec. 1891, p. 3.)

*Tess* must take its place among the great tragedies.

(W. Watson, '*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*', *Academy*, 41, 1892, p. 125.)

*Jude the Obscure* gives the sense of the return of an English writer to the Greek motive of tragedy.

(W.D. Howells, '*Jude the Obscure*', *Harper's Weekly*, 7 Dec. 1895, p. 1156.)

Henry James suddenly brings us, for all his gentleness and urbanity, upon tragedy of the highest order.

(S. Waterlow, 'The Work of Mr. Henry James', *Independent Review*, 4, 1904, p. 243.)

Such comparisons of the novel with tragedy became so common by the middle of the nineteenth century as to suggest an important literary trend. Samuel Richardson had already likened the novel to tragedy as early as 1748 in his 'Postscript' to *Clarissa*, but it was only the later discussions which related to central conceptions of the status and function of the novelist's art. These discussions show, in particular, a growing awareness that a literary transition was taking place, that one dominant mode – tragedy – was giving



way to another – the novel. And the later genre was attempting to do, in a new and often controversial way, many of the things that the older genre had done.

But what did the word ‘tragedy’ mean to those who used it in relation to the novel? It was frequently used, as it is today, to mean an extremely sad and unexpected event. In fiction, as in life, it usually meant death or some equally final disaster. For many writers, however, this single event illustrated the nature of life in general, a pattern of continuous and inevitable – *not* unexpected – suffering. For them ‘tragedy’ suggested a vision of life, a tragic philosophy, and it is in just such philosophical and moral terms that the comparison between tragedy and the novel is most often made.

To writers like George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, the traditionally ennobling effect of tragedy on humanity represented an ideal of the affective power of literature; it also represented, therefore, a model for the moral status and function of the novel. They believed that tragic drama had, in fact, been supplanted by the novel as the mirror of life and as a teaching form. This attitude could obviously lead to an over-concentration on the didactic qualities of a novel. One anonymous reviewer’s sole criterion for praising a novel called *The Trials of Margaret Lyndsay*, by a certain John Wilson, was that it illustrated ‘situations of sorrow and affliction, calculated to strengthen, by their example, the patience, the resignation, and the pity of the unfortunate’.<sup>1</sup> A more imaginative and rewarding approach to the novel’s ‘lessons’ was taken by the critic George Brimley, who stressed the wide range of experience the novel offers us, making us ‘live in the lives of other types of character than our own, or than those of our daily acquaintance – to enable us to pass by sympathy into other minds and other circumstances, and especially to train the moral nature by sympathy with noble characters and noble actions’.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘noble’ reminds us of the classical tragic models, and was to prove a controversial point, but the link between literature as vicarious experience and moral education

had a more immediate ancestry in the Romantic tradition. It is the basis of Shelley's argument that the imagination is a great moral instrument. George Eliot's aim of extending our sympathies is an echo of William Wordsworth's desire to convey the experience of common people in *The Lyrical Ballads*. So important was the concept of moral education to considerations of the novel's function that 'seriousness' became a key-word for literary judgment, as for many critics it still is.

But the battle against those who believed that the novel's job was to entertain, not teach, was not over. As late as 1890, most people saw the novel as primarily a source of amusement, as many still do. Romance became increasingly popular. The growing divide between critical and popular taste is illustrated in the critic W.E. Henley's scathing comment on the public reception of George Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming* (1889): 'the emotions developed are too tragic, the personages too elementary in kind and too powerful in degree, the effects too poignant and too sorrowful' for a public whom it irks 'to grapple with problems capable of none save a tragic solution'.<sup>3</sup>

Even those who agreed that the novel should teach disagreed over what it should teach. Many felt that while it should certainly 'grapple with problems', it ought to come up with something better than a 'tragic solution'. Pessimism was particularly abhorrent to such critics, which made Thomas Hardy's novels a frequent target for abuse. They insisted that tragedy – however 'true' – had no place in the novel, and seemed to question the validity of tragedy itself as a literary form. But the problem here is again one of definition. The frequent demands that the novel should satisfy the instinct for poetic justice remind us again of the neo-classical models and theories which formed the attitudes to tragedy of so many nineteenth-century critics, and so often had a limiting effect on early criticism of the novel.

For, to most critics, tragedy still meant Greek tragedy. And Greek tragedy more often seemed to mean the *Poetics* of Aristotle than the actual drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides.

Dramatic criticism in England had, from its birth, been classical and Aristotelian, and remained so throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in spite of the successful and radically different practice of Shakespearean tragedy, more influenced by Seneca and the Romans than by the 'Greeks'. Sir Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson and Milton each rejected the 'low' and comic elements of contemporary drama. With the Baroque tragedy of the seventeenth century, classicism really came into its own. Dramatists like Milton and Dryden, and Corneille and Racine in France, imposed limitations on themselves which were more rigid than the 'conventions' outlined by Aristotle, so that the tension between passion and the severe control of high art became their distinguishing characteristic. The logical conclusion of this increasingly scholastic, decreasingly lively tradition was the 'closet' drama of the nineteenth century. The neo-classical drama of Swinburne, Arnold and Tennyson in particular can hardly have been intended for performance, and needed long prefaces to explain the increasingly obscure classical sources.

But in spite of the evidence that new forms of tragedy were required, critics still clung to such supposedly Aristotelian concepts as the noble, majestic hero, poetic justice, the cathartic ending and the rejection of 'low' characters. Aristotle certainly suggested that the characters in tragedy should be 'good', that is the finest of their type or class, and that the hero in particular should be 'highly renowned and prosperous'.<sup>4</sup> The novelist, therefore, who chooses to make his hero a common man is faced with the problem of finding compensating factors for the loss of the (symbolic) values that derive from the hero's identification with the fate of his people. But the hero was not to be wholly good, or his ruin would be simply repugnant and horrible rather than tragic. He had to make the infamous tragic error or *hamartia*. Aristotle seems to have meant by this simply a mistake, making the hero's fate logical and convincing, but not necessarily just. His interest in *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagnorisis* (recognition) shows that his main concern is not with drama that illustrates

poetic justice in its simplest form, the punishment of evil-doing. A *peripeteia* occurs when a course of action intended to produce result *x* produces the reverse of *x*. The deepest tragedy occurs when a man's destruction is the work of those that wish him well, or of his own unwitting hand. But *hamartia* was so often misinterpreted as 'moral flaw' that there was a consequent emphasis on the notion of poetic justice. For disaster to overtake the morally innocent was to the neo-classicists not tragic, but pathetic. Tragedy should excite pity and fear. A common criticism of the nineteenth-century novel was that it excited too much pity, destroying the tension necessary to tragedy.

Although using slightly different terms, George Saintsbury is clearly making the same distinction when he distinguishes tragic pathos from sentimental pathos by an 'adequate, necessary and just'<sup>5</sup> connection between cause and effect. Without this relationship, the irony essential to tragedy cannot exist. What Saintsbury failed to see was that, for a writer like Hardy, irony exists in the protagonist's mistaken belief in a relationship between cause and effect which he can control. And even if causal guilt is absent, he may bear a degree of impersonal responsibility, of moral and aesthetic appropriateness, which is in itself tragic.

Was there no mitigating influence in favour of realism and contemporary subjects from the successful body of Shakespearean drama with which every Englishman was familiar? This native version of tragedy strongly reinforced the concept of poetic justice which later critics read into the Aristotelian tragic theory. The evil in the Shakespearean world-picture is very clearly generated by sin, rather than a simple mistake. But this emphasis on sin also places an emphasis on the tragedy of character which is missing from the classical 'tragedies of situation'.

This kind of interest in the individual's responsibility for his own tragedy is shown in the exploration which so many nineteenth-century novelists, particularly those at the centre of this study, made of the relationship between determinism and free will. What is it that makes some people complete victims of their

situation, and others able to endure, and even triumph over it? Similarly, the heroic, as well as the tragic, element is related to character rather than situation. Shakespearean tragedy concerns characters to whom it is proper to do honour, but the honour can belong to the hero not only by birthright, but by achievement.

Such stature was necessary to make the lesson of tragedy plain, to give the hero's actions a wider significance. But it was also related to the function of the 'low' or comic elements which most clearly differentiate this body of tragedy from the classical model. It is the contrasts between, and mirroring of, the 'high' and 'low' elements that give Shakespearean tragedy its depth and universality. But this argument for introducing low elements into tragedy, in spite of the brilliantly successful examples it provided, is ignored by those critics who attack similar elements in tragic novels. They frequently compare the nineteenth-century novel with Shakespearean drama. George Eliot's portrayal of rustic characters and of realistic, homely, humorous dialogue, is described, like Hardy's, with delight and admiration. But in tragedy, such elements are still suspect. It has to be admitted that humble characters are present in Shakespearean tragedy as contrast, not as potentially heroic or tragic elements. But it seems an indication of the critics' extremely static, backward-looking approach that so many were unable to see the Victorian novelists as merely taking the native, rather than classical, tradition one step further. On the whole, most of them seem to take one step back, neglecting Shakespeare's tragedy as a model for tragedy, while accepting his work as a fruitful model for comedy.

With its emphasis on the nobly heroic, undertaking great actions of high moral seriousness, the tragic ideal was, then, for many critics, totally incompatible with realism, which was concerned with what Engels called 'typical characters in typical situations'.<sup>8</sup> The attempt of George Eliot to pivot tragedy on the experience of humble characters seemed futile to a critic like J. Herbert Stack.

Despite all the efforts of the greatest novelist of our days, the tragedy of Hetty Poyser's [sic] life does not touch us nearly as the same sorrow in one of higher station. It is simply cant for educated men to pretend that their sentiments are as easily excited by the sorrows of people whose daily life and daily thoughts they can with difficulty realise, as by the sufferings of those who, on account of their nearness to us in social position, seem like ourselves, and whose sorrows we can understand and feel.

(‘Mr. Anthony Trollope’s Novels’, *Fortnightly Review*, 5, 1869, p. 191.)

Wordsworth’s attempts to educate his public in this direction had apparently failed. Few would disagree with the belief that sympathy is essential to tragedy, but can the novelist extend the reader’s sympathy across social and class barriers? Aesthetic theory becomes involved with moral and social attitudes at this point. Many realistic novelists felt themselves to be attacking not merely literary conventions but the moral sense of their readers.

But the arguments of those who hold Stack’s position cannot be dismissed purely as a kind of literary snobbery. Such a position clearly relates to those qualities of the tragic hero and the tragic action outlined above. The fate of the private, and in particular the working-class, individual lacks the significance attaching to that of the ‘highly renowned’, majestic and exceptional hero of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. And critics were quick to recognise that the absence of these traditional majestic qualities was due to the underlying philosophy of the realists. R.H. Hutton, one of the most important and perceptive of Victorian critics, blamed Hardy’s fatalism.

Tragedy is almost impossible to people who feel and act as if they were puppets of a sort of fate. Tragedy gives us the measure of human greatness, and elevates us by giving it in the very moment when we sound the depth of human suffering. Mr Hardy’s tragedy seems carefully limited to gloom. It gives us the measure of human miserableness, rather than of human grief – of the incapacity of man to be great in suffering, or anything else.

(‘*The Return of the Native*’, *Spectator*, 8 Feb. 1879, p. 182.)

These, then, are the many reasons put forward for considering the lower classes inappropriate subjects for tragedy. Their social

position deprives their fall of any wider significance, and therefore of any element of real catastrophe. And their limited mental range deprives their suffering of any greatness. '

It is undeniable that the portrayal of tragedy through humble characters raises many difficulties – some perhaps insoluble – but they are of a more practical kind than those raised by critics seeking a direct equivalent of the classical form. Even George Henry Lewes, one of the great champions of realism and the man who persuaded George Eliot to try writing fiction, points out that 'it is easy for the artist to choose a subject from everyday life, but it is *not* easy for him so to represent the characters and their actions that they shall be at once lifelike and interesting'.<sup>7</sup> In such mundane, limited spheres, truth can be dangerously close to boredom. The problem reveals itself most acutely in the representation of dialogue. It is forcibly expressed by Biffen, the realist novelist in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1893). He wishes to reproduce verbatim the conversation of working people: 'The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything *but* tedious it would be untrue' (p. 129). How is the novelist to remain faithful to this quality of tedium, which disastrously weakens the impact of his art, yet is the essence of the tragedy he wishes to portray?

Moreover, the language of such characters lacks that eloquent special pleading characteristic of the traditional tragic hero. How, then, is their suffering, their passion, to be conveyed? Even for novelists writing about upper-class characters, realism created similar problems. It is not so much that their characters cannot express themselves as that – in the rarefied atmosphere of civilised society – they dare not. The 'tea-pot style of conversation'<sup>8</sup> in Henry James's novels seemed to many critics to make his characters unreal, lacking in flesh and blood. W.E. Henley felt that this 'new American method' might be effective in the representation of the commonplace, but was hopelessly inadequate when applied to the tragic.

In Mrs. Malet's heroine there is a touch of something very much like tragedy; and we feel as we read that she ought to have been presented to us ten years ago. . . We are confronted with reticences and delicacies, with shyness and discretion and significant silence, when we are crying out for courage and free speech and the note of passion and all the majesty of truth.  
 ('New Novels', *Academy*, 22, 1882, p. 377.)

But whether the novelist chose to write about working-class or upper-class characters, he was liable to criticism if he attempted to relate tragedy to everyday experience. In his strictures on *The Return of the Native* already quoted, R.H. Hutton went on to criticise it for treating 'tragedy itself as hardly more than a deeper tinge of the common leaden-colour of the human lot, and so makes it seem less than tragedy – dreariness, rather than tragedy' p. 181. 'Dreariness' is a word similarly applied by many to James's novels. Such views are clearly at odds with those of novelists like George Eliot, who see the elements of tragedy everywhere, who see tragedy as a universal experience. The classicist's demand was for the exceptional, the heroic gesture, the hero in active conflict with the universe. Matthew Arnold's description of those situations which can give no poetical enjoyment could aptly be applied to many Victorian tragic novels – 'those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done'.<sup>9</sup> But could it not equally be applied to the last act of *King Lear*?

No issue illustrated the gulf between the traditionalists and modernists more than that of the ending. I have already mentioned the neo-classicist's desire for poetic justice. Those who, in addition, sought that cathartic experience of 'calm of mind, all passion spent', which accompanies the resolution of classical tragic drama, were repeatedly frustrated in their readings of contemporary novels. The frequent absence of finality robbed them not only of the moral satisfaction of seeing poetic justice meted out and the restoration of stability, but of the aesthetic pleasure



of wholeness. Henry James was, again, frequently singled out for his refusal to provide any resolution, tragic or otherwise. R.H. Hutton expressed the feelings of many.

Mr. Henry James is always more or less embarrassed by what he very likely regards as the artificial necessity of making a whole. He finds that life very seldom makes a whole. If you may trust him as your guide, even human passion is not commonly dramatic. It ends oftener in a ravelled thread than in a true dénouement. . . In his pictures most passions fade away; most tragedies break down before the tragic crisis.

(Review of '*Washington Square*', *Spectator*, 5 Feb. 1881, p. 185.)

Although prepared to acknowledge James's power of suggesting the continuity of things, such critics were not prepared to acknowledge the place of continuity in tragedy. The audience may be aware of life continuing at the end of tragedy, but it is life purged of the suffering that in James belongs to the continuing existence, so that the audience is more conscious of climax than continuity.

If attempts to create tragedy out of such 'realistic' subject-matter were not always acceptable, then neither were the realist methods adopted to portray them. Many critics felt the particularity with which character was rendered in so many Victorian novels was incompatible with the representative function of the tragic hero. It obscured the vast, elemental forces within and without him. Similar reservations were expressed about the often highly detailed background of the novels. G.H. Lewes warned that realism should not become 'detailism': if the novelist wants to portray a human tragedy, 'the upholsterer must be subordinate, and velvet must not draw our eyes away from faces'.<sup>10</sup>

All too often such criticisms reveal a total misunderstanding of the author's purpose. James is criticised for his too frequent tendency to 'immerse his drama in a saturated atmosphere of convention',<sup>11</sup> by an anonymous reviewer who has failed to understand the nature of these drawing-room tragedies. James – like Racine – uses social convention as a barrier between the individual and the release of his feelings, increasing by such pressure the