

Tristan und Isolde as Hegelian Tragedy

Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is often noted for the heavy influence it draws from the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Both the metaphysics presented in Wagner's depictions of the worlds of Night and Day and the "decentrifcation" of the self have obvious roots in Schopenhauer's thought and writing (Tanner, 100-107). However, another influential and pivotal German philosopher's thoughts seem to be strikingly present in *Tristan*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. It is of course not surprising that any work of Wagner's which is based on philosophical thought will contain ideas and conflicts that can be analyzed from a Hegelian standpoint. Firstly, because so much philosophy following Hegel is itself either an affirmation or a rejection of his work, Wagner infusing an opera with philosophical overtones could easily stumble into an intentional or unintentional reading that provokes Hegel. After all, some even claim, "the history of philosophy since Hegel is made up of successive and varying reactions to his work (Magee, 163)." Furthermore, *Tristan* is an opera that centers on a central conflict between two opposing, metaphysical forces. The nature of Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic is such that it lends itself best to application as a means of describing conflicts, tensions, and oppositions (Forster, 131). However, while it would be easy to argue that dialectical forces are present in the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, I would instead point out that Wagner's opera also conforms to a very different aspect of Hegel's philosophy, aesthetics. Despite the claim by some – notably Michael Tanner – that *Tristan* is not a tragedy, if one takes Hegel's analysis and definition into account the opera proves to conform to Hegel's understanding of a modern, romantic tragedy (Tanner, 140-141).

While many previous definitions of tragedy focused on the emotional response that tragedy elicited in its audience, Hegel focuses his analysis on the structure, logic, and conflict of a piece to determine whether or not a piece is tragedy. Hegel's definition of tragedy revolves around a fatal conflict between two existing rights, values, or ideals acting upon the protagonist or tragic hero. It is in the forces that act upon the Tragic Hero that Hegel distinguishes between a classic and modern- or "romantic"- tragedy (Wicks, 353). In his definition of a classic tragedy, Hegel stresses that the forces at play are life values, and are thus societal obligations that are for all practical purposes unbreakable. Thus, the conflict's tragedy stems not only from the fatal consequence of the confrontation, but also from the added sadness of the inability to reconcile

values of equal necessity and animosity (Wicks, 354). However, for a modern tragedy, Hegel instead claims that the forces are from within the protagonist, that is to say that the tragic hero's subjective and personal emotions can be at conflict (Wicks, 354). It should be noted that while Hegel did not speak extensively on the subject of their mutual exclusivity, it is indeed possible for a classical tragic hero to experience a personal anguish and conflict and conversely for a modern tragic hero to be at odds with societal obligations. The difference, however, stems in the root conflict of the tragedy's logic and the cause of the hero's downfall. Based on this definition of tragedy and this distinction between modern and classic, I would argue that Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* falls well within the domain of a modern tragedy.

In order to argue that *Tristan* is a specific kind of tragedy, it must first be established that the opera can indeed be called a tragedy at all. Michael Tanner in his book, *Wagner*, presents the argument that *Tristan und Isolde* cannot be viewed as such. While Tanner concedes that the opera is indeed "suffused with tragic feeling," he claims this falls well short of classifying the opera as a tragedy. He contends that since *Tristan*, in his estimation, is a religious drama, it is impossible for it to be a tragedy (Tanner, 141).

However, this argument appears to fall short on several points. Tanner fails to describe how a tragedy and a religious work are mutually exclusive. He gives the example of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, stating that while it too is "suffused with tragic feelings," it ends on a note of redemption and hope, which excludes it from tragic status. However, implying that any work which ends on a note of redemption or hope is no longer a tragedy would appear to be a very dangerous statement. Take for example the consummate tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus, while ending the play in emotional agony and physical disfigurement is redeemed in a sense by his self-imposed exile, which frees the city of Thebes from its plague. Surely *Oedipus* is no less a tragedy because the titular character is able to make up in some way for his flaw.

Tanner also offers no other examples or reasons why any religious work cannot also be considered a tragedy. He only offers that a work with tragic emotional content is not necessarily tragic. Even if this point is conceded, with no working definition of tragedy, one cannot throw out a work's classification as such. Tanner offers no such explanation and offers no explicit reason why *Tristan* should not be considered both tragedy and religious. Therefore, there is no pretense for throwing out the Hegelian model altogether. Especially since Tanner and Hegel seems to define tragedy from different standpoints. Tanner's idea of tragedy centers around the

response and thought elicited from the audience (Tanner, 141). He believes that because *Tristan* leaves the audience with an idea of a new world possibility, instead of a personal catharsis or grief, it is only a religious drama and not a tragedy at all. However, Hegel's definition of tragedy does not take into account audience response at all. Hegel instead focuses on the structure, logic, and narrative method of a work when defining tragedy (Wicks, 354). Tanner has no grounds for expelling *Tristan und Isolde* from the category of tragedy on structural grounds. Therefore, Tanner's belief in *Tristan's* religious nature does not provide adequate grounds for exclusion as tragedy.

Before going on to examine *Tristan und Isolde* using the Hegelian model for tragedy, it becomes necessary to define the work's tragic hero, since Hegel's idea of tragedy centers around the forces acting on this hero. On this point, I am again in contention with Michael Tanner. Tanner proposes that both central figures in *Tristan und Isolde* can be given hero status – of course he isn't speaking of tragic heroes, because he doesn't believe the opera is a tragedy (Tanner, 66). While it is indeed possible that a tragedy have multiple tragic heroes, especially a tragedy centered around a love story such as *Tristan – Romeo and Juliet* for example – in this case one member of the couple clearly assumes the mantle of tragic hero more than the other.

Tristan seems to embody the traits of a tragic hero, in Hegel's sense of the word, more than Isolde. For one thing, more insight is given into Tristan's conflict than Isolde's, by way of the Act III. Tristan voices his lament in a manner that Isolde is not afforded in the opera. The audience is given far more insight into Tristan's psyche and the effects of the conflicting forces on him as a character. Furthermore, as far as his role in the deaths of the two lovers, Tristan's seems much more active. While Isolde does die of grief, it is Tristan who seems to bring about his own fate. Isolde does attempt to kill herself with Tristan at the end of Act I, but it is Tristan who continues to actively try to move over to the realm of night and death. Tristan eagerly allows Melot to mortally wound him at the end of Act II, an action Isolde never comes close to emulating at any point in the play. Tristan's ultimate end is also much more a result of his own actions. Tristan dies in a fit of action, overjoyed at Isolde's presence and tearing the bandages from his wounds. By contrast, Isolde's death is a collapse; life simply leaves from her without the same effect as Tristan's mountains and valleys of emotion. Tristan clearly appears to be the moving force behind the progression of the tragedy, and thus the tragic hero in Hegel's terms.

With Tristan established as the opera's tragic hero, it is now necessary to identify the forces at work to bring about his ultimate fate. An obvious place to start is the conflicting forces of the world of Night and the world of Day. The realm of Day represents the Phenomenal world as described by Schopenhauer, and is a false perception of the real, underlying world of Noumena – the realm of Night (Magee, 218). At first glance, these seem to be in raging conflict. In the realm of Day, Tristan is forced to hand Isolde over to his uncle, Marke, and is bound by codes of loyalty and obedience to pretend his love for Isolde doesn't exist. It is essentially a realm of lies. By stark contrast, the realm of Night represents an opposite, unseen reality, in which Tristan and Isolde are free to express their love and be as one in an eternal setting – achievable only in death (Magee, 217-221).

However, it is not a conflict from these two forces that ultimately leads to Tristan's tragedy. The world of Day and the world of Night are separate planes altogether. Tristan has no conflict with the world of Night. He clearly has made the choice that he wishes to inhabit that realm, and spends much of the opera courting death in order that he might live in the realm of night permanently (Magee, 221). Rather, Tristan is subject to a conflict between two forces which both exist squarely in the realm of Day. He is torn between his duties and obligations – both socio-political and personal [since Marke is his liege and his close friend] – and his desires. Both of these exist only in the realm of Day. His obligations to Marke do not exist in the world of Night, because Tristan is not individuated in the realm of Night. In Night, Tristan is one with Isolde, and so could not be bound by the limitations and constraints that exist because of his status as an individual in Marke's court. Also, Tristan's desires only exist in the world of day, because that is the world in which they are unfulfilled. Tristan rails against his desires in Act III, and begs for release from them. He sees that this release is only possible by entering the realm of Night, because his desires exist squarely in the realm of Day (Magee, 218). In Night, Tristan is one with Isolde, and free to exist and affirm their mutual love. He would not have torturous desires for her, because he would be in unity with her. Tristan's death is caused not by a struggle between Day and Night, but rather because he sees Night – which is equated with death – as the only release from a constant struggle between two powerful forces within the realm of Day, his desires for Isolde and his obligations to Marke.

Wagner clearly crafts an opera that can be read as a Hegelian tragedy. His tragic hero, Tristan, is battered emotionally by conflicting forces, Tristan's obligations and desires, which

ultimately lead to his downfall and death. Wagner does not create a tragedy that Hegel would consider in the classical format, despite the structure and age of the opera's source material. Rather, using Hegel's aesthetic model, *Tristan und Isolde* is best classified as a "modern" or "romantic" tragedy. The distinction between these two forms of tragedy, classical and romantic, lies in the nature of the forces acting upon the hero.

For *Tristan* to be considered a classical tragedy, the forces acting upon him would need to be two conflicting societal or moral obligations. Hegel explains that the tragedy from these sorts of works stems not only from the death of the tragic hero, but also from the agony of knowing neither force can ever be reconciled. In a classical tragedy, a character is caught between two equally important, equally good obligations to society – Hegel includes duty to Gods and religion as societal obligation – which cannot be reconciled in a given situation (Wicks, 354). The tragic hero is therefore doomed to experience pain and failure, because yielding to either force will result in the hero performing deeds that are directly at odds with their moral obligations. In such a tragedy, the character's death – or an equivalent state – is the only way to rectify for the inevitable crime they were forced to commit against the social order.

By contrast, a romantic tragedy involves two forces that are internal to the tragic hero. The hero is torn apart by their own wishes, which may or may not conflict with their obligations towards the social structure. In this scenario, one choice may be morally superior to the other – from the standpoint of either universal or societal morals – but the conflict is internal to the tragic hero and centers on their own inability to reconcile forces of their own creation. Hegel deemed this sort of tragedy to be somehow less "tragic" than the classical, since the classical dealt directly with the conflict of his historical dialectic (Wicks, 354). In the classical model, both forces are right, but neither one can allow the other force leeway. This failure to achieve synthesis causes the death of the tragic hero. However, Schopenhauer believed that tragedy in the romantic sense gave much more of an insight into the subjective and the suffering caused by an inability to reconcile passions and the will (Magee, 144). It makes sense therefore, that Wagner would choose a more personal and subjective tragic style, since he took his philosophical cue for *Tristan und Isolde* from the works of Schopenhauer (Gregor-Dellin, 256).

The forces which afflict Tristan seem to clearly fall into the category of internal desires and forces. His obligation to Marke does come from society, since he owes Marke as his liege lord, but it is also a personal obligation as well. Marke reveals that Tristan is his "truest friend"

as he mourns over his body in Act III. Tristan's passion and desire for Isolde is obviously internal as well. There is no societal precedent in Tristan's society that encourages adultery, betrayal, erotic love, and suicide – all of which are inspired or even encouraged by Tristan's desires and passions. Tristan is torn between his own wishes, not two forces placed on him from the outside world. He therefore falls clearly into Hegel's definition of a romantic tragic hero, since he does not attempt to reconcile two forces of equal moral value – as a classical tragic hero would have to by definition.

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* stands as a masterpiece from both a literary standpoint and a musical triumph. It is especially notable for how many different philosophical movements and thoughts it is able to synthesize into a coherent, originally Wagnerian message. Aside from being able to reflect Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic, by showing a conflict between the thesis of societal norm, the antithesis of erotic and romantic love, and the synthesis of the realm of Night; the work also clearly reflects and can be analyzed in terms of Hegel's aesthetics. Namely, his theory concerning the nature and structure of tragedy. *Tristan und Isolde* exhibits the qualities of a tragedy in Hegelian terms. It features a tragic hero, the titular Tristan, who is torn between two irreconcilable forces in conflict, his obligations to Marke and his desires for Isolde. Since his conflict is between two personal, internal forces, the opera is best classified as a romantic tragedy as opposed to a classical one.

Nauder Namaky

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