ABSTRACT

Among the galaxy of contemporary Chinese writers, Shen Congwen (沈从文, 1902-1988) is certainly one of the greatest. He was a prolific writer who captured a great diversity of subject matters in his creative writings.

One aspect of his creative writings is that many of his protagonists eventually meet with untimely and tragic death. Many critics have noticed such tragic endings, but to date, there has been no systematic study available. This dissertation therefore aims to provide a systematic and synthesis study of the various stories with such a structure. A number of such stories are selected for careful scrutiny. The main focus of this study is to analyse the death of the protagonists and its thematic significance.

Four major themes have been derived from the tragic endings of his fictional characters. In some stories, the death of the protagonists implies the deterioration of the beauty of humanity and the erosion of the simple, honest, and rural lifestyle in the countryside. Shen Congwen who claimed to be a countryman himself earnestly hoped for a revival of such a simple, natural, honest mode of being. In several other stories, the protagonists' death demonstrates the author's criticism of the vulgar, instrumental and vile urban lifestyle. His detest is strong, though it is usually subtly expressed. In addition, there is the depiction of sudden death of the characters in other stories, which suggests the unpredictability and uncertainty of life. Last but not least, the author also praises the protagonists' strong devotion to true love in some of his romantic stories.

As can be seen, the death of the protagonists has important implications. Hence, death in his fiction is certainly worthy of our careful perusal.