

# ETHICAL LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HUMANISTIC SPIRIT

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**Abstract:** Ethical literary criticism interprets and analyses literary works, writers, and methods of criticism related to literature from an ethical standpoint and proposes that literature is produced from an ethical human need to express moral emotions and ideas. This article combines related literary works, starting from the four dimensions of the relationship between person and others, person and society, person and nature, and person and self. Thus, it aims at providing a paradigm to study the connotation of humanistic spirit veined within ethical literary criticism, and its value in the construction of human spirit.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Chinese Classical Literature, Ecological Ethics, Greco-Roman Literature, Historism.

## 1. Introduction

The current ethical literary criticism uses ethics as the starting point to find the relevant problems within a literary work and author through a process of analysis and interpretation. The value and role of ethical literary criticism in constructing a humanistic spirit is obvious. Literature, as an aesthetic awareness, is a product of human spiritual activity (Bochner and Ellis 117). Consciously or unconsciously, Literature inevitably reflects human nature and living conditions at different stages of humanity, and shoulders the important mission of carrying the humanistic spirit in face of the relationships between people and reality. The humanistic spirit is closely connected with human activities and meanings, so the humanistic spirit also contains

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complex moral behaviour and ethics. It is the moral and ethical content contained in the humanistic spirit carried out by literature that has laid the foundation for ethical literary criticism. Subsequently, ethical literary criticism makes value judgments and interpretations of literature from the perspective of moral ethics, as well as the resulting ideological and theoretical results. The result not only enriches and expands the connotation of the human spirit, but also is of great significance for the construction of humanistic spirit (Diamanti 67).

The values and effects of ethical literary criticism in the construction of humanistic spirit are mainly developed from four relationships: the relationship between person and society, person and nature, person and others, and person and self. These four kinds of relationships are very complex and are different from each other but penetrate each other. Each of these relationships can be interpreted from different levels and angles.

This article aims to conduct an objective investigation of ethics and morality of literature through the above four-dimensional relationship and give a dialectical interpretation of history, in order to discuss the value and role of ethical literary criticism in the construction of humanistic spirit.

## **2. Features of Ethical Literary Criticism**

The academic study of ethical literary criticism is a new academic theory based on Western ethics and has paved the way for a new train of thought in the scientific fields of sociology, economics, philosophy, and natural sciences (Nie 9). Whether the author creates the work or the readers appreciate the work, it will involve many issues of ethics where people would adopt ethical and moral viewpoints to evaluate and judge a work. Ethical literary criticism regards literature as an inevitable product of moral development and believes that its essence is an ethical art and a special way of expressing the ethics and moral life of a specific historical stage ranging from literature's inception.

Moral criticism in its traditional sense mainly criticizes literature based on the critic's own moral position and the moral

position at that time (Haines et al. 1041). Although the traditional moral criticism also emphasizes that moral consciousness as a premise is based on personal value orientation which affects the accuracy of literary evaluation, so much so that the literary evaluation is mainly an interpretation of the critics' moral concepts (Previ et al. 103). In fact, this method of criticism reverses the position held by the critics and the literary work, that is, critics use literature to express the moral concepts of an era.

Ethical literary criticism differs from moral criticism in its traditional sense, as it emphasizes that criticism should go back to the history at that time. It aims to interpret literary works by assuming the ethical position existing within the historical conditions at a certain period of time rather than making moral judgements by standing on the status quo of moral values in the present. Ethical literary criticism can investigate and explain the reasons for the occurrence of a literary work and the reasonability of the work through objective ethical factors. The theory ponders over the ethical factors in literary works that affect the fate of the characters and social events through text analysis, explains the characters and events from the perspective of ethics, and evaluates according to the historical background of that time.

As evidenced above, in comparison with moral criticism in its traditional sense, ethical literary criticism neither takes individual opinions nor the present ethical standards as the touchstone for judgment, but attempts to return to the ethical position at the birth of a literary work, which makes literary criticism more objective and reasonable. The study of specific texts and characters in texts are the core issues of ethical literary criticism. Based on the study of characters in texts, it is expanded to the study of the whole text, which is also the main research content of ethical literary criticism.

### **3. The Relationship between Person and Society**

Human beings are at the centre of everything in a society. Literary works not only reflect the relationship between

individuals and society, but also analyse the relationship between groups and society. Different people have different personalities, and these personalities also affect the relationship between individuals and society.

Since the birth of literature, people have been at the core of literary works. Literature explores human nature and makes its artistic portrayal to show human existence and the depths of human nature. Human beings are social beings, and society is a collection of individualistic beings coexisting together to form the human society. Therefore, the portrayal of human beings in literature has never been separated from the habitat of human beings—society. In other words, literature portrays people through the relationship between person and society. In this way, the relationship between persons and society becomes the basic relationship that literature highlights to portray humanity's power. (Hackett 110). Since literature is a reflection of social life in the root sense, and its essential purpose is attributed to aesthetics, undoubtedly it becomes the responsibility of literature to truly reflect the original appearance of social life by revealing the value and significance of real life. Therefore, the relationship between person and society in the literary depiction is mainly expressed as a realistic relationship. It is precisely because people and society have this truth-seeking relationship, the evaluation and judgment of literature from the perspective of morality and ethics can aptly present the moral and ethical status of the entire society, and grasp the characteristics and laws of social ethical order and moral norms (Burt 134).

Ancient Greek-Roman literature is one of the sources of Western literature. As a distant memory of nascent humanity, it reflects the moral and ethical conditions that emerged after the separation of the primitive people from nature. Literature was originally created solely for ethical and moral purposes. The appreciation of literature and artistic beauty is not the main purpose of literature and art, but it serves its moral purpose. Whether it is a myth, an epic or a tragedy, there is a human consciousness characterized by a personality and original desire. In ancient Greek mythology, the Olympus and Olympus gods

are the artistic records of the social and ethical status of the maternal and patrilineal clans based on the blood relationship. The 'Trojan War' depicted in Homer's Epics shows the concept of war and social ethical order based on survival and the value orientation of the principle of life (Homer 82). The story tells us that war is morally legal for both warring parties.

The Greek tragedy is the highest achievement of ancient Greek-Roman literature, and it also carries the moral and ethical paradigms and characteristics of the relationship between people and society in the ancient times of the Greek nation. The two vengeance in the tragedy *Orestes* reflect the respective ethical characteristics of the two major clan societies during the transition from matrilineal clan society to patriarchal clan society. Especially the court trial obviously bears the moral ethics of Athenian democracy and conveys the appeal of transition from a society maintained by blood relations to a society maintained by democracy and the legal system. The 'destiny net' in *Oedipus the King* is a metaphor for incest. (Knox and Bloom 71) It is more an ethical tragedy than a fate tragedy.

Many ancient Greek thinkers and philosophers have written about the role ethics plays in literature. Among them, Aristotle's torch shines the most light on the ethical role of literature. Aristotle's *Poetics* ponders essentially on the topic of ethics in literature, with specific focus of tragedies. In *Poetics*, catharsis plays a crucial role in explaining the role of ethics. According to Aristotle, tragedy was not only a cathartic medium for the masses to purge their emotions but was also a negative way of understanding society confined within the walls of politics, economy, and ethics. Within this walled city, Aristotle draws attention towards literature to point out the 'flaws' contained within the walls (Siebers 23).

As one masterpiece of Chinese classical literature, *Water Margin* described the deep relationship between individuals and society. The author reflects the social reality of the Northern Song Dynasty by describing the personality of different characters. Under the extremely complex social background, Song Jiang, Lin Chong, Wu Song and other heroes represent

different types of characters. They have also devoted themselves to the construction of society with enthusiasm, but they were abandoned by the ruling party in the end. In the society without democracy and freedom, the ruling party is the representative of society and the key to dominate the destiny of the people.

While studying this literary work, we can analyse the social ethical relationship embodied in this literary work from the perspective of ethical criticism. It is not difficult to find that in the process of social development, if the ruling party cannot depend on people to develop the strength of a country, finally they will lose the support of people. Therefore, whilst constructing the humanistic spirit, we should take literary works as research objects and constantly absorb and summarize the rich experience in the past, in order to continuously promote the development of a civilized society.

#### **4. The Relationship between Person and Nature**

Nature is the source of human life. Human beings cannot evolve and continue to have such progressive development, as witnessed today, without the help of natural conditions. When people and nature are separated, human beings began to search for the lost relationship with nature. On one hand, the separation of people and nature marks a great change in the history of human development (Schmuck and Schultz 256). It is the transformation of natural people into civilized people, the intellectual expansion of human beings and the externalization of rational endowments. On the other hand, the separation of people and nature also means the departure of human beings from their fully integrated source of life and loss of natural attributes. Many literary works of research value have also been produced in the process of continuous utilization and transformation of nature by human beings. Many scholars have expressed their views on the mode of getting along with people and nature.

As early as in ancient Greece, there was the idea that beauty is in harmony. The harmony between humanity and nature also represents beauty. Historically, the relationship between humans

and nature is not so simple, neither has it always been in a harmonious state. There are still many discords between human beings and nature, and even contradictory opposites. Human beings destroy nature and nature retaliates. Rousseau advocates a 'returning to nature' foreseeing the potential threat of nature's conquest to the development of human society with a high degree of historical foresight. Rousseau called for a 'returning to nature' and emphasized that there is a harmonious and unified relationship between human beings and nature. The relationship provides the possibility for human beings to enjoy freedom and equality. Consequently, once the relationship between humanity and nature falls into a tension, or even a deteriorating relationship, the "born free" people will be "in the shackles forever" (Brint 335). In addition, other natural enlightenment philosophers propose that natural jurisprudences are all based on the harmony between human and nature. The current ecological criticism has made valuable attempts in this regard.

As early as in the mythology of the ancient times in China, this relationship between people and nature was manifested. Faced with the unrecognizable nature at that time, people freely developed the imagination. They think that all natural realities such as wind, rain, thunder, and lightning are controlled by gods, and that natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes are caused by the anger of gods. Therefore, people held nature in awe, and prayed for the blessing of nature through various sacrificial activities. However, tenacious individuals did not always submit to nature. People at the same time have created mythical figures such as Houyi, Dayu, and Kuafu, showing the tenacity of human beings in the face of nature.

Jing Wei Tian Hai is a mythology from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Once upon a time, the youngest daughter Nu Wa of Emperor Yan, was accidentally drowned in the sea and metamorphosed into a bird called Jingwei. Jingwei is determined to fill up the sea, so she continuously carries a pebble or twig in her mouth and drops it into the Eastern Sea (Birrell 92). Jingwei's death shows the fragility of life and the strength of the nature. Obviously, filling up the sea with pebbles

is a futile and never-ending job, but the bird still chose to incessantly continue with its efforts. Human beings recognize that they need to respect the power of nature and rely on nature to improve their own quality of life. In addition, they also need to constantly contend with nature's discordant forces, not to be defeated by natural disasters. This is meaningful for China to build a civilized and harmonious society. We must understand how to obtain resources from nature and pay attention to feedback. To protect the ecological environment is the responsibility of everyone and the key to the process of humanistic spirit construction.

The current ecological ethics criticism focuses on the different relations between humanity and nature in literature. It coincides with ethical literary criticism in terms of vision and can be regarded as an organic part of ethical literary criticism. With the development of science and technology, and the acceleration of the modernization process, humankind has created a very rich material civilization at the expense of nature. The deviations between humanity and nature caused by anthropocentrism and the destruction of nature in the process of transforming nature have already shown the serious effects.

In the mid-1980s, many writers in China realized the crisis of human survival brought by the destruction of nature and issued severe warnings in their works. Novels such as Zhang Kangkang's *Sandstorm*, Jia Pingwa's *Cherish the Memory of the Wolf*, Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem*, poems such as Chang Yao's *Manatee Killer*, Yu Jian's *Sorrow of Dianchi*, and the reportage include Xu Gang's *Lumberjack, Wake Up*, all these literary works draw attention to this issue. These works involve human destruction of vegetation, pollution and waste of water resources, indiscriminate killing of wild animals, etc. All the works expressed their worries about the future of humanity and the advocacy of harmony between human beings and nature. Therefore, it is a warning to the blind and confident human beings to practice the ethical values and harmonious relations (Owen 69).



#### **4. The Relationship between Person and Others**

The relationship between people and others is a concentrated expression of the spiritual value of literature. Unlike the relationship between Person and Society we discussed above, we focus on the specific ethical issues among individuals in this section. Literature is written by human beings, is about human beings, and reflect different human mental attitudes of the persons who are involved in such situations. That is because the essence of being human manifests after being objectified by the other, and garners from the relationship between people. Therefore, it is almost impossible for literature to gain an insight into the human nature, reveal the depth and breadth of life, and leave a description of the relationship between individuals and others. Because of this, the relationship between individuals and others becomes the object of concern and the dimension of ethical literary criticism's evaluation.

Apart from other levels of relationships, the relationship of seeking goodness with others is an important level. It is the result of people's understanding of the relationship between people and others in practice: conforming to the purpose of people and laws is good, otherwise it is evil. Because of individual needs, the purpose can only be achieved through collaborative activities with others. In this way, goodness becomes a vital content to understand the relationship between people and others and has different forms of expression. The relationship between people and others is the social nature in the process of human survival and development, and it is also universal respect for people on the value level.

The tragic story of *Antigone* could well explain the relationship of seeking goodness with others. In the conflicts between national laws and family morals, monarchic will and personal emotions, *Antigone* was portrayed as a tragic model of abiding by family obligations and heroic fortitude. Through the description of her complicated relationship with Creon and Polynices, the work truly reflects the concepts of historical morality justice during the democratic period in Athens, Greece. From a family point of view, Polynices is the brother of Antigone.

In the fight for power, he brought disaster to the country and was dying from it. According to the laws of the city-state at the time, this behaviour was strictly forbidden. The dead body was not allowed to be buried after death. But in line with family obligations, Antigone withstood the monarch's will and legal requirements represented by Krion and buried her brother. Her behaviour is the embodiment of family moral ethics. But in terms of national interests, her behaviour seriously violated national laws and social morals, so she was buried alive (Miller 11) It is a legal solution according to morality and justice at that time. The reason why *Antigone* was portrayed as a model of tragedy implies the social and historical trend that the human law replaces the divine law (family ethics).

Traditional Chinese literature has always attached importance to the construction and education of ethics among people. The Tragic love of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in *Dream of Red Mansions* is a good example. *Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin involves a wide range of characters, with Lin Daiyu, Jia Baoyu, Xue Baochai and others as the core, and take the tragic love of Jia and Lin as a clue to describe the relationship between the different characters in the Grand View Garden (Ke and Chen 238). There are two obvious ethical storylines in the novel. One is the love between Jia and Lin, and the other is that of the big family, which is gradually dying. The author has drawn more ethical nuances through the two ethical storylines. However, Jia Baoyu was forced to marry Xue Baocai in the end because of various other interests, which caused the death of Lin Daiyu. The big family also began to decline. Jia Baoyu did not have the right to choose his wife because of the traditional feudal ethics, which caused the tragic love.

## 5. The Relationship between Person and the Self

The relationship between individual and the self is the most intrinsic and the most difficult to interpret; it actually means to know oneself. The ultimate goal is to achieve physical and mental harmony and solve the spiritual crisis of human. The ancient Chinese wisdom also emphasized the need for self-

knowledge. Lao Tzu said in *Tao Te Ching*, "Who understands the world is learned; Who understands the self is enlightened" (La Fargue 58). In literary works, the relationship between the person and the self is described through character changes, ideology, etc. Different people will have different emotions such as excitement, happiness, sadness, depression, and anger due to the influence of different situations. Some people correctly handle their own emotional changes, and some people are easily controlled, which is the result of individuals adopting different ways in the process of handling the relationship between the individual and the self. The reason that literature reveals the infinite depth of human nature and life lies in the complexity of the relationship between the individual and the self. Ethical literary criticism, whose mission is to explain the moral and ethical values of literature, will not ignore the recognition and grasp of the relationship between the individual and the self.

In the Spring and Autumn Period, Master Zeng said, "Every day I examine myself on three counts: in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach" (Waley 53). That is to say, Master Zeng has the consciousness of self-criticism and self-reflection, and examines his inner self from multiple levels at that time. The Confucian scholars in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties launched a massive criticism and self-criticism movement. They highly emphasized moral consciousness and advocated to reflect on their own faults. Among them, Liu Zongzhou in the Qing Dynasty made his own moral criticism almost to the extreme. He divided the possible mistakes by himself into six categories and regulated his behaviours according to these mistakes.

## 6. Conclusion

Ethical literary criticism is different from moral criticism in its traditional sense but exists as a mode of literary criticism that emphasizes the ethical standpoint based on historical conditions, simultaneous with interpretations of literary works. As a

product of human ideology, literature contains rich moral and ethical content within its humanistic spirit (Habib 157). Therefore, the in-depth study of literary works using ethical literary criticism method not only helps to expand and enrich the current humanistic spiritual connotation but also promotes the historical changes of the humanistic spirit, which has important humanistic spiritual construction value.

As a methodology, ethical literary criticism emphasizes the social responsibility of literature and literary criticism. It also emphasizes the instructive function of literature and takes this as the basis for criticism. Writers should take responsibility for their works. Similarly, critics should also be responsible for critical literature. The responsibility of a writer is expressed through their works, and the responsibility of a critic is shown through the criticism of the works (Nie and Shang 6). Therefore, current literary criticism cannot deviate from the basic ethical laws recognized by society, destroy the moral customs that people follow, or abuse the moral assumptions of the future to defend current literature against moral laws. We can neither criticize current literature with past moral concepts, nor can we criticize current literature with hypothetical moral concepts of the future. When judging the literary works, a historical attitude can help us to objectively criticize the value and significance of these works.

The value and role of ethical literary criticism in the construction of humanistic spirit are mainly developed from four relationships: the relationship between person and society, person and nature, person and others, and person and self. As far as the relationship between person and society is concerned, only by evaluating and judging literature from the perspective of morality and ethics can we more truly present the moral and ethical conditions of the entire society, and historically and specifically grasp the characteristics and laws of social ethical order and moral norms (Boym 101). From the perspective of the relationship between person and nature, it can be seen that the exploration of the ethical values in different eras and different types of literature, and the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, is necessitated warning to curb the

human overconfidence. Moreover, the use of ethical literary criticism to examine the relationship between an individual and others in literary works can realize the good relationship between people and others, so as to achieve universal respect for persons on the value level. Finally, the method of ethical literary criticism determines that we cannot ignore the recognition and grasp of the relationship between the person and the self. Self-moral criticism is precisely the most important and critical part of the construction of humanistic spirit. Ethical literary criticism makes historical analysis and specific interpretation of literary works from the perspective of moral ethics, which not only provides new theoretical results for the humanistic spirit, but also expands its paradigm, which is of significance for the construction of a humanistic spirit.

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