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The Expression of "Collective" and "Individual" in Moral Conflict: A Case Study of Moral Standards in Literary Works

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Abstract: This article takes the moral standards in two literary works as examples to explore the different manifestations of collective and individual in moral conflicts. The research motivation stems from the author's concern about moral conflicts arising among different cultures and groups in literary works. It is hoped that by analyzing the performances of collective and individuals in moral conflicts in different works, comparing the compliance degrees of collective and individuals to the same moral standards, and analyzing how collective and individuals deal with moral conflicts. The problem statement mainly focuses on how to understand the role positioning of collective and individual in moral conflicts and the mutual influence between them. The research methods employed are case analysis and comparative research. The author selected two representative literary works of Western culture for this study, and the moral pressures carried by collective and individuals in different situations were summarized. The research results indicate that in different contexts, the behavior of the collective significantly influences the individual. Conversely, it is also shaped by the personal choices and behaviors of the individual. Eventually, the research conclusion is drawn: In the moral conflicts presented in literary works, collective and individual are not simple opposites but complementary relations, and they jointly build complex and diverse moral relationships.

Keywords: Collective, Individual, Moral conflict, Literary works, Moral standards.

1. Introduction

It is readily apparent that written language serves as the vehicle for the dissemination and documentation of information in human civilization. Commonly, by delving into the content of a book, individuals can construct an understanding of the era in which that book is situated. In literary works, the moral conflicts between collectives and individuals frequently emerge as significant themes for exploring human nature, society, and moral norms. The collectives represent the voices and values of the social collective, while the individuals reflect personal moral choices and inner wrestling. This paper aims to analyze the manifestations of both in moral conflicts, investigate their interrelationships, and their implications for readers. This paper will review the moral standards in several classic literary works, such as the conflict between the individual and the totalitarian society under utopianism in *1984*, and the vast contradiction between the protagonist's indifference and the emotional expectations of society in *L'Étranger*, which embodies the intense moral conflict between

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the individual and the collectives. Through these works, this paper will explore how collectives formulate their distinctive moral standards in specific historical and cultural contexts and the diverse choices made by individuals when confronted with group pressure. Simultaneously, this paper will also analyze how the differences in moral standards between the collectives and the individuals give rise to conflicts. In certain circumstances, an individual's moral choices may run counter to the expectations of the collectives. This tension not only reveals the complexity of individual morality but also reflects the multiplicity of social moral standards. Finally, this paper will explore the impact of moral conflicts on individual growth and social transformation. Under the pressure of the collectives, an individual's moral choices often can stimulate social reflection and transformation, promoting the formation of higher-level moral standards. This process is not only related to an individual's moral growth but also to the moral progress of the entire society. Through an in-depth analysis of the moral conflicts between collectives and individuals in literary works, this paper aims to reveal the significance of individual moral choices and their challenges and influences on social, moral standards, thereby providing a new perspective for understanding moral issues in contemporary society.

2. Case Study about *L'Étranger*

2.1. General View of the Content

The renowned work *L'Étranger* by French author Albert Camus appears rather dull when merely viewed from a novelistic perspective. A clerk named Meursault kills an Arab. Due to insufficient evidence, the court delves into numerous indifferent actions of Meursault, such as not crying after his mother's death, not remembering his mother's age, and having an amorous liaison with his girlfriend the day after his mother's burial. Based on this, from a moral perspective, he is sentenced to death in the name of the French people. However, after a more profound comprehension of Camus and his existentialist philosophy, the author deconstructs the underlying significance of the different manifestations of the collective and the individual in this novel from a brand-new perspective.

2.2. Ontoanalysis

From an individual perspective, as the protagonist of this novel, Meursault has always led a mundane life, and his catchphrase, "I don't mind either way," indicates his indifferent philosophy of life. He shows no concern for God, his own future, or everything around him, nor does he care about the social evaluations of those around him. However, when the author tries to create a more vivid image of the character, he finds from the lines of the novel that this seemingly callous man is actually a man who loves life. He is elated to be able to sleep for 12 hours in bed, and he chases after a truck with his colleagues merely to figure out the sound of its chains. Meursault loves the true and concrete aspects of life rather than the void and vacuous words. Thus, the image of this individual in this text is already rather rich. Meursault, representing the individual, adores the genuine details in life, concealing all his preferences in his heart and instead presenting a cold and indifferent stance towards the empty and insubstantial society.

2.3. Collective Analysis

What about the collective image in this text? Undoubtedly, it is constituted by those who are judging Meursault in the court [1]. This group of people symbolizes the generally recognized and approved social moral standards in French society. For instance, as a person who adheres to social morality, when one’s mother dies, individuals are expected to weep. If individuals don't, they violate the social and moral standards agreed upon by the group. Here is a very interesting point: since individuals

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live within society, individuals are constantly in contact with the collective. Continuously, new individuals accept the moral standards of the collective and join it, while at the same time, individuals similar to the protagonist of this text are constantly being purged by the collective. The guys who fail to integrate into society will lead to being ostracized by the collective. That is to say, there is a mutual contradiction between the collective and the individual. Although the collective is composed of individuals, the individuals that make up the collective have lost their individuality as individuals, leaving only the uniformity produced by the collective [2]. Hence, the author introduces the concept of group pressure here. The group exerts pressure on the individual, compelling the individual to submit to the group and simultaneously transforming the individual in accordance with the group's imagination, blunting the individual's edges, eliminating the individual's uniqueness, and leaving only the "subset" under the unified standards of the group [3].

2.4. Conflict Analysis

From "Absurdity" to "Freedom," in order to fully demonstrate the conflict between the individual and the group, Camus has established an intriguing moral predicament for us in the text [4]. For the protagonist Meursault, the dilemma lies in whether he should opt to submit to the collective authority and transform himself or choose to be a hero and adhere to his true self [5].To the collective that judged Meursault, his actions were undoubtedly at odds with theirs. From a familial perspective, when the mother passed away, normal people would weep for it; only Meursault responded indifferently and even went out with his girlfriend the next day. Facing the issue of his mother's death, Meursault chose indifference rather than the eagerness expected by the collective, which became a crucial point for the collective to assail Meursault. When confronted with a moral quandary, the collective sets a generalized standard they anticipate, and those who choose to comply with the standard are submitting to authority. However, individuals who persist in being themselves become heroes and instigate a challenge against the collective authority [6].

2.5. Potential Impact on Society

When looking back at the era in which the novel was set in 1942, during the Second World War, French culture remained one of the predominant cultures within colonialism. The narrative in the novel, depicting Meursault's killing of an Arab man and his subsequent condemnation to death for not weeping at his mother's funeral, stimulated the audience's reflection on moral standards. As individuals residing in the colony of Algeria, although they were not French, they were profoundly influenced by French culture. Having grown up in an Arab cultural milieu, they were judged by the moral standards of French culture because they are seen as a collective in French culture. This dualistic perplexity led more individuals to reflect upon their relationship with the collective. After the conclusion of World War II, the erstwhile colonial empires lost their potency, and this incited social reform in pursuit of freedom for the colonized people. It also liberated them from the moral standards imposed by colonial culture and enabled them to establish more appropriate moral standards based on their own living circumstances[7, 8].

3. Case Study about *1984*

3.1. General View of the Content

Having concluded the discussion on *L'Étranger*, it comes to *1984*, one of the three major anti-utopian novels of the 20th century. This novel boasts a relatively stronger narrative. It depicts a fictional future in which the entire world is embroiled in a perpetual war. In the First Airborne Field, this region is dominated by the Party, and the Party has organized the Thought Police to control the

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people's minds. The leader of the Party is Big Brother, and the Thought Police demand that everyone worship him, though Big Brother may not truly exist. The protagonist of the novel, Smith, is an Outer Party member who works at the Ministry of Truth. The Ministry of Truth is responsible for propaganda and modifying history, and its task is to rewrite past history to ensure that Big Brother is always correct. Here, people engage in hate campaigns daily, condemning the people's enemy, Goldstein. The protagonist grows weary of this collective fanaticism and earnestly desires a haven for himself. Regrettably, in this world, telescreens bearing Big Brother's face are everywhere, constantly monitoring the residents. If one behaves even slightly aberrantly, the Thought Police will promptly come to one's door for a "courtesy visit." Despite Smith's superficial compliance with the Party's rules and regulations, deep within his heart, he is replete with resentment and suspicion towards the existing system. Thus, he commences his clandestine rebellion, initially by penning a diary to express his discontent and subsequently by entering into a romantic relationship with a woman named Julia, who also holds doubts about the system. The two begin to plot resistance, but their covert activities are promptly detected by the "Thought Police." Smith discovers that it was all a trap set by Core Party member O'Brien. Ultimately, after undergoing a series of dual tortures on both the physical and psychological fronts at the Ministry of Love, Smith is "overthrown." His thoughts are thoroughly domesticated, and he accepts the Party's reformation and calmly confronts Big Brother's punishment – death [9].

3.2. Collective Analysis

In this work, the collective is highly autocratic and totalitarian. George Orwell demonstrates the devastation of individual freedom by portraying a world rife with surveillance, oppression, and propaganda machinery. In the utopian society depicted in this work, the sole moral standard is Big Brother, who represents everything. The Thought Police will purge any individual who contravenes the standards established by Big Brother. In such a highly centralized and despotic social environment, the individual's voice is minuscule and almost non-existent. The individual's channels for expressing opinions are blocked, and they can only passively receive information from the group. Multiple scenes in this work showcase the highly obedient image of the collective. For instance, the description of the hate campaign where the group's emotions are thoroughly aroused, the scene where people shout "B-B" after the hate campaign ends, and the yoga class, among others. The most intriguing aspect of this work lies in its presentation of the shaping of the individual by the group. Here, the group does not merely destroy the individual but shapes them in an unconscious environment. This silent and imperceptible transformation causes individuals to unwittingly efface their individuality and degenerate into an insignificant cog in the group. The behavior of Smith's neighbor's children yelling "thought criminal" and reporting their own father serves as powerful evidence for this argument [10, 11].

3.3. Ontoanalysis

Smith's growth and decline in the narrative reflect the conflict between the individual and the collective. Despite his endeavors to resist and seek the truth, he eventually relinquished his independent thinking and wholly submitted to domination after undergoing extreme persecution. As a distinct individual, Smith discerned the irregularities of the group, and his work experience facilitated his recognition of the aspect where the collective controlled public opinion and effaced individual thinking. The ideological nonconformity incited Smith to initiate his rebellious acts, spanning from keeping a diary to indulging in prostitution, encountering Julia, and ultimately being apprehended by the Thought Police for acquiring the banned book of the Brotherhood. Undoubtedly, the protagonist was predisposed to rebel against the collective. Nevertheless, other individuals apart

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from him, such as the children of Smith's neighbor's family, the neighbor Parsons, and Smith's wife Katharine, presented completely disparate individual images, namely, cogs within the collective. They lost their individual moral standards and thoughts, retaining merely unconditional obedience to the collective. This contrast empowered readers to perceive the influence of the group on the individual more intuitively. This literature exhibits to us how the group molds, reforms, and assimilates individuals, imposing uniform moral standards upon them. In fact, personality and characteristics play two different important roles in the growth of individuals, and neither is necessary. Researchers need to give full play to Aristotle's thought of moderation in terms of the degree and proportion between characteristics and personality. Readers can neither completely erase characteristics and only pay attention to the development of personality nor allow characteristics to develop without limit while ignoring personality [12]. The collective represented by Big Brother ignored this liberalizing development and chose to rely on autocracy and the thought police to control the development of these idiosyncrasies.

3.4. Potential Impact on Society

This book was published in 1949 during the Cold War era, a time of East-West confrontation. This satirical work on totalitarianism was frequently regarded as a satire of Soviet despotism. In reality, this book has opened a door regarding totalitarianism, facilitating individuals' contemplation on the relationship between the collective and the individual under highly centralized authority. Simultaneously, this book has deepened individuals' reflection on nationalism. The concept of a nation encompasses numerous individuals who, perhaps, have diverse living and cultural circumstances but share the same nationality and are subjected to the same moral standards. For instance, the Germanic peoples dispersed across various European countries or the 56 ethnic minorities of the Chinese nation. As individuals, they possess distinct moral standards. However, from the group perspective of a nation, a unified moral standard is imposed on them, gradually drawing individuals closer to the collective and accomplishing the silent transformation of the collective on the individual.

4. Conclusion

Through this research, it is discovered that the relationship between the collective and the individual is not merely one of opposition but rather a complementary and interdependent moral connection. To a certain extent, an individual's moral choices can trigger social reflection and transformation, promoting the formation of higher-level moral standards and thereby influencing the choices of the group. This is because individuals can drive social change through their compliance with or resistance to the group in different manners. If individuals comply with the group, society will increasingly tend towards collectivism, with unified thoughts from top to bottom. Individuals might lose their uniqueness and become homogeneous. A truly uniform moral standard may emerge in society, although this standard might not be applicable to everyone. However, once individuals become homogeneous and only the group remains, who would care if the moral standard suits everyone? If individuals resist the group, dissenting voices can effectively prevent groupthink and provide more perspectives for the group. Thought innovation often requires collision, and society can undergo transformation towards a more diverse future. Meanwhile, the group constantly exerts pressure on both internal and external individuals to achieve greater group coherence. The greater the pressure on individuals, the higher their compliance. However, this could easily lead to the loss of individual thinking ability, reducing them to mere cogs of the group. If the pressure exerted by the group is too weak, it may cause individuals' thinking to become overly diffuse. Excessive dispersion might give rise to various cultural dregs, which in turn could impede the joint development of the group and the

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individual. Overall, this paper reveals the complex dynamics of moral conflicts between the collective and the individual, emphasizing that only by integrating individuals and the group, appropriately managing pressure, and encouraging divergent thinking can individuals ensure the absence of major divergences when confronted with moral conflicts in the future and guarantee social progress. This study hopes to offer references for related fields that combine literary works with reality to explore the relationship between the group and the individual. The research is conducive to in-depth discussions on the relationship between the group and the individual. Nevertheless, this study still has limitations. From a cultural perspective, the works selected in this study are all Western European and American literary works, presenting limitations in a global context. In the future, individuals can commence from a broader cultural environment, such as East Asia and South America, integrating diverse cultures worldwide to better understand the complementary relationship between the group and the individual.

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