

The Eulogy of Goodness and the Pursuit of Humanity--Analysis of the Ethics in Little Women

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Abstract. Little Women was one representative of the American writer Louisa May Alcott. This masterpiece based on reality shows us a world filled with love. In the past, many scholars always exploring the female consciousness reflected in the work from the perspective of feminist, while this paper intends to use the method of Ethical Literary Criticism, to analyze the ethics reflected in the word, investigate the influence factors, and find certain moral principles with practical significance that are good for today's society.

Introduction

Little Women, written in the mid-19th century, was one of the most successful works of Louisa May Alcott. The clue of the whole story is the growth process of the four sisters of March, and it shows us the real middle-class life profoundly. Some people say that Little Women was filled with moralizing and lack of realism and imagination, but in my opinion, it is these pleasant and fresh moral teachings, clever and banter comments, realistic autobiographical descriptions that let the novel still shining brightly de-spite a century's vicissitudes. The ethics in the novel have classic values, providing us with a valuable reference.

Method of Ethical Literary Criticism

From a methodological point of view, Ethical Literary Criticism, learning from the methods of Ethics, is a critical method in studying literature. It not only explains the moral phenomenon appeared in literary history dialectically and historically, but also persists in using the current moral values to explain the moral phenomenon in contemporary literary works and then make value judgments. From the origin point of view, Ethical Literary Criticism regards literature as a product of moral. It puts literature as a unique expression form of a specific historical stage of ethics and moral life. Literature is essentially the art of ethics.

Since the beginning of literature, ethics never leave the sight of writers. In the history of the theory and criticism of literature in both China and the west countries, there are lots of achievements in the focus on ethical issues. From Greek literary theory always holding a very clear ethical and moral standards in the discussion of literature to Conrad's discussion on the purpose of novels, that is, the discovery of moral should be the goal of every story; from Chinese scholars' "writings for conveying principle" and the pursuit of morality to the contemporary culture re-searchers' discussion on the narrative ethics and moral issues of novels, ethical issues are always closely linked with the development of literature and advancing with the times.

The method of Ethical Literary Criticism was first put forward by Professor Nie Zhenzhao in 2004. Under the impacts of varies Literature Criticism Theory, Ethical Literary Criticism not only makes us have a place in the literary criticism world dominated by western countries, but also gives us some new attempts and ways in reading classical literature. Ethical Literary Criticism is different from tradition-al moral criticism.

It is not simply a moral value judgment of good or bad from today's moral stance in analyzing literature in history, instead it emphasizes to return to the historic ethics site, that is, to back to the site or moment that the event happened to explain literary works using the ethics view at that time.

In such an era with a variety of literary works which crossed the "moral line", using "anti-ethical" narrative techniques and arousing the reader's moral confusion, the ethical value of literature increasingly shown its charm across time and space. The paper of a well-known scholar Dr. Li Dingqing about Ethical Literary Criticism and construction of humanity spirit tells us that using the method of Ethical Literary Criticism to interpret classical works, we can explore the ethical and moral factors from the aspects of relationships between man and society, man and nature, man and man, man and the self and then find the meaning and educational function of the works for the construction of human spirit.

Little Women's Ethics

Little women is a timeless classic, depicting the sweet and happy life of a normal middle-class family of America in the 1860s. Although the story occurred in the early days of the Civil War with political movements in full swing, the author had no mention of the cruel war and the reform; instead she used her fresh and warm writing tones to show us a peaceful and harmonious land of idyllic beauty. Through the description about family, friendship, and love of marches, this novel advocated good ethics and provided spiritual and moral sustenance for the ordinary American people with mental distress at that time. In the view of Alcott, kindness and humanity, forgiveness and optimism, grittiness and independence, mutual learning and accommodation were all indispensable spiritual qualities essential for personal growth. They were the source of life happiness, social stability and world harmony.

From the beginning of the novel, we slowly know that the eldest daughter Meg was a gentle, graceful and peacockish girl. She tried to be noble and decent in life, wanting to provide an example for her sisters. She was yearning for high society life, but when she really entered the flashy luxury social, she felt that the so-called upper class people "were not particularly cultivated or intelligent, and that all their gilding could not quite conceal the ordinary material of which they were made." She suddenly found that "it does seem pleasant to be quiet, and not have company manners on all the time. Home is a nice place, though it isn't splendid." Through a conversation with her mother, she recognized that the inner beauty is the most precious quality and she should learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty. On her own love and marriage problems, she was not in favor of Aunt March's point of view, that is, she ought to marry well and help her family, and it's her duty to make a rich match. She resolutely chose John, a poor but kind and aspirant guy, as his lifelong companion. Although the life after marriage was trivial and hard and everything had to start with humble way, Meg and John had mutual understanding and support. They learned how to forgive each other in trivial life and how to live better in careful planning of something. Her husband kept juggling hard for life, and Meg worked diligently in housework and took care for their children. They devoted themselves for their families and took responsibility for their happy life.

The second daughter Jo was the central figure of the book. The process of her growing up was the process of her self-perfection and without a doubt it became the focus of the book. Jo had the least self-control and a fiery spirit, and "she thinks that keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South". When her bad temper made Amy almost drowned in the water, she suddenly realized her lack of morality. She reminded herself to be calm and restraint in her future life. At the edge of life and death, she came to understand the feeling of despair and remorse and owned a beautiful harvest of self-control. In her career, Jo did as well as boys with her contemporaries. She took her pen as a tool to support herself, and made contributions to her family. She published stories and novels, using her working capacity to establish her position in the patriarchal society. At the same time she had the courage to change herself, and humbly accepted Professor Bhaer's assessment of her work. She no longer wrote sensational stories and decided to 'sweep mud in the street', for that's honest, at least. In the aspects of the choice of love and marriage, Jo decisively rejected Laurie's courtship, though handsome and clever Laurie was her childhood sweetheart, and also had a wealthy family. She settled down with Professor Bhaer, a middle-aged people whose behavior sincerity and docile, for she found that marriage was not a moment of passion or a shackle of fate. In her eyes, marriage should have more understanding,

freedom, equality and responsibility. Although Professor Bhaer was on one's uppers, he had an admirable character which was more persuasive than money, status and beauty. In a world of mundane pursuits, both Jo and her sister, rejected the flashy and unreal love to choose a family filled with responsibility.

This kind of concept of love formed a sharp contrast with today's abnormal point of view, that is, "I'd rather be crying in a BMW than laughing on the back of a bicycle". In addition, Jo and her husband used the old manor left by aunt March to run a school so as to receive and educate children. Although they were busy, they felt very happy. In the "Bhaer gar-den", a paradise, Jo's harvests were not only the happiness of being a mother but also the sweetness for having a satisfactory work. She realized her values in life.

Good ethical relationships between people were personified by Beth, the third daughter. She not only strived to overcome her shyness, but also tried her best to help the weak and the poor. When their mother was not at home, Beth took care of the sick baby of Hummel, their poor neighbor, sympathetically and responsibly. Unfortunately, she infected with scarlet fever. During her illness, her first thought was not her own body, but the family and friends, whether they would get sick. Beth loved others as herself, so everybody loved her very much. Even" the milkman, baker, grocer, and butcher inquired how she did, poor Mrs Hummel came to beg pardon for her thoughtlessness and to get a shroud for Minna, the neighbors sent all sorts of comforts and good wishes, and even those who knew her best were surprised to find how many friends shy little Beth had made." When Beth was facing her death, she was calm and brave. What she left was not fear, but detached calm and endless love. The youngest daughter Amy, though a little bit pretentious, tried hard "to be above the little meannesses and follies and faults that spoil so many women". She persisted for arts, no matter how many obstacles, failures and setbacks she met. She firmly believed that one day would create an elegant work of art. During the days in Europe, Amy not only improved her artistic taste but also met with Laurie, being his bosom friend and falling in love with him. Laurie's sincerity, change and devotion made the calm and mundane Amy felt both happy and humble, so she decided to constantly improve herself to become a qualified lover of Laurie. Amy realized the meaning of true love from little drops of life. It is a kind of happiness that money and status could not give. Although they also had dull and sad days, they supported and comforted each other. Sometimes even love could not make them free from worry and pain, but they did not lose heart, for they believed that "when there is love, there is hope".

The process of these four little women's growing up was the process of their ethical and moral improvement. They were kind, strong, and optimistic, and everywhere was brimming with love and humanity because of them. Using the realistic style, Alcott tried to show the real life of the normal middle-class family at that time. This book reflected her caring for humanity and her unique understanding of ethics in her days and let the readers in every age feel the enthusiasm, love and sincerity among people. The spiritual and moral strength and moral education showed in her work were very powerful that the empty talk could not match.

The Impact of Zeitgeist and the Enlightenment Significance

As we all know, any creative literary works are inseparable from the times in which the writers live. *Little Women* is no exception. In the age of Alcott, the United States was undergoing tremendous changes: in politics, they had an active abolition of slavery; in the economy, they conducted a transition from rural to industrialized society; in culture, they inclined the popular new idea-Transcendentalism. The old and new ethics interweaved each other. The old moral behaviors such as obedience and piety were under clouds of suspicion, and the new ethics emphasizing on self-reliance gradually came into people's vision. Living in a strange in-between period, Alcott grew up in contradiction: on the one hand, her work affirmed the value of traditional ethics such as marriage, motherhood and housework; on the other hand, she questioned them through the protagonists in her work. These were all reflections of the inner contradiction of the author as a responsible girl and an aspiring writer. She hovered between tradition and idealism, showing the impacts and constraints of certain zeitgeist in her age. Although the work has some limitations, this will not affect its position in the history of contemporary literature. As professor Nie Zhenzhao once said, we could not measure it directly with the current standard, instead we should be based on the era they had lived and analyze the ethical and moral reasons of events so as to provide useful guidance for today's society. Although the figures in *Little Women* were not perfect characters, what they

reflected was exactly the truths of history, carrying the author's understanding and pursuit of good ethics at that time. This novel was always moving people by emotion, reflecting the moral responsibility and obligation for human and the society as a literary work. The wonderful moral characters presented in the book such as kindness, benevolence, independence and optimism transcended the boundaries of time and space, setting a reference for us to distinguish good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and this is the most crucial reason why this work became a classic, just as the Nobel laureate Mo Yan (the Nobel Prize in Literature 2012 was awarded to Mo Yan) once said: "Literature may be of little help in politics, but the impact on individuals is profound." With the development of science and technology, the influence of individual consciousness on social development was gradually enhanced. If literary works cannot assume the responsibility to promote good ethics, our spiritual civilization construction today will be difficult. When the literature can lead us to distinguish right and wrong, it can provide spiritual power for us in building a harmonious society and realize our Chinese dream, and only when it can promote social stability and development can we truly realize the value of literature.

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