

Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Approach to Literature Studies

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Abstract *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014), the crystal of ten-year painstaking efforts of professor Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism in China, offers a new approach to literature studies. The book, composed of two parts and appendixes including glossary and definition of ethical literary criticism, seeks to illuminate the working mechanisms of ethical literary criticism and its terminology and claims that literature takes its origin from ethics, and moral enlightenment or teaching is the primary function of literature. The first part discusses some basic theories and answers the feasibility and necessity of ethical literary criticism as a methodology. The second part demonstrates how ethical literary criticism works with his innovative reading of a series of literary classics. The appendixes are the list of terms and their definition and explanation. A striking merit of this book lies in its close combination of theory studies and critical practices.

Key words *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*; Nie zhenzhao; literary criticism

Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism (2014), the crystal of ten-year painstaking effort of professor Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism in China, offers a new approach to literature studies. The book, composed of two parts and appendixes, namely, basic theories of ethical literary criticism, the application of these theories to text analysis, and the list of its terms and their definitions and explanation, seeks to illuminate the working mechanisms of ethical literary criticism and its terminology such as ethical selection, natural selection, ethical taboo, ethical environment, ethical knot, ethical line, ethical identity, ethical confusion, Sphinx factor, human factor, animal factor, rational will, irrational will, natural will, free will, etc. A striking merit of this book lies in its close combination of theory studies and critical practices which sets a good example for those scholars to avoid getting themselves bogged down in “theoretical complex,” “preordained theme complex,”

and “term complex”(4).

In the first part Nie gives the answer to the question of what ethical literary criticism is. Beginning with the origin of literature Nie claims that literature is “a product of morality,” or “a unique ethical expression in a given historical period” and it is “fundamentally an art of ethics,” and then defines ethical literary criticism as “a critical theory that approaches literary works on the basis of their ethical essence and educational function from the perspective of ethics”(13). In order to make it clear Nie reads diachronically through the relationship between literature and ethics and compares ethical literary criticism with moral criticism on the differences between ethics in philosophy and that in ethical literary criticism. Unlike moral criticism laying much emphasis on “good or bad evaluation of a given literary work from today’s moral principles”(128), ethical literary criticism is to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence, and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works, thus examines the ethical values of a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written. In distinguishing the differences Nie takes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as an example to make his argument more convincing. According to moral criticism, the influential interpretations are a play about “character tragedy” and that about “Oedipus complex”(130). However, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism you will find that it is “a tragedy about ethical dilemma aroused by the change of Hamlet’s ethical identity”(133).

A big breakthrough in the first part is the discussion about natural (biological) selection and ethical section. Nie points out “the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a selection between the identities of animals and the identities of human beings”(32). The theory of natural selection by Darwin and the argument of labor assumption by Friedrich Engels are regarded to be forceful in differentiating human beings from animals, while in Nie’s view “both Darwin and Engels failed to make a fundamental distinction between man and animals though explained where human beings have come from”(34). In Nie’s opinion, natural selection is only the first step to help human being to be who they are in a biological sense. “What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step, ethical selection”(35).

To make it more persuasive Nie resorts to the story of Adam and Eve from Bible. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are human beings purely in biological sense. Despite of their being physically different from such creatures as livestock, insects and wild animals, so far as knowledge is concerned, there are no fundamental differences between them and the rest of other animals. Only after eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge has the man acquired knowledge about good and evil, which completes the distinction between man and the rest of other creatures. Viewed from

the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Nie claims that “The consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil from eating the forbidden fruit helps Adam and Eve to complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in biological sense but also in ethical sense”(35). In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion of identifying human beings from animals. The story of Adam and Eve reveals the vital role played by ethical selection in human beings’ liberation from herds of animals as well as in their realization of their difference from animals. “The nature of ethical selection lies in man’s decision to be a human or an animal, and the precondition of this decision is the knowledge about man’s self or about what distinguishes human beings from animals”(36).

Closely related to the argumentation of ethical selection is Nie’s enlightening concept of Sphinx factor. Viewed from the light of ethical selection, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted as “an exploration of the mystery of why a man is such a being”(36). When human beings acquired their figures through natural selection, they also found that they still contain many animal features, such as the instinct to survive and to reproduce. The feature of Sphinx’s combination of a human head and an animal body has two implied meanings: Firstly, the most important feature of human beings lies in its head, which stands for ration of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process; Secondly, it indicates that human beings evolve from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals. Nie names this feature “the Sphinx factor, which is composed of two parts — human factor and animal factor”(38). Human factor equals “ethical consciousness embodied by the human head”, which results from human being’s natural selection in their evolution from savage to civilization. Oppositely, animal factor is human being’s “animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires”(39). To a large degree, the Sphinx factor is a key to understanding literature. Nie states that “the various combinations and alternations of human factor and animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literary works, thus conveying different moral implications”(38). In this light, Sphinx Riddle is an ethical proposition for human beings to ponder over after they finished natural selection thus urges human being to go through another step of evolution — ethical selection.

In the second part Nie demonstrates how ethical literary criticism works with his innovative reading of a series of literary classics. When developing his ethical literary criticism, Nie aimed at “offering a new approach to the study of literature in China [and] has achieved as much he has aspired, which is evidenced in his many new and well-recognized conceptions”(Shang 4). In his reading of *Hamlet*, he uses “incest taboo” and “ethical identity” as key words to uncover the reason of Hamlet’s delay to revenge. According to Nie’s view, when Hamlet’s mother marries Claudius,

his ethical identity undergoes tremendous changes: He becomes Claudius's step son and his prince which makes him hesitate to take revenge, because he has to avoid the ethical taboo of patricide and regicide. So Hamlet's delay in revenge is mainly caused by his identifying the ethical relations between Claudius and him as father and son. The monologue "To be or not to be" therefore is not a question about life and death but about ethical dilemma.

In reading *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Nie challenges the arguments of "predestination" and "Oedipus complex" and then concludes that it's "an ethical tragedy resulted from the conflict between ethical taboo and Oedipus' intensifying ethical consciousness"(177). Sophocles makes a full use of incest story of Oedipus' killing his father and marrying his mother to explicate the tragic process of Oedipus' ethical selection. The reading of *The Old Man and The Sea* is also a fresh note Nie strikes. Without a doubt, the interpretation of Santiago as a symbol of "code hero" is universally accepted, yet Nie introduces the Jungle Law to his analysis of the old man and gains from his failure the insight that human beings should prevent themselves from ethical chaos to "avoid degenerating themselves into animal and shoulder the ethical responsibility to maintain a harmonious relation with nature other than grab rapaciously from it according to Jungle Law"(214). If readers go through all the parts they will find each reading of Nie opens a new horizon and delivers a new perspective to the work under discussion thus furthers the related researches. Even the appendixes are also an integral part of the book and offer readers a quick way to catch all the terms and their usages which are illustrated with brief analyses of characters and plots from literary classics.

Ten years ago Nie initiated ethical literary criticism in literature studies at the 2004 National Conference on Anglo-American Literature in Nanchang with the purpose to reiterate the close relationship between theory and practice as well as to correct the wrong inclination of Chinese scholars to engross so much in the import of western theories as to dumb themselves to voice their own theories and approached in literary criticism. Now with the publication of this book Nie not only establishes his discourses of criticism and systematic theory, but also sets up an example for Chinese scholar to make innovation in literature studies. As Nie notes that "ethical literary criticism is not to give a new name to its western counterpart and the traditional moral criticism, but to established its own terminology and critical mechanism"(10). It does not aim at making an over-simplified judgment about literature by saying it is good or bad, but attempts to unpack the ethical values of literature, and the truth about social life depicted in literature from an ethical perspective. Moral criticism examines and evaluates literature according to today's moral principles therefore often lacks objectivity, while contemporary western ethical criticism, though reviving in 1980s

and then becoming popularity, “fails to construct its systematic critical theory” thus loses its independence and gives way to other critical theory (Yang 24). For example, Wayne Booth’s ethical criticism is more narratological than ethical while Martha Nussbaum’s is inclined to “explain philosophical problem with analyses of literary works which are more or less marked with moral criticism” (Yang 24). Although Hillis Miller stressed on the change from the impossibility of reading to the ethics of reading, his ethical criticism is strictly a kind of “deconstructive close reading or a principle of reading (Yang 24)”. In this sense Nie’s ethical literary criticism betters its counterparts and moves the critical scholarship a step forward.

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