

Unbalanced Sphinx Factor in The Cement Garden

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Abstract: *The Cement Garden* is one of McEwan's most famous works during the "Ian Macabre" period. This novel can not only be analysed from the perspective of narratology while simultaneously evoking a sense of ethical disquiet and shock among its readers. From the standpoint of literary ethics criticism, this paper focuses on analysing and revealing the imbalances of the Sphinx factor during the process of the four characters losing their parents. Due to the changes in the family and social environment, the four siblings gradually show the complex of animal factors surpassing human factors to varying degrees. The balance between immature rationality and unregulated animal nature eventually leads to abnormal ethical consciousness, resulting in cognitive disorders in the four siblings, which eventually leads to the tragic action of incest.

1. Research Background and Significance

This thesis intends to interpret the ethical choice and unbalanced sphinx factor in *The Cement Garden* based on the theory of ethical literary criticism. *The Cement Garden*, one of the most excellent short stories by Ian McEwan, draws the attention of numerous domestic and foreign readers. Through the review of the previous relevant research inside and outside China, the thesis finds that the current studies on *The Cement Garden* largely focus on the perspectives of narratology and ecofeminism. However, they ignore the fact that Ian also focuses on characters' inner worlds. The psychological analysis lacks a philosophical dimension and ethical enlightenment for readers. Ethical literary criticism precisely provides a critical platform due to its combination with psychology and psychoanalysis. Nie says: "The method of ethical literary criticism does not reject other methods, but other critical methods are often not easy to do". So far, the research about the ethical value of this novel from the perspective of ethical literary criticism in academic circles is still rare and limited. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to analyze this novel from this perspective.

With the rise of new critical theories, scholars at home and abroad continue to enrich the research content and the number of studies on the story. However, apart from the adequate affirmation of these achievements, there exists a trend that most of the studies ignore the ethical choice and unbalanced sphinx factor of the protagonists and neglect their self-reflection and self-rescue, which is also an important research subject in ethical literary criticism. There is a gap in the present studies of *The Cement Garden* in terms of ethical literary criticism. With this background, the thesis is devoted to exploring the story with the theory of ethical literary criticism.

There is a long history and tradition of ethical literary criticism that can be traced back to The Classic of Poetry by Confucius, the ancestor of Confucianism. The foreign ethical literary criticism

originates from Greek mythology, Homeric hymns, and drama. The Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao attaches much importance to the theory. Combining the Chinese tradition and the essence of foreign theories, he puts forward his opinions and concepts, which arouse a heated discussion in the Chinese literary field. Professor Nie believes that literature is the special expression of ethical ideas and moral life in a particular historical period. He also makes contributions to the construction and introduction of core terms like ethics, ethical taboo, ethical consciousness, ethical situation, ethical identity, ethical choice, etc. Professor Liu Jianjun expresses that literature as a study of humans in virtual society cannot be accomplished in isolation from the judgment of ethical value and ethical criticism. This thesis fills some gaps in the literary ethical criticism of this novel, emphasizes the textual analysis of ethical choice and the unbalanced sphinx factor, and at the same time carries on more textual practice with the theory of literary ethical criticism.

In ancient Greece, literature showed the content of ethics to a large extent, and the themes of literary expression were mostly related to the themes of ethics and morality. [1] In modern society, people's life experiences and mental states are becoming increasingly complex. Under these circumstances, critics should pay more attention to the personal inner world and the modern complex than ever before so as to devote themselves to the exploration of morality.

Ethical and moral research is a kind of social philosophy whose purpose is to solve problems in life in order to make life achieve its best and most perfect development. Ethics is about right and wrong, good and evil; it also depicts our obligations and enables us to identify what we must do. In human life, ethics is a special social standard. In different social behaviors, human beings use complex social connections to adapt to communication in order to ensure the normal order of social life. Thus, ethics constrains and restricts people's behaviors. However, human behavior is a free act, an independent judgment, and a result of voluntary choice. It would not be a choice that is contrary to the will. In other words, morality is an act of human self-discipline, self-care, and self-restraint. An ethical choice is the foundation of human existence. The world has its own specific mechanism of operation, and people cannot have their cake and eat it, too, so people always face a variety of choices and make their own ethical choices in ethical dilemmas.

This thesis can provide readers with a new perspective on reading Ian McEwan's novels. This study hopes to help the readers re-examine the ethical factors in society, hoping to help us establish a positive social and moral environment. Meanwhile, it will give us some moral enlightenment. Professor Nie mentioned that literature is an art about ethics in essence, and the basic function of literature is teaching. This paper will list immoral examples and improper actions of the characters and carry out moral warnings through the ethical literary criticism of this novel, which will provide some ethical and moral references for us to enter the real family and society.

In this novel, the ethical interpretation gives us some inspiration. We should not let our own animal factor conquer the human factor, shrink moral responsibility, or escape ethical dilemmas in real life. Although ethical events and luck in life are inseparable, it will be very difficult for us to make ethical choices. We cannot give up our own rational will. We should actively take responsibility, make ethical reflections, and think about our true ethical values.

2. An Introduction of Ian McEwan and *The Cement Garden*

Ian McEwan is one of the finest writers of his generation and among the most controversial. He has achieved unbroken popular and critical success since, on graduating from Malcolm Bradbury's Creative Writing Project, he won the Somerset Maugham Award for his collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975). Shortlisted four times for Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize for Fiction, he secured the honor with *Amsterdam* (1998), confirming his position with Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, and Martin Amis at the forefront of contemporary British writing.

Although primarily a novelist and short story writer, McEwan has also written three television plays. Across these many forms, his writing nonetheless retains a distinctive character, perhaps best summed up in Kiernan Ryan's phrase, 'the art of unease'.

McEwan's early pieces were notorious for their dark themes and perverse, even gothic, material. Controversy surrounding the extreme subject matter of the first four works, which are concerned with murder, incest, and violence, was exacerbated by their troubling narrative framework and the way in which conventional moral perspectives are disrupted or overturned. The reader was frequently drawn into prurient involvement with the characters.

McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978), is the story of siblings who bury their mother in the cellar rather than acknowledge her death, then slowly revert to a feral state, avoiding the outside world until, in a powerful conclusion, the authorities simultaneously discover the body and the elder children locked in an incestuous climax [6]. McEwan evokes a disquieting sense of inevitability in the unfolding of these events, generating an odd suspension of standard moral and narrative expectations.

When the novel was published in 1978, it sparked a plagiarism controversy. Critics accused it of having a similar plot to Julian Gloag's *Our Mother's House* [2], and even Gloag accused McEwan of stealing his ideas. McEwan is now regarded as one of the finest novelists in contemporary English literature, and the controversy surrounding originality has long since been resolved. But scholars have paid undiminished attention to the novel, or, in David Malcolm's words, "a mixture of fascination and slight horror" [5]. The author believes that what makes the novel attractive but disturbing is the series of ethical events it tells and the enlightenment and thinking it brings. In essence, the real significance of *The Cement Garden* lies in the fact that McEwan successfully uses the novel as a special literary form to tell a shocking ethical story to warn the world.

Although McEwan's subsequent writing has moved away from the more disquieting of these themes, he continues to explore the impact on ordinary people of unusual or extreme situations as they face sudden and shocking violence or slip into acute psychological states [12]. At the same time, his writing has begun to address broader themes, examining how social and political issues determine our personal lives. In recent years, he has even focused on the relationship between robots and humans.

3. The Sphinx Factor in Literary Ethics Criticism

Ethical literary criticism is defined as a critical methodology to interpret literature from the perspective of ethics. The theory developed into a coherent theoretical framework; it asserts the ethical nature and edifying function of literature and thereby seeks to highlight in the literary text the ethical relationship and moral order among human beings and within society in a historical context. Though provocative to a degree, the arguments and methodological toolbox used inject a unique ethical dimension into literary criticism and will help readers understand the ethical and social potency of literature.

"Sphinx Factors" is an important concept in the theory of ethical literary criticism, derived from the ancient mythological Sphinx's riddle. As a concept that encompasses the binary opposition and conflict between the "human factor" and the "animal factor," it is widely used in the practice of ethical literary criticism. The concept of "Sphinx Factors" has a rich theoretical origin and a solid theoretical foundation built upon evolutionary ideas, the theory of virtue ethics, and the theory of psychoanalysis. The evolutionary idea of "survival of the fittest" embodies the significance of ethical consciousness in moral evolution. The theory of virtue ethics states that only after making their "natural selection" and generating their ethical consciousness through "ethical selection" can human beings pursue "virtue" and "learn to be human." The personality theory in Freud's psychoanalysis is deeply related to the concept of the "Sphinx Factors." The Sphinx Factors and their ethical conflicts presented in literary works embody human progress and reflect the human evolution toward goodness and self-

awareness.

After the first biological selection of humankind, it is regarded as the second important choice, the ethical one, that Adam and Eve picked and ate the forbidden fruit in Eden and Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx. It is an ethical choice to distinguish humankind from animals and to make savage people ethical beings. In an ethical sense, man is an existence of a sphinx factor, a combination of a rational factor and an animal factor. The sphinx factor is the core content of ethical statements in literary works.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Gray makes an ethical choice, which is to exchange his identity with his picture, which results in his tragedy in the end. In the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King is the embodiment of natural will. Hsuan Tsang, who is his master, imposes restraints upon him by means of a hat and a spell on it and ultimately helps him convert from a monkey to a Buddhist. These highly metaphorical literary texts not only provide us examples of different combinations of the Sphinx Factor and its variations, reveal clearly the value of this ethical choice in the history of society and individuals, but also manifest the ethical conflicts among rational will, natural will, and irrational will. In reflecting on these ethical issues, we feel greatly enlightened. The ethical choice and ethical conflict of the Sphinx Factor are the embodiments of human progress towards good. The ethical conflict of the Sphinx Factor presented in literary works is also aimed at the evolution of human beings to good and self-cognition.

4. Unbalanced Sphinx Factor in *The Cement Garden*

4.1. The Human Factor and The Animal Factor

“The sphinx factor is really made up of two parts - the human factor and the animal factor. Among them, the human factor is the higher factor, while the animal factor is the lower factor. Therefore, the former can control the latter, thus making people become people with ethical consciousness.” [3] The human factor can promote the evolution of themselves when they evolve from being barbarous to being civilized. Human factors can make people produce ethical awareness to achieve the change from animal to people. “The rational will is the part that is close to the moral will, such as the standards of good and evil in judgment and choice, and the code of ethics.” [7] The demonstration of core will of human factor is rational will, which are manifested as observing the human moral paradigms such as ethical order and ethical taboo, etc.

Contrary to the human factor, animal factor is the animal instinct of human and is the residue of animal instincts during the evolution, which leads to the fact that human still have non-rational factor after experiencing biological choice [9]. The most prominent will of animal factor is shown as “natural will”, which is mainly manifested as the basic physiological requirement and psychological dynamics of human. “Free will, also known as natural will, is the embodiment of animal factor. Free will is mainly generated from human animal instinct, which is mainly manifested in different human desires, such as sexual desire, appetite and other people’s basic physiological requirements and psychological dynamics.” [14]

The key factor for people to be human being is not people’s animal factor but their human factor. If human factor as higher factor controls the animal factor as lower factor, human will have ethical awareness. In literature, the human factor of people tends to be controlled by their animal factor so that the ethical awareness of people becomes weak and they even don’t have ethical awareness and can’t tell goodness from evilness. In *The Cement Garden*, the different combinations and changes of Sphinx factor [8] on Jack and other people leads to changes of their characters and behaviors and ethical conflicts between them, promoting the development of the novel plots and bringing us the ethical enlightenment about human growth.

4.2. Combination and Change of Sphinx Factors

In the endless pursuit for desire, the animal factor on Jack inhibits his human factor and hinders the production of ethical awareness. “The human senses that embody animalistic factors can generate strong desires and emotions, namely free will, so in the face of strong carnal desire, human’s rational will is often powerless.” The most obvious demonstration of animal factor on Jack is his masturbation habits and fornication awareness. Jack, who is in adolescence, can’t resist the desire for masturbation and his usual doings are to take his sister Julie as sexual desire subjects. Once, after the game of doctor and patient with Julie and Sue, Jack ran to the bathroom and started masturbation and there was the figure of Julie. He recalled that “I thought of Julie's pale-brown fingers between Sue's legs as I brought myself to my quick, dry stab of pleasure”. We can see that Jack, who loses his head due to sexual desire, does not hesitate to fix the sexual desire object on his sister. This constant rising and untimely hindered sexual desire stimulate the fornication awareness and foreshadowing the subsequent fornication.

Jack is occupied by animal factor and the natural will of Jack is like a wild charger. He is not guided and inhibited by rational factor and commits the ethical crime of patricide. At the beginning of the novel, Jack has said the paradoxical words that “I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on his way.”. These narrated words are difficult to understand at first, but when you read it carefully, you feel that it makes sense. From the surface, Jack indeed does not kill his father who dies because of sudden heart stroke. Therefore, Jack is not the murderer. But actually, Jack contributes to the sudden heart stroke of his father and the missing of the best treatment time. Therefore, he is indeed the murderer. We know from the novel that the Jack’s father has heart disease and is not suitable for manual labor. For this, it is screamingly obvious to Jack.

The disease of his father is not arousing pity. On the contrary, it has become an advantage and capital of mocking his father. When handling cement with his father, Jack doesn’t take good care of his body and disease at all and does not mean to reduce burden of his father. Even if the father moves slowly because of lack of physical strength sometimes which will undoubtedly deteriorate the disease of his father and even will lead to death. Jack is supposed to express his care to his father by handling cement, be a son who has a sense of morality and responsibility. As a result, handling cement becomes an excuse for him to vent his resentment and revenge. On handling cement, we can’t see that the understanding, care and love and help Jack has for his father. On the contrary, he stimulates the diseased father on purpose and displays his strength and manliness before his father, mocks the weakness of his father and obtains a satisfaction and happiness in this way.

Even if when Jack is handling cement, he cannot control sexual desire and cannot get rid of the idea of masturbation. Jack lies that he goes to the bathroom, but actually he wants to satisfy his strong sexual desire. The consequences brought by this behavior is because he wants to satisfy his sexual desire at the moment, it costs his father life. However, when Jack is satisfying his sexual desire, his father has sudden heart stroke and collapse. What a pity, after seeing that his father has a heart stroke, Jack does not have a sense of urgency at all and fails to save his father against time. He drags on purpose and seems that he wants his father to die. Jack completely understands what this mean, his father who has heart disease lies down on the floor and he also understands that he must save him, but he walks slowly and watches his father to die. Jack commits “patricide” finally [11]. From the indifferent narration tone, we can’t see that he has any guilt or sadness towards the death of his father. He has a very negative judgement towards the death of his father and thinks that the death of his father is “not important” compared with “his physical development”. Moreover, Jack even thinks that the death of his father is not as important as these cement in his home.

The ethical structure of children and parents is a pair of binary opposition [13]. Once children lose their parents, the ethical structure of children in the ethical environment is broken and becomes a monadic structure. In view of the absence of parents, the original complete ethical structure of Jack's family is destroyed, resulting in their ethical choice, that is, the process of moral maturity encountered difficulties. Julie and Jack made the sphinx factor lose its proper imbalance in the ethical choice, that

is, the animal factor began to dominate. They gradually become controlled by their primitive instincts and are unable to abide by the basic ethical choices, eventually leading to the tragedy of incest. Tom lost his ethical reference in the process of self-identification, his ethical consciousness could not generate, and his rationality could not mature, which made it difficult for him to complete the ethical choice of self-identification. As a result, he longed to become a girl on the one hand, and wanted to be a doll on the other hand. Sue is in a similarly flawed ethical structure, she spent the time in diary writing and story reading, and addicted into literary works. "Ethical value is the most basic value of literature, which reflects the essential characteristics of all literary values." [4] In this sense, literary works partly have the ethical function of parents, which makes it possible for Sue to complete her own identification and enter the process of ethical choice. Unfortunately, in the end, Sue was negatively influenced and misled by her sister Julie, brother Jack and Tom in the absence of her parents, and her ethical consciousness remained in the initial stage, and her rationality was not fully mature [10]. This also reflects the importance of the objective conditions of ethical choice, namely the ethical environment.

5. Conclusion

Due to changes in the familial structure and significant variations in their living atmosphere, the animalistic traits of Jack and his siblings often override their human features, leading to a lack of ethical awareness and rationality. Conversely, the characters in the text develop erroneous identities and generate a sense of incestuous desire, ultimately resulting in a state of ethical disarray inside the novel. Viewed in this light, the novel not only reveals the puzzles and difficulties of children's self-development but also suggests the necessity for human beings to make an ethical choice after making a biological choice. McEwan's goal in writing about immorality and incest is not to astonish people or let him be "Ian Macabre". From the perspective of literary ethics criticism, ethics is the key word to answer the above questions. By reproducing a series of ethical events such as patricide, mother burial, and incest, *The Cement Garden* highlights the difficulties children face in judging good and evil, identifying themselves, and making ethical choices in the process of growing up and reveals the importance of ethical awareness and correct guidance for children's growth and moral perfection. In this way, the novel sends a moral warning to society and brings us a lot of profound thoughts about growth and ethics.

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