

An Interpretation of *The Untold Lie* From the Perspective of Existentialism

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Abstract:

Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg Ohio* is a classic modernist work. This paper aims to interpret the short story *The Untold Lie* with Sartre’s existential philosophy, and explain Ray’s existential dilemma from the perspectives of absurdity and alienation pain, and the choice of free will, in order to explore the essence of human beings and the meaning of life. The absurdity of *The Untold Lie* is rooted in the alienation and nihilism in the process of the transition from the handicraft society to the capitalist industrialized society. In the alienated world, the so-called value standards no longer exist, and people are always in a state of anxiety, despair and sense of unintentionalness. Ray seeks meaning from life itself, and finally chooses to return to his own nature by returning to his family, which shows the choice of free will in Sartre’s existentialism philosophy. This paper is beneficial to the study of the philosophical problem of how to live in the works and the real world.

Keywords —Existentialism, Absurdity, Free choice, *The Untold Lie*

I. INTRODUCTION

Winesburg Ohio Written by Sherwood Anderson is a classic modernist work. The purpose of this paper is to interpret *The Untold Lie* using Sartre’s existential philosophy to reveal the real theme that people should seek meaning from life itself and take responsibility.

Existentialism is one of the most important schools of contemporary Western philosophy. The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre as the representative of existentialism. He advocated that existence precedes essence and respects human subjectivity and freedom. Philosophically, Sartre tried to use phenomenological methods to combine phenomenological and ontology to establish a phenomenological ontology, namely his “liberal philosophy”. Using the intentionality theory of Husserl’s phenomenology as his method, he reformed Heidegger’s theoretical philosophy of existence, equated freedom with human existence,

and reduced human existence to human action. Man is not some established and fixed thing. Human existence is like an empty bracket full of various possibilities. It should be filled by people themselves who constantly freely choose to act, so that it becomes some existence designed and planned by oneself. The existence of people is the existence of consciousness, so human survival in the world will produce negative emotions such as loneliness, nausea, anxiety, self-deception and so on. However, because consciousness also has transcendental characteristics, people can return to their true free existence. Therefore, Sartre's existentialist philosophy emphasizes the state of human existence. In addition, the contingency of existence, human freedom and human responsibility occupy a very important position in Sartre’s philosophy. Emphasizing freedom does not mean that people can do whatever they want, because Sartre also emphasizes responsibility. There is a

interrelated dialectical relationship between freedom and responsibility.

II. THE ABSURDITY OF THE WORLD AND THE PAIN OF ALIENATION

Absurdity is the basic concept of existentialism. Sartre mentioned that “the world is obviously absurd, and everything ends with death”. The world is absurd and life is painful. Human beings live in a world of nothingness and absurdity, and their existence and way of existence are absurd. A heterogeneous force that is difficult to define controls individuals, who are unable to eliminate the alienation of the surrounding environment and control their own situation. The Untold Lie is full of absurd descriptions, which can be clearly displayed through Ray’s living state and mental state. At the beginning of the article, Hal’s father’s death is introduced, which plays up the depressing and absurd atmosphere of the town. Ray is employed on a farm. His character is serious and his family’s economic conditions are difficult. He needs to bring up “a dozen of thin legged children”. He looked back on his life and suddenly found that he was pushed into marriage by the great absurdity:

His marriage had come about through one of his days of wandering. He had induced a girl who waited on trade in his father’s shop to go with him and something had happened. He was thinking of that afternoon and how it had affected his whole life when a spirit of protest awoke in him. He had forgotten about Hal and muttered words. “Tricked by Gad, that’s what I was, tripped by life and make a fool of.”

Under this great sense of absurdity, he had a painful feeling of alienation, and constantly denied his identity in an attempt to escape from reality. Moreover, Ray regards his colleague Hal as his former self, “The other”, and suggests that he should stay away from marriage. “Other people are hell”, Hal in the absurd world is watched by Ray. In this alienated alienation relationship, Ray materializes Hal, and attempts to control and watch him:

Of a sudden he forgot all about being a quiet old farm hand and throwing off the torn overcoat began to run across the field. As he ran he shouted a protest against his life, against

all life, against everything that makes life ugly. “There was no promise made,” he cried into the empty spaces that lay about him. “I didn’t promise my Minnie anything and Hal hasn’t made any promise to Nell. I know he hasn’t. She went into the woods with him because she wanted to go. What he wanted she wanted. Why should I pay? Why should Hal pay? Why should anyone pay? I don’t want Hal to become old and worn out. I’ll tell him. I won’t let it go on. I’ll catch Hal before he gets to town and I’ll tell him.”

III. CHOICE OF FREE WILL

The absurdity of the world and the alienation between human beings make human beings unable to find the meaning of life, and life is meaningless and painful, But Sartre’s existentialism “is not a pessimistic description of human beings, because it puts the fate of human beings in his own hands, so there is no theory more optimistic than it”. The ultimate assumption of existentialism is to guide people to create their own essence and realize real existence by giving full play to their own freedom and assuming corresponding responsibilities. Sartre believes that human beings are absolutely free, and freedom is the essential attribute of human beings, “It must be recognized that the necessary and basic condition of all actions is the freedom of the existence of the doer”. Individuals first exist and can take action, and decide their own essence through choice.

People are constantly shaping themselves in the process of making choices, and the greatest essence of freedom is reflected in various actions that people make. The world is absurd and meaningless, so only by making choices and actions freely and shaping oneself can individuals determine their own essence, and only in this way can people find the meaning of their real existence. In addition to free choice, Sartre also emphasized the importance of responsibility. No matter what choice he made, he must bear the responsibility and consequences.

Ray and Hal made a choice in the novel The Untold Lie. Even though Ray regretted his marriage for countless times in his personal meditation, wanted to rebel against and overthrow the current life state and marriage, and wanted to suggest Hal abandon the pregnant Nel, Ray finally saw the

lovely children and chose to return to the family. In this process, Hal's choice undoubtedly affected Ray's idea. Hal seems to be an unreliable playboy, but he has his own unique views on life. "She did not ask me to marry her. I want to marry her. I want to settle down and have kids." (171) After knowing this decision, Ray also regained his love for family life. "As he went some memory of pleasant evenings spent with the thin-legged children in the tumble-down house by the creek must have come into his mind".

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This novel deeply reflects Ray's thinking about marriage and absurd life, and the story of the next generation of young Hal who chooses to return to marriage and form a family after facing the absurd world. This novel expresses the hope for life and the concern for the plight of contemporary people. His works transcend the limitations of time and

space and are still of great significance and value for the survival of human beings in the future epidemic era. In this paper, Ray, from feeling the absurdity of the world and the pain of being alienated, finally succeeds in pursuing the philosophical significance of positive survival in line with existentialism, and conveys people's desire and pursuit for freedom, love and understanding.

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