

Analysis of the Intellectuals' Transcendence of Dilemma in Humboldt's Gift

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Abstract: This paper analyzes intellectuals' dilemma and shows modern American intellectuals' dilemma. Violence, sexuality and money threat them all the time, which reveals the devastation of utilitarianism on literature. The first chapter analyzes the root of intellectuals' dilemma. Chicago was full of chaos. This city was full of social violence, causing the intellectuals to be in dilemma; sexuality corroded intellectuals' spirit; worship of money made them lost their identity. The second chapter analyzes how intellectuals should transcend the dilemma including the regressing to Jewish identity; opposing the timeserving and forgiving the world.

Keywords: Intellectuals; Dilema; Trancendence of dilemma

1 Chapter one Causes of intellectuals' dilemma

The chapter analyzes the social causes of intellectuals' dilemma and explored the intellectuals' living environment. This work takes Chicago as the background of the story. Chicago was full of chaos in every corner. Social violence was a serious threat to these intellectuals, especial these Jewishes, causing them to suffer dilemma; the indulgence in sex made them suffer emotional crisis and financial crisis; the worship of money made them lost their academic pursuit.

1.1 The rampancy of violence

Since the early 1920s, Chicago had been surrounded by its crime problem, which drew close attention from the whole world. It was even regarded as the center for crime and the gangsters. *Humboldt's Gift* was set in a time when gangsters and crime remained a big problem in Chicago and the whole city was full of violence and blood. Violence was a main part in Chicago's daily life. Social violence threatened Chicago, causing the intellectuals in Chicago to suffer.

In *Humboldt's Gift*, Chicago's violence is manifested by the scoundrel Cantabile's entanglement with dramatist Citrine. The Cantabiles were in the middle of the Capone-era homicide clique, driving trucks carrying whisky banned at the time, beating people for the mafia. He and his cousin teamed up to cheat Citrine. Citrine did not care about the event, eventually causing his beloved Mercedes car to be smashed with a bat by Cantabile and his cousin. Chicago's justice has long been flooded with blood, as if the wild beast was killing these intellectuals, especial the Jews. Capone, who had scared Citrine, had been sentenced to only a year in prison for tax evasion. Chicago police, politicians, and even teachers turned a blind eye to Chicago's chaotic atrocities, making the rough city even more fearless.

As showed above, Chicago was a city of violence. People, especially the intellectuals, were overwhelmed by it. However, they had no ability to protect themselves from smuggles and then they lost courage to reason with them gradually. Finally the violence led to the lack of sense of security in the mass, which is an important factor leading to the intellectuals' dilemma.

1.2 The indulgence in sexual desire

Humboldt's Gift expressed deep concern about the excessive indulgence in sexual pleasure, and the spread of unchastity became the main force of disintegration of the intellectual's family. The chaos and disorder of the social relation were brought by the over-liberation of the sexuality.

The world was driven by sexuality. Citrine could not control his desire and had an affair with Leonard. He finally abandoned his wife Renata. However, Leonard leaved Citrine to find another home. Passion is not equal to love, and men and women are still in pursuit. The line between love and desire is blurring. In the *Humboldt's Gift*, Chicago's scoundrel, Canterman, offered to express his sexual desire to the Citrine, *there was one thing that needed three of us to do it together. You're lying on your back, she's on you, and at the same time, it's against me.* (Bellow, 2007, p205) The erotic requirement reflects the tendency of bisexuality. And the dominant consequence is the prevalence of AIDS, and the hidden consequences are sexual desire.

Chicago with indulgence in sexual desire epitomizes the reality of American society. Spiritual civilization is extremely empty and lacking. People cannot control their desires, and the entire city suffers. So does the intellectuals.

1.3 The wordship of money

After the Second World War, the America became richer than ever. Social material wealth sprung up in large quantities. Money

gradually became the standard of world to measure everything. While transforming the social value system, it corrupted the spiritual culture and morality at the same time. Under the extreme material temptation, many intellectuals become slaves to money.

The atmosphere of money worship brings negative effects, and every close pair turned to fragile. In *Humboldt's Gift*, Denise, Citrine's ex-wife, troubled Citrine in the divorce case and designed to get his entire fortune. Although Denise had taken the custody of the Children, the house and all the money from Citrine's most successful play, Denise was still greedy. Because of the previous earnings Citrine had earned, Denise demanded thirty thousand dollars a year. She gathered a lot of evidence, some true and some false, to prove that Citrine was capable of making enough money. She ignored the lowered productivity and the dilemma that Citrine faced and just wanted the money. This novel also created a series of divorce judges and lawyers who dominate the world of money. From university professors to gangsters, criminals, scoundrel, all of people couldn't resist the temptation of money, and finally they lost themselves in the pursuit of money.

People were hunted by the devil of money, in the pursuit of which people lost themselves. On one hand, the intellectuals are the victims of money-worship; on the other hand, though the intellectuals didn't want to be assimilated into this atmosphere, they still failed. The failure caused them suffer more.

2 Chapter two The intellectuals' transcendence of dilemma

This chapter mainly talked about how the intellectuals transcend those dilemmas. In face of identity crisis, emotional crisis and academic crisis, they chose to accept to the Jewish identity, oppose the timeserving and forgive the world that once hurt them. The intellectuals got into trouble for a while, but in the end they all managed to transcend them and reconstruct the intellectual identity.

2.1 The regression to Jewish Identity

American culture was the mainstream one in the 1970s, which was regarded as the elegant, energetic, and successful one. On the contrary, the Jewish culture was regarded as the tacky and low one. Therefore, many intellectuals choose to conceal their true identity and even give it up. However, abandoning their roots was just their beginning of dilemma. Regression to Jewish identity had been an important key to get rid of these dilemmas.

Through Humboldt, Citrine reestablished his faith and returned to Jewish identity. Citrine insisted on visiting Humboldt's lonely old uncle in the sanatorium, despite Leonard's fierce opposition. It was the trip to return to the Jewish culture. It was after his trip to Coney that Citrine received the gift of Humboldt, a volume left over by Humboldt, in which Humboldt forgave Citrine. In addition, the gift also includes two script outlines, which made Citrine realize his betrayal of the Jewish, and help him regress to Jewish identity. And then he decided to visit his dying brother, even though it was strongly opposed by Leonard. "*Once they are there-irrefutable-there is nothing to do with them. Their reality is more important than mine. Beyond the vivid point, I became passionately attached.*" (Bellow, 2007, p443) Family was prior than the lover, which reflected the strong cohesion of Jewish culture. Citrine resisted the temptation of American culture and achieving a complete return to the Jewish identity.

Identity is a person's root and belongingness. Only when these intellectuals identify their identity, can he firm their position, guard their original heart and transcend all kinds of dilemmas. At the end of the novel, Citrine, together with Humboldt's only uncle, Waldema, held a "perfect and proper" funeral for Humboldt and his mother. During the funeral, Monasha sang "an ancient black American hymn 'Home'": "*go home, I want to go home.*" (Bellow, 2007, p486) It is an urgent matter for intellectuals to identify their own culture.

2.2 The opposition to the timeserving

In addition to criticizing the pragmatism of American society against the desolation of people's spirit and intellectual powerlessness, this novel also criticized the intellectuals' perfunctory behavior. The last thing that should happen is that intellectuals please the masses. As Citrine said, people are in a difficult position, and the main reason is that they have given their moral authority to the mass.

Citrine isolated himself to oppose the timeserving. In a multicultural society, Citrine was invaded by various secular forces, and life was boring and meaningless. Everything was being driven to secularize Citrine. In face of all kinds of troubles in the commercial society, Citrine chose to isolate himself. He refused to do what others regard right and should do, and instead he pursued what was best in his heart. Citrine found that with the superiority of his material life, he was more and more nostalgic to the past, missing the youth when he listened to Humboldt's talk, spiritual truth, good and beautiful home. "in the current state of affairs, [refers to Renata, Dennis, children, courts, lawyers, Wall Street, sleep, death, metaphysics, fate and cause and effect, the universe in our hearts, our existence in the universe], I still haven't stopped thinking about Humboldt." Citrine thinks of souls, death, Humboldt, etc., which were seen as abnormal and intolerable in the eyes of others, because many of Americans put the fame and money in the most important place. If you want to get them, you must follow mass, and cater to the public. At first, Citrine certainly did that, which caused a terrible loss. However, he made a change to oppose the timeserving. He would rather be reclusive in a small hotel to examine him than return to Chicago or Italy. At that time, he regreted his sins which included refusing help the poor Humboldt, pursuing money and reputation, indulging in the sexuality. In conclusion, After Citrine realized the wrong tendency and corrected it; he created a meaningful work and achieved success again.

Citrine in *Humboldt's Gift* is the conscientious intellectual plagued by capitalist multiculturalism. In the noisy society, he chose to isolate mentality, thinking about the value of life, existence and other values. He tried to awaken people whose mentality was being manipulated by mass culture. The society in the novel is a multi-dimensional society, and Citrine is an intellectual who opposes the tendency of timeserving.

2.3 The forgiveness of the world

Tolerance is a dose of "good medicine". Learning to be tolerant of others is equal to being kind to intellectuals themselves. The more forgiveness the irritable world has, the less damage intellectuals will suffer. If these intellectuals refuse to forgive the fault of others, they are not yet a noble cultivation, but also make their hearts suffer pain. When forgiveness happens, the transcendence will

arrive.

Learning to forgive the fault of others is also to relax their own heart; otherwise their heart will be in the dark and wet forever. Citrine finally reconstructed his intellectual identity through forgiveness. Citrine was once betrayed by Humboldt. Citrine regarded Humboldt as his mentor, his close friend. However, Humboldt took his more than 60 million secretly when he was in trouble. In addition, Humboldt also repeatedly criticized and insulted him in public, which made Citrine miserable. All of these seemed to be difficult to forgive, but Citrine did it. He gave Humboldt pardon. He said that he will still remember that Humboldt is a lovely man, a generous man with a heart like gold. From time to time he leafed through these manuscripts. He was convinced of the value of these things. From here, we can infer Citrine has forgiven Humboldt and he also saved himself from a painful spirit. He finally overcame these dilemmas and reconstructed his image as an intellectual.

People will always resent and hate because some things make their life chaotic, which makes themselves in pain, anger, hatred and frustration. So everyone needs to learn to forgive, and then our mind can go forward without burden.

3 Chapter three Conclusion

In *Humboldt's Gift*, Bellow analyzes the fate and crisis faced by intellectuals, reflecting the anxiety and confusion of the American intellectuals in the 1960s. Humboldt's faith inspired Citrine not to relinquish intellectual responsibility and that he would pass on the intellectual pursuit of the spirit. Citrine and Humboldt continue to seek their identities in the chaotic world, giving meaning to tiny life. Bellow believes that real intellectuals should transcend national boundaries, oppose the timeserving, and undertake the social responsibility.

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