

# A Comparative Study of “tree” in The Apple Tree and Hawthorn Tree Forever

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the love tragedies in The Apple Tree and Hawthorn Tree Forever which take place, develop, and come to an end under the “tree”. Through the clue of the two stories – “tree”, we can have a glimpse of the development of the love. The apple flower and hawthorn in spring are related to hope and love. The two lovers show love, express love, as well as end love under the tree. With the flowers faded, their love also comes to an end. Through the comparative study of the “tree” in the two stories, the tragic results are foreshadowed. The characteristic of the protagonists is certainly one of the reasons for the tragedies. However, the characteristics are shaped by the society to some extent. From the social background, we can get some clues.

**Keywords:** Comparative Study; Tree; Love Tragedy; The Apple Tree; Hawthorn Tree Forever

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on a comparative study of “tree” in the two stories The Apple Tree and Hawthorn Tree Forever.

The Apple Tree, written by John Galsworthy – “one of the most prominent of 20th century realistic English writers” (Wu Weireng 350), is one of his most anthologized short stories. Frank Ashurst, a college student, goes to the countryside in spring. He meets, makes love to, and proposes to a beautiful Welsh farm girl named Megan under the apple tree. However, the man betrays their love the next day, and falls in love with another girl, Stella, who becomes his wife later. Without having her lover come back, Megan drowns herself in the pool under the apple tree.

At Ashurst’s silver wedding day, he comes back by accident. All are same, but Megan, and “the apple tree, the singing and the gold” (Galsworthy 115) have gone.

Also at the beginning of The Apple Tree, there is the quotation: “The Apple-tree, the singing and the gold.” from Hippolytus of Euripides:

Hippolytus is most pure in his heart, reverencing chiefly Artemis the Maiden, Goddess of the Chase, and utterly contemning the worship of Aphrodite. Wherefore the wrath of the Queen of Love is kindled against him, and she makes Phaedra, his father’s young wife falls in love with him. Even though he has rejected her, his father does not believe him. He is expelled and killed on the way.

Hippolytus of Euripides is a tragedy. So at the beginning of The Apple Tree, the author has shown it is a love tragedy.

Hawthorn Tree Forever is also a love tragedy which takes places during the Cultural Revolution in China. In order to respond “build classroom in the fields, City K sends an Education Revolution Team to edit a new textbook in Xi Ping Village” (Ai Mi 1).

Jing Qiu, as a member of the team, goes there. She develops love with Sun Jianxin, often called Third. Hawthorn, as the clue of the story, witnesses the development of their love. Hearing the song of hawthorn tree, they meet each other; the hawthorn tree makes them closer; and Third is buried under the hawthorn tree.

Jing Qiu, the offspring of a landowner, stands for the lower class in the society at that time, while Third, son of the chief of a military area, represents the upper class. The social background and their characteristics are reasons for the tragedy.

The “tree”, included in the title of the two stories, is the clue of the two stories. We can get the whole story through the “tree”. Through studying the image of “tree” in the two stories, we can have the whole understanding how their loves develop, how the authors imply the tragedies, what leads to the tragedies and learn to analyze a novel through the typical image.

## 2. A comparative study of the “tree” in the two stories and in classics

### 2.1. The image of the “tree” in the two stories

#### 2.1.1. *The image of the “tree” in The Apple Tree*

Looking into the wild spring in the country side, the apple trees in *The Apple Tree* come into our sight. There is “an old orchard of apple trees” on the farm. The orchard is a place where we can enjoy beautiful flowers and maybe sweet fruits, which implies Ashurst and Megan’s love will begin here in this kind of atmosphere. The orchard of apple trees is a closed setting, separated from the outside world, and only in this kind of atmosphere can their love be reasonable. During Ashurst’s staying on the farm, the author has described the apple trees fantastically, because the author “used some carefully-chosen details that were significant in showing the nature of the characters and the specific atmosphere of that moment”. With the development of the plot, the trees become more attractive, and the lovers are more excited.

Gradually the author stops the shot on a big apple, “lowest in the orchard, grew so close that its boughs almost overhung the water” Ashurst cleans himself in the pool under the apple tree, undoubtedly so does Megan before.

The apple trees in *The Apple Tree* are just ordinary trees, but the author relates them to the love story, giving the symbolic meaning to the apple tree.

#### 2.1.2. *The image of the “tree” in Hawthorn Tree Forever*

Just like the apple trees in *The Apple Tree*, the hawthorn tree in *Hawthorn Tree Forever* exists realistically. “Looking at the hawthorn tree from the long distance, it is not special, even without any flower”. The color of the tree emphasizes its role for revolution. “Third accompanies Jing Qiu to the Xi Ping Village that night and under the hawthorn tree”, they shows love to each other. And then Third gives her knitting wool of hawthorn red and hawthorn flowers, all are related to hawthorn tree (flower), as well as their love.

There is another hawthorn tree in *Hawthorn Tree Forever* that is a song called “hawthorn tree”. It is from Soviet Union, telling a story that “Two youths fall in love with the same girl, but the girl, unknowing which one to choose, goes to ask the hawthorn tree” which is still about love. The song just like the prelude or the match-maker draws the two lovers closer.

### 2.2. The symbolic meaning of the “tree” in the classics

#### 2.2.1. *The apple tree in Greek mythology and Bible*

Apples appear in many religious traditions and myths. In Greek mythology, what is the most famous about apple is “the apple of Discord”. Hao Peng gives us a brief introduction of the story:

Excluded from the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the Goddess of discord becomes angry. In retaliation, she tosses a golden apple for the most beautiful woman among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Paris of Troy is appointed to select the recipient. Aphrodite tempts him with the most beautiful woman in the world. The primitive instinct of the boy is moved and he awards the apple to Aphrodite, thus indirectly causing the Trojan War.

Atalanta, also of Greek mythology, raced all her suitors in an attempt to avoid marriage. Hippomenes knew that he could not win in a fair race, so he used three golden apples, gifts of Aphrodite, to distract Atalanta. It took all three apples and all of his speed, but Hippomenes was finally successful, winning the race and Atalanta’s hand.

In the meantime, in western literary works, “apple” is often regarded as forbidden fruit. We know the larynx in the human throat has been called “Adam’s apple” because of a notion that “it is caused by the forbidden fruit sticking in the throat of Adam”.

Through all of these, we know the apple has been a symbol of love and sexual seduction, which can help us gain love, but also brings disasters sometimes.

#### 2.2.2. *The hawthorn tree in Greek mythology and folklores*

Hawthorn trees are very common, not as outstanding as apples in people’s minds. Nevertheless, there are still some mythologies and folklores from which we can learn about hawthorn trees.

The hawthorn shows “the winter is over and spring is at hand”. In ancient Greece, the hawthorn has been regarded as “the emblem of

hope, and its branches are stated to have been carried by the ancient Greeks in wedding processions, and to have been used by them to deck the altar of Hymenaios” .

Besides the Greek mythology, there is also a piece of folklore about the hawthorn tree in ancient China. Here is the story:

A beautiful girl calls Shi Liu, living at the foot of a mountain in Shan Dong province and she falls in love with a youth called Bai Jing. Unfortunately, the emperor is attracted by her beauty, and forces her to be his lover. After that, Bai Jing runs after her to the South Mount, waiting for her at the peak of the mountain day and night. At last, he becomes a tree. In the meanwhile, Shi Liu runs away from the emperor and finds the tree into which Bai Jing has turned. Her heart breaks into pieces, and also turns to a tree bearing small red fruits which people call “Shi Liu”. Hearing the news, the emperor orders to cut down the tree, and calls it “Shan Zha” meaning dreg in the mountain. However, people love the brave “Shi Liu”, so call her “Shan Zha ”. From these we know that hawthorn trees, just like the apple trees, are related to hope, love and marriage.

### **3. Reasons for the love tragedies**

#### **3.1. Turbulent social backgrounds**

##### *3.1.1. Crisis of belief at the beginning of the 20th-century Britain*

The writers indirectly expose the negative aspects of the society which lead to the love tragedies. We can understand it better from the understanding of the society at that time.

The Apple Tree is finished in 1916 and published in 1918, a product of the World War I. Before that, “Great powers in the world are involved in wars for larger lands, stepping from capitalism to imperialism”. What is worse, the first historic event in the new century is that Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901. “With the death of Queen Victoria came not only the weakening of the Victorian values, but also the economic and political decline of the whole state”. All of these make the Britain society turbulent. So the upper class in Britain confirms “the social system is peaceful and stable in Victorian time”, and advocates lower class should obey to the higher class.

In The Apple Tree, Ashurst comes from the upper class, so he is bourgeois in his bone and that is why he feels very comfortable in the atmosphere of some old walled-in English garden, while Megan, who is just a country girl, grows up in the orchard of apple trees. Their love is not fair on the base, just like Phaedra’ love to Hippolytus – a stepmother’s love to the son in Hippolytus.

However, the new generation, like Ashurst in the story, grows up in Victorian time. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Victorian time is over and the Great Britain is stepping into a new time, with more problems, conflicts emerging, which breeds a spirit of rebellion and despair, so A. C. Ward says “youths in the new generation criticize the former age, for it is hypocritical, superficial and stupid”. In the meanwhile, they want to pursue something new and exciting.

Ashurst makes a fictional paradise – the orchard of the apple trees in The Apple Tree to run away from the civilized society and look for the best things in his life. It is in the orchard of the apple trees, the closed setting that the love between Ashurst and Megan is reasonable. “It was certainly different from any spring he had ever known, for spring was within him, not without”. The countryside, the spring in the countryside, and the girl in the countryside are all new to him, so he is attracted by her at the first sight, and falls in love with her crazily. “The outside world – the civilized society always affects, even disturbs the closed setting, and then series of conflicts take place, the tragedy at last”. Once the innocent girl is captured, Ashurst is dragged back to the civilized society.

Ashurst, a representative of the upper class, always “exposes the conflicts and decadence of the bourgeoisie from itself”. Ashurst, who wants something exciting, but can not resist the temptation of the past, is a bourgeoisie in miniature, so he can not enjoy the best things in his life.

##### *3.1.2. Suppression of feelings during The Cultural Revolution in China*

The love story in Hawthorn Tree Forever takes place in 1974 which is during the Cultural Revolution in China. The whole story and the protagonists are deeply affected by the society. We can get some clues of the love tragedy from observing the society at that time.

The Cultural Revolution, taking place in China from 1966 through to 1976, is a social movement to further cement socialism by removing capitalist elements from Chinese society. During the Cultural Revolution, the state institutes a policy known as “the Down to the

Countryside Movement” . Young people from the cities are moved to the countryside, unable to receive all forms of normal education. The scientists, the intellectuals and the technocrats who have served the progress of the society and made valuable contributions in different ways receive unfair treatment.

We can imagine people’s feelings are suppressed and they are afraid to express them in this situation.

In Hawthorn Tree Forever, Third and Jing Qiu have become the victims of the age. They stand for different classes in the society, and their thoughts are affected by the society and the classes they belong to. Third has a dominant position in the society because of his family background, while Jing Qiu thinks to be inferior in her heart, so she is very careful about her behavior.

We can explore some hints of the society from Jing Qiu. On one hand, she does not believe Third will fall in love with her, and she is shameful because of her family background, from here we can see Jing Qiu is deeply affected by the thoughts of classes in the society. On the other hand, she is an adolescent girl, but nothing or nobody she can refer to, which leads to Jing Qiu’s foolish about love and misunderstandings to Third.

## 3.2. Characteristics of the protagonists

### 3.2.1. Impulsive Ashurst and passive Third

John Galsworthy, the author of *The Apple Tree*, is “a skillful and prolific short-story writer” . He pays much attention to the characters in the story, “Describing the characters vividly is the key point to make the novel valuable for a long time”. From his vivid description, we can observe the protagonists in full aspects, from which reasons for the love tragedy can be seen more clearly.

First, Ashurst, the hero in *The Apple Tree*, is vainglorious and hypocritical, keeping the class consciousness deeply in his heart.

Ashurst, growing up in the walled-in garden, is proud to be English. He stands for the upper class in the society, so he looks down upon Joe who is a country youth, or a “clods”. He always thinks himself to be chivalrous to protect the country girl. The chivalry is something out of date, which represents the upper class’s memory for Victorian era. In his opinion, to be chivalrous was to show sympathy and pity, so when he harms Megan every time, he will feel remorseful. All these show that he is vainglorious and hypocritical.

Second, he is impulsive, and afraid to carry on responsibility.

When he pursues Megan on the farm, “I’ve done it” has been mentioned many times, from which we can imagine he just wants to enjoy the excitement, without thinking too much of the results. Tempted by the wild spring, the charming night, and the marvelous apple flowers, he accepts her love, declares his own, but abandons her at last. At the ending part of the story, he also puts the blame on the spring and that the Goddess of love – Aphrodite is seeking a victim. Certainly, Ashurst, just like Hippolytus in the Greek mythology becomes the victim of Aphrodite, and loss the best things in his life – “the apple tree, the singing and the gold” .

Third, the hero in *Hawthorn Tree Forever* is on the contrary of Ashurst. He is almost a perfect man in the novel, with fine background, handsome appearance.

First, he can respect himself, and then show respect and love to others.

He had no prejudice to the lower class, like Mr. Zhang’s family, Jing Qiu. Besides he always does things for Jing Qiu sincerely, even though she often makes some mistakes. He is ready to protect his lover wherever and whenever. “Love is considerate care to lover’s life and growth, which means responsibility, respect and understanding” . However, Third always gives and just waits for Jing Qiu, which makes himself kind of passive, so until his death, Jing Qiu does not call his name. This is also part of the tragedy.

Second, he is brave and confident about the future.

When Jing Qiu is anxious about her family background, Third brings hope for her, letting her believe there will be some changes. He makes many predictions, which almost come true.

He is a brave man, without following the society’s rules, and has a rational understanding about the politics. Third is not only a lover, but also a torchbearer in Jing Qiu’s life. He gives what he could give, though Jing Qiu has never called his name. He is kept in her heart forever.

In a word, the two heroes in the two love stories have different characteristics: Ashurst in *The Apple Tree* is typical bourgeois, while

Third in Hawthorn Tree Forever, is unselfish, which is perfect at that time. To some extent, they are shaped by the society.

### 3.2.2. *Loyal Megan and brave Jing Qiu*

Besides the heroes, the heroines also play important roles in the development of the stories.

Megan is the heroine in *The Apple Tree*. The author of it – John Galsworthy has been described like this “He is often a blatant sentimentalist, particularly when it comes to portraying women or the poor. His women are almost always self-sacrificing sufferers”. Megan is pure, and kind-hearted, which the city, the upper class lacks. However, this new thing couldn’t last long in that society.

“I could not help loving you. I want to be with you – that’s all”, from this we can see the pure country girl is brave to find her lover by overcoming difficulties. As a country girl, she is willing to kiss Ashurst’s feet, and thinks it is not to her he should beg pardon, from which we can see she feels inferior to him and she is always the one who gives, and self-sacrificing suffer. However, she chooses to die under the apple tree to make their happy time forever, and she is not brave enough to pursue the happy life without Ashurst, but it is this that shows her loyalty to love.

Another pure girl – Jing Qiu is the heroine in *Hawthorn Tree Forever*, who reminds people of some wonderful memory about their love, and people nowadays yearn for pure love. But some of her characteristics brought some regret.

Jing Qiu always hesitates to respond to Third’s love, which shows that people are debarred from expressing their emotion. Jing Qiu is the representative at that time. She has to be very careful about her behavior. Her mother’ concept about love also misleads her so that she thinks that it is not appropriate for man and woman sitting together, and her nonsense about love and horror makes her anxious. She can not devote herself to Third’s love until Third is dying.

At the first stage, Jing Qiu is the victim of the age, shaped by the society and protected by Third. After Third’s death, she has to pursue her life by herself. Jing Qiu grows into a great woman from a pure girl. Finally, Jing Qiu is brave to face Third’s love and lives a happy life. Just like Third said, “If you live, I will not die; if you die, I really die” .

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