

# "THE MYSTERY OF SPHINX" AND THE ETHICAL PARADOX OF WESTERN TRAGIC CHARACTERS

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**ABSTRACT:** From the ancient Greek tragedy to the modern tragedy, the plots of ethical paradoxes appear repeatedly in various works due to the confusion of the characters in the drama. According to literary ethics criticism, the ethical paradox of western tragic characters is the result of ethical choice; the solution of ethical paradox depends on how the "ethical knot" is solved, in the process of ethical choice of theatrical characters, accompanied by ethical contradictions or after solving, transferring or ending, ethical public opinion is finally solved. This article believes that the problem of public opinion in a Western drama is not only caused by identity confusion, in fact, many other elements that constitute drama may lead to public opinion problems, such as the emotional paradox of drama, the paradox of action, and the paradox of time and space and language paradox, etc., are all areas of Western tragic paradox research. Therefore, the study of public opinion can provide a new perspective on Western tragedy. In the ancient Greek tragedy "Oedipus the King", there is such an important "discovery", a character, her existence changed and promoted the narrative process of the drama, she is the "Sphinx" who committed suicide by jumping over the cliff due to the riddle of Oedipus. This paper particularly examines ethical paradoxes of "The Sphinx" appeared in Sophocles' "Oedipus the King".

**INDEX TERMS:** Sphinx, Oedipus, Human, Identity, Ethical Literary Criticism; western tragedies; ethical paradox.

## INTRODUCTION-

Although in the plot of "Oedipus the King", the Sphinx did not officially appear but was only mentioned by the priest when there was a major outbreak in the city. On behalf of the broad masses of worshippers, the priests asked Oedipus to take measures to resolve the current crisis as soon as possible. The priest pointed out that since Oedipus had solved the riddle of Sphinx, and saved the life of the worshippers, and was regarded as the hero and king of worshipping people, can save the city again to preserve the wisdom of the name. The storytelling of the drama officially kicked off, because the story of King Oedipus is compact and interlocking. The plot of the mystery of the Sphinx in Oedipus's story seems inferior in front of the plot of "killing the father and incest for mother". In fact, the story of the Sphinx mystery is the key to the whole story. Without the existence of the Sphinx, all the stories ahead, cannot be discussed. Regarding the mystery of Sphinx, scholars have long been conclusive. Among them, there are three main types of representative viewpoints:

**First**, the riddle is also a form of tragedy, and that "Oedipus The King" is not the one and only mainstream tragedy. The tragic theme revolves around a riddle, and, from its prelude, unfolding, and ending, it is itself in the form of a riddle."

**Second**, the riddle is a trap of maternal incest, Jung believes, "Oedipus cracked the simple and naive riddle and thought that he had already defeated the Sphinx, but he did not know that he had become a victim of maternal incest".

**Third**, the riddle is a symbol of the difference between humans and beasts. The Sphinx's riddle about human beings is actually a question of how to distinguish people from beasts".

The above three important points are of great help to the understanding of "Oedipus the King", but we can't help but ask, is the Sphinx a human or a beast? Does Sphinx want to be a human or want to be a beast? The purpose of her to eat people. Why does she commit suicide? In the final analysis, the tragedy that caused the Sphinx to commit suicide is mainly due to the confusion of the Sphinx identity. This led to ethical conflicts; and prompted Sphinx to complete his ethical choices through suicide, the main motivation comes from the formation of Sphinx's ethical consciousness. By analyzing the "Sphinx Mystery" and "Sphinx Death", the paper also reveals the identity confusion and ethical paradox of Western tragic characters, which is helpful for Western tragic works. On this basis, summarizing and sorting out the "ethical paradox" has important significance for the study of the ethical value of Western tragedy.

A tragedy in the history of the West, "Oedipus the King" is the tragedy of identity because of the confusion caused an ethical paradox. The core drama is about "killed his father and marry his mother," mainly due to the identity confusion and the ethical crisis triggered. Interestingly, the "discovery" and "sudden turn" that led to the ethical tragedy of King Oedipus were closely linked to the emergence of the "Sphinx Mystery" and the "Sphinx's Death". "The mystery of the Sphinx" is also an important plot of ethical

public opinion caused by identity confusion. Therefore, to analyze the origins of the "Sphinx Mystery", we must start from the sect of the Sphinx. Is "Sphinx" a human or a beast? To figure out that Sphinx is a human being, we must first understand the life of Sphinx.

### **TRAGEDY, LIFE, AND IDENTITY OF THE "SPHINX" –**

According to Hesiod, she was a daughter of I. Orthos (orthrus) & khimaira (Chimera), (Hesiod theogony 326)

according to others, she was a daughter of-

2. Typhoeus (Typhon) & Ekhidna (Echidna) (Apollodorus 3.52, hyginus pref & fabulae 151, lasus frag 706a)

3. Typhoeus (Typhon) & Khimaira (Chimera), (Scholiast on Hesiod & Euripides)

It can also be seen as that the Sphinx is the result of the incest of Ekhidna and his "son" Orthos.

### **THE SINS OF THE FATHER--**

Yet before Laius left Olympia, he betrayed King Pelops—Laius had become enamored with Chrysippus, Pelops's illegitimate son. Laius kidnapped the boy, bringing him to Thebes to serve as his sexual plaything. Chrysippus soon killed himself to escape his shame. As the king of Thebes, Laius married within the House of Cadmus. His wife Jocasta (called Epicasta by Homer and others) was the daughter of Menoeceus, a Theban noble descended from Agave and Echion. Laius and Jocasta remained childless for many years. Troubled by this misfortune, Laius decided to consult the oracle at Delphi for a cure.

The Oracle offered Laius no cure. Instead, he heard a warning: Have no child by this bride, for if you do, that child will kill you. Three times the oracle cautioned that a child of Laius would bring ruin not only upon his father but on the city of Thebes as well.

This matter also offended the goddess of the marriage, Hera. Therefore, Laius suffered the curse of the Gods: Laius will die in the hands of his son. Sphinx appeared in the city of Chapel to set up a mystery, it is the Hera faction to punish the worshippers. She was sent by the gods to plague the town of Thebes as punishment for some ancient crime, preying on its youths and devouring all who failed to solve her riddle.

### **THE RIDDLE OF IDENTITY-**

Sphinx appeared in the suburbs of the city to set up a riddle to eat people. This move caused panic for people. Many travelers were eaten because they could not answer the riddle of Sphinx. The son of Creon was not spared. Therefore, the regent of Thebes, King Kreon (Creon) offered the throne to the one who would destroy her. Anyone who kills the Sphinx as a savior of the people will be entitled to the position of the king, and the former king's widow and Kreon's sister was also promised. Oedipus heard the news and hoped to "double-edged." Oedipus's challenge to Sphinx was not easy. Sphinx tried to use the hardest riddle to make it difficult for Oedipus and she couldn't imagine it to be cracked by Oedipus but he does so and thus Sphinx slammed into the cliff and committed suicide.

In fact, the Sphinx set up the riddle to perform God's mission and to manifest God's will, but Sphinx did not think about whether she was a human or a beast. From the perspective of literary criticism, the identity of a person, on one hand, is natural, and on the other hand, acquired. "Natural choice is to solve the problem of human identity formally, that is, to distinguish human from beasts in form and appearance, so as to obtain the identity of human. The acquired choice is to solve the problem of human identity ethically and emotionally, not only it distinguishes human beings from the beast, and but it also confirms the identity of the person in terms of the values of responsibility, obligation, and morality". Formally, the shape of the sphinx's face is mainly derived from heredity. Although the behavior of the riddle is no different from that of human beings, in essence, the Sphinx is still a beast. Although Sphinx has a beautiful girl's head, she has also learned some human "riddles", but it was sent by Hera to worship the mystery, it is still a "monster." If Sphinx has the identity of the human, then "it" should have the responsibility and obligation of the human at the same time and have the correct value judgment.

Why does Sphinx's challenge to Oedipus make it the hardest riddle she has to master? Is it true that Sphinx wants to be a human? This actually involves Sphinx ethical awareness issues. As a "monster" with a human head, the Sphinx is not entirely an animal, but the natural selection does not completely make the Sphinx grown into full shape. "Although people have acquired human form through natural selection, they have not acquired the essence of human beings, they cannot really distinguish people from beasts. Until the ethical consciousness of human beings arises, and then truly distinguish themselves from beasts... because, with the emergence of ethical awareness, human beings are eager to escape from ethical chaos and move toward ethical order and peace. They understand the importance of ethical order for human survival and reproduction and abide by the most basic ethical rules, such as taboos, responsibilities, obligations, etc. Therefore, the Sphinx with the human head has actually possessed the ethical consciousness of the human being, but its ethical consciousness is still in the initial stage, her ethical consciousness is relatively

thin, and there is not enough understanding and the behavior in her about eating people. At the same time, although the Sphinx has a head, the body of the lion, the snake tail and the bird's wing, all such appearance make it confused about her ethical identity.

Since, Sphinx wants to be a person and actively thinks about what is a person's "hallmark", why after the mystery of the person being exposed, Sphinx's jumped into the cliff? In a sense, this is the Sphinx's ethical choice to become ethical existence of the "person". For Sphinx, the confusion of identity puts her in an ethical dilemma: if she is a beast, she can continue to "eat people", even without the need to set a mystery for human; yet the "head" of Sphinx and ethical awareness drives her to think and at the end, she became ashamed of eating several persons. Since if one wants to be a person, and the rule is that people can't eat people, be the first to stop eating people. Sphinx chose to jump to the cliff to commit suicide just to prove that she can become an ethical person because animals will not be guilty because of eating people, and will not actively jump to the cliff to "suicide."

This is the ethical paradox that Sphinx caused by identity confusion: survival and death. On the one hand, like a sphinx of the human body and the lion's body, the behavior of eating people shows that she is no different from animals and cannot distinguish between good and evil, but the riddle she sets also shows that she is thinking about what is "human"; After she knew the answer about what was "human," she resolutely jumped off the cliff and committed suicide. This move by Sphinx's suicide just proves that she finally made human behavior, that is, through death, she proved that she is a rational person and completed her ethical choice by means of death. From the point of view of the Sphinx's motivation to eat people, the Sphinx riddle and the mystery are the results of the gods' decision. In other words, the gods presuppose all the endings. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus believed that the principle of "karma retribution" is the core content of the ancient Greek gods. "The vast majority of the 'gods' described in his works are in different forms. Different angles show the seriousness of this basic principle and the irresistibility of this basic law". Because the personal behavior of Laius caused others to lose their sons, according to the teaching principle of "karma retribution" in ancient Greek mythology, Laius will die in the hands of his own son; in order to increase the punishment for Laius, the son of Laius will commit his incest to his mother. Therefore, Sphinx's riddle is to lead to the emergence of Oedipus, Oedipus is full of paradoxical sadness. This is what Jung said as "the victim of maternal incest."

#### **CONCLUSION-**

According to literary ethics criticism, ethical paradox refers to the "ethical knot" generated in a literary work due to the specific ethical environment and special relationship of characters in a certain context; with the development of the plot. The ethical knot is finally solved in some way, and the public opinion changes transfers or terminates. In literary works, the generation of ethical paradox is closely related to the ethical context at that time. The changes in the ethical identity of the characters in the works also play an important role in the emergence of ethical paradox in certain circumstances. At the same time, the generation of ethical paradox is the result of the ethical choice of characters in the works. Without ethical choices, there is no ethical paradox. The ethical dilemma consists of two moral propositions. If the selectors make moral judgments on their own, each choice is correct, and each choice is in accordance with universal moral principles. However, once the selector is in both making a choice on their own and also in the pressure of others, the conflict arises and leads to another violation of ethics, which is contrary to the principle of universal morality. The paradox of "The Mystery of Sphinx" is that Sphinx began to actively think about the question of what is "human" because of her special life experience and special mission. With the gradual formation of its ethical consciousness, after knowing what is "human", she resolutely chose to commit suicide because human is the only being who can commit suicide, it is a mental faculty, a power, a gift.

Throughout the history of the development of Western tragedies, the number of works foreshadowing ethical paradox is numerous because of the confusion of the identity of the characters. Because of this similar storytelling, we use literary ethics criticism to explain this interesting topic. The causes of tragic character identity confusion and ethical paradox in different periods of tragedy are different. Due to the different ethical contexts and maintenance methods, different periods of drama classics have different ethical expressions. In the ancient Greek period, under the influence of mythological stories and mythological thoughts, the playwrights focused on the issue of blood ethics taboos. The tragic conflicts mainly revolved around the "blood ethics maintenance"; in the Middle Ages, under the influence of theological thoughts, the tragedy was more Theological propositions such as suffering and atonement are promoted. The tragic conflicts mainly revolve around "faith maintenance". From the Renaissance to the 19th century, under the influence of humanism and rationalism, playwrights focused on the private property of capitalism. The writing of personal desires and personal freedoms, the tragic conflicts mainly revolved around the "rationality"; in the 20th century, influenced by irrational thoughts, the development of tragedy in the 20th century was diversified and multi-formed, human survival, the growth of human beings and the feelings of human beings are suppressed by modern society. The tragic conflicts mainly revolve around the "universal value maintenance method". The evolution and change of 'four kinds of ways' have provided us with a new perspective on understanding Western literature. We can now more clearly understand why writers in different eras of writing style write like that, and why some writers or works are in the same place. The emergence of the era will have such a large impact and cultural reasons for the decline in later development. Although the ethical paradox in the tragic works of different periods in the West is closely related to different ethical environments and choices, in the generation of all ethical paradoxes, the ethical choices

of the characters are generated by the big “The ethical knots linked together.” Literary ethical criticism is to provide insights into the study of Western tragedies by analyzing how these "ethical knots" are generated and how they are solved, as we witness in the case of Sphinx.

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