

# Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection

**Nie Zhenzhao**

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University

Yuhangtang Rd. 668, Xihu District, Hangzhou, 310058, China

Email: niezhenzhao@163.com

**Abstract** Charles Darwin's biological selection offers a forceful explanation of biological evolution. With reference to Darwin's concept of biological selection, the article puts forward its counterpart: ethical selection. While biological selection answers how humans are different from animals physically, ethical selection explains the distinction between human beings and animals in a cognitive sense. The riddle of the Sphinx can be viewed a story about the evolution of ethical consciousness, the progression from natural selection to ethical selection. The feature of the Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body implies that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for the reason of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process, and that human beings evolved from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals. The "Sphinx factor" is composed of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. In literary works, is exemplified in the combination of natural will, free will, and rational will in characters. The interplay of the three wills is embodied in individuals as contrasting yet interrelated forces in determining their ethical choices and moral behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords** Ethical Literary Criticism; biological selection; natural selection; ethical selection; Sphinx factor

**Author** **Nie Zhenzhao** is Professor at the School of International Studies and Director of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies of World Literature, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). His main research interests include English and American literature, comparative literature, and the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism. He was elected foreign member of Academia Europaea in 2018.

---

1 The main body of this article is the first chapter of the monograph 《文学伦理学批评导论》 (*Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*), translated from Chinese to English by Luo Liang-gong, et al. This work is sponsored by the project of the National Social Science Fund of China (Project No. 21AWW001).

## Natural Selection

In its origin, “literature is a unique expression of ethic and morality within a certain historical period. As such, literature is not just an art of language but rather an art of ethics” (Nie 14). Human beings invented written words out of their ethical needs to document their life stories and their understandings of the self and the world. In the earliest beginnings of the human world, mankind was confronted with an array of questions ranging from practical issue of life, such as how to interpret and cope with diseases and natural disasters, to life-searching questions, such as how to provide value judgment and make life choices. Before the invention of written words, it is hard to trace how our ancestors dealt with these questions. It was not until the invention of written words that texts were formed and literature came into being. This explains how texts can teach us about the lives and the development of moral norms in historical times.

In the history of human civilization, the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a selection between the identity of animal and that of human being. The theory of biological selection developed by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) offers a forceful and scientific explanation of biological evolution. According to him, human’s separation from the great apes is characterized by a number of morphological, physiological, and behavioral changes, such as walking on two legs and manipulating tools by hands. Darwin’s theory of evolution explains how natural selection functions in the descent of man from some lower forms, considering the evidence of homologous structures in man and the lower animals. Biological selection accounts for the physical forms of human beings, however it leaves the question open for discussion: other than in a biological sense what are the essential features that distinguish human beings from animals in nature? As Darwin pointed out in his book *On the Descent of Man*, “I have hitherto only considered the advancement of man from semi-human condition to that of the modern savage” (100). Biological selection is the first decisive step in the transition from ape to man, which helps them to be who they are in a biological sense. What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step—ethical selection. The evolution of human civilization, as I believe, experiences three stages of natural selection, ethical selection and scientific selection.

It should be noted that Friedrich Engels, relying on Darwin’s theory, goes a step further to argue that it is labor that differentiates human beings from animals. In his essay “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” (1876), Engels describes the whole process of how “human society arose out of a band of tree-climbing monkeys” and the decisive role that labor played. In Engels’ speculation,

the apes, when moving on level ground, began to adopt a more erect posture in walking with the hand freed to use tools such as stones and stools, and eventually the hand was so flexible that it could produce tools. "The gradual perfecting of the human hand" led to the development of the brain and its attendant senses, of the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of abstraction and judgment. This is how human society evolves from apes. According to Engels, labor is the characteristic difference between the band of monkeys and human society and more important, it creates human existence.

Both Darwin and Engels succeed in accounting for whence human beings have come. Engels, however, is conscious of the key question that matters in human evolution: what is the essential distinction between man and other animals? Engels' answer is labor. He suggests that labor becomes different, more perfect, more diversified with the development of human beings' ability in the cooperation of hands, organs and speech and brain. This explains the development of the institutions associated with human civilization: "Agriculture was added to hunting and cattle raising; then came spinning, weaving, metalworking, pottery, and navigation. Along with trade and industry, art and science finally appeared. Tribes developed into nations and states." He concludes that "the animal merely uses external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it."

Engels made supportive claims about how man evolved from apes in manifold and dynamic ways and of how nature had been reconfigured through human intervention. He ascribes this difference as a result of labor and comes to the conclusion that humans have thus become distinguished from animals by their ability to manipulate nature through labor. In fact, his notion of labor and its function in human evolution is still under the influence of Darwin's theory of biological evolution, which he has acknowledged in the beginning of his essay. He implies that humans are fundamentally different from other mammals in a biological sense, however, like Darwin he does not explore the question in a cognitive sense. Although labor undoubtedly spurs the development of our brains in the evolution process, it is merely one of the conditions that enables humans to evolve from apes. Considering the fact that other mammals like humans are in constant process of evolution, it inevitably points to the key question, what is the essential distinction between humans and other animals in the brain.

### **Ethical Selection**

With reference to Darwin's concept of biological selection, I place much emphasis

on its counterpart: ethical selection. While biological selection answers how humans are different from animals physically, ethical selection explains the distinction between human beings and animals in a cognitive sense. It is ethical selection that helps to endow human beings with reason and ethical consciousness, and thus eventually turns them into ethical beings. In fact, the story of Adam and Eve from the Bible provides a persuasive case for the distinction between natural selection and ethical selection.

The Book of Genesis provides two creation narratives which on the surface seem to be self-contradictory. In the Garden of Eden, God creates man in his own image and ask him to take care of everything else that he has made. However, Adam and Eve are human beings purely in the biological sense. Despite of their physical differences from living creatures in the Garden of Eden such as livestock, insects and wild animals, they are part of the world of animals created by God. So far as knowledge is concerned, they remain basically the same as other animals, being naked with no sense of shame, taking fruit from trees when hungry, and drinking water from streams when thirsty. This narrative points to a confusion unanswered in the Bible: what enables man to fulfill God's will?

The act of eating the fruits from the Tree of Knowledge in the second narrative is significant in the sense that Adam and Eve have thus acquired knowledge and ability to conjure negative moral concepts such as shame and evil. It explains their consequential actions of feeling ashamed of their nakedness and looking for leaves to cover their secret places. They also realize their sin of disobeying God for eating fruit from the forbidden tree. If taken the story of Adam of Eve from its biblical context and reading it instead as an allegory, it indicates knowledge is the determining factor between humankind and animals. Accordingly, the original sin could be interpreted as the commonalities shared by man and animals. While Darwin believes that humans' knowledge is acquired through biological selection, I believe that human's rationality is acquired through ethical selection.

Eating the forbidden fruit and the consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil help Adam and Eve complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in a biological sense, but also in an ethical sense. In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion for distinguishing human beings from animals. The notion of good and evil emerges along with ethical consciousness and is used to evaluate human beings only. In this sense, good and evil constitute the basis of ethics.

### **The Riddle of the Sphinx**

The story of Adam and Eve is an allegory of the function of ethical selection in

human's development. The text of *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, furthermore, provides a literary interpretation of the significance of ethical selection in organization of human society.

The key issue concerning ethical selection is to achieve the act of self-awareness through rational means. "Knowing thyself", a phrase that was inscribed over the entrance to the temple of Delphi, constitutes the major themes of *Oedipus the King*. Previous studies place great emphasis on this ancient Greek play as an expression of issue concerning humanity's doomed failure to fight against fate. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the Sphinx Riddle can be seen as self-inquiry of why humans are such beings, or to put it in another way, what is an essential part of oneself.

The Sphinx is a mythological figure in Egyptian and Greek art and legend having the body of a lion and the head of a man. The most famous image is the winged sphinx of Boeotian Thebes. Sitting above the rocky entrance to the city of Thebes, it demanded the answer to a riddle from all travelers and if answered incorrectly strangled and devoured them. The creature recites its riddle to Oedipus: "Which creature has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" Oedipus gave the answer correctly: man—who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then uses a walking stick in old age. The Sphinx then threw herself from high rocks and died. According to the myth, Oedipus is the first and the only one who could solve this riddle which, viewed from today's perspective, is apparently not a difficult riddle. The parable, however, conveys an important message for us to understand this early tradition of man's self-searching.

According to Hesiod, the Sphinx was a daughter of Orthrus and Echidna. In Greek mythology, Orthrus was a dog with two heads and Echidna was a monster, half-woman and half-snake, according to Hesiod's description, "half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake, great and awful, with speckled skin" (Hesiod 32-33). There are many half-animal and half-man/woman monsters in Greek mythology, such as the Minotaur in the Cretan Labyrinth, Pan the god of shepherds, Satyrs the god of woodland, and Chiron a half-horse man.

Considering the links between human evolution and mythology, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted not as an exploration of the mystery of why humans are such beings. The significance of the riddle lies not in its difficulty, but in its implications for our understanding of humanity. Since the Sphinx is female with a woman's head, a lion's body, an eagle's wings, and a snake's tail, it is thus a difficult question for ancient people to tell whether the Sphinx is human being or animal: the

human head seems to imply that the Sphinx is a human being, or more specifically a woman, but the lion body suggests that the Sphinx is an animal. In the early stage of human civilization, the identity of Sphinx is indeed a confusing question.

As such, the Sphinx's riddle points to the essential distinction between mankind and animals. The feature of the Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body suggests that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for the rational will of human beings emerging in the evolutionary process. However, its animal features such as lion's body and snake's tail indicate that she retains some primitive desires associated with animals. The Sphinx' riddle, while pointing to the confusion in identity, is essentially a question of human nature.

### **The Sphinx Factor**

The Riddle of the Sphinx is a story about the evolution of human consciousness. Previous interpretations have put great emphasis on the antagonism between man and beast. The image of Sphinx, if looked closely, acquires the symbolic meaning in the cognitive process of man's understanding of human nature.

The feature of the Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body implies that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for the reason of human beings emerging in the evolutionary process. It also points to the fact that human beings evolved from animals retaining features common to animals. With this in mind, I name this feature the "Sphinx factor." It is composed of the human factor and the animal factor. The human factor refers to ethical consciousness embodied by the human head, which results from human being's biological selection in the evolution from savagery to civilization; while the animal factor suggests human beings' animal instinct mainly under the influence of primitive desires.

The human factor and human nature, though different in concepts, are interrelated. The human factor contributes to the formation of ethical consciousness, which is the determining component of human nature. Human nature is the essential distinction between man and animals, with ethical consciousness being its external manifestation. When man acquires ethical consciousness, he is able to tell good from evil. As discussed earlier, this is best exemplified in the story of Adam and Eve.

Likewise, the animal factor, though incompatible with the human factor, is not identical with the nature of animals. It refers to human beings' instinct common to all animals with natural will and free will being its external manifestation. Animal

instincts are essentially different from humans' in the sense that they bear no moral consequences, while human's natural will (motivated by libido) and free will (embodied as desires) are constrained and regulated by rationality and morality. As such, the dialectical relationship between animal factor and human factor indicates on the one hand the evolution process of human from apes, and on the other hand, rationality and morality are not born but acquired with constant learning and strenuous practicing. In this sense, man exists as an ethical being.

In normal circumstances, the human factor is superior to the animal factor. A man could become a person with ethical consciousness, as the former can take control of the latter. In contrast to the human factor, the animal factor refers to the human being's animal instinct, which is controlled by primitive desires. As an irrational element, the animal factor accounts for the animal instinct retained in human beings in the evolutionary process. Viewed in this light, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted as an ethical proposition for human beings to meditate after the completion of biological selection. The choice of being human or being animal in turn requires them to complete their evolutionary process by undertaking the ethical selection. In terms of the Sphinx factor, the varied combinations and alternations of the human factor and the animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literature conveying different moral implications. There are an uncountable number of literary works demonstrating the interplay between the human factor and the animal factor. Typical examples are *Oedipus the King*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Cloven Viscount*, and *The Journey to the West*.

The teaching function of Children's literature is of value because it cultivates children's personality and moral integrity. It is noticeable that fairy tales are mostly framed in the world of animals. Reading children's development with reference to the concept of the sphinx factor, it becomes clear that the mental growth of children is a process of learning to be human with moral values and rational thinking. This is the significance of how literature engages the children-readers in an active learning style.

### **The Sphinx Factor and Oedipus' Crime**

The riddle of the Sphinx can be viewed as a story about the evolution of ethical consciousness. It indicates the progression from natural selection to ethical selection, a transition that raises us to new levels of understanding of ourselves and the world. While Oedipus' answering to the riddle of the Sphinx suggests that he with exceptional wisdom is conscious of man's essential difference from animal, his tragedy fully explains the severe punishment for breaking ethical principles.

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus accidentally killed his father, became the king of Thebes and married his mother. He saved the city from the mercy of the Sphinx by answering the monster's riddle, however, by unknowingly fulfilling the prophecy he brought disaster to the city. In the beginning of *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles gave a bleak depiction of the city of Thebes:

A rust consumes the buds and fruits of the earth;  
The herds are sick; children die unborn,  
And labour is vain. The god of plague and pyre  
Raids like detestable lightning through the city,  
And all the house of Kadmos is laid waste,  
All emptied, and all darkened: Death alone  
Battens upon the misery of Thebes. (52)

A plague of death struck the city of Thebes, bringing disastrous effects on crops, livestock, and the people. Creon was sent by Oedipus to the Oracle at Delphi seeking guidance for the cause of the plague and returned with the message that the murderer of the former King Laius must be brought to justice in order for the plague to be lifted. With Oedipus' persistent pursuit of Laius' killer, it turns out that Oedipus himself was the murderer. There has been much debate about Oedipus' crimes and his subsequent punishment. In Greek tragedy and myth, it is the norm that man (and hero) is punished for disobedience towards God's will. This is why the play has often been read as a comment on Oedipus' fight against his fate. An alternative explanation is that Oedipus's tragedy lies in his pride. Whichever explanation, though seemingly convincing from a certain perspective, is offered, they all evade the question about the nature of Oedipus' crime.

Unlike other tragic heroes of Greek myth who are punished for a tangible crime, Oedipus was punished severely for his acts of regicide, patricide and incest. Such acts are taboo. They are strictly forbidden, as they jeopardize the foundation of Athenian society. Its harmful consequences are fully exemplified in Oedipus words:

If I had eyes,  
I do not know how I could bear the sight  
Of my father, when I came to the house of Death,  
Or my mother: for I have sinned against them both  
So vilely that I could not make my peace  
By strangling my own life. (68)



In ancient society, parent-child incest is a universal taboo and has been strictly opposed for biological and cultural reasons. Ample evidence indicates that although incest aversion is shared with other species, incest taboo is implemented as a primitive yet effective means of the avoidance of inbreeding, as inbreeding often leads to biological defects, and furthermore, threatens the institution of the family and society. When a particular practice deviates from societal norms, it becomes taboo. The sex taboo, though often associated with superstition, is a primitive understanding of the science of biological inbreeding, which serves for the grounds of ethical rules. It is safe to conclude that the consciousness of taboo begins with the evolutionary phase of natural selection and it is embodied in ethical rules in the phase of ethical selection.

In primitive society (and even in societies today), every clan has a totem (usually an animal) and people with the same totem are prohibited from breeding. In Sigmund Freud's seminal work *Totem and Taboo* (1913), he examines the system of totem in preventing incest. Moreover, the system of totem arranges the institution of family and society. Reading within reference to the natural selection, the totem could be read as a symbol of the animal factor both in every human being and in the collective unconsciousness of the biological selection. Taboo and totemism are closely related in primitive societies as they determine how early human societies are arranged. In *Oedipus the King* we could trace the significance of taboo in the early history of human society. As pointed out by Oedipus, the city of Thebes is haunted by "the horror of incest:"

O marriage, marriage!  
 The act that engendered me, and again the act  
 Performed by the son in the same bed—  
 Ah, the net  
 Of incest, mingling fathers, brothers, sons,  
 With brides, wives, mothers: the last evil  
 That can be known by men: no tongue can say  
 How evil! (68)

The violence of the taboo leads to dire consequence. Oedipus punished himself severely by gouging out his own eyes and having himself sent into exile.

This realization provides us with a new perspective to revisit the links between Oedipus' tragedy and the Sphinx' riddle. Solving the Sphinx' riddle signifies that

Oedipus is a rational man capable of telling beast from man. The question of whether Oedipus deserves the harsh punishment by gods depends on the severity of the crimes that he committed: killing the king and incest. Such acts are not tolerated in the traditional society and are condemned by Oedipus himself. Reading Oedipus's crimes as an allegory, it suggests that even when man acquires the consciousness of rationality and morality, he is forever engaged with fights against evil as the animal factor is inherent in human beings. Oedipus' rational will is best exemplified in his persistent pursuit of the murderer and insistence in punishing the murderer. Even when he eventually found out that he was the murderer, he would not exempt himself from punishment. Oedipus' tragedy suggests that in the evolutionary phase of ethical selection, human beings have experienced a great variety of tragedies in forming a society governed by rational will and ethical rules.

### **Dorian Gray's Natural Will and Rational Will**

In literary works, the concept of the sphinx factor is exemplified in the combination of natural will, free will, and rational will in characters. Natural will, common to man and animals, refers to the forces manifested as a range of instincts driven by libido, such as sexual instincts. Free will, closely related to rational will, is manifested consciously as desires, or more specifically, a conscious pursuit of certain aims. Of the three wills rational will is exclusively bound by moral laws. The interplay of the three wills is embodied in individuals as contrasting yet interrelated forces in determining man's ethical choices and moral behaviors.

The function of literature is to teach moral values by praising virtue and punishing vice. Its ultimate aim is to answer the questions of how to put natural will and free will under the control of rational will. In the literary examples such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Italo Calvino's *The Cloven Viscount* and Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng's *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, we find consistent yet varied attempts to answer the questions of what must be done to be a moral person. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus' acts of killing his father and marrying his mother could be read as a manifestation of natural will, which is an expression of the animal factor driven by the survival and sexual instincts. Nevertheless, his possession of rational will determines his observation of taboo, which is reflected in his persistent pursuit of his father's murderer and his eventual self-punishment.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however, Dorian Gray commits the crime driven by the force of free will. The novel is often read as Wilde's advertisement for aestheticism as the 1891 version features a preface defending the artistic rights and art for art's sake. Wilde himself, however, admits that Dorian Gray "is a story

with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment” (248). Here Wilde discusses the conflicting relation between aestheticism and desires, which ultimately points to the same question as explored in *Oedipus the King*: How to become a rational man?

In Basil Hallward’s portrait, Dorian Gray is “a young man of extraordinary personal beauty”: He was handsome “with his finely-cured scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair” (17). He has a simple and beautiful nature: “He is trustable. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity” (17). For Hallward, Gray represents “an entirely new manner in art, an entirely new mode of art”: “a school that is to have in it all the passion of the romantic spirit, all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek. The harmony of soul and body—how much that is” (12-13).

When the masterpiece is finished, Dorian was confronted with this ethical choice: whether he would “grow old, and horrible, and dreadful” while “this picture will remain always young” or the picture will age instead of himself:

If it were only the other Way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that—for that I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that. (25)

Under Lord Henry’s hedonistic influence, Dorian is overwhelmed by the pursuit of beauty and sensuality embodied as the artistic image in the portrait. This leads to his confusion of his two identities: one in reality and its representation the other in portrait. He identifies himself with the portrait and realizes in agony that he will age and die while the portrait remains young. His secret wish fully explains his choice of youth and devotion to the savoring of sensations.

The conflicts between free will and rational will—two opponent forces of the sphinx factor—are embodied in the seeming contradiction between soul and body as realized by Dorian:

Soul and body, body and soul—how mysterious they were! There was animalism in the soul, and the body had its moments of spirituality. The senses could refine, and the intellect could degrade. Who could say where the fleshly impulse ceased, or the psychical impulse began? (62)

Reading the passage from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the human

soul has the capacity for rational thought, while the body represents the existence of natural will driven by primitive forces of desires. Obedience to the desires and impulses of the body will be undeniably immoral. The dialectical relationship between spirit and matter is clearly stated in the novel: “The separation of spirit from matter was a mystery, and the union of spirit with matter was a mystery also” (52). Dorian, however, is conscious of the two contrasting forces and their moral obligations when he realized in desire: “Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him” (132). Nevertheless, driven by the force of natural will, he chose to pursue instant gratification without thought of its moral consequences,

Dorian’s selection is an ethical one which makes a transformation between the identity of his portrait and that of his own. His portrait becomes a symbol of human factor as it shows the moral and physical decay of Dorian: it becomes more hideous with each one of Dorian’s selfish acts. In contrast, Gray himself falls prey to natural will and irrational will: he is fully devoted to the savouring of sensations and leaves his egotism unharnessed. While Gray remains fresh-faced when the painting is finished, the portrait, as the manifestation of Dorian’s soul, becomes disfigured. The central crime of Dorian is the act of murdering Basil, the painter and creator of the portrait. The killing is an unpardonable crime and a transgression of ethical taboo as Basil plays the father role for Dorian.

His corruption is made visible in the painting and the portrait becomes perfect reflection of his soul. Indeed, when he stabbed Basil to death, his hands in the painting now dripped red with blood. In this sense, the picture, the only piece of evidence of his crimes, is a reflection of his conscience. It is in fear of this cruel paradox that Dorian couldn’t tolerate the existence of the painting and decided to destroy it with the same knife used to kill Basil:

He had cleaned it many times, till there was no stain left upon it. It was bright, and glistened. As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. (187)

He stabbed the picture in despair and instead he is dead. The picture and the man exchange characteristics: now the picture is restored to its youth and beauty while Dorian’s figure is aged and withered.

The ruination of Dorian Gray teaches a moral that unbridled desires and pursuits lead to grave consequences. Just as human body cannot exist without soul,

a life ungoverned by rational faculty is questionable and worthless. With spirit or rational will, man can tell good from evil and distinct itself from animals. In rejection of the concept of morality, Dorian fails to reject the temptations of desires and sensations, steeped in crime.

### **The Separation of Soul and Body in *The Cloven Viscount***

In some literary works, the combination of human factor and animal factor are embodied as the separation between soul and body, for example, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Cloven Viscount*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Journey to the West*. The moral tale of Dorian Gray can be read as a comment on the interplay of human factor (represented by the picture) and animal factor (represented by Dorian). These two factors, when interrelated, make up a whole human being. A man practices his rational acts when free will is under the control of rational will. Dorian, as a negative example, demonstrates how free will unbridled by rational can and will bring disastrous end.

Likewise, *The Cloven Viscount* provides another example of the separation between body and soul. In the Turkish wars of the seventeenth century, Viscount Medardo was hit by a cannonball and his body got split in two:

When the sheet was pulled away, there lay the Viscount's body, horribly mutilated. It not only lacked an arm and leg, but the whole thorax and abdomen between that arm and leg had been swept away by the direct hit. All that remained of the head was one eye, one ear, one cheek, half a nose, half a mouth, half a chin and half a forehead; the other half of the head was just not there. The long and short of it was that just half of him had been saved, the right part, which was perfectly preserved, without a scratch on it, except for that huge slash separating it from the left-hand part blown away. (11)

As a result of the injury, Viscount Medardo exists as two separate people: Gramo (the Bad) and Buono (the Good). Gramo, who is taken control of by the bad nature of Medardo, returns to Terraba, living in castle. He roams through the countryside and is obsessed with destroying things by halves. He caused his father's death. He enjoys inflicting a similar divided state on all living creatures such as a frog, butterfly, mushroom and flower. He burned his own castle and caused his nanny to be scarred from the flames. Cruelly he exiled her to the seaside village of lepers.

Gramo's malevolence forms a sharp contrast with Buono's altruism. Buono was found by a group of hermits in the pile of dead bodies and recovered under the

care of hermits. In his long pilgrimage he did good deeds and returned home. He is obsessed with mending creatures: he sent the injured dog to the vet; he planted the fig tree which was taken down by wind; and he sent the lost child back home.

On the surface Calvino explores dichotomies of good and bad. Yet Calvino offers alternate interpretations of this central division. Medardo's division refers to philosophical dualism of mind and body as embodied in rational will (human factor) and irrational will (animal factor). A rational man is an embodiment of the sphinx factor, a combination of human factor and animal factor. While the two factors are inseparable, the latter is checked and constrained by the former. The separation of these two factors, more often than not, leads to extreme cases of evil. In the example of Viscount, the two halves are split and non-reconcilable. In order to decide who will be Pamela's husband, Grama challenges Buono into a duel and as a result both of them were severely wounded. Dr. Trelawney sews the two sides together and managed to make the Viscount whole again: a whole man again, neither good or bad, but a mixture of goodness and badness.

Calvino suggests the intricacy of moral identity as there are two sides of man, the evil half and the good half. However, he seems to remind the reader as the evil viscount cannot represent the Viscount, the good viscount cannot be saved without the evil half. Likewise, animal factor cannot be entirely eradicated as is made necessary in man's acquisition of wisdom. This is the dual nature of the sphinx factor.

### ***Journey to the West* and Chinese Supernatural Tales**

One of the themes of *Journey to the West*, which is more often than not neglected, is the Sphinx factor. Sun Wukong, the monkey king, is the main character who has to implement rational will against free will. Originally a monkey born from a stone, he learns human language and rituals in his pursuit of immortality and deity. During the process of learning, he develops an awareness of rules and is given the name of Sun Wukong ( 孙悟空 ). The naming process is symbolic: the family name 孙 has the same pronunciation as 狒 , yet his master deliberately takes off the left side of this character which means animal. It is not until he learns the act of the *Tao* (for example, 72 polymorphic transformations) that he is transformed from animal to human.

In the case of Sun Wukong, the lack of rational will leads to an array of mischievous acts and, finally, his rebellion against Heaven. From this moment, he begins his journey of moral edification. He is first punished by the Buddha for his willful acts: the Buddha manages to trap him under a mountain, sealing it with a talisman for five hundred years. Even when he became Tang Sanzang's disciple, he

is constantly reproved for his violence by Tang Sanzang. Ultimately, he can only be controlled by a magic gold ring that Guanying has placed around his head, which caused him unbearable headaches when Tang Sanzang changed the Ring Tightening Mantra. Only after the 81 evils during the journey does Sun achieve Buddhahood and complete the journey of ethical selection. This explains why the gold ring automatically falls off when he is granted the title of Victorious Fighting Buddha. With the awareness of rational will, Sun doesn't need to be observed and disciplined by outer forces.

Like the Sphinx, Sun is driven by the desire for knowledge and wisdom, although he still retains traces of animal features—his long tail and the Sphinx' lion body suggest that both of them are in the process of natural evolution. In opposition to the dominant view that Sun Wukong is a personification of the disquieted mind that bars humanity from enlightenment, I read him as a symbolic image in man's evolution from animal to man. His head of a monkey indicates that he hasn't fully acquired the human form. Sun's behaviors of free will are constantly checked by Tang sheng. When he needs to chastise him, he tightens the band by chanting the "Ring Tightening Mantra." The band together with Buddhist mantra is a symbol of rationality, a unique feature of mankind. In fact, Sun Wukong's childlike playfulness forms a huge contrast to Tang's rationality. The final removal of the band suggests that Sun has developed from animal to man.

Tang Sanzang is weak in defending himself from the demons on the pilgrimage. However, he forms a dynamic relationship with Su Wukong. Although he needs Sun's protection, as Sun's Master, he gives Sun enlightenment. Tang is a monk who is obedient to the rules and prohibitions of Buddhism. When Sun disobeys him or challenges him, he chants the mantra and discipline Sun. His conflict with Sun, though seeming to be on the issue of killing, is in fact a conflict between free will and rational will.

Along the journey, Tang Sanzang is constantly terrorized by monsters and demons because of a legend which says that one can attain immortality by consuming his flesh because he is a reincarnation of a holy being. Although the act of eating Tang Sanzang is undoubtedly evil, the purpose of these demons is unanimous, that is, to achieve eternity. For these monster and demons, most of them have been practicing the art of Tao in the hope of becoming an immortal and even deity after centuries of training and cultivation. They are able to take human form, however, because of the lack of human nature of rationality, they are essentially different from human beings. For them, the flesh of Tang Sanzang symbolizes the spirit of rational will. As such, eating Tang Sanzang, though evil in nature,

represents their utmost efforts in the transformative process from monsters to men.

We can find similar examples in Chinese supernatural tales. Take *Liaozai Zhiyi* (Strange Stories from a Studio for Leisurely Conversations) for example. It records the arduous and life-long process of animals' transformation into humans. For humans who aim to transform into a deity, they need to cultivate the Taoist practices in daily life together with doing good deeds and purifying themselves from egoism. Goodness is the aim and purpose of transformation. In contrast to humans, it is harder for animals to transform into humans. Only those with great determination and persistent pursuit can finally achieve human forms. Nevertheless, without experiencing the evolutionary process of ethical selection, animals in human form cannot be recognized as human as they are not yet beings endowed with reason.

In sum, the Sphinx factor interpreted within the framework of ethical literary criticism facilitates new ways of engaging with literature and fostering new understandings of literary history. In the history of human civilization, mankind underwent two important processes: natural selection and ethical selection. Natural selection allowed human beings to evolve from apes physically, whereas ethical selection distinguishes them from animals spiritually. In an ethical sense, mankind is the outcome of the Sphinx factor, which can be seen as the combination of the human and animal factors. The Sphinx factor is the central element expressed in literary works. The combination of the human factor and the animal factor determines the intricacy of characters and plots and, more importantly, demonstrates the moral implications of the text within specific historical times.

### Works Cited

- Calvino, Italo. *The Cloven Viscount*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1962.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. London: William Clowes and Sons, 1882.
- Engels, Frederick. "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man." <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/>
- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo*. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1919.
- Hesiod. *The Theogony*. Trans. Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006.
- Nie Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: Theory and Terms." *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol.14, no. 1, 2010, pp. 12-22.
- Sophocles. "Oedipus the King." in *Drama: Classical to Contemporary*, edited by John C. Coldewey and W. R. Streiberger. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000. pp. 49-70.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982.