

Re-examining the Modern Significance of Literary Epics through Dream of the Red Chamber and One Hundred Years of Solitude

Yiqun Xie

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua Zhejiang 321004, China

Abstract: The epic as a literary form has existed since ancient times and has continuously evolved throughout history. By examining the epic qualities of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this article explores how modern and postmodern epics differ from classical epics. It argues that the essence of the epic lies in the representation of a nation's cultural psychology and spiritual temperament, regardless of whether it depicts everyday life, heroic characters, or realistic narratives. A nation's epic often carries the expectation of national revival. Re-examining epic writing across different historical periods helps deepen our understanding of how to create literary epics with national characteristics, offering significant inspiration for contemporary literature.

Keywords: Literary epic; *Dream of the Red Chamber*; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Modern significance

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1.Introduction

The epic is a literary “monument” of an era, carrying the historical memory of a nation. Different periods in history have produced epics of distinct aesthetic and ideological characteristics. Thus, re-evaluating epic writing remains an important theoretical issue.

In this article, a conceptual distinction is first made between the narrow and broad definitions of the epic. The narrow definition refers to the universally recognized classical epic form. The broad definition, however, places fewer limitations on content and form, emphasizing instead the epic spirit embodied in a work. While the former has become a mark of classical civilizations, the latter continues to evolve by inheriting and transcending earlier traditions, presenting different manifestations in different literary periods—this will be the focus of the present study.

2.From Classical Epic to Modern Epic: The Case of Dream of the Red Chamber

The epic originated in the early stages of human civilization and was closely intertwined with myth and legend. Its classical form, the heroic epic, employed grand narratives to depict the origins of nations and the deeds of heroes. Works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* center on war and the involvement of deities, embodying the sacredness and heroic worship characteristic of early epics. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, provided one of the earliest definitions of epic, emphasizing that it re-presents significant actions through narrative, marked by structural unity and historical vision.

With the advancement of human society, epic literature gradually shifted from theological to secular themes. Works like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* still retain strong religious dimensions, yet they also reflect rising humanist thought and individual consciousness. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, epic writing turned toward the portrayal of national history and social reality. Heroic worship gave way to narratives grounded in collective human experience, and the epic spirit began to continue in the form of the novel—thus emerging what may be termed the “modern epic.”

Although traditional Chinese literature lacks a classical epic tradition in the Western sense, many Chinese long novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties display epic qualities in their narrative scale and depth of social insight. Among them, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a paradigmatic example. Through the rise and decline of an aristocratic family, the work conveys the historical consciousness of an era. Its epic nature is manifested in the following aspects:

2.1 Grand Structural Scale

Dream of the Red Chamber constructs a complex and open narrative centered on the decline of the Jia family. With a vast array of characters from various social strata, it covers imperial power and officialdom as well as marriage, ethics, and economic life. The multi-layered narrative structure presents a panoramic view of society, akin to the holistic vision characteristic of epics.

2.2 Realistic Social Content

Hegel argued that epic literature should present the totality of a nation's social life. The novel provides detailed depictions of daily life within the Jia household, revealing the crisis concealed beneath material splendor, while exposing social stratification and power dynamics. Examples include the "Proclamation to Shield Officials" that symbolizes bureaucratic corruption, Xue Pan's violent seizure of Xiangling showing the tyranny of power, and Liu Granny's visit revealing class disparity. Additionally, the incorporation of spoken language, folk idioms, riddles, and seasonal customs endows the narrative with cultural authenticity rooted in national tradition.

2.3 Profound Expression of National Spirit

The essence of the epic lies in its expression of national spirit. *Dream of the Red Chamber* challenges the apparent orthodoxy of Confucian ethics by foregrounding the theme of qing (情, human feeling) as a critique of oppressive social norms. Jia Baoyu represents an ideal form of humanity—cherishing sincerity, emotional integrity, and compassion—in contrast to the utilitarian and hierarchical social order of the Jia clan. His rejection of fame and officialdom does not signal anti-Confucianism, but rather a return to the core Confucian value of ren (仁, benevolence), thus embodying a spiritual re-examination of national ethical traditions.

In this sense, although *Dream of the Red Chamber* does not feature heroic legends or divine intervention, it transforms epic representation by endowing ordinary human lives with historical significance. It thus completes the transition from sacred epics to secular literary epics and exemplifies the essential features of the modern epic: panoramic social narrative, historical depth, and spiritual critique.

3. The Postmodern Character of the Epic: The Case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Modern epics are generally grounded in realism, presenting grand narratives through depictions of social totality and historical development. However, as literature entered the postmodern era, epic narratives began to transcend the constraints of realism, absorbing new aesthetic strategies such as the magical, the absurd, and the symbolic. This shift opened new possibilities for epic writing. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a paradigmatic example of this transformation. The novel not only preserves the core spirit of the epic but also revitalizes it through narrative innovation within a postmodern context.

To begin with, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* retains epic scale in terms of structural magnitude. Centered on the fate of the Buendía family over seven generations, the novel spans more than a century of history and constructs a vast narrative world. Yet unlike classical epics, which unfold through linear historical progression, this novel adopts a cyclical conception of time. The story appears to be eternally trapped in repetition, with each generation reenacting the fates of their predecessors. This cyclical time structure reflects the historical stagnation of Latin America and expresses the tragic impotence of a nation unable to escape its historical predicament. Thus, although the novel maintains the epic quality of scale, it departs from the progressive temporal logic of classical epic and instead presents a form of historical irony.

Secondly, in terms of epic content, the novel reconstructs Latin American history through magical realism, transforming historical reality into symbolic narrative. The work portrays cultural conflict, imperialist intervention, capitalist exploitation, and religious colonization—key historical experiences of Latin America. The arrival of the railroad in Macondo symbolizes the intrusion of capitalist modernity; the episode of the banana plantation is an allegorical reflection of the 1928 Banana Massacre in Colombia, exposing the brutality of imperial capital; and the

civil wars echo the Thousand Days' War, revealing endless political violence and ideological manipulation. Márquez does not reproduce history realistically; rather, he reshapes it through mythic language, giving it allegorical depth. This demonstrates that postmodern epics do not seek historical authenticity in form, but rather historical interpretation and the revelation of national experience.

Furthermore, the novel achieves the core function of the epic by probing deeply into national psychology. Its central theme—"solitude"—is not merely a personal emotional state but a collective historical condition of Latin America. Under colonial oppression and modern dislocation, Latin American society experiences cultural fragmentation and identity crisis. The recurring motif of memory and forgetting symbolizes the collapse of historical consciousness: as the inhabitants of Macondo gradually lose their memory, they also lose their past and ultimately their existence. Forgetting thus becomes a metaphor for historical amnesia and national decline. Through this metaphor, the novel issues a profound warning: the loss of historical memory leads to cultural extinction. In this sense, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* elevates its narrative from national allegory to universal reflection on human destiny.

Additionally, the novel reconstructs the image of epic characters. Classical epics are often driven by heroic figures who shape history through their will and action. In contrast, the characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are passive before fate; they are trapped in predetermined cycles of existence and incapable of altering their circumstances. This anti-heroic characterization embodies a postmodern sense of historical futility and existential helplessness. Rather than celebrating human triumph, the novel exposes the limits of human agency—an implicit critique of the heroic ethos of traditional epics.

In conclusion, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simultaneously inherits and transforms the epic tradition. It retains the epic's breadth of social vision, depth of historical reflection, and intensity of spiritual inquiry, yet departs from traditional epic form through its artistic freedom and narrative experimentation. The novel abandons linear narrative and embraces cyclical time; it rejects monumental history in favor of allegory and symbolism; it shifts focus from heroic individuals to collective historical fate. As such, it demonstrates that the epic has not disappeared in modernity but has instead evolved into new expressive forms in the postmodern era.

One Hundred Years of Solitude may therefore be regarded as a quintessential "postmodern epic." It proves that epic literature remains a vital force, not by repeating the conventions of heroic narrative, but by confronting national trauma and exploring the existential crisis of humanity. In doing so, it completes the transformation from traditional epic to a modern and postmodern epic form rooted in cultural reflection and historical consciousness.

4.Rethinking and Reinterpreting the Epic

Debates over whether the epic has come to an end and how it may continue to exist in modern literature have long generated theoretical controversy. A survey of modern and contemporary scholarship shows that understandings of the epic generally fall into two major categories: the inheritance view and the termination view.

The inheritance view emphasizes that the epic as a literary mode still retains vitality. Hegel argued that the epic presents the totality of a nation's life and spiritual world, serving as a concentrated expression of national consciousness. McLennan stressed that the epic is "grand in scale," possessing historical scope and transcendence regardless of whether it is classical or modern. Bakhtin emphasized the epic's historical distance, while Harold Bloom highlighted the "antagonistic striving" of epic characters, who shape their spirit through confrontation with fate. These perspectives share a common claim: the epic is not merely a literary form but a narrative mode that carries cultural memory and articulates historical experience.

In contrast, the termination view argues that the epic, as an ancient genre, has lost its social foundation. Belinsky claimed that the epic belonged to the "childhood" of nations and could no longer arise in modernity. Lukács maintained that the modern world, having lost a unified spiritual system, can no longer produce epic totality. Hegel himself admitted that the modern novel may inherit epic functions yet suggested that it already lies outside the

traditional scope of epic literature. These views treat epic as a static genre and fail to recognize its potential for transformation.

In reality, however, the epic is not a fixed stylistic form but a narrative spirit. Its longevity derives from its synthesis of history (shi) and poetry (shi). “History” represents depth, truthfulness, and responsibility, requiring writers to confront reality with a “historiographical consciousness.” “Poetry” endows the epic with imagination, symbolism, and aesthetic force, elevating narrative beyond mere chronicle into the realm of spiritual revelation. Thus, the criterion for epic writing lies not in whether it employs realism or features heroic protagonists, but in whether it conveys a people’s historical experience and cultural spirit.

With the evolution of modern literature, the epic shifted from heroic epic to people’s epic. Classical epics portrayed gods and legendary heroes, while modern and postmodern epics highlight the historical significance of ordinary lives. *Dream of the Red Chamber* does not celebrate heroic exploits but reveals the crisis of feudal culture through the decline of the Jia family. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* departs from traditional historiography, yet connects the destiny of the Buendía family with Latin American history, forming a national allegory. This indicates that the essence of epic lies not in grand subject matter but in spiritual depth and cultural responsibility.

From a cross-cultural perspective, every nation needs its epic, for epic is a vehicle of cultural identity and historical reflection. Yet modern criticism still often relies on outdated Western classical criteria—such as the presence of heroes, wars, and verse form—to deny the epic nature of modern works, which is a misinterpretation. The epic has not vanished; it has undergone continual decentralization and expansion—from verse to prose, from war to everyday life, from hero-centered narrative to collective history.

A great epic should also possess universality. Universality does not imply erasing cultural individuality, but rather reaching the shared core of human experience through national expression. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is rooted in Chinese ethics and emotions yet resonates with universal human dilemmas. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is firmly grounded in Latin American history yet illuminates the existential solitude of humanity. Thus, the “history” of epic concerns national destiny, while its “poetry” concerns the human spirit.

For Chinese literature, the possibility of epic writing remains. Although China did not develop a Homeric epic tradition, it possesses rich historical resources and profound cultural narratives. While *The Literary Mind* and the *Carving of Dragons* established a lyrical tradition rather than an epic one, the emergence of Chinese fiction from the Tang and Song dynasties onward, especially its development in the Ming and Qing and its modern transformation after the May Fourth Movement, has already laid the foundation for epic expression in China.

The future of Chinese epic writing depends on both inheritance and innovation. On one hand, writers should draw on global epic traditions, such as grand historical narration and symbolic cultural allegory. On the other hand, they must root their writing in national cultural experience, transforming historical memory into narrative power. The epic need not rely solely on grand narratives; it can enter history through individual life, discovering the link between private fate and collective destiny.

As Harold Bloom noted, great epics are born of “unremitting spiritual striving” and “profound reflection on human fate.” Therefore, the epic should not be treated as a relic to be resurrected, but as an enduring literary mission—to write the spiritual history of a nation, to convey the power of an era, and to respond to the shared destiny of humankind.

5. Conclusion

The epic has always been a crucial subject for both literature and society. Although not every writer must pursue epic creation, every era needs a number of outstanding epic works to sustain its historical depth. A nation’s epic often carries the expectation of cultural continuity and even national rejuvenation. The key to creating a literary epic is to grasp the unique cultural spirit and emotional temperament of one’s own nation, while connecting it with the broader human condition and addressing universal existential dilemmas. Despite the immaturity and challenges that

contemporary literature may face, what remains encouraging is that writers continue to experiment and explore. This persistent search itself signifies the enduring hope of Chinese literature.

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