

The Formation and Effect of Tension Structure ——Taking the Children's Education Text *The Diary of Evil Children* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

As a physical phenomenon, “Tension” refers to the coexistence of two opposing forces, resulting in a tense and gripping state, and there is also such a mechanism in literary works, that is, the “complements, contraries and opposites” in the text are also opposite and complementary, and the “conflict or friction” between them can also create a tense and shocking effect. Therefore, the physical term tension can be used to properly and vividly describe some characteristic or influence of literature. *The Diary of Evil Children* is such a typical text full of tension. It combines various “complements, contraries and opposites” such as children's perspective, childish language, legendary plot, thriller content and indifferent narrative, forming a strong tension structure and shaping a pair of extremely persevering and vicious twin “children's Heroes”, shows the author's complex attitude towards the children's education view and human survival philosophy of “fighting evil with evil”, and the strong condemnation of the cruel war. In China's war literature works, there is a lack of works with tension structure containing various “complements, contraries and opposites” like *The Diary of Evil Children*. Thus, the cruel side of war is often avoided or weakened. Therefore, *The Diary of Evil Children* should be regarded as a text of children's education and a survival fable in wartime, and become a thought-provoking reference for us to carry out children's education and examine human nature and war. The reason why Agota Kristof 's *The Diary of Evil Children* can attract attention and thought-provoking comes from this mechanism of tension that is similar to physics.

Keywords: Tension; Physical Phenomenon, Mechanism, Literary Characteristic, Literary Influence, Children's Education

1. INTRODUCTION

“Tension” was originally a physical word, but now it has been widely used in literary criticism. Literary critics use this physical concept (also a physical phenomenon) to vividly describe some characteristic or influence of literature. Of course, in different stages of the development of literary theory and among different literary theorists, the meaning of tension has different emphases, even completely different. In the Chinese context, because of the inherent “pictographic” characteristic of Chinese and people's thinking habit of

“just as the name suggests”, as long as people understand the physical definition of “tension” in *The Modern Chinese Dictionary* - “the mutual traction force on both sides of any section of an object under the action of pulling” [1], among the many literary definitions of tension, they tend to be more familiar with and cordial to the definition and interpretation of tension by the British critic Roger fowler in *The Dictionary of the Terms of Modern Western Literary Criticism*, and accept that tension is “the conflict or friction between complements, contraries and opposite”, “where there are opposing and interrelated forces, impulses or meanings, There is tension” [2]. I also understands the transition and

extension of the word tension from physics to literature in this way, which is similar to the coexistence of two opposite and complementary forces of “pulling” and “traction” (such as pulling a rope), “pulling” and “resilience” (such as pulling a bow) in physical phenomena, resulting in a tense and gripping state, in literary texts, “complements, contraries and opposites” are also opposite and complementary, the “conflict or friction” between them can also create a tense and shocking effect.

Among the literary texts, *The Diary of Evil Children* [3] can be said to be a typical one full of tension. *The Diary of Evil Children* is the first novel written by Hungarian female writer Agota Kristof who was born in Hungary in 1935 and took refuge in Sweden in 1956 due to domestic riots. *The Diary of Evil Children* was written in French because the author “left the environment of his mother tongue” and “was forced to write in French”. [4] After its publication in 1986, it won the “European Book Award”. Later, Agota Kristof published *The Evidence of Two People* and *The Third Lie* in 1988 and 1991 respectively, which together with *The Diary of Evil Children* constituted an independent and interrelated “trilogy of evil children”.

Since its publication, *The Diary of Evil Children* has aroused great repercussions in many countries and has been translated into more than 30 languages. In Chinese, although its traditional Chinese version was published by Taiwan Xiaozhitang publishing house in 1993 and reprinted many times, its simplified Chinese version was introduced relatively late. It was not until 2009 that the complete “trilogy of evil children” was published by Shanghai People's publishing house. In terms of reading, in China, it is still limited to a very small number of people in the literary circle. The few review articles on it mainly focus on the introduction of its basic information. An obvious sign is that there are no special courses in the Chinese Department of Chinese universities to introduce and study it, let alone write it into the history of foreign literature and classify it as a classic that students must study. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze how the novel forms a thrilling tension structure from two aspects of content and narrative, and then show how this tension structure shows the complex theme of the text and the author's strong emotion. In the future, it is hoped that such a soul stirring work full of tension can be used as a children's education text, enter the parent-child reading vision of Chinese parents, and provide a cold and sharp reference for their children's education from a certain angle. Of course, it can stimulate adult readers to face and consider the real war and human nature soberly.

2. THE FORMATION OF TENSION STRUCTURE

The Diary of Evil Children adopts the structure of diary. The whole book consists of 62 “diaries” of about

1500 words each written from the perspective of children and in the simple language of children's exercises. These “diaries” begin when the twins “go to grandma's house” (the title of the first chapter) from a big city at 9 years old, and end when they “leave grandma's house” (the title of the last chapter) at 15 years old. The plot reflects the typical forms of “adventure” legend and “growth” story. From these external characteristics, *The Diary of Evil Children* seems to be a fascinating fairy tale suitable for children. But it's not.

2.1. Content

From the “Evil” in the title of the novel, it suggests the horror of its content “not suitable for children”. The protagonist in the story is a pair of inseparable twins. They have been fostered by their mother from the big city to their grandmother's house in the countryside because of the war. Grandma is a dirty, cold, mean and vicious old woman. She even has poisoned her husband, but she can cunningly escape from legal responsibility. Living in such a grandmother's home, coupled with the lack of materials, the twins begin their “growth” road with unreasonable coldness, reason and perseverance that ordinary children don't have. They “never play” and do “work, study and practice” every day. Their job is to share grandma's work: watering, feeding pigs, herding sheep, picking mushrooms, collecting firewood and chopping firewood... They can not only quickly be competent for the cumbersome work of adults, but also try to build a bridge on the river so that they can go deep into the forest and pick up more firewood, mushrooms and chestnuts. They also explore the hiding places of fish in the river and “catch as many as they can” easily. In terms of reading, they “learned to read, write and calculate” in school. Now they “decide to continue studying and don't rely on Teachers” at Grandma's house. They first take checkered paper, pens and notepad from the stationery store in a soft and hard way that does not meet their young age and surprises the stationery store owner, and then they study each other in typos correction, composition, reading, mental arithmetic, mathematics and recitation. Later, they also learn foreign language from foreign officer who is renting in their grandmother's house, learn singing and playing harmonica from foreign officer's herald and church maid, and self-teach all kinds of tricks, magic and drama, and then perform in bars. “Practice” is the key reason why the twins are branded as “evil children”. In order to endure torture, forget pain and live to death, they carry out the following cold and cruel “practice”: beating each other, abusing each other, fasting, pretending to be deaf and blind, staying still, begging, “Cruelty” (killing)... Their “practice” is definitely not a general virtual situation experience, but a real and tragic test of “extreme survival”. For example, during the practice of beating each other, the two of them start by slapping each other in the face, which make them

“black and blue”, and then “beat each other shirtless with a belt”, “every time they beat each other, they say: ‘No pain! It doesn't hurt!’”. In addition, they “rub their palms from the fire and deliberately burn themselves”, “take a knife to cut their thighs, arms and chest, and then sprinkle alcohol on the wound”, and then tell themselves “no pain! No pain!”. When grandma is angry, they say to grandma, “grandma, stop yelling, why don't you hit us!”. During the “cruel” practice, they learn from killing chickens and fish, and then learn to get used to killing animals that shouldn't be killed, such as frogs and butterflies. They even try to hang grandma's male cat. From then on, the cat “no longer come close to our house”. After these “exercises”, The twins are indeed reborn, “invincible to all poisons”, and can even kill without blinking an eye. They adapt to the dirt, hunger and cold caused by material shortage, and gradually improve and overcome them through self-reliance; They live in harmony with their grandmother in the struggle of “beating is closeness, scolding is love”; They can be notorious and frighten the arrogance of the little gangsters in the town, and help and protect the bullied neighbor little girl --“Little Rabbit”; Because the church maid has insulted the “animal like crowd” like the shoemaker who has treated them well, they hide the bullet in the firewood and injure her whole face. When they are arrested for interrogation and tortured as murder suspects, their practice of staying still and beating each other play a life-saving role. Finally, they “not a single bone is broken, except a few teeth, but they are baby teeth”.

2.2. Narrative

In the narrative aspect of the novel, if we only look at the titles of each chapter literally, it seems that the narrative motivation of the narrator (the diary twins -- “we”), comes from the accidental encounter of life. They just record the people and things every day simply and passively. However, in terms of content structure, there is an inevitable sequence and causality between the chapters. For example, after the chapters introducing the personnel and environment of the twins' sojourn, such as “Grandma's Home”, “Grandma”, “Forest and River”, “Dirt” at the beginning, it is written that the twins “Practice to Endure the Pain of Skin and Flesh” and “Practice the Pain of Soul”. The chapter “Neighbor and Her Daughter” writes that “Little Rabbit” made a living by begging, and the later chapter writes that twins “Practice Begging”. In the chapter “Little Rabbit”, it is written that the Little Rabbit's non working mother is likely to pretend to be deaf and blind. In the next chapter, the twins begin to do “The Practice of the Blind and the Deaf”. In the chapter of “Deserters”, it is written that the twins find a deserter in the forest “haven't eaten for three days”. In the following chapter, the twins begin to “Practice Fasting”. In the chapter “Grandpa's Grave”, it

is written that the twins follow grandma and learn that grandma has poisoned Grandpa. In the next chapter, the twins begin to “Practice Cruelty” ... All these are like an iron ring tightly sleeved with an iron ring, closely connecting the seemingly scattered plot of the whole novel. The core motivation and principle of series connection are the twin's strong will to survive and the survival law of the powerful to win under the background of war. Looking at the narrative sentence pattern of the novel, according to the author's self-report, she “just started” and “learned French from children”. Therefore, the simple sentence pattern and structure similar to children's “homework” in the novel seem to be the author's helpless move, which are also in line with the narrative identity of twins as children. But this is just a representation. In fact, it is also the author's deliberate use of “a cold and objective way of writing” [5]. The reason why the author chooses this writing posture is indirectly shown when the novel describes how the twins write their compositions: twins think “the standard for evaluating articles ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is very simple: everything must be true. We can't write that grandma looks like a ‘witch’, but we can write ‘everyone calls her an old witch’. If we write ‘the herald is very kind’, this is not necessarily true... We simply write ‘the herald handed us two blankets’”. That is to say, the author's choice of sentence patterns, like twins, is based on the principle of conveying the true face of life. In the environment of war, any subjective decoration, beautification and definition of life and human nature may be illusory and false, and people can only believe the temporary and detailed truth, therefore, the author can only use simple, almost monotonous, clumsy sentence patterns used by children to narrate.

3. THE EFFECT OF TENSION STRUCTURE

Therefore, no matter in terms of content or narrative, *The Diary of the Evil Child* is not a one-way work. It uses the plot of “adventure” and “growth” often used in general children's stories to express the content of horror and “not suitable for children”, from the perspective of children, the simple language of children's exercises describes the cold and tragic survival law and life reality. It is the “conflict or friction” of these “complements, contraries and opposites” that makes the novel form a tight and shocking tension structure. It is this structure that makes readers aware that the evil child diary is definitely not a warm children's fairy tale, but more like an adult fairy tale that needs “grading” tips. Facing the “cold” and “evil” children described by the author in the tone of “indifference”, adult readers will involuntarily think about not only what kind of view of children's education should be established, but also how to examine their own personality and treat human humanity. Because in the face of cruel war, adults with rich experience are

inevitably a “child”. In the novel, the twins show a strong purpose and willpower when maintaining and developing their lives. On the contrary, the adults around them, whether grandma, the mother of the neighbor “little rabbit”, foreign military officer and herald renting in grandma's house, priest and maid of the church, or their mother and father, are either sloppy, either depressed and disgust with the world, or happy at the moment, or obscene and frail... Under the teasing of the war, they are all weak, clowns and wretches. So the twins are more like two “children's Heroes” who are going to be given big roles by god. The author uses them to experiment and show how human beings can survive in bad material conditions and cruel interpersonal relationships. Therefore, *The Diary of Evil Children*, an adult fairy tale, is actually a human survival fable in wartime.

In such an adult fairy tale and human survival fable, because of the extreme horror of its content and the extreme indifference of its narrative, readers can easily be seized by the author's seemingly deliberately expressed view of children's education and human survival philosophy, that is, the “evils” in human nature such as the twin “evil children” - perseverance, indifference and cruelty, they will undoubtedly stimulate the human body and will weakened and paralyzed by civilization, and strengthen the hardness and tolerance of human nature. Especially in the war environment of the law of the jungle and the destruction of life, such “evils” seem to be the “only choice” for human beings, especially children, to preserve their lives and grow up. Therefore, we can only take it as a “vaccine” to “fight poison with poison” and “fight evil with evil” and inject it into human body when they are young, so that it can help human resist and immunize against all kinds of unexpected situations and misfortunes in life. However, the key is whether the twins, who have almost lost all the feelings of pain both in body and spirit through cruel self-education (“practice”), really have strong and long-lasting vitality? Are they heroic models that human beings should cultivate and expect? The conclusion is negative, when we read the end of *The Diary of the Evil Child*, we can find that one of the twins, after using his father to step on the landmine buried by the border wall, crosses the border unharmed and begins his adult life in a foreign country. Later, *The Third Lie* write that decades later, the man who has crossed the border comes back to look for his brother and mother, but his brother pretends not to know him because he is afraid that he will disturb their now calm life. He jumps off the train and commits suicide on the way back to the foreign country. It can be seen that the long-term perseverance of life “practice” can not fill the emptiness in his heart, nor can it dispel his need for ethical warmth. Therefore, the ending of the whole “trilogy of evil children” is a tragedy, and the theme the author intends to express can be concluded at this time, that is to strongly condemn and oppose the cruel war - to avoid the abnormal development of human

nature in war, we can only prevent the occurrence of war. In fact, the author's anti war thought has been clearly expressed through the voice of the masses when the twins performed in the bar in *The Diary of Evil Children*: “You just want to be heroes, so you trigger the war! You men, this is your war. Since you want it, do it! Bullshit hero!” “No one will like war, no one, absolutely not.”

The plots of *The Evidence of Two People* and *The Third Lie* almost “overturn the original structure of *The Diary of Evil Children*” [6]. In these two follow-up novels, the experiences of twins in their grandmother's house in the evil children diary have become wishful fictions of one of the twins. At the beginning of the war, the father of the twins wants to abandon them and his mother to live with his lover. When his mother shoots his father, she accidentally injures one of his brothers. The one who is injured by mistake is sent from the hospital to the rehabilitation center. After the rehabilitation center is bombed, he is sent to an old woman's house in the countryside. She is the “grandmother” in *The Diary of Evil Children*. The brother who stays at home lives in loneliness, hard work and depression all year round, because his mother turns the guilt and missing for the wrongly injured brother into ridicule and indifference to him. The brother who is injured by mistake is more lonely and painful in the “grandma” home. Therefore, he invents the “diary” of twins inseparable in the “grandma” home to make himself feel that his brother is around. Therefore, in terms of content, *The Evidence of Two People* and *The Third Lie* are actually strengthening the anti war theme in *The Diary of Evil Children*. However, their repeated entanglement in narrative clues and the gradual adulthood of narrative subject have lost the separation and contrast effect compared with the concise and coherent narrative mode and children's narrative perspective of *The Diary of Evil Children*. Therefore, the artistic appeal of tragedy has decreased.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, Agota Kristof 's *The Diary of Evil Children* is a novel full of tension, eye-catching and thought-provoking. It combines various “complements, contraries and opposites” to form a strong tension structure. The opposite and complementary forces in the novel include at least these five groups: children's perspective and thriller content; childish language and cruel behavior; loose records and strong survival will; simple narration and cold survival rules, tragic life reality; indifferent writing posture and complex and strong love and hatred for human nature and war. These five groups of “opposites” repel and produce each other, forming a rich and strong tension: the more childlike the perspective is and the more childish the language is, the more shocking the content is; the simpler and more objective the narrative is, the colder and more tragic the survival law and life reality it embodies, and the more

complex and intense the author's attitude and emotion it expresses. It is through such a tension structure that the author creates a pair of "children's Heroes" images of twins who are extremely persevering and "vicious", and shows the author's complex attitude towards the children's education view and human survival philosophy of "fighting evil with evil": helpless acceptance and lingering despair coexist. It is also through strong tension that the author strongly expresses his disgust and condemnation of the cruel war, because only by putting an end to the occurrence of war can we prevent the extreme abnormal development of human nature. As the author said, "reality is more cruel than I wrote" [7]!

For the Chinese context, Agota Kristof 's *The Diary of Evil Children* seems to have a particularly cold and sharp reference significance. As we all know, since the end of the Qing Dynasty, saving the nation from subjugation and survival, innovation and growth have always been the biggest theme of China's social development. In such a social environment, the content and theme of China's war literature tend to describe the grand scene and victory process of the just war, show its great significance and immortal value to national independence and national strength, and their narrative style is often grand and stirring. Since the 1980s, literary works in the new era have become more and more rich in the perspective of war. However, one of the more obvious tendencies is that many writers put the content and theme into the shaping and praise of rough and heroic folk heroes, and their narrative style is often wild and passionate. For example, Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan's *The Red Sorghum* [8], which portrays a folk anti-japanese hero, is a typical example. It is not only widely respected by the literary circles as a pioneer literary work, but also has been adapted into various artistic forms such as film, TV drama and drama for many times, which has had a wide impact in the society. In other words, for a long time, China's classic war literary works generally do not have a "tension structure" to accommodate all kinds of "complements, contraries and opposites". Therefore, the cruel side of the war itself has been intentionally or unintentionally avoided or weakened by many Chinese writers, and such avoidance or weakening has been naturally accepted by readers, gradually became their collective unconsciousness. However, as Lu Xun, the greatest writer of modern Chinese literature, said: "A real warrior dares to face the bleak life and the dripping blood." [9] Therefore, novels such as Agota Kristof 's *The Diary of Evil Children* are just a thought-provoking reference for us to carry out children's education and examine war and human nature. In particular, how to judge and consider the nature and degree of the long-standing complex thought of "fighting evil with evil" needs our serious thinking and careful practice.

In short, just as the coexistence of opposite and complementary forces in physical phenomena creates a tense and gripping state, the compatibility of

"complements, contraries and opposites" in literary texts can also create a tense and shocking effect. The reason why Agota Kristof 's *The Diary of Evil Children* can attract attention and thought-provoking comes from this tension mechanism. Compared with those works with unidirectional style, the literary influence of such works with tension structure is not to make people "unconsciously" or "without contradiction" moved and intoxicated, but shocking and in-depth thinking.

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