

Ethical Form Features in Hilary Mantel's Novels*

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There are different ethical forms in Hilary Mantel's works, suggesting the author's anxiety and reflection on family ethical issues, female problems, human nature, and the social reality. By detailed descriptions of various people's major crises in daily life, with the ethical form features as focusing on individual life, highlighting the dilemma of moral judgment, and exploring the nature of ethical dialogue, Mantel expresses her deep moral concern and simple ethical pursuit in reality.

Keywords: Hilary Mantel, ethical forms, features, moral ambiguity

Introduction

British female writer Hilary Mantel has drawn extensive attention due to her Man Booker Prize books *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Recent years, academic circles at home and abroad have conducted a multi-angle study on Mantel's works and achieved diversified research results. Generally, Mantel's novels fall into four categories: historical novels, family novels, supernatural novels, and female novels. In reality, all of her novels involve ethical issues, including relation among emperor and his ministers, family ethics relation, religious ethics, and love ethics. Hence, all of Mantel's novels represent concrete ethical relation forms, crisscrossed by a network of ethics relation, which develop the four parts of the Mantel's ethical morphology. Firstly, it devotes to revealing family problems, including the presentation and imagination of parent-child relationships, marriage bonds, etc. Secondly, it concerns the state of women's existence, exploring women's social positions, desire, and dilemma. Thirdly, it focuses on the revelation of human nature, criticizing selfishness, brutality, and violence. Fourthly, it has great reflections on historical issues and current social realities.

In Daniel Bell's eyes, culture itself is an effort to provide interpreting system for human lives and help them deal with existential predicament (Bell, 1992). As "everyday life culture (Osborne, 2004)", Mantel's works portray common people's subsistence crisis in everyday life carefully. The color of violence, gloom, and terror expresses the author's deep understanding of the social, political, and ethical issues caused by the negative consequence of modernization, value transformation, human's alienation, etc. The way is a kind of ethical responsibility, an ethical power, inevitably representing a focus on individuals' life experience, a highlight of the dilemma of moral judgment, and an exploration of ethical communication nature.

A Focus on Individuals' Life Experience

Fiction is the culture of everyday life. A novel gives an account of the individual's or group's ethical

* **Acknowledgements:** This work is the final result of "The Study of Ethical Forms of Hilary Mantel's Novels" (Project Number: 16NDJC114YB) supported by philosophy and social sciences program in Zhejiang Province.

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encounter in which human beings are taken as its object, presenting people's joys and sorrows in the society, their feelings of gratitude and resentment towards others, and their painful struggle with themselves. The relationships between man and society, man and others, and man and himself pervade the whole society so that there is ethics. Scholar LIU Xiao-feng (1999) once said: "the so-called ethics, in fact, is the meridian of life based on a certain values; in turn, a sense of life is an ethics. How many kinds of life determine how many kinds of ethics" (p. 102). The writer's ethical responsibility is to describe the real ethical situation of human beings through literary creation. Mantel has a deep understanding of this responsibility. Every life deserves careful examination because they have their own secrets and dreams. Cromwell, Henry VIII, and Anne Boleyn in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Court Bodies*, Charles O'Brien and John Hunter in *The Giant O'Brien*, Evelyn Axon and Muriel in *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Father Angwin in *Fludd*, and professional psychic Alison Hart in *Beyond Black*, each of her novel leaves us a live ordinary individual. In fact, Mantel's intention is not to completely shape a typical character, but to demonstrate the current situation and difficulties human beings are faced with at present. This is a writer's speculation on a certain phenomenon and understanding of human nature, natural world, or society. It is sure that Mantel focuses on the individuals' life experience without ignoring the social background. In *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, Frances Shore with her husband came to Saudi Arabia. She rented and lived in an apartment in Jeddah far away from their national colony. Soon, she found that this was a country completely different from the Western. Women were bound to ethical codes and they were not allowed to drive, drink, and even hang out alone in the street; men were armed with rifles. The air was shrouded in the shadow of fear and murder everywhere. In such a society where a slight violation of Islamic law could lead to imprisonment or more severe punishment, Frances was full of fear and terror every day. In *Fludd*, Mantel fabricated a social background that there was a dull town in the north of England in 1950s where the local people were ignorant and superstitious, rejecting all reason and progress. There was a church in the town where Father Angwin was a bishop. Later, Father Fludd joined them. Two priests together led the town residents against a dark ruling power, a depressive disorder in spirit.

Obviously, the narrative is individual, but cannot do without the social background in each story. Since the individual lives on the earth, he cannot do anything at his will. Social ideology and ethics rooted in society are still quietly manipulating the numerous individuals who are going through their different lives. Only by telling about the individual's life under the social background, is there an opportunity to find the possibilities for human survival. Those all kinds of ethical forms in Mantel's novels present more of a taste of the vicissitudes of life and a kind of understanding and tolerance of the individual's life.

A Highlight of the Dilemma of Moral Judgment

Concerning literary ethical critics, a focus on individuals' life experience will always lead to a paradoxical judgment of moral evaluation and a dilemma to ethical orientation (JIAO, 2007). Mantel's fiction is keen on individual's unique and exceptional feelings towards life. Its profundity lies in an individual's ethical dilemma when choosing whether to integrate or to separate with society and others and when deciding whether to persist on his own "truth" or to give up in front of the powerful authority and the fixed truth.

There is no clear-cut line between the good and the evil. Mantel has always been trying to use "moral ambiguity" to express her ethical attitude. She invites readers "to understand instead of making conclusion" (SHI, 1991) and to think instead of judging by presenting a variety of ethics forms. Be it historical figures like Cromwell, Henry VIII, Robespierre, or ordinary people like Isabella, Ralph Eldred, characters Mantel depicts

are neither the total masters of their own fate nor the utter slaves of society. Instead, they forge ahead both difficulty and persistently in-between. The characters in the novels may not only be fragile but also heroic. Their fates can never be explained, understood, or judged simply by the common social rules. The novels highlight some "abnormal" individual behaviors with feature of inflated ambitions, while beneath them hidden the power operations of "normal" social rules and ethnics. This is reflected in the relationships: the supervision from oneself, the dialogue between oneself and others, as well as the supervision from others and society.

Wolf Hall presents two important characters: Thomas Cromwell and Thomas More. In fact, Cromwell has always been considered as an evil figure and More the upright figure from the perspective of collective ethnics. This ethnical attitude is clearly expressed from two portraits which stand on either side of the massive fireplace of the main parlor in the Frick Museum in New York hang two portraits by Hans Holbein. Seen from the portraits, Cromwell has been demonized while More sainted by Hans Holbein, giving a sharp contrast. These two opponents in life are now frozen in art. The result of their conflicts is Cromwell's hounding of More to his death as a traitor to the King, suggesting a chaotic history of the Tudor Dynasty. However, this collective ethnical attitude has been questioned by Mantel. With a great deal of art and techniques, she presents a totally different story concerning these two Thomas and gives a new perspective to those readers who are trustful to this history. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell was born humble but was savvy and sophisticated. He carefully served the tyrant king Henry VIII and successfully grabbed the status, wealth, and power he envied. While people around him met their tragic fate one by one, Cromwell enjoyed his rising career. Compared with his notorious image in history, Mantel's modification itself to this attractive history has been a great literary breakthrough. In addition, her depiction of More is another successful attempt. She topples down the respectful saint image of More and depicts him as a stubborn Puritan and hypocritical moralist. His boycott towards Henry VIII's disobedience to the Pope's teachings is out of his pride and piety. Compared to More's virtue on the surface, the guilty the Cromwell shoulders seems to be obvious self-protection as well as the imagination and expectation for human beings' pragmatism. After reading *Wolf Hall*, readers tend to show their deep sympathy towards Cromwell and feel disgusted at More. The new ethnical attitude reflects the profundity of literary thoughts and the depth of human emotions. A simple judgment of right or wrong can by no means define these two Thomas. As each individual has their own unique life experience, an objective response tries to be given to each one "sympathetic understanding" and "understandable sympathy".

Every Day is Mother's Day also tells an ethnical story hard to judge by morality. Muriel Axon lived dependently with her mother and was isolated from the outside world. As a widowed witch, her mother was strict with her and the society she lived in was full of darkness in welfare and modern politics. As a result, Muriel suffered from enormous trauma in body and soul out of some unexpected coincidence: This girl who seemed mentally retarded got pregnant. In fact, her superficial stupid was a cover of her unique thought and secret. *Every Day is Mother's Day* is a title with morality ambiguity and full of ethnical paradox. Mother's hurt to the daughter leads to the daughter's murder to the mother. At the beginning, the relationship between the daughter and her mother was very tense. Mother's over strict attitude killed daughter's character and self-ego and led to her spiritual disorder eventually. Later, when Muriel ran away from the orphanage, she killed her unborn baby and took her revenge on the Sydneys because of her mother's death. In fact, Muriel herself killed her mother. In the sequel *Vacant Possession*, when she came back to her living place after the revenge, she showed severe symptoms of Schizophrenia: She felt her mother was haunting in her house and the house was

rotten and wet everywhere. She hated her mother Evelyn, but at night she turned herself into the mother and talked to herself.

Milan Kundera once said, "Novels are beyond the morality judgment. This is the morality of novels" (Kundera, 1995). Concerning individual feelings, similar plots in Mantel's novels cannot be judged from morality perspective. Good works should be ambiguous, giving different people different touches. It is the feature of "morality ambiguity" of good novels that bestows the characters and stories in them with infinite possibilities and thus further enriches the novels. The greatness of Mantel's novels lies in the features of her ethnical critiques:

It is higher than the morality on earth and concerns about the delicate changes of life and soul. It doesn't pursue worldly answers but the echoes from the soul. It has nothing to do with the sociological and moral issues, but puts forward its creative views on the world and human heart by deeply perceiving and understanding humanity. (XIE, 2005, p. 39)

An Exploration of Ethical Communication Nature

The British postmodern narrative theorist Mark Cory pointed out, if the inner world of the character we go into is that of a morbid mentality, or of a distorted motivation, or of something evil, it runs counter to our moral values and it will not win our sympathy. Therefore, it is the sympathy we show for the morally disgusting character that arouses the moral dispute over literary works (Cory, 2003). The "moral dispute" just reflects the dialogical nature of the question of ethics in literary works. Ethics is about how human beings survive. The ambiguity of morality provides the room for the discussion and dialog over the ethics in the works and this can lead to the ethics dialog among the author, the reader, and the character.

Good and evil always co-exist in almost all the characters in Mantel's works. The author makes her moral practice to persuade people to choose goodness. However, in her narration, she never tries to create her characters on the basis of the existing truths and neither rushes to make judgment on the characters and the life. The author goes to great lengths to explore all the possibilities of the characters and the incidents, put forward questions, and let readers judge by themselves. Under the author's guidance, the readers will understand the characters' inner feelings and life experience.

In *Bring up the Bodies*, via Cromwell's introspection, the author expresses an ethical attitude that cannot be expressed in general perspectives. Take the frequent "idiot perspective" in the novel as an example, Cromwell, when in his introspection, often demonstrates the typical features as "confusion, puzzle, absent-mindedness, soliloquy, and cogitation". The purpose of choosing the introspective Cromwell as the perspective is to lead the readers to attain a more genuine understanding of ethics through the contradiction between the unusual "stupidity" (cogitation) and the usual social ethics.

He does not sleep. His thoughts race. He thinks, I never lay awake a night for love, though poets tells me that is the procedure. Now I lie awake for its opposite. But then, he does not hate Anne, he is indifferent to her. He does not even hate Francis Weston, any more than you hate a biting midge; you just wonder why it was created. He pities Mark, but then, he thinks, we take him for a boy: when I was as old as Mark is now, I had crossed the sea and the frontiers of Europe. I had lain screaming in a ditch and hauled myself out of it, and got myself on the road: not once but twice, once in flight from my father and once from the Spanish on the battlefield. When I was as old as Mark is now, or Francis Weston, I had distinguished myself in the houses of the Portinari, the Frescobaldi, and long before I was the age of George Boleyn I had dealt for them in the exchanges of Europe; I had broken down doors in Antwerp; I had come home to England, a changed man. I had made over my language, and to my exultation, and unexpectedly, I spoke my native tongue with more fluency than when I went away; I commended me to the cardinal, and at the same time, I was marrying a wife, I was proving myself in the law courts, I would go into court and smile at the judges and talk, my expertise laggard to my presentation,

and the judges were so happy that I smiled at them and didn't smack them round the head, that they saw the case my way, often as not. The things you think are the disasters in your life are not the disasters really. Almost anything can be turned around: out of every ditch, a path, if you can only see it. (Mantel, 2012, p. 235)

Apparently, Cromwell, as a narrator, is reminiscing about the past incidents, which he himself, as a witness, has also experienced. Double focusing embodies the narrator's different awareness of ethics in different perspective and thus constitutes an ethical dialogue across two space-time dimensions. How can Cromwell, the son of a blacksmith, struggle to the top of power and become the country's most powerful figure after King? Following Cromwell's reminiscence and experience, the readers can identify themselves with his thorny situation, in which he was confronted with a volatile king and a group of covetous aristocrats. With the slightest fault, he might be doomed eternally. For Cromwell, who has struggled to survive and gain power, to protect himself is his instinct. All he has done is only to "find an easy way to live" (Genette, 1990). The teenager who survived his father's cruel beating has been long aware of this cruel world. He defends himself with his sharp and cruel claws. He grows up in unbelievable hardness. He is thoughtful and rational, knowing how to deal with his enemies toughly. He is considerate and generous toward his friends. The author's choice of the perspective of the introspective character presents a more sympathetic and humane Cromwell. It also makes the plots more trustworthy and expresses the author's sympathy and appreciation of the character.

In the novel, Mantel does not directly tell readers whether Cromwell is a good man or a bad man and whether he is kind or evil. He is a figure with rich descriptions of his multi-dimensional characters, which cannot be simply defined as "good" or "evil". "The theory of good nature" and "the theory of evil nature" in our life ethics could not judge Cromwell's ethical imputation because of his unique life. Apparently, Mantel does not want to make an explicit moral judgment on the characters in her works. Instead, she leaves it to the readers. The author creates the characters, while the readers interpret the characters. The author, the characters, and the readers start a massive dialogue on the ethical issues of the works. In this dialogue, the readers are the true protagonists while the protagonists in the works become the objects of the dialogue. The root and impetus of the dialogue derives from the works. The readers cannot make their judgment without taking into account the consciousness of the writer and characters. The intention of the dialogue is to "explore thoroughly people's endless inner secret" (Bakhtin, 1988).

Susan Sontag (2009) once said: "serious novelists are thinking about moral issues seriously. They tell stories; they describe what has happened; they arouse our common humanity in their works we identify. They cultivate our ability of moral judgment" (p. 104). There is no doubt that Mantel is a responsible storyteller. With her wonderful stories, she does attempt to cultivate modern people's ability to make their moral judgment. Thanks to her plain pursuit of ethics, many of her novels have deeply impressed and touched the contemporary readers.

Conclusion

Ethics is the core of culture. "Life" and "ethics" are of the same nature in the cultural level. The ethical morphology of Mantel's novels is generated and developed from reflection and criticism on family, female, human nature, and historical reality. Of all ages, the value of a work often depends on the strength of human survival narrative as well as the serious examination and reflection of the present situation and the future of human existence. Obviously, in her works, Mantel not only has a penetrative interpretation on human behavior from different narrative perspectives—understanding, recognition, and appreciation, but also makes a profound

examination and reflection on it, sensitively to warn people of the errors and biases of cultural development and to protect human's lofty spiritual care and pursuit of justice. Mantel's creative thought enlightens us that only by looking at life with ethics and learning to think ethically can life have ethics and spirits.

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