

Narrative Judgments and Its Ethical Implication in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time**

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As a newly developed theory, narrative ethics has its reasonability and advantages in that it can not only analyze either the contents or the forms of the texts, but also make an analysis of the combination of both contents and forms. This article, supported by James Phelan's rhetorical narrative theory as the theoretical base, attempts to explore and interpret narrative judgments and its implied ethics existing in *The Child in Time* by Ian McEwan so as to observe the hidden aesthetic orientation, the value judgments and the ethical intentions of the text and help to reveal the author's views of narrative ethics and aesthetics of the novel.

Keywords: Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*, rhetorical narrative, narrative judgment, ethical implication

Introduction

The British contemporary writer Ian McEwan (1948-) is recognized as one of the most influential writers in the late 20th century and reputed as a leading figure in contemporary British literature. His works attract widespread attention among both readers and critics by the skillful narrative art, the elegant writing style, the in-depth social insight, and the unique aesthetic and ethical features. It is McEwan's paying continuing attention to the darkness and weaknesses of human nature and considering much about the almost collapsed inner order of modern people that enables his novel writing to present the complicated human mental activities and the complicity of the world, meanwhile arouses strong disputes on the ethical level.

Since his first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, was published in 1975, western critics have been showing their interest and concern with McEwan and his works, but the systematic study on McEwan and his works started in the early 1990s. While it was not until in the late 1990s that Chinese scholars began to pay their attention to McEwan and the studies on McEwan and his novels have been booming in China in recent years. During the past few decades, scholars and critics have made careful and systematic studies on McEwan from various perspectives such as psychoanalysis criticism, feministic criticism, new historicism criticism, narratology, eco-criticism, ethical criticism, cultural studies, etc. and tried to explore different kinds of thematic thoughts; reveal family ethical and moral values; interpret main and minor characters in the novels; or discuss the narrative techniques and strategies employed in the novels. Lately, with the increasing up-surfing of narratology and literary ethical criticism, the issue of narrative ethics in McEwan's novels began to draw critics' attention.

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Being written during McEwan's transitional period from "Macabre" to a writer more concerned about social and political issues, *The Child in Time*, McEwan's third novel, is of great importance in McEwan's literary world, which is thematically linked to his first two novels. Childhood is still a major concern, as are gender relations in McEwan's early works. Nevertheless, this novel marks a considerable change for McEwan's earlier fiction in other aspects. *The Child in Time* has a wider social and political purview than either *The Cement Garden* or *The Comfort of Strangers*, which, for many critics, reveals McEwan to be "one of the foremost novelists of his generation" (Childs, 2007, p. 11). The story of *The Child in Time* takes place over a few years in a projected future of the late 1990s, in a London of beggars licensed by the government and schools offered for sale to private investors. The central storyline focuses on a married couple, Stephen and Julie, who grew apart after their only daughter goes missing. The second-string plot concerns the composition and publication of a government childcare manual. These two strands of narrative are brought together not just through events in Stephen's life but also via his concern with the idea that a generation or society can be appraised by its attitude towards the nurturing and education of children.

As is known to us, ethics is an important dimension to narrative judgments. Ethical judgments can function as a typical example to display the interrelations between narrative judgments and narrative ethics. In the case of the relationship between narrative judgments and narrative ethics, James Phelan argues that narrative judgments,

straddle the border between textual dynamics and readerly dynamics. The implied author uses textual features to guide the authorial audience's judgment (textual dynamics) but those judgments then have consequences for the audience's interpretation of and response to the next set of events (readerly dynamics). (Tang, 2007, p. 14)

James Phelan points out that the rhetorical understanding of narrativity is "tied (1) to the rhetorical definition of narrative as somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened and (2) to the concept of narrative progression" (Phelan, 2005b, p. 323). This assertion suggests that a literary work's narrativity involves with both the dynamic progression of the author's telling the story and the reader's dynamic progression of understanding the story. Both progressions are dynamic and in order to complete a narrative, these two progressions have to constantly adjust themselves. Therefore, narrativity consists of both the author's and the reader's observations and judgments and it encourages the interaction of observing and judging. Narrative judgment is crucial to the rhetorical understanding of narrativity in that it exists in both the author's writing procedure (the narrative judgments made by the author and the characters) and the reader's reading procedure.

In accordance with James Phelan's theory of narrative judgment, and on the basis of close reading and detailed analysis of McEwan's third novel *The Child in Time*, this paper will zero in on Phelan's three types of judgments: interpretive judgments, ethical judgments and aesthetic judgments to elaborate the narrative ethics of narrative judgments and interpret the ethics of love and resurrection of the family reflected in this novel.

A Brief Review of James Phelan's Theory of Narrative Judgments

Narrative judgment is a crucial concept in rhetorical theory and also ethics is an indispensable dimension to narrative judgment. In *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, Phelan claims that "the progression of instability is accompanied by narrative judgments" (2007, p. 9). Previously, he argues that the issues of narrative judgments are "central to the novel and the reader's

experience of it" (Phelan, 2005b, p. 322). More importantly, narrative judgments "are crucial to the activation of our multileveled responses and to our understanding of the interrelations among form, ethics, and aesthetics" (Phelan, 2007, p. 6). Hence, it is no exaggeration to postulate that narrative judgments play an indispensable role in Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative. Among all the post-classical approaches to narratology, only Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative touches upon the issue of narrative judgments, which, to a large extent, demonstrates the power of rhetorical theory of narrative. Phelan's theory of narrative judgments, from the perspective of rhetorical communication (authorial agency, textual phenomena, and readers' responses), explain why it is possible for different readers to share similar or same experiences in reading a narrative. The point has been convincingly advanced via a set of general theses, which are constructed in a logical and persuasive fashion. Phelan (2005b) first formulates a taxonomy of six general theses about the importance of narrative judgments in the rhetorical approach to narrative and then in his monograph (2007), he revisits his theory of narrative judgments by proposing a new taxonomy of seven theses about narrative judgments (Shang, 2011, p. 182).

In his first thesis, Phelan points out: Narrative judgments are central for a rhetorical understanding not only of narrative ethics but also of narrative form and narrative aesthetics (Phelan, 2005b, p. 323), or narrative judgments are the point of intersection for narrative form, narrative ethics, and narrative aesthetics (Phelan, 2007, p. 7). Then Phelan put forward a corollary of this thesis, which is that "judgment functions as the hinge that allows each of these domains to open into the other two" (2005b, p. 323). According to Shang Biwu (2011), it can be inferred from this thesis that there are at least three senses to understand it: firstly, narrative judgment is a crucial concept in rhetorical understanding of narrative; secondly, narrative judgment should combine with narrative form, narrative ethics and narrative aesthetics together; and thirdly, as far as narrative judgment is concerned, narrative form, narrative ethics and narrative aesthetics are intersected with each other (p. 182). So if we readers can deeply understand the narrative judgments in *The Child in Time*, we can better appreciate the narrative form, narrative ethics and narrative aesthetics represented in this novel. Or in other words, if we can analyze the narrative form of this novel, we can fully sense the narrative judgments, deeply understand the narrative ethics and better appreciate the narrative aesthetics as well.

In Phelan's point of view, there are three main types of narrative judgment and each type has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two. These three types of narrative judgment are: "interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative; ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions; and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts" (Phelan, 2005b, p. 324; 2007, p. 9). And under this thesis, Phelan also adds two corollaries: "Corollary 1: a single action may evoke multiple kinds of judgments. Corollary 2: because characters' actions include their judgments, readers often judge characters' judgments" (ibid.). As is known to us, this is one of the most essential theses that Phelan has made about narrative judgments. In this thesis and its two corollaries, Phelan introduces the typology of narrative judgments; the interrelations of narrative judgments and the possibility of double judgments.

It is revealed in this thesis that there exist three types of narrative judgments: interpretive judgments, ethical judgments, and aesthetic judgments, which are usually overlapping with and affecting each other. And we may classify the three types of judgments into two levels: the first level is character's judgments and the second level is audience's judgments. To make it in detail, in the novel *The Child in Time*, the characters make different interpretative judgments about their responses and reactions to specific events that happen in the story

and these interpretive judgments overlap with ethical ones. It is not unsurprising that since the characters' interpretive judgments overlap with ethical judgments, the audience's judgments are also overlapping. And while reading the novel, we readers may also make some positive ethical judgments of characters' behaviour or performance. These decisions we make about the ethical questions will have consequences for our aesthetic judgments. Then I will give some detailed analysis about the three types of narrative judgments and how they are overlapping and affecting with each other in *The Child in Time*.

Detailed Analysis of the Three Types of Narrative Judgments in *The Child in Time*

In terms of narration, *The Child in Time* both differs from and recalls McEwan's earlier novels. It is longer and has a much more complex story material than his earlier novels and is regarded by some critics as the turning point in McEwan's writing career, a change from the previous "literature of shock [...] into a more socially conscious literature" (Slay, 1996, p. x). Others go even further and diagnose an "ethical turn in McEwan's writing career" (Schemberg, 2004, p. 28). The novel concerns a child's sudden and mysterious disappearance and the painful ordeal that the parents must endure in order to accept their daughterless, and seemingly hopeless, lives. *The Child in Time*, however, is much more than a missing-child novel. With the intricate images of children and the complexities of time that recur, McEwan portrays the search for the child that exists in every individual. In this novel, McEwan describes a large number of events in the course of searching the missing child and these events are themselves sufficient to make the issue of judgments central to the novel. But McEwan also arranges the progression of his narrative, which makes the issue of readers' judgment of McEwan as an author equally significant. Based on Phelan's primary theses of narrative judgment, the following part of this section will mainly concentrate on McEwan's *The Child in Time* to discuss the three types of narrative judgment: interpretative judgments, ethical judgments and aesthetic judgments, which are made by the main characters, the narrator and the audiences of the novel.

The first type is interpretive judgments of the narrator, the characters and the readers. In the case of the narrative progression, the seeking of the missing three-year-old daughter is undoubtedly a nuclear event in this novel, which dominates the novel's main narrative direction and also causes many kinds of judgments. First of all, the different judgments made by characters in the novel on this event lead to the instabilities of the story level. Secondly, the narration and judgments on the event by the narrator and the guidance to the reader by the implied author forms the tensions of the discourse level¹. Both instabilities and tensions are textual dynamics which can push the development of the novel and the double judgments (judgments on the event and judgments on characters' judgments) made by readers are reader's dynamics. The story of *The Child in Time* is told by a third-person omniscient narrator, from whose narratives, the readers know that the main character in the novel, Stephen Lewis attempts to recover from the loss of his daughter, Kate, who was abducted while shopping with his father in a local supermarket. The novel's principal action begins some two years later after the abduction. In the early part of the novel, the reader has already learned that the loss of the daughter has resulted in the breakup of Stephen's marriage with his wife, Julie. At the beginning of the story, the narrator tells such a scene to the reader:

¹ In his book *Narrative as Rhetoric* (1996), Phelan defines instability as "conflictual relations between or within characters that lead to complications in the action and sometimes eventually to resolution"; and he defines tension as "conflictual relations—relations involving significant gaps in values, beliefs, or knowledge—between authors and readers or narrators and readers." See James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*, p. 90.

Jogging and weaving to overtake, Stephen remained as always, though barely consciously, on the watch for children, for a five-year-old girl. It was more than a habit, for a habit could be broken. This was a deep disposition, the outline experience had stenciled on character. It was not principally a search, though it had once been an obsessive hunt, and for a long time too. (McEwan, 1992, pp. 1-2)

Therefore, as far as readers' interpretive judgments are concerned, the above scene tells the reader the context of the story and the feelings of Stephen. But it is very hard for the reader to understand why Stephen has been and is on the watch for a five-year-old girl and to know what happened to Stephen, which causes the tension between the reader and the narrator and it pushes the narrative progression to the story on the discourse level. With the development of the interpretive judgments by the narrator on this event, the tension is gradually relaxed. Besides the narrator's interpretive judgments, characters in the novel also have their own judgments on the key event. Hit by the event, Stephen is in a state of despair, still struggling to come to terms with the loss of Kate, and separated from his wife, Julie, who has gone to live in an isolated cottage thirty miles from London. In his mind, Stephen thought it was all his mistake and he said to Julie, "I am sorry to be a nuisance" (McEwan, 1992, p. 64) with great guilt. In contrast, some of the novel's scenes which can be regarded as informal by the reader, especially those describing Stephen's relationship with his wife, his musings over his missing daughter, his reflections on his own fugitive past, strike a consistently relaxed but forceful note. Through these scenes, the narrator's and characters' interpretive judgments on the events happened may have overlapped with their own ethical judgments, and maybe somewhat have influenced the audiences' ethical judgments.

Ethical judgments, the second type of narrative judgments, are about moral value and actions of characters. Phelan argues:

Individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments. Consequently, within rhetorical ethics, narrative judgments proceed from the inside out rather than the outside in. It is for this reason they are closely tied to aesthetic judgments. (Phelan, 2005b, p. 325; 2007, p. 10)

From this thesis, we can assume that each narrative has its own ethical criteria; that the way to make narrative judgments is from the inside out instead of the outside in; and that ethical judgments are closely associated with aesthetical judgments. According to Shang (2011), Phelan's explanation is that the rhetorical theorists do not make ethical criticism by applying a pre-existing ethical system to the narrative, no matter how much they may admire the ethics elaborated by some eminent philosophers or great thinkers such as Aristotle, Kant, Levinas et al., on the contrary, rhetorical theorists like Wayne Booth, James Phelan, attempt to reconstruct the ethical principles inside the narrative texts, which is totally different from those philosophers and moralists. After the reconstructing of the ethical principles inside the narrative texts, literary critics make their judgments on them. In consequence, the audiences' ethical value may be influenced by the constructed ethical system and of course, the audiences may refuse to accept or deny such an ethical system. It is certain to admit that the rhetorical theorists do bring values to the narrative text, but their values are "open to having those values challenged and even repudiated by the experience of reading" (Phelan, 2005b, p. 325; 2007, p. 10). In a more general sense,

ethical judgments work through the application of the ethical principles underlying the work to the specific behaviour of a character (or narrator). Sometimes the underlying principles will be coherent and systematic, but at others they may be ad hoc and unsystematic, and at still others they may be inconsistent. (Phelan, 2007, p. 11)

The questions of how to reconstruct the ethical principles and whether the audiences' ethical value is influenced or not by these principles can be answered by the view of ethical positions put forward by Phelan. In *Living to Tell About It* (2005a), Phelan identifies four types of ethical positions:

(1) that of the characters with the story-world; (2) that of the narrator in relation to the telling, to the told, and to the audience; (3) that of the implied author to the telling, the told, and the authorial audience; and (4) that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations (1)-(3). (Phelan, 2005a, p. 23)

Then, Phelan adds "the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act" to the previous taxonomy of ethical positions in his *Experiencing Fiction* (2007, p. 11). Shang (2011) points out that once the ethical principles underlying a narrative have been reconstructed, the next step that the rhetorical theorist can take is to apply these ethical principles when making ethical judgments (p. 186).

In *The Child in Time*, the event of seeking the missing daughter touches the core of morality of both the reader and the main characters. Facing the great tragedy to their family, Stephen and Julie make their own ethical judgments with each other. Julie cannot forgive her husband and wants to leave the house. When she abandons her husband to nurse her despair in the solitude of a remote cottage, Stephen sinks into the mire of introspection and blames himself by the ethical judgments he makes and seems doomed to stay painfully in this catatonic state. Putting themselves in Stephen's shoe, the audiences of this novel will make their ethical judgments on Stephen's performance and definitely show their sympathy to him. In Chapter 3, the omniscient narrator depicts such a scene that on the day he visits Julie in her rural retreat after several months of separation, he witnesses "something of overwhelming importance" (McEwan, 1992, p. 50). And this, for McEwan, is the germ of the novel—something wondrous which heralds the end of pain and the renewal of life and love. On the way to Julie's house, Stephen stumbles upon a pub he knows he has never seen before, but which affects him with a sense, "almost a kind of ache, of familiarity, of coming to a place that knew him too" (p. 56). The loss of the daughter changes the ethical relations between Stephen and Julie. But following the anonymous third-person narrator's calm narration, the audiences witness the whole progression that Stephen and Julie experience and make their own ethical judgments when reconstructing their ethical principles while reading the novel. At the end of the story, the newly-born baby again changes the couple's ethical relations, which represents the renewal of love between husband and wife and the resurrection of their family. The ethical dimension dominates the overall narrative act of the novel.

Phelan also contends that ethical judgments in narrative include not only the judgments about the characters and their actions but also the judgments about the ethics of storytelling itself, especially the ethics of the implied author's relation to the narrator, the characters, and the audience (Phelan, 2005b, p. 326; 2007, p. 12). It is clear that this thesis primarily copes with the ethical judgments about the ethics of "the told", particularly about the characters and their actions, besides which Phelan also highlights the importance of the ethics of "the telling" about narrative judgments, especially ethical judgments in formulating his theory of narrative judgments. Thus in addition to ethical judgments about characters and their actions, Phelan, in his another thesis, adds ethical judgments about the ethics of storytelling, the ethics of the implied author's relation to the narrator, the characters and the audience in particular. "In considering the ethics of the telling," Phelan argues, "we again want to identify the author's implicit ethical principles and apply them to the particular techniques of the telling" (Phelan, 2007, p. 12). In terms of the relationships between the two couples in *The*

Child in Time, the different narrations by characters themselves and the anonymous narrator, to some extent, have changed the readers' cognitions. By different narratives on the same events, the implied McEwan deliberately guides the individual readers to make their different judgments and helps them constantly reconstruct and evaluate their ethical principles of the narrative world. The implied McEwan seems to suggest that the life is filled with thorns and roses and the couple have to face the reality and co-experience happiness or pain, which can be reflected in the contemporary British society.

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan arranges an omniscient narrator to tell the story who can convey the author's implicit ethical principles, which can be sensed by the audiences through his narration. As can be seen from Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative judgments, the rhetorical ethics involves a two-step process which is called reconstruction and evaluation. After the process of reconstruction has been done, rhetorical ethics moves to the process of evaluation. Just as Phelan puts it, "individual readers need to evaluate the ethical standards and purposes of individual narratives, and they are likely to do so in different ways" (Phelan, 2005b, p. 327; 2007, p. 13). It is clear that this thesis deals with the issue of how individual audiences make narrative judgments, particularly ethical judgments. With the descriptions of Stephen's three encounters with Julie, the individual readers, in *The Child in Time*, make their ethical judgments about the main characters or even the implied author through their reconstruction of the narrative. Then the readers also make their evaluations to the judgments made by the characters and the narrator.

As for the issue of aesthetics judgments, which belongs to the third type of narrative judgment, Phelan's thesis goes like this: "Just as rhetorical ethics proceeds from the inside out, so too does rhetorical aesthetics. And just as rhetorical ethics involves a two-step process of reconstruction and evaluation, so too does rhetorical aesthetics" (Phelan, 2007, p. 13). In *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*, Phelan wants to defer some further comments on the aesthetic achievement in the text and introduces his seventh and final thesis about narrative judgment: "individual readers' ethical and aesthetic judgments significantly influence each other, even as the two kinds of judgments remain distinct and not fully dependent on each other" (Phelan, 2007, p. 14).

From the above theses, therefore, it can be clearly seen that the aesthetic judgments and the ethical judgments are closely interrelated with each other, but still remain their distinctions. According to Phelan, "aesthetic judgments, like interpretive and ethical judgments, are both local and global, but, unlike interpretive and ethical judgments, they are also both first-order and second-order activities" (2007, p. 134). Aesthetic judgments are called first-order because the individual readers make judgments of quality that exist alongside their interpretive and ethical judgments, and they are second-order because they follow from and depend on their interpretive and ethical judgments. First-order aesthetic judgments are readers' ongoing assessments of the technical skills manifest in the narrative: its relative mastery of style, temporality, devices of disclosure, narrative discourse, and other elements of craft; while second-order aesthetic judgments are the judgments readers make about the overall quality of the experience offered by the progression, both as they read and after they finish reading. Second-order aesthetic judgments are dependent on and follow from all three primary-level judgments—not just the aesthetic but also the interpretive and the ethical (ibid).

Practically, the reconstruction of narrative aesthetics deals with the analysis of the narrative techniques employed by the performer of the telling behavior such as the implied author and the narrator; whereas the evaluation of the narrative aesthetics aims to examine the effect of these narrative techniques, for example, the achievements of the narrator and the implied author and their influence on the individual readers. In *The Child*

in *Time*, McEwan successfully uses the anonymous omniscient narrator who is much more reliable than the first person character narrator when telling the progression of seeking the missing daughter. Furthermore, the marked, if intermittent, formality of the narrator's language is another skill that McEwan employed on purpose. Such intermittent formality of language has multi-functions in the case of narrative techniques: it dignifies character and action; it puts them in a broader intellectual context that is appropriate to Thelma's mini-lectures on the nature of time (1992, pp. 45-47, 135-139). Another function is perhaps a self-referential one of drawing attention to the act of narration, of reminding any reader of the presence of story and storyteller (Malcolm, 2002, p. 94). By using these narrative techniques, McEwan and his narrator perfectly fulfill both the ethical principles and aesthetic principles of literary texts.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be clearly seen that ethics is an indispensable dimension to narrative judgments. Ethical judgments can serve as a typical example to demonstrate the interrelations between narrative ethics and narrative judgments. However, it should be noticed that in the process of reading, the ethical judgments are just one of its many consequences. In Phelan's view, the ethical dimension of reading is "deeply intertwined with cognition, emotion, and desire: our understanding influences our sense of which values the text is calling forth, the activation of those values influences our judgments, our judgments influence our feelings, and our feelings our desires" (Phelan & Martin, 1999, p. 100).

In *The Child in Time*, McEwan plots the progression of his narrative in which there contain many judgments for the reader to interpret and shows again his artistic arts of narrative as well as more mature writing style. With full interpretation and exploration of the three types of judgments existing in the novel, it is clearly shown that McEwan successfully achieves both in aesthetics and in ethics. McEwan uses distinctive narrative techniques to present the reader with a more developed novel than his previous works and the novel proves to be a progression both technically and thematically. In this novel, McEwan strips from Stephen and Julie the very core of their existence, the essence of their relationship and then allows them to rebuild themselves by relying on the same thing that was taken from them—love. In this sense, we can see that McEwan's description of the macabre, sordid, sadistic world in his earlier novels has disappeared. What's more, his Gothic adolescence has given way to adult life and grown-up insights, which is believed to mark a watershed in McEwan's fiction.

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