

Ethical Dilemmas and Ethical Choices in the Lady from the Sea

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Abstract: Henrik Johan Ibsen is a famous Norwegian dramatist with great ethical consciousness in the 19th century, whose dramas contain rich ethical connotations. In the late period of Ibsen's creation, truth and freedom became the important themes that ran through the drama. *The Lady from the Sea* is a new direction of Ibsen's drama creation. Instead of revealing the real social problems directly, he pays attention to people's mind, ethical dilemmas and ethical choices, and expresses his attitude towards social reality with the help of the characters' mind. The fantastic diaspora experience has become an important source of Ibsen's drama, which changes his creative form, and makes his characters form dramatic conflicts in the confrontation between internal and external environment, as well as deeper cognition and thinking. This paper analyzes the three characters in *The Lady from the Sea* to explore their ethical choices under the ethical dilemmas of self, family, marriage and other conflicts, as well as the profound interpretation of the concept of love and freedom.

1. Introduction

Henrik John Ibsen is an ethically conscious Norwegian dramatist whose dramas contain rich ethical connotations. Truth and freedom are the important themes that run through Ibsen's dramas, especially in the late period of his creation, his personal experience becomes an important source of his drama creation. *The Lady from the Sea* is a new direction of Ibsen's creation. After that, "Ibsen's dramas pay more attention to the exploration of the psychological aspects of the characters and play down the sense of existence of social problems in the drama. It is still not divorced from realistic social problems [1]." At the beginning of the drama, Ellida is the sequel wife of Dr. Wangel and lives with her two stepdaughters. Ellida has been in close contact with the sea since she was a child, and she has an almost obsessive pursuit of the sea. She spends some time in the sea every day, so she is called the "Lady from the Sea". In Ellida's mind, her marriage to Wangel is like a cage, binding her freedom. She yearns for the sea and misses the unknown "sea marriage" with Johnston (the Stranger). However, when Johnston returns from wandering and wants to take her away, Ellida falls into the ethical dilemma of the conflict between family ethics and free will. When Wangel finally returns her freedom, Ellida chooses to return to her family and lives a happy and stable life with the Wangel family. In this drama, Ibsen shifts from focusing on social issues to exploring people's mind by symbolic means and paying attention to people's

ethical dilemmas and ethical choices. This change expresses the change of Ibsen's attitude towards life and his deeper understanding and judgment on the issue of love. This paper analyzes the three main characters in *The Lady from the Sea* to explore their ethical choices under the ethical dilemmas and the profound interpretation of the concept of freedom.

2. Multiple Ethical Dilemmas of the Wangel Family

As a typical drama situation, ethical dilemma refers to "the insurmountable contradictions and conflicts brought to the characters because of ethical confusion [2]". In response to this, Wang Yuli said that the insurmountable dramatic conflicts make ethical dilemmas full of tension and suspense and stimulate readers' interest in reading. Ethical issues go deep into people's mind, so ethical dilemmas often touch the deep contradictions of human nature, pass through particularity and enter universality. Because of inherent contradictions and conflicts, ethical dilemmas often highlight the inner secrecy and greatness of characters. These three points are usually possible to make the works dramatic, unique, and universal [3]. Ethical dilemmas generally exist in Ibsen's late dramas. In *The Lady from the Sea*, the Wangel family experienced multiple ethical dilemmas, and the conflicts of family ethics, free will, rational will and marriage perplexed every family member, resulting in dramatic and enlightening plots.

2.1. Ellida: Pursuit of Freedom and the Shackles of Marriage

Ellida's ethical dilemma stems from her dual marital identity as Johnston's fiancée and Mrs. Wangel, which is an ethical dilemma caused by the game between her free will and rational will. As the daughter of the lighthouse keeper, Ellida has a close relationship with the sea. She has an almost "morbid" infatuation with the vast and unpredictable sea, which embodies her free will. In her marriage to Wangel, Ellida, who lives on land, swims in the sea no matter what season, in order to get rid of the shackles of her marriage and family and get a moment's respite, so she is known as the "Lady from the Sea". Dr. Wangel said: "As long as she goes into the sea, she will be happy, and the sea is her lifeblood [4]." The sea gives Ellida a short period of freedom, and only by connecting with the sea can she discover her true self. Ellida longs for the vast sea and the first marriage full of freedom like the sea. In Ellida's view, her first marriage to Johnston is the true marriage she is longing for. As a sailor, Johnston told her about the life at sea full of freedom, and his life was so seductive to Ellida that they got engaged through the ceremony of exchanging rings into the sea under the witness of the sea. Ellida's obsession with this "sea marriage" symbolizes her understanding of the attributes of the sea, which not only represents the vastness and boundlessness of the objective space, but also represents Ellida's spiritual open-mindedness, free from any bondage. However, Johnston accidentally killed the captain and failed to take Ellida away, causing their engagement to be delayed until Ellida married Wangel. Yi-fu Tuan, a Chinese-American geographer, said in *Topophilia* that "Changes in the objective environment will affect human perception, attitude and value [5]". Ibsen describes Ellida from the sea to the land, which shows Ellida from the pursuit of self to the marriage life in accordance with traditional values, but this transformation runs counter to her pursuit of free will.

Ellida in marriage is like a dying mermaid stranded on the shore, far from the sea and losing her freedom. She could not adapt to family and marriage life, and the ethical identity of Mrs. Wangel. In her view, her marriage to Wangel is a deal. Wangel's ex-wife died and the family needed a hostess. Ellida was sad about Johnston's escape and needed someone else to heal. Ellida is about the same age as her two daughters, so they get along with each other and communicate at a distance. In the repressed marriage life, Ellida's free will makes her infatuated with the sea more intense, but the traditional ethics makes her in a dilemma, so when Johnston finds Ellida and asks

her to leave with him, Ellida changes from her initial refusal and fear to a complex state of obsession and entanglement. Ellida is clearly aware that people's free will should be restricted by rational will, and when faced with ethical choices, the two often conflict, resulting in her ethical dilemma.

2.2. Wangel: Altruism and Exclusivity of Love

Wangel's dilemma stems from the confrontation between his love for Ellida and his rational will. He is loyal to his marriage to Ellida and guards family ethics. For Wangel, Ellida satisfies his sense of love and makes him happy. He is unilaterally addicted to love, willingly indulging and satisfying all Ellida's behaviors. Wangel can be said to be a competent husband. He knows that Ellida was born at sea and has a kind of "home-sickness" about the sea. Therefore, when he observes that the limitations of the natural environment at home and the ethical environment within the family are not conducive to Ellida's free will, try his best to satisfy Ellida's pursuit and attachment to the sea. Ibsen described love as the sea, mysterious and incalculable. After Wangel knows about Ellida's previous engagement, he says to Arnholm, "It is almost as if they themselves lived the life of the sea. There is the rush of waves, and ebb and flow too, both in their thoughts and in their feelings, and so they can never bear transplanting. It was a sin against Ellida to take her away from there, and bring her here [4]." Wangel feels remorse and carries out deep self-reflection. He confesses that "I was extraordinarily selfish", so he proposes the solution of moving his family to the seaside. But he doesn't know that moving would not unlock Ellida's heart, but the dilemma is from their marriage. When Johnston appeared, Wangel knows the truth, and he realizes that what she wants is not as simple as having to touch the sea every day, but is to get rid of their marriage and follow her own free will.

After learning about Ellida's engagement to Johnston, Wangel is very shocked and sad, but when he learns that Ellida said she had no contact with Johnston, he chooses to believe and tolerate Ellida. Wangel's love for Ellida made him no longer want to struggle with his wife's past engagement, and he thinks that their marriage could still be as stable as before. At this time, he still has hope that his wife should follow the ethics of traditional marriage. He believes that Ellida would return to the family in the game of rational will and free will, but his fantasy was shattered by the change of attitude. Johnston's ocean attributes are fatally seductive to Ellida, even if he is dangerous. When Ellida decides to go to the appointment and end it face to face with Johnston, Wangel showed great resistance, and he tried his best to stop Ellida from keeping the appointment. Wangel is filled with unease and a strong possessiveness for Ellida. He worries that she would leave their family and follow Johnston to live the free life she had always wanted. When Ellida went to the appointment and had a dispute with Wangel, he learned what Ellida really thought. Her words pierced Wangel's heart and made him re-examine their marriage and reflection on the true meaning of love. Because of his love for Ellida, he wants her to stay and live with him, and also because of love, he wants her to pursue herself. This ethical dilemma afflicted Wangel's heart, so he falls into the ethical dilemma of egoism and exclusivity in love.

2.3. Bolette: Family Responsibility and Self-worth

Unlike Ellida, who was born at sea, Bolette's family values are deeply ingrained. After her mother's death, Bollard, as the eldest daughter of the family, has been responsible for housekeeping and taking care of her father and sister, because her stepmother, Ellida, could not do her mother's job. There is an irreconcilable estrangement between the two daughters and the young and eccentric stepmother, and their relationship is only superficial peace, not closeness. As an intermediary between stepmother and daughter, Wangel, he doesn't not do well the duties and

obligations of being a husband and father. In terms of life, as the eldest daughter of the family, the absence of the father makes Bolette have to grow up, not only to take care of the family's daily life, but also to love his sister to make up for the lack of maternal love. In terms of emotion, girls of the right age at that time regarded marriage as an important way to seek development and future, but Wangel always focuses on Ellida, but pays little attention to Bolette, who is of marriageable age, thus neglecting his physical and mental development. The neglect of her father and the alienation of her stepmother lead to the lack of her inner happiness. She suppresses her need for affection in the insipid family relationship, shelves her free will and dedicates herself to the whole family.

Compared with her lively and naughty sister Hilde, Bolette is more mature, calm and sensible. The price of this kind of growth is that Bolette bears the family responsibility and suppresses her free will, which makes her feel the shackles of the family environment. Opposite to the sea is the pond of the Wangel family. Bolette said, "I think we live very much as the carp down there in the pond. They have the fjord so near them, where the shoals of wild fishes pass in and out. But the poor, tame house-fishes know nothing, and they can take no part in that [4]." In Bolette's view, the carp in the pond symbolize herself. She has no freedom and can only behave herself at home, which also shows her inner depression. Bolette has been tired of the immutable life, and she is eager to leave this repressed family atmosphere to pursue freedom, but she has no opportunity and reason to take actions, and the family responsibility fetters her. As a result, she stuck into the ethical dilemma of family responsibility and self-worth.

3. Ethical Choices of Free Will and Rational Will

British philosopher George Edward Moore said that "the characteristic of ethics is not the study of assertions about human behavior, but the assertions about the two properties of things, that is, the nature expressed by the term 'good' and the opposite nature expressed by the term 'evil' [6]." It is difficult to define the moral categories of "good" and "evil", and the test of whether human behavior conforms to ethical standards should be placed in a specific context. Nie Zhenzhao also said, "The ethical dilemma consists of two moral propositions. If the selectors make moral judgments on them separately, each choice is correct, and each choice is in line with universal moral principles [2]." "Freedom" and "reason" are the important themes of Ibsen's dramas. When these two themes conflict, any choice made by the parties in the dilemma has a certain rationality. In *The Lady from the Sea*, the Wangel family faces multiple ethical dilemmas, and the ethical choices made by the characters indicate the resolution of their ethical dilemmas.

3.1. Ellida: Independent Choice of Returning to the Family

Ellida yearns for freedom and hates the shackled family life, which is the ethical dilemma she faces. She is nostalgic for the sea and her engagement with Johnston, but in the article, Ibsen portrays Johnston as a gloomy and invisible "Stranger". In Ellida's inner world, Johnston always represents freedom, and this extreme allure exists in her spiritual fantasy. When Johnston appeared in front of Ellida as the "Stranger", she does not show the surprise that he is about to go to freedom, but instinctively scared and avoided, throwing herself on Wangel like a child. At this time, Johnston becomes a real stranger. When the Stranger hopes Ellida would go away with him, she falls into fear and expectation of the unknown. The conflict between Ellida's free will and rational will reach its peak, and thus she stuck in an inextricable ethical dilemma.

Ellida and Wangel have a dispute over the pursuit of free will and the observance of family ethics. In this process, Ellida's free will is embodied incisively and vividly. "I care nothing for such formalities. Such outer things matter nothing, I think. What I want is that we should, of our own free will, release each other [4]." At this time, Ellida regards herself as the "other" and thinks

that she is not a member of the Wangel family, which reflects her sense of non-belonging in the family. When Ellida bravely expresses her thoughts, her self-consciousness awakens and breaks the ethics tied to her by her own free will. The more he stops her from keeping the appointment, the more she longs for freedom, and even told her that their marriage is like a deal. It is because of her confession that Wangel let her go to pursue her freedom. When Wangel finally decides to dissolve their marriage and set Ellida free, this ethical dilemma is resolved. Ellida's free will is satisfied, and she can pursue her ideal life without being bound by anyone. However, at the end of the drama, Ellida unexpectedly chooses to return to her family and live with Wangel. This outcome seems to be that Ellida chooses to follow family ethics instead of pursuing her free will, but in fact it is another way to realize her free will. The exile of Ellida made her get rid of the shackles of family ethics and completely become a "free person". This state is the ultimate freedom that Ellida seeks. From the beginning to the end, what Ellida yearns for is not the boundless sea or the strange "sea marriage", but the free choice without any restraint. In the end, Ellida's soul is "purified". Her ethical choice to return to the family is also a kind of willing self-control.

3.2. Wangel: Rational Choice of the True Love

On the issue of marriage, Wangel is one of the most attractive male characters created by Ibsen. Ellida thinks their marriage is a deal, which is a combination of a man who lost his wife and couldn't bear to be lonely, and a woman who was abandoned and helpless. In fact, Wangel is indeed a competent husband, and he was obedient, passionate and respectful to Ellida. He can understand and support Ellida's "morbid" behaviors to the sea, and he can also tolerate her previous engagement. Wangel's happiness stems from his traditional marriage to Ellida. During the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, when women's status was low, "men's social, legal and economic superiority caused their spouses to lose the right to choose freely [7]." Women are often regarded as men's private property, and Johnston's presence means that his property has been infringed. At this time, Wangel regards possession as love, so he firmly prevents Ellida from keeping the appointment.

The dispute between Wangel and Ellida pushes the drama to the best part, and the ethical dispute about freedom and family ends in the compromise of Wangel. The emotional development of Wangel towards Ellida is the process of the gradual awakening of his rational consciousness. He gradually adapts to Ellida's abnormal behavior and finds a way to understand her [8]. When Wangel realizes that their marriage is a constraint on Ellida, he cancels their "deal". Despite all the reluctance and pain in his heart, Wangel made a rational choice, lifted the legal restraint of marriage on the spot, returned Ellida to freedom and gave her the right to make her own choice. If it is expressed in the language of power: "Power is very close to freedom. It is a kind of freedom to get rid of the interference of others, and it requires giving others the same freedom [9]." At this time, Wangel no longer "materialized" Ellida, but regards her as a free man on an equal position with her, regardless of identity or gender. Wangel's love for Ellida has been sublimated, from the original private possession to equality and respect, with practical actions to refute the marriage "deal" in Ellida's words. The legitimacy of marital identity between Ellida, Wangel and Stranger is the confrontation between rational will and free will. Ellida has been in a passive position before, whether to go or stay will violate ethics. Wangel uses his rational will to help Ellida make the final ethical choice and solves her ethical dilemma. In the process of confrontation between sensibility and reason, Wangel made a rational choice to realize Ellida's free will. When Wangel broke through his ethical dilemma, his devotion and love move Ellida and finally get his wife's return. This story reversal affirms the male charm of Wangel in making rational choices, and also makes

Ibsen's dramas very attractive.

3.3. Bolette: Rational Choice of Freedom and Marriage

Bolette's ethical dilemma comes from the suppression of family responsibility and the desire for freedom. With regard to female freedom, the Norwegian writer Annemarie Anne Marie Rekdal concludes in her monograph *Frihetens dilemma: Ibsen lest med Lacan*. She believes that there are two kinds of female freedom in Ibsen's works. One is absolute freedom, that is, women violate the patriarchal order and obtain complete freedom. The other is restricted freedom, that is, women are castrated by the patriarchal order and get limited freedom. In this drama, what Ellida pursues is absolute freedom, but unlike Ellida's free will, the freedom pursued by Bolette is limited by all kinds of reality and appears to be more life-oriented and concrete. The early death of the mother, the neglect of the father, the alienation of the stepmother and the childishness of the younger sister all prompts Bolette, as the eldest daughter, to accelerate her growth and assume the responsibility of taking care of the family. In the long-term self-dedication, the precocious Bolette also desires to get rid of her family and yearns for freedom, when her free will begins to awaken. However, the influence of traditional marriage on Bolette is deep-rooted. She also hopes that her future will be based on a marriage with a material foundation and can lead a stable life, so she is not desperate to pursue freedom like Ellida, but is based on reality and makes her ethical choices under the domination of rational will.

Bolette is an ideal realist. Her ethical choice is made by the combination of her free will and rational will, which perceptual and rational are intertwined in her mind. On the one hand, Bolette is emotional. The insipid family atmosphere makes her painful and depressed, so she is eager to escape from her family to learn knowledge and explore the world. On the other hand, Bolette is rational. She is clearly aware that in the patriarchal society. The important destination of women is marriage, so she takes the material basis into consideration in the scope of choosing a mate. The interweaving of the two emotions reinforces the complexity of Bolette's character. For example, when her teacher, Arnholm, shows that he could help her realize her desire to learn, she is very pleased. However, when he asks Bolette to marry him, her first reaction is to refuse because she only regards him as her teacher. However, Bolette carefully considered Arnholm's words later. After rational thinking, Bolette agrees to his proposal, because Arnholm's material foundation could indeed meet her wishes and provide her with a stable life. Bolette is a very hierarchical female character in Ibsen's drama. She has a certain self-consciousness. She does not compromise with the ethical shackles of the traditional family and becomes a puppet of secular life, but yearns for the unknown and is not willing to live a mundane life. However, Bolette is also a victim of secular ethics. Her rational consciousness originates from the secular concept in the patriarchal society. "Throughout history, women have always been subordinate to men, so their dependence is not caused by a historical event or social change, which it doesn't happen by accident [10]." Under the patriarchal system, women's self-identity is limited by the central position of men. They lack self-awareness and pay more attention to the secular order of family life and female virtues. Under this background, Bolette agrees to marry Arnholm without falling in love with him. Her ethical choice is more in line with the current situation of women's life at that time, so Bolette is a realist with rational will.

4. Influence of Ibsen's Life Experience

Ibsen is known as "the father of modern drama". His dramas are closely related to his personal experience. Ibsen's early radicalism was related to the change of his family circumstances. He was born in a privileged family, but his family went bankrupt because of his father's speculation. The

tyrannical father and the battered mother made Ibsen have a deep sense of sympathy for women, which is also an important reason why Ibsen wrote about the plight of women. Through the writing of the women in the family, Ibsen puts forward the social problems such as equality between men and women and the independence of female personality, which are rarely touched by the playwright, but he only points out the plight of women at that time, but does not help the women to design ways to get rid of them. In this regard, Ibsen said, "If I can not set it up, then I can at least destroy [11]." He Chengzhou, a Chinese scholar, pointed out when studying Ibsen, "Throughout women in Ibsen's works, although they are basically housewives, the plot seldom shows the daily life of housewives, even sex and maternal love. Some people said that Ibsen's women are 'lack of femininity', which may be related to Ibsen's focus on abstract spiritual exploration [12]."

The Lady from the Sea marks the first time that Ibsen has shifted the focus of his drama from social issues to psychoanalysis, which is closely related to Ibsen's personal experience. His plays are mainly about what happened in his own country, but it is a pity that he was often treated unfairly by his compatriots during his lifetime. Because of his distinct personality and radical art experimental spirit, he did not get the attention of domestic critics, which is an important reason why he wants to leave the motherland and live in a foreign country for more than 20 years. But ironically, it was during more than two decades of self-exile that Ibsen wrote the best works of his life. He has a broad cosmopolitan vision rather than a narrow nationalist mood, which enables him to have an extraordinary artistic imagination and set foot in cross-ethnic international themes. For example, in *The Lady from the Sea*, Johnston sends letters to Ellida from all continents after the accidental assassination of the captain. Ibsen in exile is like the "Stranger" Johnston, a cosmopolitan, writing down his own experience and state of mind through the strokes of his hands.

Ibsen's diaspora experience makes him write not only for domestic readers, but also for international readers. He has a global vision and a global concern for human beings, and the problems discussed are also common problems faced by all human beings. Ibsen's works are all responses to the social changes and deep problems in the 19th century. When modern western society exerts more and more pressure on people's survival and spirit because of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, nihilism and pessimism take advantage of the emptiness, and the natural, primitive and comfortable life before the Industrial Revolution has become the life that people yearn for in their minds [13]. Reality and ideal, sensibility and reason, life and dream, freedom and limitation. These binary opposites appear in people's spiritual and emotional activities, because people's subjective factors can not make it balanced and harmonious, so it often makes people uneasy, anxious, melancholy and painful, resulting in mental dilemmas that are difficult to get rid of. In *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen puts forward that the way to get people out of this spiritual dilemma is to let people enjoy the right to an independent, dignified and free choice of way of life. Ibsen once said, "In this day and age, every creative writing should be devoted to crossing the boundaries left by our predecessors [14]." Ibsen achieved self-transcendence in different periods. He carefully explored and constructed drama dilemmas, especially ethical dilemmas, which was one of his ways to cross the boundary.

5. Conclusion

No matter what era he grew up in, ethics is an enduring issue. The advanced nature and exploratory spirit of Ibsen's dramas have an important influence on the later playwrights. As an ethical thinker, Ibsen wrote many works containing ethical issues. In *The Lady from the Sea*, Ibsen shows ethical issues such as reality and ideal, sensibility and rationality, life and fantasy, freedom and limitation. A unified interpretation of these opposite ethical issues can provide all kinds of possibilities for human beings to resolve ethical dilemmas, which is of great practical significance

to human development.

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