

The Sphinx Factor and Ethical Dilemmas in The Intruder

Qingrong Chen

English Language and Literature, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, 401331, China

Abstract: “The Intruder” is a short story written by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in his later period. In this novel, Borges has a obvious change from his previous narrative style, creating a shocking story with a simple plot, characters, and scenes. By depicting the tragic drama caused by the emotional entanglement between the Nilsens and a woman, it shows the tragic character of the suburban commoners in the old days. This paper analyzes the ethical dilemma faced by the Nilsens in the novel from the perspective of literary ethics, and analyzes the ethical conflicts formed in the process of combining and transforming the Sphinx Factor, with the aim of revealing the ethical nature of the tragedy in *The Intruder* and pointing out that the process of ethical choice itself is an unavoidable tragedy.

Keywords: The Intruder; Sphinx Factor; Ethical dilemma; Ethical choice

Jorge Luis Borges, a master of Spanish literature in the 20th century, is known as “the writer of writers”. His works are characterized by their timelessness and philosophical depth, “reflecting the chaos of the world and the unreality of literature”. Borges spent his life reading and writing, and in his later years he lost his eyesight but continued to write. “The Intruder”, which he dictated with the help of his mother after he lost his sight, tells the story of the Nilsens, and Juliana, a woman who suddenly enters. This novel is very different from Borges’ previous complex and esoteric narrative style. Both the plot, characters and scenes are simple and straightforward, without setting up a maze, without the interlocking of time and space, and without the back and forth transformation of illusion and reality.

1. Literary ethics criticism

Literary ethics is a method of literary criticism, which is mainly used to interpret, analyze and explain literary works from an ethical standpoint and to study writers and issues related to literature^[1]. In literary ethics criticism, the Sphinx factor is a central concept in understanding literary works. The Sphinx Factor represents two aspects of human beings: the human nature factor and the animal nature factor. The human factor represents the rational consciousness of human beings, which is the higher factor, and the bestial factor represents the free will of human beings, which is the lower factor, and what makes human beings ethically conscious is the ability of the human factor to control the bestial factor. Different combinations and variations of the Sphinx factor will lead to different behavioral characteristics and character expressions of characters in literature, forming different ethical conflicts and showing different values of moral teachings^[2]. In *The Intruder*, the Nilsens go through several stages of ethical choices, wanting to escape from the ethical dilemma but getting deeper and deeper in the dilemma, wanting to maintain the brotherhood but choosing the extreme means of killing Juliana, and their rational consciousness “going over the edge”, which makes the tragedy happen both in a reasonable and unexpected way.

2. The literary ethics of “The Intruder”

2.1 The animal factor: desire

The main characters of “The Intruder” are the Nilsens, who live in the suburbs of Tudela. The two brothers do not like to associate with others, but they are as good as an iron plate, and if you offend one of them, you will get two enemies^[3]. The Nielsen brothers are not so much two people as two parts of one person. These two parts were originally tightly bound together in a balanced and harmonious relationship with each other^[4]. However the appearance of Juliana upset the balance between them. The Nilsens were not clean men, and their frequent visits to brothels were commonplace in the area: men never took women seriously, and they served no other purpose than for pleasure and lust. This shows that the social atmosphere and moral values of the whole suburban area were corrupted and deformed, and in such an environment, people were easily driven by desire to do something out of the ordinary, which is why the author says that this story is a tragic microcosm of the character of the old suburban pimps. When Eduardo realized that he had fallen in love with his brother’s lover, he chose to find another girlfriend to divert his attention. At this time, his human factor and rational consciousness temporarily prevailed, and he still had a relatively sober ethical perception, however, escape could not solve the problem, and his desire for Juliana did not dissolve, and even grew stronger, he drove his girlfriend away, became more and more gloomy and non-verbal, and often drowned his sorrows with alcohol.

2.2 Animal factor out of control: fall into ethical dilemma

Christian noticed his brother's abnormality, not only did he not get angry, but also offered to share Juliana, and his brother did not refuse. This behavior is obviously against the ethical order, but the brother is under the control of rational consciousness to make a choice to maintain the brotherly relationship, while the brother's consent is controlled by the animal factor, allowing the desire to spread and develop. If the Nielsen brothers are treated as two parts of one person, this also reflects the fierce contradictory struggle between the two Sphinx factors in the human body. Christian thought he could avoid a fight by giving up Juliana, but how could love be shared? Love ignited the fire of jealousy, Cain's soul was wandering, and the two of them often quarreled over trivial matters under the control of the bestial factor, and a rift appeared in the brotherhood, and the two of them were caught in the dilemma of brotherhood or love between men and women.

2.3 The gamble between rational will and natural will

The Nilsens decided to sell Juliana, but both of them cannot control their feelings and secretly visit her in the brothel behind each other's back, and finally they have to take her back again. This process shows that the dilemma the Nielsen brothers are in is an intractable one: on the one hand, the Nilsens bond is strong, and although they are irascible, they are not ungrateful, vicious people. The Nilsens are penniless, and the author introduces the furnishings of their home with the ulterior motive of mentioning a worn Bible, which surprises even the parish priest. The presence of the Bible may seem alien to them, but in fact it is the only spiritual support for the Nilsens in their difficult life, and a symbol of their sense of reason. On the other hand, the two brothers' love for Juliana is equally strong. When they let Juliana leave, they also carefully remind her to take her mother's belongings with her, which shows the tender side of the two tough guys. This kind of affection is rarely in the local environment, but also to their shame. "Cain's soul was wandering - but the affection between the Nilsens was immense". In this gamble of rational consciousness and free consciousness, the rational consciousness always suppressed the free consciousness, and they never thought of fighting for women and turning against each other. Even so, they could not get rid of the dilemma, because the animal factor of human always existed, both of them could not eliminate the desire for Juliana, and likewise could not eliminate the jealousy caused by Juliana.

2.4 The unavoidable tragedy: the creation of irrational will

Faced with an insurmountable dilemma, another kind of irrational will emerges: "It is an immoral will. It arises not from instinct, but from a wrong judgment or a desire to commit a crime". The Nilsens killed Juliana, avoiding the human tragedy of fratricide, but ending in another, more profound tragedy, becoming slaves to the animal factor. Obviously not, they can never annihilate the shadow of their hearts, because the fire of jealousy ignited by Juliana will never be extinguished, and the spirit of Cain will always linger around them^[5].

3. Conclusion

From the moment the brother joins the triangle, the end of the tragedy is already predetermined, and the shadow of jealousy will not disappear, even if the Nilsens always choose to sacrifice Juliana to preserve the brotherhood between the brother and the lover, however, although the rational consciousness can control the natural will, it cannot completely destroy it. The process of ethical choice is destined to be tragic, and the tragic death of the woman becomes a wound that the brothers can never forget.

References:

- [1] Nie Zhenzhao. Literary ethics criticism: basic theory and terminology [J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2010,32(1):12-22
- [2] Nie Zhenzhao. Literary ethics criticism: ethical choices and the Sphinx factor [J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*,2011,33(06):1-13
- [3] [Argentina] Borges. *Borges' Collected Works: A volume of literary autobiography* [M]. Translated by Wang Yongnian. Haikou: Hainan International Press and Publication Center, 1996
- [4] Zhang Yan. The Lost Path of Humanity: An Analysis of Human Nature in *The Third Man* [J]. *Popular Literature and Art (Theory)*, 2008(09) 61
- [5] Zhao Deming. *20th Century Latin American Fiction* [M]. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2003