

The Fall of a Family

Tracing the Aristotelian Model of Catastrophe in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Buddenbrooks*

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In the *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that tragedy is a mimesis of an elevated action that evokes pity and fear.¹ The core of tragedy is the plot and, according to Aristotle, the best kind contains peripeteia or catastrophe that is the reversal of fortune from good to bad. Guided by this Aristotelian model, I attempt to read two great novels that epitomize the catastrophe within a family. Although originating from two different cultures and time periods, both Cao Xueqin's *Hong Lou Meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, hereafter *HLM*) and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* stand out in their unified theme of *Verfall* (decline). Each novel bears its own traces of an Aristotelian tragedy and unfolds the catastrophe by way of elaborate foreshadowing implanted throughout the plot. Neither *HLM* nor *Buddenbrooks* strictly follows the structure of a tragedy in Aristotle's time, yet both works are inspired by the spirit of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics* and bear similar traces of the Aristotelian model in portraying the fall of a family. Following the framework illustrated by Aristotle,² both *HLM* and *Buddenbrooks* are constructed upon a complex plot with a reversal in the course of the transformation that is the fall of the family.

¹ "Tragedy, then, is a mimesis [*mīmēsis*] of an action [*praxis*] that is serious [*spoudaiā*], complete [*teleiā*], and having magnitude [*megethos*]; with language [*logos*] embellished individually in each of its forms [*eidōs* plural] and in each of its parts [*morion* plural]. It is done by performers [*drōntes*] and not by way of narrative [*apangeliā*], through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] bringing about the purification [*katharsis* = catharsis] of such emotions [*pathēmata*]." (1449b 23-28). The cited passages of Aristotle's *Poetics* are all translated and annotated by Professor Gregory Nagy.

² "[T]he structure [*sunthesis*] of the most beautiful [*kallistē*] tragedy [*tragōidiā*] should be not simple [*haplê*] but complex [*peplegmenē*] ... So, it is necessary for a plot [*mūthos*] that is well-constructed to be simple [*haploûs*] rather than double [*diploûs*] (which is what some people say it should be), and to change [*metaballein*] not to good fortune [*eutukhiā*] from bad fortune [*dustukhiā*] but the opposite, from good fortune [*eutukhiā*] to bad fortune [*dustukhiā*]" (1452b 30-31, 1453a 12-16).

Yet unlike an Aristotelian tragedy, key characters are also the driving force of each novel, carrying out functions of the plot.

Cao Xueqin's *HLM* portrays the gradual decline of a large aristocratic family in mid-seventeenth-century China. Since only the first eighty chapters remained in circulation today, it is difficult to pin down the entire story.³ Nevertheless, the author has left numerous traces in the first two thirds of the novel foreshadowing not only the destiny of each major character but more importantly the ultimate fall of the family.⁴ Starting from the preamble to the story in Chapter 1, the author claims that the novel itself consists of dreams that are meant to serve as a warning, and the warning itself may well be the decline of the family.⁵ If this introduction is obscure in laying out the course of the story, then the fifth chapter is a turning point where the skeleton of the decline is constructed. In this chapter, the protagonist, Jia Baoyu, pays a visit to 太虛幻境 (“Visionary Confines of the Great Void” and hereafter “the Confines”) in his dream. The Confines is a realm beyond this world—a dimension crucial to the story’s complex structure already introduced in the first chapter of the novel. Before the main story unfolds, the preliminary character 甄士隱 (Zhen Shiyin, insinuating “real events concealed”) follows a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest to the entrance of the Confines, and on the gate he notices a pair of scrolls that reads “假作真时真亦假 / 无为有处有还无” (Cao 6: “truth becomes fiction when the fiction is true / real becomes unreal where the unreal is real”; my trans.). These words are crucial to understanding *HLM*, a story about a dream intertwined with reality. The premise

³ The entire novel is believed to have 120 chapters, although some scholars argue that there are only 108 chapters.

⁴ There is clear evidence that Cao finished writing the *HLM* within his lifetime (and some critics of his time even read the novel in completion). Unfortunately, the most common 120-chapter “complete” *HLM* (the last 40 chapter added by Gao E) clearly departs from Cao’s original plan. For this reason I am using the 80-chapter edition in my reading.

⁵ “此回中凡用梦用幻等字，是提醒阅者眼目，亦是此书立意本旨。” (“Words such as dream and fantasy are used in these chapters as warning for the readers’ eyes. They are also the conception and the goal of this book”; Cao 3; my trans.).

implied by the scroll on the gate of the Confines is the backbone of this enormous family saga, most notably in the name of the main family “Jia” (homophone with “fake”) which is accompanied by a mirroring family “Zhen” (homophone with “real”). This wordplay has set the frame for a complex structure that creates ambiguity in interpretation: either an unreal reality if read as pure fiction or a real irreality if read as a fantastical autobiography. In this sense, by laying out the structure of the story in Baoyu’s dream, the author re-emphasizes the liminal zone between real and unreal that the story itself inhabits.

During his visit to the Confines, Baoyu meets 警幻仙姑 (“the Monitory Vision Fairy” and hereafter “the Fairy”), who enlightens him on his own destiny as well as those of the young women in his family with a series of obscure oracular songs. If the Aristotelian model is applied, in this imaginary realm two components of the complex plot are embedded—the *recognition* occurs in the protagonist’s dream, and the Fairy foretells the *reversal*. The fall of the Jia family can be interpreted through several of the oracular songs specific to each young woman’s fate. One striking example that predicts the family’s fall is the tenth song, attributed to Wang Xifeng. This song, entitled “聪明累” (“The Burden of Craft”), reveals the tragic destiny of Xifeng and the ultimate fall of the whole family:

机关算尽太聪明，反算了卿卿性命。生前心已碎，死后性空灵。家富人宁，终有个，家亡人散
各奔腾。枉费了意悬悬半世心，好一似荡悠悠三更梦。忽喇喇似大厦倾，昏惨惨似灯将尽。
呀！一场欢喜忽悲辛。叹人世，终难定！（Cao 55）

Too crafty with your schemes, in the end you will count your own life in. When you are alive your heart is already broken, after you die your soul will be free. The prosperous family with people living in peace will end in the death of the family with everyone fleeing on his own. You’ve wasted your worries for half a

life, so much like a wandering dream at midnight. The sudden whoosh is like when a mansion collapses, the dark brutality is like when the light is about to extinguish. Alas! Happiness will suddenly be turned into harsh tragedy. Sigh, life in the end is difficult to determine. (my trans.)

“Happiness will suddenly be turned into harsh tragedy” might even be read as a direct quotation from Aristotle and foretells the family’s tragic ending. Its fall is comparable to a collapsing mansion both visually and metaphorically. This frightening simile suggests that in the end the Jia residence will fall apart along with the final disintegration of the family. From the brightest of the day to the darkest hour, the song “The Burden of Craft” condenses the family’s lifespan into a few lines and reveals the Aristotelian reversal of fortune. Even though the decline of the family spans across four generations and over a hundred chapters, fear lingers around the abrupt peripeteia and is carried all the way to the last song, entitled “飞鸟各投林” (“The Flying Birds Each Seek the Woods”):

为官的, 家业凋零; 富贵的, 金银散尽; 有恩的, 死里逃生; 无情的, 分明照应。欠命的, 命已还,
欠泪的, 泪已尽。冤冤相报自非轻, 分离聚合皆前定。欲知命短问前生, 老来富贵也真侥幸。
看破的, 遁入空门, 痴迷的, 枉送了性命。好一似食尽鸟投林, 落了片白茫茫大地真干净!

(Cao 56)

The officials, their family estates decline; the rich, their wealth completely gone; those who bestowed benefits escape from death; those without feelings are clearly looked after. Those who owed a life, the life is returned; those who owed tears, the tears are drained. Retribution of injustice is indeed not light, separation and reunion are all predestined. If you want to know why your life is short, ask your previous existence, and prosperity at an old age is pure luck.

Those who see through life enter the gate of the void;⁶ the obsessed ones lose their lives in vain. How similar is this to birds perching upon the trees after all the food is gone, leaving behind the white ground empty and clean! (my trans.)⁷

Strikingly indeed, notwithstanding the obscurity of the verses, the ending of the story is clear: the dream has become a nightmare, a complete catastrophe. According to the last oracular song, the Jia family will eventually lose its power, wealth and nearly all of its members. Here the Aristotelian reversal is manifested in several layers, as the family changes from high to low social standing, from rich to poor, from prosperity to ruin. Using Aristotle's definition of a complex plot, I might also add that in Baoyu's dream in the Confines, although the reversal is clear, a simultaneous recognition from the protagonist is missing. At the end of "The Flying Birds Each Seek the Woods" song, Baoyu stops the fairies' performance, feeling "drowsy and dull." As the protagonist of the story, Baoyu neither reads beneath the text of any song nor relates those alerting verses to his own life at all. Therefore, different from what Aristotle sees in Oedipus, whose fate is recognized and reversed simultaneously,⁸ here in *HLM* the protagonist Baoyu remains ignorant even after being enlightened in a transcendental space. After this visit, the gate of the Confines will never open for the protagonist again.⁹ For a spectator in an Aristotelian tragedy, the oracular song that announces the family's imminent catastrophe at the height of its prosperity would evoke fear and pity. The early nineteenth-

⁶ The expression "遁入空门" ("enter the gate of the void") means becoming a Buddhist monk or nun.

⁷ There is textual discrepancy underlined in the cited passage: "照应" (to look after, to coordinate), which in other editions is written as "报应" (retribution).

⁸ "Recognition [*anagnōrisis*], as the word itself indicates, it is a change [*metabolē*] from non-knowledge [*a-gno-iā*] to knowledge [*gnō-sis*], heading in the direction of being-near-and-dear [*philiā*] or in the direction of being-not-near-and-dear [*ekhthrā*], in connection with persons who are defined as heading toward good or bad fortune respectively. The most beautiful form of recognition [*anagnōrisis*] is when it happens simultaneously with a reversal, as is the case with the recognition in the *Oedipus*." (1452a 30-4).

⁹ Until the end of chapter eighty, this is the only instance where a main character travels to the Confines.

century literary critic Wang Guowei considers *HLM* “a tragedy of tragedies,”¹⁰ and in my opinion it is through the protagonist’s ignorance of his fate coupled with the audience’s recognition of the catastrophe that the spirit of an Aristotelian tragedy is captured.

From the opening chapter of *HLM* Cao Xueqin blurs the boundary between the real and the unreal, making his story unidentifiable and therefore the recognition impossible. If he is deliberately toning down the autobiographical hue in *HLM* by naming the family Jia (“fake”), then in comparison Thomas Mann is almost molding the Buddenbrook family into his own with an emphasis on its artistic inclination. Similar to the doom in *HLM*, Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* also narrates the story of a family’s decline in a complex plot. The catastrophe, likewise, does not occur in an instant reversal of fortune but rather unfolds gradually in a sequence of events that brings down the Buddenbrook family step by step. In other words, just like the fall of the Jia family in *HLM*, the *Verfall* of the Buddenbrooks is no accident; instead, in each novel the family’s fall is manifested gradually. The story of the Buddenbrooks begins with a dinner gathering in their recently purchased family house on Mengstraße. Already in the very first chapter the author flaunts the luxurious interior of the *Landschaftszimmer* with an overflow of significant details. In the midst of quasi-ostentatious affluence Thomas Mann deliberately implants traces of the *Verfall*:

Im Verhältnis zu der Größe des Zimmers waren die Möbel nicht zahlreich. Der runde Tisch mit den dünnen, geraden und leicht mit Gold ornamentierten

¹⁰ In chapter 3 of “红楼梦评论” (“The Review of *HLM*”) Wang Guowei discusses the aesthetics value of *HLM*, in which he writes, “《红楼梦》与一切喜剧相反, 彻头彻尾之悲剧也。” (“Different from all comedies, *HLM* is a tragedy through and through”; Wang 11; my trans.). He lists three types of tragedies (referring to Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation*) and claims that the tragedy in *HLM* occurs within typical relationships among ordinary characters and therefore is the most tragic of all: “不过通常之道德、通常之人情、通常之境遇为之而已。由此观之, 《红楼梦》者, 可谓悲剧中之悲剧也。” (Wang 13: “It occurs within nothing but common moralities, common relationships, common circumstances. Therefore, *HLM* is the tragedy among tragedies”; my trans.).

Beinen stand nicht vor dem Sofa, sondern an der entgegengesetzten Wand, dem kleinen Harmonium gegenüber, auf dessen Deckel ein Flötenbehälter lag. Außer den regelmäßig an den Wänden verteilten, steifen Armstühlen gab es nur noch einen kleinen Nähtisch am Fenster, und, dem Sofa gegenüber, einen zerbrechlichen Luxus-Sekretär, bedeckt mit Nippes. (Mann 12)

The furniture was not much in proportion to the size of the room. The round table with the thin, straight and lightly gilded legs stood not in front of the sofa but instead against the opposite wall facing a small harmonium, and on its top a flute case lay. Other than the stiff armchairs scattered against the walls in order there was only a small sewing table by the window and, facing the sofa, a fragile and luxurious dresser covered with knickknacks. (my trans.)

What stands out in this paragraph is the mismatch among objects: the small sewing table by the window seems to be out of place in this overly ornate house, especially in its fragility; whereas the expensive dresser is filled with inexpensive little things. The family's prosperity, although reflected by the rich decor of a new mansion, is not meant to be stable. Already in the first chapter Mann makes it clear that a reversal of fortune is not only possible for a family as established as the Buddenbrooks but also destined during their prosperous days.

Likewise, the family's decline is also signaled early in *Buddenbrooks*. Different from a well-structured narrative dimension in *HLM* that explicitly lays down the trajectory of the plot, the foreshadowing is rather obscure in *Buddenbrooks*. In the same *Landschaftszimmer*, a highly allegorized space charged with motifs, music first appears in the form of a harmonium joined by a flute case. As the plot further unfolds, in the perpetual struggle between mercantile and artistic tendencies within the Buddenbrook family, music becomes its cause of ruin by plaguing the fourth (and last) generation—Hanno Buddenbrook, who is not a child of vigor to

begin with. Hanno's feebleness is also anticipated by the yellow tone of the *Landschaftszimmer*, which then blends into the yellow leaves outside the window of the linden trees along the cemetery across the street.¹¹ In other words, by visual extension yellow is connected to the death motif in *Buddenbrooks*. Towards the end of the novel, after playing a duet with his mother, Hanno is left alone for a moment before he returns to the piano and pours all his emotions into an overpowering improvisation.¹² Here, Hanno draws the curtain over the door, leaving the room in "yellowish semidarkness." Thomas Mann's choice of words in this short intermission is no accident. As mentioned above, yellow is the designated color for sickness and decay in *Buddenbrooks*, and here Hanno finds himself standing on the threshold of light and darkness, an indication of his liminal position between life and death, between taking over the family business and caving in to the power of music.

The decline of the Buddenbrook family is constantly foreshadowed in this irreconcilable conflict between the mercantile and the artistic tendencies of its members. When Christian Buddenbrook half-jokingly tells his siblings that being an artist must be wonderful,¹³ he does not realize that the obsession with art would eventually bring down the entire family. In *Buddenbrooks*, music is decadent (*verfallend*) and hence directly connected to the decline (*Verfall*) of the family. To the author, Thomas Mann, Richard Wagner's music encapsulates the core of decadence, and what he refers to as the "Richard-Wagner-Stadt-München," therefore,

¹¹ "Draußen, jenseits der Straße, war schon jetzt, um die Mitte des Oktober, das Laub der kleinen Linden vergilbt, die den Marienkirchhof umstanden." (Mann 12).

¹² "Hanno blieb im Salon zurück. Er trat an die Glastür, die auf die schmale Veranda führte, und blickte ein paar Minuten lang in den aufgeweichten Vorgarten hinaus. Plötzlich aber trat er einen Schritt rückwärts, zog heftig den cremefarbenen Vorhang vor die Tür, so daß das Zimmer in einem *gelblichen Halbdunkel* lag, und ging in Bewegung zum Flügel. Dort stand er abermals eine Weile, und sein Blick, starr und unbestimmt auf einen Punkt gerichtet, verdunkelte sich langsam, verschleierte sich, verschwamm ... Er setzte sich und begann eine seiner Phantasien" (Mann 718; my emphasis).

¹³ "»Ich bin immer sehr häufig in Konzerte gegangen«, sagte er; »ich sehe es gar zu gern, wie die Leute sich mit ihren Instrumenten benehmen! ... Ja, es ist wahrhaftig wunderschön, ein Künstler zu sein!«" (Mann 254).

is where artists find their home. When Tony Buddenbrook moves to Munich after her second marriage, she experiences a serious cultural shock in this southern metropolis:

Übrigens war es nicht diese Formlosigkeit und dieser geringe Sinn für Distanz allein, was ihr fremd und unsympathisch blieb: Sie drang nicht tief in das Münchener Leben und Treiben ein, aber es umgab sie doch die Münchener Luft, die Luft einer großen Stadt, voller Künstler und Bürger, die nichts taten, eine ein wenig demoralisierte Luft, die mit Humor einzuatmen ihre Stimmung ihr oft verwehrte. (Mann 354)

Also it was not just this formlessness and this slight sense of distance that remained strange and unpleasant to her: she did not get deep into the life and goings-on of Munich, yet its air surrounded her, the air of a big city, full of artists and townspeople who were not doing anything, a rather demoralized air that her temperament often forbade her to breathe in with humor. (my trans.)

Tony Buddenbrook, now Frau Permaneder, finds Munich uninhabitable and its air demoralized. She is unable to feel at home in southern Germany—not just for a drastically different lifestyle but also (and more importantly so) for its decadent atmosphere. Munich is a city for artists, including Wagner himself. As a stern Buddenbrook from the north who has not acknowledged her own “inner artist,” Tony is overwhelmed by Munich, with its all-empowering southern flair, which is essentially a pervasive artistic temper that challenges the Hanseatic mercantile ethics. Unlike her two brothers, Thomas and Christian, Tony has not taken a firm stand between commercial and artistic life, and to live in a city of artists would only confuse her moral compass. In her resistance to Munich, Tony is in fact fighting against

the inner artist of a Buddenbrook, a battle that has proven futile and doomed to fail since the very beginning.

Later in *Buddenbrooks*, via Herr Edmund Pfühl's protest against *Tristan und Isolde*, Thomas Mann brings the Wagnerian decadence and the family's struggle with the power of music to surface: "Dies ist das Chaos! Dies ist Demagogie, Blasphemie und Wahnwitz! Dies ist ein parfümierter Qualm, in dem es blitzt! Dies ist das Ende aller Moral in der Kunst!" (Mann 478: This is chaos! This is demagoguery, blasphemy and lunacy! This is a scented fume in which lightening flashes! This is the end of all morals in art!"; my trans.). In response, the musician Gerda Buddenbrook defends Wagner's revolutionary music:

"Seine ungewohnte Art im Gebrauch der Harmonien verwirrt Sie ... Sie finden, im Vergleich damit, Beethoven rein, klar und natürlich. Aber bedenken Sie, wie Beethoven seine nach alter Weise gebildeten Zeitgenossen aus der Fassung gebracht hat ... und Bach selbst, mein Gott, man warf ihm Mangel an Wohlklang und Klarheit vor!... Sie sprechen von Moral ... aber was verstehen Sie unter Moral in der Kunst? Wenn ich nicht irre, ist sie der Gegensatz zu allem Hedonismus? Nun gut, den haben Sie hier. So gut wie bei Bach. Großartiger, bewußter, vertiefter als bei Bach. Glauben Sie mir, Pfühl, diese Musik ist Ihrem innersten Wesen weniger fremd, als Sie annehmen!" (Mann 478-479)

"His unusual way in using the harmonies confuses you ... In comparison to this, you find Beethoven pure, clear and natural. But bear in mind, how Beethoven upset his contemporaries brought up by the old fashion ... and Bach himself, my God, people blamed him for the lack of harmony and clarity! ... You speak of morals ... but what do you know about morals in art? If I am not wrong, isn't it

the opposite of all hedonism? Well, good, you have it here. Just as in Bach.

Greater, more conscious, and more deepening than in Bach. Trust me, Pfühl, this music is less foreign to your inner self than you think!” (my trans.)

Here, although addressed directly to Herr Pfühl, Gerda’s defense in fact is alluding to the suppressed artistic traits within the family that only come to light fully in her son Hanno—art is by no means an unfamiliar phenomenon to the Buddenbrooks. As Aristotle explains in Chapter 15 of the *Poetics*: “[t]here should be nothing that makes-no-sense [= is senseless = is *alogon*] in the things-that-are-being-done [*pragma* plural] (in tragedy)” (1454b 6).¹⁴ The decline of the Buddenbrooks is no accident; moreover, the destructive force of music is an organic part of their fall. The artistic blood in fact flows in the Buddenbrook veins, and Gerda might as well be talking to the “still-ignorant” family members like Tony herself: art is much less foreign to their inner nature than they would choose to believe. Herr Pfühl is persuaded by Gerda and accepts his natural inclination towards Wagner’s new music. As soon as Herr Pfühl starts playing *Liebestod*, the austere church organist can no longer resist this new music that he once referred to as pure chaos and madness. This sudden recognition frightens Herr Pfühl, but in contrast nobody from the Buddenbrook clan is fully able to realize the destructive power of art that will bring the family to its complete ruin.

In this scene, the fourth-generation Hanno Buddenbrook has been a silent observer the whole time. The seven-year-old witnessed Herr Pfühl’s recognition and transformation in that highly intense moment, shaken not by the danger of Wagner’s irresolvable melodies but by the

¹⁴ Also in chapter 24, Aristotle reiterates his point: “Stories [*logos* plural] should not be composed [*sunistasthai*] of parts [*meros* plural] that make-no-sense [= are senseless = are *aloga*], and should have nothing that makes-no-sense [= is senseless = *alogon*], or, if it is to be otherwise [= if there is in fact something that does not make sense to a character], it should be [something that was done] outside the plot [*mūtheuma*], as when Oedipus does not (yet) know how Laios died, and not inside the drama [*drâma*], as in the *Electra*, where the messengers make their narration about the Pythian games, or, as in the *Mysians*, where the silent character arrives from Tegea to Mysia.” (1460a 28-33).

seriousness and profundity of music itself. In this subtly constructed scene that takes place inside Marienkirche, Hanno Buddenbrook, submerged in the decadent notes of Wagner's *Liebestod*, is baptized into the cult of art. It is no coincidence that the Wagnerian "love-death" has become the boy's first lesson of music, as it is in fact a harbinger of his own doom, whose fragile life feeds on his musical obsession. As his mother Gerda says later, with those "Buddenbrook hands" Hanno was born a musician, and the boy himself always knows it.¹⁵ Different from his aunt Tony and his father Thomas, Hanno is aware of his own destiny and, without an inner struggle, opts for the artistic path at the very beginning. In the fourth generation of Buddenbrooks, the family's tragic fall is already evident and irreversible, and different from previous generations, Hanno Buddenbrook does not shy away from music—instead, he embraces this destructive force and the *Verfall* itself. In this sense, the recognition of an Aristotelian tragedy is a more complex component of the plot in the *Buddenbrooks*. In fact, it is not a particular character but the Buddenbrook family as a whole that undergoes a process of recognition, slowly acknowledging and yielding to their artistic side. The moment Hanno becomes aware of his fascination with music upon hearing the *Liebestod*, a simultaneous reversal also takes place. His *love* is leading him and his family to *death*.

Other than members of the family, the Buddenbrook mansion on Mengstraßen also plays an important role in the novel, not only witnessing but also experiencing the family's catastrophe. This house, newly purchased at the beginning of the novel, should have been the testament to the Buddenbrooks' ever-growing power and wealth, as this beaming toast from

¹⁵ Gerda is trying to ask Herr Pfühl to teach Hanno music: "...Und Sie sollen sehen, Sie werden ganz guten Erfolg mit ihm haben. *Er hat die Buddenbrookschen Hände ... Die Buddenbrooks können alle Nonen und Dezimen greifen.*" When Hanno begins his formal musical training, everything is already natural to him: "Kaum war das Erste und Elementarste überwunden, als er schon anfang, in leicht faßlicher Form zu theoretisieren und seinen Schüler die Grundlagen der Harmonielehre sehen zu lassen. *Und Hanno verstand; denn man bestätigte ihm nur, was er eigentlich von jeher schon gewußt hatte.*" (Mann 481; my emphasis).

Herr Jean Jacques Hoffstede to the Buddenbrook household proclaims: “... Keine trübe Zukunft störe / Eures Lebens Fröhlichkeit, / Jeder neue Tag gewähre / Euch stets neue Seligkeit. / Freuen, ja unendlich freuen / Wird mich euer künftig Glück.” (“... May no gloomy future disturb / the happiness of your life, / May every new day grant / you forever new bliss. / Your future happiness, / shall give me endless joy”; Mann 34; my trans.). But as the curtain rises, the audience soon realizes that the story of unending bliss is a tragedy “in the making”—the Buddenbrook family is not on the rise as this witty toast promises. Unlike the Jia family, which is still on the rise in the first third of *HLM*, the Buddenbrooks have already reached their peak when the novel opens. Once a showcase of power and wealth, the Buddenbrooks mansion has become the witness to the family’s gradual decline, including the death of the older generation, Consul Johann Buddenbrook and his wife Elisabeth. The house has quieted down over the years, deserted and lonely like an aging man. Eventually the Buddenbrook mansion is emptied and sold to Consul Hagenström, undergoing its own reversal of fortune from pride to shame:

Kaum aber stand das Haus in der Mengstraße leer, als auch schon eine Schar von Arbeitern am Platze erschien, die das Rückgebäude abzurechen begannen, daß der alte Mörtelstaub die Luft verfinsterte. (Mann 584)

However, the house on Mengstraße was hardly empty when a group of workers showed up and began to demolish the back building, as the old plaster dust clouded the air. (my trans.)

Even the street itself is desolate: “Es fehlte der Chor der »Hausarmen«, die in der Mengstraße Schuhzeug und wollene Sachen in Empfang genommen hatten, und es gab keinen Knabengesang” (“The band of the ‘poor folks of the house’, who had received shoes and

woolens on Mengstraße, was absent, and there was no choirboy singing either”; Mann 583; my trans.). It would be too easy not to recall a drastically different time, the warmest of family memories that is the Buddenbrook Christmas, when the whole family gathered at the grandparents’ home with gifts and Christmas stories. Together they would sing “O Tannenbaum” as they move across the house. It was a happy time then. However, when this traditional German Christmas carol is last heard in *Buddenbrooks*, it is sung in “halber Stimme”—a voice stifled, no longer cheerful, and there is no particular reason for a joyful event.¹⁶ Just as Francesca da Rimini tells Dante in the *Inferno*, “nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria” (*Inf.* V 121-123). There is no greater sorrow than thinking about a time of happiness in misery. Even when the Mengstraße mansion is emptied out after the sale, the family memories cannot be removed like all the furniture. The *tempo felice* that lingers in the Buddenbrook consciousness after their *Verfall* will only evoke more intense pity from the audience of this family tragedy. The Mengstraße house observes the decline of the Buddenbrooks and truthfully reflects the tragic reversal of the family’s fortune according to the Aristotelian model.

Likewise in *HLM*, the rise and fall of the Jia family is also closely connected to the change in their house. In Chapter 16 of the novel, the Jia family receives good news from the Court: their eldest daughter Jia Yuanchun has been promoted to Imperial Consort. As a result, the family plans to build a separate residence for the return visit of their daughter as Emperor’s concubine, who would later name it “大观园” (“the Garden of Broad Vista” and hereafter “the Garden”). It is a residence of pure extravaganza, and its excessive luxury is most striking when

¹⁶ “... und dann ging man, indem man mit halber Stimme die erste Strophe des »O Tannebaum« sang, durch die Zimmerflucht in den großen Saal hinüber. Es lag kein besonderer Grund vor zu freudigen Veranstaltungen. Die Gesichter waren nicht eben glückstrahlend und die Unterhaltung nicht eben heiter bewegt. Worüber sollte man plaudern?” (Mann 583).

seen through the eyes of Granny Liu, an old country woman who claims to be a distant relative of the family. On her second visit, she is invited by Grandmother Jia (Baoyu's grandmother) to have a tour of the Garden, which Granny Liu describes as "ten times better than those pictures"¹⁷ Perhaps even more lavish than the Buddenbrooks' Mengstraßen mansion, since its construction the Garden has witnessed the peak of the family's prosperity. However, it will soon undergo rapid decline, which, as one might speculate, is connected to Yuanchun's loss of favor in the Imperial Court. In Chapter 18, Jia Yuanchun returns to visit her family as the distinguished Imperial Consort, and even she herself (who lives in the grandiose Imperial Palace) is struck by the magnificence of the new Jia family residence:

只见园中香烟缭绕,花彩缤纷,处处灯花相映,时时细乐声喧。说不尽这太平景象,富贵风流。
。 [...] 且说贾妃在轿内看了此园内外如此豪华,因默默叹息奢华过费。(Cao 170)

... she only saw the smoke of incense curling up in the Garden, colorful flowers, lights and flowers reflecting each other everywhere, fine music and loud clamoring all the time. It is impossible to describe this landscape of peace and prosperity in full, the wealth and luxury. [...] So the imperial consort Jia saw this from the inside of her sedan chair and sighed in silence about the lavishness and extravaganza. (my trans.)

¹⁷“我们乡下人到了年下,都上城来买画儿贴,时常闲了,大家都说怎么得到那画儿上去逛逛,想着那个画儿,也不过是假的,那里有这个真地方。谁知我今儿进了这园子一瞧,竟比那画上还强十倍。怎么得有人也照着这个园子画一张,我带了家去,给他们见见,死了也得好处。” (“Our country people always come to the city to buy pictures to put on the wall before the New Year, and whenever we are free, we all talk about how we should go into those pictures and wander around. When you think about it, those pictures are all fake, how can there be a real place like that? But who knows that when I come and see the Garden today, it is ten times better than those pictures? If someone can paint this Garden, I'll bring the picture home and show it them, and then I can die in happiness;” Cao 394-395; my trans.)

Intriguingly, the common 120-chapter edition of the novel leaves out a paragraph in between the passage cited above (marked by brackets and ellipsis in boldface). What is missing is a rare monologue by the Stone addressed directly to the audience:

此时自己回想当初在大荒山中，青埂峰下，那等凄凉寂寞，若不亏癞僧、跛道二人携来到此，又安能得见这般世面。本欲作一篇《灯月赋》、《省亲颂》，以志今日之事，但又恐入了别书的俗套。按此时之景，即作一赋一赞，也不能形容得尽其妙，即不作赋赞其豪华富丽，观者诸公亦可想而知矣。所以倒是省了这工夫纸墨，且说正紧的为是。(Cao 170)

Now when I look back at my time in the Great Void Mountain under Green Ridge Peak, such bleakness and solitude. Had it not been the Buddhist with mangle and the Taoist with a limping foot who brought me here, I would not have seen this spectacle. I wanted to write a *Poem to Lantern and Moon* and an *Ode to Family Visit* to record today's event, but I was afraid that I would get into the set practice of other books. For the scene of here and now, even if composing an ode and a eulogy would not be able to describe its miracle in full; so I shall not compose those to praise its luxury and magnificence. The observers can know by only imagining, which saves my effort, and I shall talk serious business. (my trans.)

The Stone, bearing multiple identities in the novel,¹⁸ for the first (and perhaps the only) time speaks directly to the audience about the drastic contrast between his once bleak life as a stone and now the indescribable prosperity in his reincarnated earthly life. In the Aristotelian model, the Stone goes from poverty to prosperity and eventually returns to his original state

¹⁸ The Stone is the protagonist of the frame story set forth by the author in chapter 1. As a worthless stone wanting to experience life on earth, he is also the understood protagonist of *Dream of the Red Chamber*—Jia Baoyu, who was born with a piece of jade (transformed from the Stone) in his mouth. The name Jia Baoyu can also be understood as “fake precious jade” through homophones, hence he is neither real nor valuable, only a worthless stone. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is also called *Story of the Stone* for this reason.

as a useless stone under Green Ridge Peak, so his reversal of fortune is a more complex one. Continuing with the Aristotelian train of thought, there also seems to be a double plot in the story of the Stone: one for the frame story, the other for the story within. But it is not the double plot described by Aristotle in Chapter 13 of the *Poetics*—one for the good and one for the bad characters—using the example of the *Odyssey*.¹⁹ Instead, the author of *HLM* creates a double plot in the sense of a two-fold reversal in the outer plot and a single reversal in the inner plot. If Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* is a more complex case for one component of the Aristotelian tragedy (recognition), then Cao Xueqin’s *HLM* is a more complex tragedy for its double structure. Without the real ending of *HLM*, we can only speculate what might have happened to the Stone in the end: as the *real* protagonist of the story, the Stone would reappear at the end of the novel after having experienced the reversal of fortune twice—once from his humble life as an abandoned stone to the prosperous earthly life as the young master of a wealthy noble family, but then, with the fall of the family, a fortune again reversed. However, this double-reversal should not be simply interpreted as a return to the origin. The Stone, after his journey to the World of Red Dust and the reversal of fortune, returns to his *real* life as a stone (no longer a piece of “fake jade” as the protagonist’s name indicates), is both the actor and the audience of the tragedy. Following the model of tragedy in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, I might even further argue that in recounting his own story in the World of Red Dust, the Stone is experiencing catharsis through pity and fear evoked by his own catastrophe.²⁰

¹⁹ “Second [most beautiful] is an arrangement [*sustasis*] said to be first by some, which has a double [*diplê*] arrangement [*sustasis*] just like the *Odyssey*, and ends [*teleîn*] in opposite ways for those who are better and for those who are worse.” (1453a 30-3).

²⁰ “Tragedy, then, is a mimesis [*mīmēsis*] of an action [*praxis*] that is serious [*spoudaiā*], complete [*teleiā*], and having magnitude [*megethos*]; with language [*logos*] embellished individually in each of its forms [*eidōs* plural] and in each of its parts [*morion* plural]. It is done by performers [*drōntes*] and not by way of narrative [*apangeliā*], through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] bringing about the purification [*katharsis* = catharsis] of such emotions [*pathēmata*].” (1449b 23-28).

In *HLM*, the peak of prosperity occurs on the first Lantern Festival celebration depicted in Chapter 18 when Yuanchun returns home as Imperial Consort to the newly-built Garden. The Mid-Autumn Festival—another holiday for family reunion—becomes an ill omen of its separation, echoing a line from the oracular song “The Burden of Craft” in Chapter 5: “The prosperous family with people living in peace will end in the death of the family with everyone fleeing on his own.” Moreover, as envisioned in the last song, “The Flying Birds Each Seek the Woods,” after the fall of the Jia family all family members will fly away like birds, leaving their nest abandoned. The “white ground” in the song is a metaphor for the Jia family after its fall, empty of both wealth and status; more physically speaking, it is also alluding to the Garden, which will be deserted or even destroyed completely. In contrast with the family’s pinnacle of fortune in Chapter 18, where the entire Garden gleams in full splendor, the Mid-Autumn Festival in Chapter 75 indicates the very end of family joy and the very last family reunion in the Garden.²¹ Throughout this celebration, many details imply that the family will soon fall apart. Even the supposedly cheerful family dinner becomes inauspicious, as their dwindling wealth is revealed through the lack of rice:

因见伺候添饭的手内捧着一碗下人的米饭，尤氏吃的仍是白杭饭，贾母问道：“你怎么昏了，盛这个饭来给你奶奶？”那人道：“老太太的饭完了，今日添了一位姑娘，所以短了些。”鸳鸯道：“如今都是可着头做帽子了，要一点儿富余也不能的。”王夫人忙回道：“这一二年旱潦不定，田上的米都不能按数交的。这几样细米更艰难了，所以都是可着吃的多少关去，生恐一时短了，买的不顺口。” (Cao 782-3)

²¹ This may also well be the very last family gathering at all. In chapter 13, before dying the spirit of Qin Keqing sent an omen to Wang Xifeng in a dream that foretells the destiny of the Jia family. She left with two final lines: “三春去后诸芳尽，各自须寻各自门” (“After three springs all flowers will wither / Everyone needs to seek his own door”). A common interpretation of this prophecy is that the Jia family will fall to the ground after three years.

Since she saw the one who serves rice has a bowl of rice for the servant in hand, and Madame You is still eating round-grained rice, Grandmother Jia asks: “Are you mad, serving this rice to your mistress?” That person replies: “Madame, your rice is finished, and we have an extra young lady today. That’s why we are short.” Yuanyang says, “Nowadays we have to cut the cloth out of our head to make the hat, no leftovers at all.” Lady Wang replies immediately, “These past two years because of floods and droughts, the farms can’t even meet the quota, not to mention these types of fine rice, so we only request as much as we need. We are afraid that if we are short, the rice we buy outside would not be to our taste.” (my trans.)

Even on a holiday, there is not enough rice for everybody at dinner, and Lady Wang’s words about the farms also reveal the family’s declining wealth. Moreover, with the last sentence from Lady Wang the author also seems to suggest that in the end, after the family’s fall, all the remaining members will even struggle to get any food at all, even the kind that “is not to their taste.” Despite the shortage of rice and lack of family members, this Mid-Autumn dinner goes on in a rather joyful mood. In the end, Grandmother Jia looks at the dinner table and says, “可见天下事总难十全” (“This shows nothing can ever be perfect in this world”; Cao 791; my trans.). If only mildly, Grandmother Jia—the oldest living member of the family—is lamenting the incompleteness on a holiday that celebrates the opposite.²² It is an ill omen indeed, as the first half title of this chapter suggests “开夜宴异兆发悲音” (“At the Night Banquet an Unusual Sign Utters a Sad Sound”). Even the title of the following chapter that depicts the second half of the same night is in complete reverse, departing from the propitious festivity: “凸碧堂品笛感凄清凹

²² Mid-Autumn Festival, also known as the Moon Festival, is a time when the whole family gathers to watch the full moon. The word for “round” in Chinese is also homophone with “reunion” and “perfection.” Hence it is a holiday that celebrates completeness.

晶馆联诗悲寂寞” (“At Convex Emerald Hall They Feel Sad Hearing the Flute; At Concave Crystal Hall They Grieve for Solitude Writing a Poem”). Chapter 76 continues with the night by following the activities of two female protagonists, Daiyu and Xiangyun, who stay to watch the moon and write a long poem by the pond together. The most famous verse of their long poem improvised in the desolate Garden is the last one, breathtakingly beautiful but also staggeringly ghostly: “寒塘渡鹤影, 冷月葬花魂” (“The chilly pool ferries the stork’s shadow / The cold moon buries the flower’s soul”). The tone of this poem that strongly conflicts with the family reunion would make any reader shiver. On this night of full moon, what remains in the Garden is nothing but a shadow and a soul, bereft of life and body. From warm to cold, from reunion to separation, throughout the night of the last Mid-Autumn Festival the reversal of fortune is once again manifested and the fall foreshadowed in an Aristotelian model.

Like the family itself, the Garden, too, begins to disintegrate towards the end of the eighty chapters. There have already been problems of “mismanagement” that lead to stealing, smuggling and gambling among servants in the Garden. All the trivia adds up and altogether plays a role in the decline of the Jia family as a whole. On the other hand, these problems within the Garden also indicate that the fall of the family comes from the inside. In Chapter 74, there is a search of the Garden led by Lady Wang. This hostile action is driven by her suspicion of flippant maids around her son Baoyu and is further stirred up by servants from different interest groups. It is plausible that this “inside raid” is only prelude to an actual raid organized by the Imperial Court that would eventually bring the Jia family down from the outside. It is worth noticing that the mirroring Zhen family happens to be in deep trouble at that very moment when Lady Wang is conducting the search of the Garden in the Jia family. As Tanchun (Baoyu’s half-sister) sarcastically points out when her room is being searched:

“你们别忙，自然你们抄的日子有呢！你们今日早起不曾议论甄家，自己家里好好的抄家，果然今日真抄了！咱们也渐渐的来了。可知这样大族人家，若从外头杀来，一时是杀不死的。这可是古人曾说的百足之虫，死而不僵，必须先从家里自杀自灭起来，才能一败涂地呢！”

(Cao 773)

“Don’t you hurry, there will definitely be a day when you are raided too! Weren’t you talking about the Zhen family earlier today, how they raided their own house out of the blue? Now they are being raided for real! Our turn is also coming, slowly. Don’t you know that a big family like this cannot be killed at once from the outside? This is just like how old saying goes: a centipede is not stiff even when it dies. Our family has to be killed from the inside in order to be fully destroyed!” (my trans.)

Tanchun is the sharpest among the female characters in *HLM* and the most candid one also, for as a daughter outside the direct line of descent she can often express her opinions without reservation.²³ Tanchun’s comment about the “inside raid” is a revelation of an inside decline of the Jia family—its most deadly catastrophe is not imposed by an external force; rather, the family declines and decays from *within*. These words from Tanchun are mere sarcasm evoked by antagonism and rage, but the ongoing power struggles within the Jia family may well lead to an ending of the kind she describes. In this sense, the structure of their fall is reminiscent of the suffering according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which is the third element of the plot. “But when (negative) experiences [*pathos* plural] occur in relationships-of-nearness-and-dearness [*philiā* plural] to one another, as when a brother kills or intends to kill a brother, or a son his father,

²³ Jia Tanchun is presented as the third girl in the Jia clan, after Yuanchun (Imperial Consort), Yingchun, and followed by Xichun. She is the daughter of Jia Zheng (hence sister of Baoyu and Yuanchun), but her biological mother is not Lady Wang but Dame Chao, a concubine of Jia Zheng.

or a mother her son, or a son his mother—or if anyone else does [*drân*] any other such thing—this is what needs to be sought after [by the maker of tragedy]” (1453b 19-22). Although no familial murder has occurred within the Jia clan yet, there are indeed attempts—notably in Chapter 25, when Dame Zhao²⁴ attempts to kill both Baoyu and Xifeng²⁵ with demonic tricks. Following the logic of the plot, one might speculate that after eighty chapters someone within the family would conspire against Baoyu and Xifeng (and even the ones close to them). In this presumed attack the consequences would be more serious and destructive, directly contributing to the family’s eventual fall, because both Baoyu and Xifeng are crucial to the survival of the Jia clan. Even in the episode of the “inside raid” in Chapter 74, the conflicts within the family are already evident: between masters, between servants, between masters and their servants. Tanchun’s reaction to the raid is tolling the death bell for her family, signaling once again the sufferings and catastrophe that await.

There is also enough reason to believe that the destruction of the Zhen family foreshadows that of the Jia family, which will contribute to the complete fall of the Jia family. The two families are not only connected by their mirroring names (*zhen-jia*, real-unreal) but also by their shared political and financial interests.²⁶ Following the logic of this story, their declines, too, should be closely linked. In the chapter following the search within the Jia family, the

²⁴ Dame Zhao is Jia Zheng’s concubine, a marginalized character in the story craving for real power in the family. She has a son and a daughter (Tanchun), who are Baoyu’s half siblings but unable to inherit the family wealth or title like Baoyu.

²⁵ Wang Xifeng, a powerful female character in *HLM*, manages the family from the inside. Therefore, she is often loathed by marginal family members who have no actual power. Xifeng is married to Jia Lian (she is also niece of Lady Wang). Baoyu is seen as the heir to the family’s title, whereas Xifeng is the one managing the family’s wealth.

²⁶ For instance, in Chapter 16 when members of the Jia family are planning to build the Garden, it is briefly mentioned that there is a significant sum of their money kept by the Zhen family, and they can use part of it to furnish the Garden. From this detail the unusual tie between these two families is implied.

recent catastrophe of the Zhen family is further disclosed, when the nurses dissuade Madame You from paying a visit to Lady Wang:

“奶奶且别往上房去，才有甄家的几个人来，还有些东西，不知是作什么机密事。奶奶这一去恐怕不便。”尤氏听了道：“昨日听见你爷说，看邸报甄家犯了罪，现今抄没家事，调取进京治罪。怎么又有人来？”老嬷嬷道：“正是呢。才来了几个女人，气色不成气色，慌慌张张的，想必有什么瞒人的事情，也是有的。” (Cao 779)

“Madam, don’t go there yet. A few people from Zhen family just came by with some items. I don’t know what secret they have. It might be an inconvenient time to go.” Madam You heard this and said, “Yesterday I heard your master say that according to the *Court Paper* Zhen family is incriminated. Now all their property is confiscated, and the family is taken to the capital to be punished. How come there are still their people coming here?” The old nanny said, “Exactly. The women who came by just now looked all pale and flustered. There must be something stealthy going on.” (my trans.)

With the mirroring relationship between these two families, it is fair to predict that the Garden of the Jia family will also be raided by people from the “outside,” and all their properties will be confiscated, everyone related to the Jia clan punished. The interlocking destinies between these two families in *HLM* are reminiscent of the “double structure” that Aristotle describes in Chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, but depart from it in essence: “Second [most beautiful] is an arrangement [*sustasis*] said to be first by some, which has a double [*diplê*] arrangement [*sustasis*] just like the *Odyssey*, and ends [*teleîn*] in opposite ways for those who are better and for those who are worse” (1453a 31-33). Different from the *Odyssey* in the Aristotelian model, the declines of the two families in *HLM* are similar—one serves as the

preamble to the other, the *real* for the *unreal*. The story of decline in *HLM* involves two families, but the structure of the plot is not double as the one found in the *Odyssey*. Instead, according to the Aristotelian model, the structure of Cao Xueqin's novel is singular, as it addresses one and only one issue that is the fall of the family. The structure of *HLM* is complex but not double: it is built on a frame story (the Stone) with a two-fold catastrophe that introduces the main story, in which a single plot is shared by two families, and with this mirroring effect the *Verfall* is dramatized. The unity of this complex plot may be recognized by Aristotle as the best kind according to chapter 13 of the *Poetics*.²⁷

Although the trajectory of the Jia family's ultimate catastrophe is already set in place within 80 chapters, the actual denouement of *HLM* is a mystery. In this sense, it remains a tragedy without resolution. In *Buddenbrooks*, the ending testifies its subtitle—*Verfall einer Familie*. In the final chapter Frau Permaneder, the observer and survivor of the Buddenbrook decline, weeps for her family's tragic fall at the death of her nephew Hanno:

“Hanno, kleiner Hanno,” fuhr Frau Permaneder fort, und die Tränen flossen über die flaumige, matte Haut ihrer Wangen ... “Tom, Vater, Großvater und die anderen alle! Wo sind sie hin? Man sieht sie nicht mehr. Ach, es ist so hart und traurig!” (Mann 729)

“Hanno, little Hanno,” Frau Permaneder continued, and the tears flowed all over the soft and weary skin of her cheeks ... “Tom, father, grandfather and all

²⁷ “So, it is necessary for a plot [*mūthos*] that is well-constructed to be simple [*haploûs*] rather than double [*diploûs*] (which is what some people say it should be), and to change [*metaballein*] not to good fortune [*eutukhiā*] from bad fortune [*dustukhiā*] but the opposite, from good fortune [*eutukhiā*] to bad fortune [*dustukhiā*], not through depravity [*mokhthēriā*] but through a great error [*hamartiā*] of a person such as the one we have described, or of a better person rather than a worse one.” (1453a 12-16).

the others! Where did they go? People can no longer see them. Alas, it is so hard and sad!” (my trans.)

The death of Hanno is the finale of the Buddenbrook *Verfall*, which leaves the family with no heir and no future to continue. Tony herself, having lived through two failed marriages, is the sufferer of her own catastrophe which is also inseparable from that of her family's. Tony's survival perhaps only exacerbates her desolation, making her the true tragic hero of the novel. In a sense she is comparable to the protagonist of *HLM*,²⁸ and Baoyu's personal meditation in Chapter 78 captures the pathos of the imminent doom that slowly sinks into the protagonist's consciousness: “大约园中之人, 不久都要散的了” (“Perhaps people within the Garden will all go away soon”; Cao 822; my trans.). It is not an immediate recognition of reversal as *Oedipus* experiences in Sophocles's tragedy. Here, the tone is more melancholic than frightening, more pitiful than shocking. As mentioned earlier, during Baoyu's visit to the Confines, he disregards the enlightenment of his own fate. However, as the story progresses the signs of the family's decline trickle out. It slowly dawns on him that everything in his life is falling apart, and life in the end offers nothing but disillusionment, which is already spelled out at the very beginning of *HLM*, as the Stone desires to enjoy the pleasure and wealth in the World of Red Dust:

“那红尘中有却有些乐事, 但不能永远依恃, 况又'美中不足, 好事多魔'八个字紧相连属, 瞬息间则又乐极悲生, 人非物换; 究竟是到头一梦, 万境归空。到不如不去的好。” (Cao 2)

“Although there is pleasure in the World of Red Dust, its eternity cannot be relied on. Then these two proverbs are also connected, ‘there is imperfection in beauty, fortune is filled with misfortunes.’ In an instant, misery can arise from

²⁸ Based on the logic of Cao Xueqin's construction of the plot, in the end Jia Baoyu would also remain the only survivor after his family's fall.

the utmost happiness. People change, and things too. In the end it is just a dream, and all circumstances will return to the void. You'd rather not go." (my trans.)

The words from the Buddhist monk and the Taoist priest are not only a warning to Baoyu but also the thesis of *HLM*. In the transience of prosperity and the dreamlike nature of life the essence of an Aristotelian tragedy is laid out. It is a story about the change of things and of people, about the reversal of fortune from prosperity to adversity. Even so, the protagonist's recognition of the catastrophe in *HLM* is different from that of Oedipus after receiving the news from the Corinthian messenger. Instead, near the end Baoyu is more disillusioned with life than shocked by the fate of his family. It might as well be a dream.

Despite a popular reading of *HLM* as a romantic story, the core of the plot has never diverted from the catastrophe, as readers of the novel are constantly reminded as the story progresses. Perhaps Tony Buddenbrook is not so very different from Baoyu. Both characters, having survived the family's *Verfall*, look back and reflect on the time of happiness in great despair. With the impending catastrophe, Baoyu composes an elegy in Chapter 78 that "pre-mourns" the doom of his family.²⁹ At the very end of *Buddenbrooks*, Tony questions her own faith in the face of her family's tragic decline:

"Ja, so sagt man ... Ach, es gibt Stunden, Friederike, wo es kein Trost ist, Gott strafe mich, wo man irre wird an der Gerechtigkeit, an der Güte ... an allem. Das Leben, wißt ihr, zerbricht so manches in uns, es läßt so manchen Glauben zuschanden werden ... Ein Wiedersehen ... Wenn es so wäre ..." (Mann 729)

²⁹ At the death of the maid Qingwen Baoyu composed a long elegy entitled "芙蓉女儿誄" ("Elegy for the Hibiscus Lady") which is often interpreted as a pre-elegy for his beloved Lin Daiyu and for the ultimate fall of his family.

“Yes, so people say ... Alas! There are times, Friederike, when there is no solace. May God punish me, when people have doubts about justice, about kindness ... about all this. Life, you know, shatters so many things inside us, making many beliefs crash ... Looking back ... If it would be so.” (my trans.)

This is the ultimate disillusionment of life seen through a Schopenhauerian filter. *If* Tony were to hear the words from the Buddhist monk and the Taoist priest in the first chapter of *HLM*, perhaps she would understand that life in this world is a tragic experience. Yet Thomas Mann did not conclude *Buddenbrooks* on a completely pessimistic note. What he achieves by capturing Tony in the deepest of her suffering as a conqueror against her own reason is revolutionary:

Sie stand da, eine Siegerin in dem guten Streite, den sie während der Zeit ihres Lebens gegen die Anfechtungen von seiten ihrer Lehrerinnenvernunft geführt hatte, bucklig, winzig und bebend vor Überzeugung, eine kleine, strafende, begeisterte Prophetin. (Mann 729)

She stood there, a winner in the good fight—which during the time of her life she led against the temptation of her inner reason—hunchbacked, tiny and quavery before certitude. A small, chastising and excited prophet. (my trans.)

There, Tony Buddenbrook remains a *Prophetin*, the ultimate tragic heroine, having endured the reversal of fortune and overcome the adversity of life. We can only speculate what might happen to the protagonist of *HLM* when he returns to his life under the Green Ridge Peak as a stone after having experienced the tragic fall of his earthly family. In the end, the resolution to both *HLM* and *Buddenbrooks* is not the death of all but the survival of a lonely one, grieving for the irreversible fall and recounting irretrievable happiness like a tragic hero. Through the

Aristotelian lens, the fall of both the Jia family and the Buddenbrooks could be viewed as variations of a catastrophe foretold, fictionalized, and reenacted. Among the spectators, through recognition (or the lack thereof) these stories could even evoke fear and pity, because the plot of each inevitable *Verfall* is reminiscent of the Aristotelian model of catastrophe and, if traced to the core, perhaps not that distant from the spirit of tragedy in the *Poetics*.

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