

Dilemmas and Choices in Graham Swift's *Waterland* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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ABSTRACT

Waterland is one of the representative works of Graham Swift, a contemporary British novelist. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this paper interprets the ethical choices of the main characters in the *Waterland* and analyzes the influence of different combinations of Sphinx factors. On the one hand, influenced by their animal instinct, some people make irrational ethical choices, resulting in irreversible ethical tragedies. On the other hand, after being controlled by animal factors, some people return to their ethical consciousness, recover their rationality, make the right ethical choice and usher in salvation for themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Waterland is the third full-length novel by Graham Swift, a contemporary British novelist, published in 1983. It was nominated for the Man Booker Prize as soon as it was published. It was also highly praised by readers and critics and was recognized as a masterpiece. Since the mid-1990s, people have made insightful interpretations and analyses of this work from the perspectives of Marxism, Lacan psychoanalysis and ecocriticism, but many ethical factors in the work have been ignored. Based on the literary ethical criticism proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, this paper will analyze the influence of Sphinx factor on the ethical choices of the main characters in the novel.

In the long history of human civilization, man has made two self-selections. From ape to man is the first choice made by human in the course of evolution, but it is only a biological selection. This choice enables man to be distinguished from the beast in form. The second choice, the ethical choice, makes man truly break away from the lower biological world and become an ethical existence different from the beast.

From the ethical sense, humans are a sphinx factor, composed of human factors and animal factors. Sphinx factor is the core content of ethical expression in literary works. The so-called "Sphinx factor" is actually made up of two parts—the human factor and the animal factor. The different combination and change of Sphinx factor will lead to different behavior characteristics and character expression of characters in literary works. In *Waterland*, the main characters will have different behavior characteristics and

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personalities, which are related to the different combinations of Sphinx factors in the body.

ETHICAL CHOICE DRIVEN BY ANIMAL FACTORS

Ethical literary criticism holds that animal factor is human animal instinct. Animal sex instinct completely depends on instinct choice, and original desire is the determining factor of animal choice. Animal factor is the residue of animal instinct in the process of human evolution and the irrational factor in the human body. Influenced by animal factors, Thomas Atkinson, Ernest Atkinson and Mary Metcalfe made wrong ethical choices in *Waterland*, which resulted in serious consequences.

Thomas Atkinson: Domestic Violence

Thomas Atkinson was a corporate Titan with a successful career. When the Fens district was stricken in 1815, Thomas became a civic example by giving food and money to the hungry. Such experience made him think that he was superior, his heart germinated the animal factor named control desire, which foreshadowed the tragedy after. In 1819, while his wife Sarah was in the prime of her life, Thomas, who was in his sixties, was growing old, but stricken with gout and confined to his home. It affected his normally even-tempered temper, and he could no longer accompany his wife out for walks or drive to visit friends. He began to doubt Sarah's loyalty and affection for him, and during this time, animalistic factors built up in his body. Finally, one night when Sarah returned home from a party, the couple argued. In a fit of rage, Thomas's weak rational will was outweighed by his powerful desire to conquer, and the animal in him took over. He got up from his chair and hit his wife hard across the face. Sarah hit her head hard on the corner of the walnut desk.

In the face of his motionless body, Thomas shouted to his son in a grieving and remorseful voice heard throughout the house: "I killed my wife! I have killed my dearest Sarah! " At this point, the humanity within him took over again, and he recovered his sanity, but it's too late. Although Sarah regained consciousness a few hours later, she never regained her intellect and Thomas spent the rest of his life regretting it.

The ethical dilemma Thomas encountered was that he was in an authoritative position in the family, but now he could only be taken care of by Sarah, while his wife, as a client, was now stronger and healthier than him, and Thomas's subject and authoritative position was deconstructed. However, the patriarchal society regards the strong husband and weak wife as the order norm of family ethics, and the patriarchal society entrusts the husband to have absolute control over his wife. Thomas, who is old and infirm, cannot accept that Sarah has an advantage over him in any aspect, and his suspicion and jealousy of Sarah are increasing day by day. His pursuit of complete dominance over the other half is essentially a manifestation of possessiveness. This kind of possessiveness, like the animals occupying their own territory, is also a kind of primitive animal desire. Finally, he makes an irrational ethical choice—to regain his own

control through domestic violence. This shows that even a momentary loss of reason and dominated by animal factors may cause unimaginable consequences. Little could Thomas have imagined that the slap would tear apart his otherwise happy family and discredit himself.

Ernest Atkinson: Incest

Ernest Atkinson's early years as heir apparent to the Atkinson family business were ludicrously wild. At 21, he announced his marriage to Rachel, the daughter of a hard-up journalist, and his only child, Helen, was born the following year. Unfortunately, the winery he inherited continued to suffer from declining profits. To make matters worse, his wife died after 13 years of severe asthma. Ernest, suffering from a double shock, sought solace by mixing a very strong beer and, with the help of his 12-year-old daughter, began talking about his special brew. A year later, Ernest returned to the political scene with a warning to curb aggression to avoid war, only to be scorned. One night, his winery burned down, and Ernest, whose career had failed one after another, lived like an exile in a large house in the country with his daughter. In 1915, father and daughter were invited to the parade, which turned into a farce when marching soldiers, attracted by Helen's beauty, clumsily crashed into each other. This had a profound effect on Ernest: his daughter suddenly had the ability to mock the trafficking of war without the need for verbal action—and his own words had failed. It was then that he “fell in love” with his daughter. Love, this inevitable thing, has its stages of development. It begins with love, which turns to lust, which turns to loyalty, which turns to union. And these stages can happen to a father and daughter, although it's not normal. Then he realized that, though he could not control the people there, he could control his daughter. This desire for control, as a kind of free will, is the embodiment of animal factors.

Taboos are formed in the process of human maturity, and the emergence of ethical taboos is the result of human ethical choice. As the family business gradually languishes and his personal political ambitions fail, Ernest firmly holds on to Helen, the only lifeline around him, and gradually “fell in love” with his daughter. When Ernest was alone with his daughter Helen, the animal factor in his body suppressed the human factor and broke the ethical taboo. As the war progressed, the more desperate Ernest became for humanity, the more he adored his own daughter, and he came to believe that only from such beauty could a savior be born. By this time, he had lost his mind, his sense of ethics had completely disappeared, and he was more desperate than ever to have a child, even though Helen fell in love with another man, he insisted that Helen have his child. The child he held up as his savior was born a fool. And the product of incest, Fool Dick, grew up to kill the village boy Freddie Parr. Ernest's incest tragedy not only brought harm to his daughter Helen, but also indirectly led to the tragic fate of the next generation.

Mary Metcalfe: Sink in Desire

Mary Metcalfe was the daughter of a farmer whose mother died giving birth to her. Her father, Harold Metcalfe, was a devout Roman Catholic who never remarried in order

to remain loyal to his wife, who died the following year. The farmer, Metcalfe, was intent on getting his daughter into the world, hoping to make her a little virgin. Without asking her his own advice, he sent her to the school of the Sisters of St. Gonhilda, confident that all his efforts and arrangements would eventually pay off. Growing up in such a repressive home and school environment, Mary came to adolescence. On the train to school, she met Tom Crick, the same age boy from a boys' school. Perhaps because they were in the same boat (they both lost their mother when they were young), they fell in love with each other.

On school holidays, when the railway could no longer provide a meeting for them, they would meet in the late afternoon in the hollow of the farm's ditch bank, which was out of sight. Mary was bold. She invited Tom to explore the mysteries of each other's bodies. Curiosity rubbed against her 15-year-old body, making her fidgety and eye-rolling. Curiosity drove her to break through all constraints, making her want to touch, see and experience everything unknown and hidden. Curiosity is a kind of free will, and free will is the will of animal factors. At this time, Mary, without proper guidance, has gradually been controlled by animal factors.

One day, Mary and some boys and girls were playing provocative games by the Hawkwell Ditch. As they stripped off layer after layer, the other girls sped away in panic as Mary's curiosity overcame her inhibitions. When she saw the astonishing size of Tom's brother Dick, she felt a dangerous mixture of curiosity and sympathy, plus a little lust. She began to educate Dick about emotions, even though he didn't know what love was.

Since then, Mary has had an affair with both Tom and Dick. Until one day, she found out that she was pregnant. She knew the baby was Tom's, but to protect Tom, she told Dick that the baby was Freddie Parr's. Dick the fool who had no sense of right or wrong, acting on his emotions killed Freddie. Upon learning the news, Mary immediately realized that her actions had indirectly killed Freddy. At this time, her rational will control her free will. She decided to abort the fetus in her stomach in order to seek salvation.

But the fallout was far from over. Mary became the target of public criticism for having a baby out of wedlock because it was an ethical taboo for women at that time, while the public avoided talking about Tom's actions. Devastated, Mary chose to live in seclusion for three years, and then married Tom under the arrangement of both fathers to overcome the negative effects of abortion. But once a woman is given the ethical identity of a wife, the patriarchal society demands that she become a mother. Unable to have children due to the abnormal abortion at a young age, Mary was forced to steal other people's children to meet the requirements of the patriarchal society and make herself match the ethical identity of the mother, which led to the confusion of the ethical identity. Although Mary eventually suffered from amnesia and was locked up in a mental hospital, she was still attacked by a male-dominated public opinion regardless of the ethical dilemmas behind her madness.

ETHICAL CHOICE DRIVEN BY HUMAN FACTORS

Ethical literary criticism holds that human factors, namely ethical consciousness, are superior factors, which can control animal factors and make people become ethical conscious people. The most important characteristic of ethical consciousness is the ability to distinguish between good and evil. In *Waterland*, Helen Crick returned to reason after having incest with her father and Tom Crick told his father the truth about Freddie's death, both of which show that their humanity is redominated.

Helen Crick: Return to Reason

Helen adored and sympathized with her poor father, who had been her only close companion since childhood. How could she know what was normal and what was abnormal after years of seclusion with her father in the countryside? She had an incestuous affair with her father. But for the stage after the union, for the conception of the child of love, she flinched and trembled. It can be said that with the growth of age and the increase of social experience, Helen gradually began to understand the importance of ethical order. She realized that the ethical relationship between her and her father broke the ethical taboo and was not recognized by the public. Her fear of having an incestuous child with her father also testifies to the formation of her ethical consciousness.

To deflect her father's plans, she began to persuade him to convert their country house into a hospital for war patients, and she herself would become a nurse. Helen helped the poor and sad patients to seek salvation, which is also the embodiment of her human factor controlling the animal factor. But as much as the father had invested in this hospital and dreamed up all sorts of great plans, the hospital only served to remind them that evil was ever present and that the past was not the past. Her father was more desperate than ever to have a child. As she shuttled back and forth between the concierge and the hospital, she would think: Actually, I'm stuck. My life has stopped. Because when a father loves a daughter and a daughter loves her father, it's like tying a knot in the road to the future, like a stream trying to swim upstream. By this time, she was deeply entangled in an ethical dilemma. She still loved her father, both in the way a daughter should and in the way a daughter should not, but she did not want to hurt him. And although she didn't want children, she wanted a future, and she was used to caring for soldiers who had been traumatized by war. Because in her nurse's heart, there's motherhood. Therefore, for Helen at this time, it was an ethical dilemma whether to break her father's wish or give birth to a child and suffer the world's rejection.

But love always happens. Soon after, a wounded soldier named Henry Crick arrived. He fell in love with the nurse who was in love with her father, and as he fell in love with her, Helen fell in love with him. And this second love untangled the first. After falling in love with Tom's father Henry, her desire to get out of the ethical dilemma became more and more urgent, but the condition of leaving her father was to give birth to his children. Helen had no choice but to conceive and give birth to her father's child, Dick.

To break free from the ethical dilemma, Helen first chose to take care of patients to obtain psychological redemption, and then in order not to hurt his father and Henry, she chose to agree to the crazy requirements of his father. Helen was pushed into the ethical chaos of incest by her father, but she never hurt anyone. While taking care of her father to fulfill her daughter's obligations, she cared for Henry and accompanied him out of the war trauma. Finally, she chose to hurt herself and gave birth to Dick. Such ethical choice also reflects qualities of kindness, forbearance and self-sacrifice.

Tom Crick: Tell the Truth

Tom lacked initiative in the whole matter of Freddie's death. When Mary tells him that it was his idiot half-brother Dick who killed Freddy, he silently observes, weighs the evidence, puts the pieces together, and finds that it is. Now he is facing the ethical dilemma of whether to tell the truth. On the one hand, he doesn't want to tell the truth because of kinship. Because although Dick is a fool, but after all, the two brothers lived together for more than ten years, have different feelings than others. Tom didn't want to see Dick lose his life because of him. Besides, Tom didn't want his father to be sad. On the other hand, if he told the truth, people would be curious about Dick's motives, and his affair with Mary and Mary's pregnancy would be known to the public. In the small place where they lived, such gossip would certainly make him and Mary subject to criticism.

But when the case ends with Freddy falling into the water after drinking, he rushes to deliver the good news to him, only to be met by Mary, who had a stronger sense of cause and effect than he did. He lost his temper and tore the stalks of the grass wildly. It was his way of escaping from reality, because he knew that telling the truth was the right and sane thing to do. In the end, when he saw Freddie's parents in pain and even attempted suicide, his ethical consciousness gradually returned and finally told his father the truth about Freddie's death.

CONCLUSION

Swift once said in an interview: The difference between a good novel and other novels is that a good novel makes the reader finally find that they have undergone a transformation. By describing the ethical choices made by the main characters in the face of the problems of family and marriage, the confrontation between desire and reason, as well as the ethical dilemmas of crime and repentance, *Waterland* cleverly reflects the author Swift's ethics: ethical taboos must be observed to create a harmonious relationship between men and women. Ethical literary criticism holds that, no matter what method is adopted, the main purpose of literature is to help people complete the ethical selection process of choosing good and abandoning evil to become a moral person by virtue of the function of teaching. By depicting the ethical choices made by the main characters in the face of ethical predicaments, Swift shows profound ethical values to readers. He not only provides experience and self-reflection for human civilization but also provides essential enlightenment moral education for modern people.

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