

Original Paper

Analysis of Alison Moore's *The Lighthouse* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract

The Lighthouse is an excellent contemporary novel that tells the family tragedies of two generations which involve numerous individuals and families. After being shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize, it has been noticed by many researchers and scholars from home and abroad. Starting from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, this paper intends to have a detailed analysis of the ethical issues existing in *The Lighthouse* through the method of close reading. This paper also attempts to have an insight into the moral and ethical problems in modern families, or the problems between contemporary people, trying to analyze the main characters' self-developments of morality and the author's ethical values from the discussion of the main characters' ethical choices, the construction of ethical identities and the human and human relationship in this novel.

Keywords

The Lighthouse, personal and family morality, ethical literary criticism, modern ethics

1. Introduction

The Man Booker Prize had brought a series of excellent literary works into the light of public, among which include the British writer Alison Moore's first novel—*The Lighthouse*. Alison Moore, a new talent in British literature stage, has created several short stories previously, making herself noticed by the public and literary critics. Her first novel, *The Lighthouse*, was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize, and she was also awarded "The British National Book Award" in the same year. *The Lighthouse* has gained much attention since it came out.

The plot of *The Lighthouse* seems quite plain yet quite intriguing: the novel begins on a North Sea Ferry, on whose blustery deck stands middle-aged Futh, heading to Germany for a restorative walking holiday following his recent separation from wife, Angela. Of a lonely and, at times, socially awkward disposition, Futh seemingly lacks any kind of support network and throughout the novel remains adrift, waiting to

see where the tide takes him. Ill-prepared for the holiday, Futh's failed relationships is mirrored by his general inadequacy as we see him getting lost and suffering from both sunburn and blisters. Futh's chapters are interwoven with those of Ester's; the landlady of Hellhaus -lighthouse in German- the guesthouse in which Futh spends the first and last day of his walking tour. Ester, too, is a heavily flawed character, stuck in a loveless marriage to husband Bernard that is littered with infidelities and loneliness. The imagery within the novel is a key and integral feature, and creates an evocative sense of place as well as lending itself well to memories which both Futh and Ester reminisce. And while the prose is sparse, it too, works in harmony with the melancholy nature of the novel. The whole story gives readers a sense of melancholy and loneliness, setting them reflecting on the true meaning of family and life.

2. Literature Review

As a comparatively new novel, *The Lighthouse* has not been thoroughly studied by the learners and scholars from home and abroad, so the thesis and documents that can be used for reference are very limited. By the time of 2022, the studies on the book *The Lighthouse* can be divided into two main types: the general analysis about the writing style and techniques employed in the whole novel; and the interpretation of the book from the perspective of Psychoanalytical Theory.

2.1 Studies at Home

The studies by Chinese scholars, especially by Wang Xiaojun, have made an exhaustive analysis on this novel about its writing style and techniques employed by Alison Moore. Wang points out that in the novel Moore artistically uses montage to unfold the two storylines—the life of Futh and the life of Ester. The previous life and emotional experiences of the two main characters gradually come to the light as if jigsaws being turned over to complete the whole story ultimately. Wang also noted that this novel has a distinguished characteristic of the style of modern writing for the abundant use of images, symbols and the stream of consciousness technique. The lighthouse is the most outstanding image appeared in the book. It has extremely important symbolic connotation and runs through the whole story as a thread. What's more, the author employs free association and internal monologue to depict characters, which gives the book a more modern style.

2.2 Studies Abroad

While Chinese scholars focus more on the writing style and techniques of this book, the focus of foreign scholars and learners on this novel is quite different. According to the study of professor Kubilay, this novel can be interpreted from the perspective of Psychoanalytic Criticism. Throughout the book, memory has always played an important role in Futh's and Ester's life. The two main characters are trapped in their own memories, suffering from the pain and loss caused by the past and refusing to get rid of them, just like the moth flying into the fire. By using Psychoanalytic Criticism, Kubilay points out that the modern human beings, represented by the main characters Futh and Ester, are just prisoners of the past who can't get rid of the negative influence of it and will eventually come to the tragic end just as Futh and Ester. Through the tragic story of two generations and numerous families, the novel uncovers the

fact that family can not satisfy modern people's emotional and sexual need and is doomed to dismantle and lose its ethical function.

From the previous studies on the novel, it can be found that both Chinese and foreign scholars have made great progress in the study on the book *The Lighthouse*, and they all pointed out there are ethic issues existing in the novel to some extent. Nevertheless, none of them has drilled down into the deeper levels of the ethical aspects. The tragic end of the two main characters, Futh and Ester, is essentially caused by their failure to construct their ethical identity and their making of wrong ethical choices. Therefore, there is plenty developmental space to study *The Lighthouse* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, to delve into the deeper cause of the characters' unavoidable tragic life.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Definition of Ethical Literary Criticism

Ethical literary criticism is put forward as a methodology by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao in 2004 for the first time at the meeting "Study on British and American Literature in China: Reflection and Looking Forward". According to professor Nie, "In terms of methodology, ethical literary criticism is an approach to literary criticism developing on the basis of introduction of ethical methods and the assimilation of these ethical methods into the texture of literary critical methods." In 2010, he refined its definition as "ethical literary criticism is a method of literary criticism, which is mainly used for explaining, analyzing and elucidating literary works and researching the writers, writings and issues which are related to literature from the viewpoint of ethics." (Nie, 2010, p. 14) Since the proposal of ethical literary criticism, the situation that western literary criticisms get the upper hand in the Chinese literary criticism field has been changed. Ethical literary criticism originates from literature and serves for the moral aspects of literature. As a critical approach, ethical literary criticism is often adopted to make an objective investigation into the ethical and moral factors in literary works. It is the combination of western criticisms and the theory of ethics, a completely new literary criticism that targets at the literary works. As a successful example in Chinese literary field, ethical literary criticism has made the voice of China heard by others on the world literary stage and has made great breakthroughs in literary research. The nature of ethical literary criticism, mainly based on the perspective of ethic, is to make an interpretation of the ethical characteristic and ethical quality in literary works, studying the ethical values of the author and the ethical characteristic and social values behind those literary works. The ethical environment is what ethical literary criticism emphasizes greatly. Thus, when it comes to the research of literary works, it is necessary to "come back to the ethical scene of history, stand on the ethical stance at that time to find out the objective ethical reason for literature and explaining why, analyze the ethical factors that brought about social events and influenced individual destiny, and finally, make moral evaluation from historical perspective." (Nie, 2010, p. 12)

Ethical literary criticism holds that literature is essentially the art of ethic. It is those ethical characteristics that endow literary works with infinite charms and show the moral and ethical value of literature. Thus, employing ethical literary criticism to analyze literary works has great necessity and feasibility.

3.2 The Definition of Ethical Choices and Its Analytical Values

The literary works record and narrate various choices made by individuals throughout their life, which decides that the focus of literary research should be shifted to the analysis and criticism of the specific activities of ethical choices. As the core and fundamental theory of ethical literary criticism, “ethical choices are the second choice after human beings’ first biological choice.” In the theories of ethical literary criticism, the ethical choices are the manifestation of the character’s psychology and disposition, which are made under the influence of the ethical environment, the restricted choices. The nature of ethical choices is to choose to become human or brute. It is exactly this kind of choice that has transformed human beings into higher animals, behaving differently from animals in a real sense. People would make different ethical choices under the influence of different ethical environments, and those ethical choices are the crucial factors that could determine one’s fate.

The analytical value of ethical choices lies in that it is the powerful theoretical foundation for the study of human nature, “there are no other theories that can perfectly explain the process of how human beings have finished the transformation from form to essence just as the ethical literary criticism”. Everyone has to make his or her own ethical choices which accompany them from the cradle to grave. As for the value in contemporary society, ethical choices are the choices of responsibility. People are facing different kinds of ethical choices, which means how one would react when he or she has to take responsibility or fulfil his or her personal values. Every ethical choice made in different life stages has crucial impact on one’s destiny. Thus, it can be found that the influence of ethical choices on literary works cannot be overlooked.

3.3 Developments of Ethical Literary Criticism

In addition to Professor Nie Zhenzhao, there is another scholar in China who has a profound insight into this criticism, that is Professor Li Dingqing. In 2006, professor Li declares that ethical literary criticism plays a significant role in the construction of humanistic spirit and manifests its function in the following four relationships, “In terms of man-society relationship, it is showed in pursuit of truth; as for man-nature relationship, it is reflected in the pursuit of beauty by advocating the idea of harmony; concerning man-others relationship, it is exhibited in the pursuit of good by faithfully representing the complexity and ethical significance of interpersonal relationship; with regard to man-himself relationship, it inherently converts the moral desire for the sublimation of a mental being”. He also indicates that literature is a subject of human beings, and human beings are the sum total of all social relationships. The relationship between human and society is not merely the theme of literature creation, but also becomes the first criterion for critics and scholars’ studies on the value of the literature works” (Li, 2006, p. 44) Apart from this, Li also notes that the importance of the relationship between human and human

is the main reflection of the literature spirit. Therefore, it is essential that relationships between human and human are described in literature creation.

Professor Li's innovative thoughts on ethical literary criticism give the researchers new perspectives to employ it in literature analysis, that is to study the human-nature relationship, the human-society relationship, the human-human relationship and the human-self relationship in a literary work through closely reading the text.

4. The Chaos of Ethical Choice and Ethical Identity

In essence, the ethical choices are the choices about how to conduct oneself in a particular environment or context, which are also the construction and confirmation of one's identity. The activity of one's ethical choices are usually decided by his or her identity or social status. That is to say, different choices will be made by different people and those different choices will construct new personal identities. The analysis and evaluation of one's personality, psychology, emotion and mentality are actually the analysis and evaluation of the ethical choices of this person who has certain ethical identity. No matter the psychology or mentality, emotion, or the morality, they all exist in specific activities of ethical choices and connect with certain ethical identity. Thus, the shift of psychology and mentality usually happens during the process of making choices. Therefore, understanding the characters' psychology, emotion, morality, mental status and learn edification through analyzing their ethical choices and identity becomes a necessity.

4.1 Ethical choice of Ester and Her Ethical Identity

In the novel *The Lighthouse*, the heroin Ester has to make her own ethical choices. The first one is the choice of betraying Conrad, Bernard's brother, and choosing to get together with Bernard, which makes her lose a sincere relationship; the second ethical choice she makes is the immoral quirk of cheating when she and Bernard's marriage meets trouble.

When Ester was young, she had a relationship with Bernard's brother Conrad. They got along quite well and Ester also developed a good relationship with Conrad and Bernard's mother Ida. During their engagement Ester heard from Ida that Conrad's elder brother Bernard had a bad relationship with them, and he rarely came back home even though he lived nearby. On the day of her engagement party with Conrad, Bernard came back home and they two developed a forbidden and immoral sexual relationship. Ester was a woman who was mature enough to discern the right and wrong. As an engaged woman, she should have resisted the temptation from outside and guarded the coming marriage with her fiancé Conrad, but she still chose to mess up with another man, who was none other than Bernard, Conrad's brother. This kind of behavior of Ester has seriously violated the moral principle. What's more, after she had married Bernard, Ida told her that Bernard did not love her at all, the reason for his action is just a revenge over Conrad because Conrad used to take his girlfriend and then rejected her. Things afterwards also had proved that Bernard was just a man who was strongly possessive and merely took Ester as his personal possession. The second ethical choice Ester made is her reaction when her and Bernard's

marriage became problematic. After their marriage life came to a plain and flat stage, Ester could no longer find any love from Bernard. What she did was quite extreme: she constantly seduced the male customers in the hotel and had sex with them in order to get Bernard's attention. In fact, her behavior could not resolve their marriage problem radically, instead, the situation got worse. Bernard was angry about Ester's cheating on him indeed, but what he really mads at was the truth that Ester was no longer his personal property and only controlled by him anymore. Ester had made the wrong choice to save her dying marriage and the outcome was doomed to be a failed one. In Ester and Bernard's marriage, Ester has failed to construct her own ethical identity as a faithful wife and determined woman due to her low moral and ethical principle.

4.2 Ethical Choice of Futh and His Ethical Identity

Futh also made his own ethical choice which influenced himself greatly. At an early age, Futh's parents had always quarreled with each other and their family atmosphere was quite tense. His mother loathed his father deeply. They got divorced quickly after coming back from travelling and she went off immediately and never came back to see Futh. However, the biggest victim in this failed marriage was Futh. As a young child, the leaving of his mother has left inconsolable scar on his heart. His thirsty for the maternal love has been cut off since his mother's leaving. Thus, Futh has put his longing for the maternal love on the only item that his mother has left—the lighthouse, a perfume bottle that has been used up. In Futh's memory, his mother always wore this perfume which smelled as violet. He started to carry this lighthouse-shaped perfume bottle with him wherever he went, taking it as an embodiment of his mother which could console and comfort him. Under the influence of his incomplete family, Futh has become a man who doesn't understand the true love and the meaning of marriage. His marriage also turns out to be a failed one. Still longing for his mother's love in his innermost heart, Futh fell in love with a woman who has lots of similarities with his mother and anticipated to regain the love he lost from his mother. "He recalls asking Angela, after they were married, if she could make an apple crumble. Finding her in the kitchen the next day cooking apples, he stood at her shoulder while she worked and he told her about this memory of his mother, how the smell of the apples took him back." (Moore, 2012, p. 52) Futh unconsciously treated his wife as a substitute for his long-lost mother. After getting married with Angela, however, Futh still did not take his responsibility as a qualified husband: "He was a bad listener, apparently, bewilderingly incapable sometimes of following simple instructions. He was always late leaving the house, late arriving anywhere, even when he had to meet Angela. And he never apologized, even when he was clearly in the wrong." (Moore, 2012, p. 31) Futh behaved very aloof and indifferent toward his wife in their marriage. Essentially, his such kind of behaviour is due to his failure to construct his ethical identity. As a child who had been brought up in an incomplete family, his father didn't set him a good example as the qualified husband and father, which caused Futh couldn't understand what should a man do and what kind of responsibilities a man should undertake in marriage. Futh didn't manage to construct his own ethical identity as a husband, which eventually made him face with troubled marriage in his forties.

Ethical literary criticism holds that the Sphinx Factor is a very important element which has influence on people when they are making decisions. After gaining the rationality, there still exists the animal factor on people and they still have the possibility to become the evildoer. From the perspective of ethics, Ester and Futh were overwhelmed by their free will, which made Ester betray her former lover and formed a quirk of cheating, Futh married a woman like his mother and didn't take responsibility in his marriage. This is the embodiment of their immature rationality and the violation of the moral and ethical principle. In the viewpoint of ethical choices and identity, Ester and Futh didn't manage to take their ethical responsibility, and they were controlled by the free will instead of the rational will. Both made their own ethical choices, which were wrong and against the moral principle, only bringing them suffering and loveless marriage. And Ester and Futh's failure to make right ethical choice is radically decided by their failure to construct their own ethical identity. This is the most important factor that caused Ester and Futh's tragic life. Through the depiction of the two character's life experiences, Alison Moore tries to demonstrate the huge impact exerted by the wrong ethical choices and the unsound ethical identity, further indicating the importance of the personal ethical choices and identity.

5. The Estranged Relationship between Human and Human

The spiritual value of literature and the function of moral instruction of literature are mainly reflected by the relationships between human and human. Literature is the very manifestation of every aspect of human being's life and human activities also play extremely vital role in literature. As Professor Li Dingqing has pointed out: "Goals of an individual can be achieved only through the cooperation with others." Hence, the relationship between people and others is an important dimension in ethical literary criticism. Interpersonal relationships are formed in the context of social, cultural and other situations. The context can vary from family relations, friendship, marriage, relations with associates and neighborhoods. This part is an analysis of the relationships between the main character Futh, and his surrounding people.

5.1 Alienated Relationship between Futh and His Father

In *The Lighthouse*, the readers can easily find the discordant relationship between Futh and his father. According to Futh's memory, his father and mother had a bad relationship during their marriage: they often quarreled with each other, and Futh's mother behaved totally indifferent to the words and actions of Futh's father. Not long after their family travelling, his mother divorced with his father and left their family, leaving Futh as a single-parented child. Young as he is, he had understood he still wanted the love from his mother. Therefore, Futh hated his father in the cockles of the heart for making his mother leave. Moreover, after divorcing with Futh's mother, his father had several chaotic relationships with different women, which caused Futh's deeper hatred on him. Thus, even though Futh had grown up, got married and lived near his father's house, he rarely visited his father and communicated with him. The father and son who should keep the most intimate relationship now become almost strangers to each other.

5.2 Estranged Relationship between Futh and Angela

In Futh's memory, he unavoidably recalled his failed marriage with Angela, his ex-wife. Futh now is divorced, going to Germany alone for a restorative walking. However, his explanation of the reason for his divorce with Angela is quite different from the truth. Futh recalled that long before their divorce, Angela had developed a sexual relationship with Kenny, a friend of Futh. He had put all the blame for their failed marriage on Angela's infidelity. However, through the story he has told, readers can find that Angela's cheating on him is not the biggest reason. Throughout their marriage, Futh kept an indifferent attitude toward Angela and made little devotion to his family. He was even reluctant to make apology for his own wrongdoings to Angela. Even when Angela had an abortion, Futh didn't give her much care and attention, which finally made Angela get hopeless about him and their marriage. As a husband, Futh didn't take the responsibility to provide emotional support to his wife and his family. This is the true reason for their unsuccessful marriage.

According to ethical literary criticism, the relationship between human and human is an important element in the ethical relations and contains rich ethical connotations. "The basic connotation of the ethic in the ethical literary criticism mainly refers to ethical relations and ethical order that exist between human and human". (Nie, 2010, p. 17) What's more, one's ethical identity is always reflected by one's relationship with others. By presenting the disharmonious relationship between human and human in contemporary society and tragic stories of family in *The Lighthouse*, Alison Moore uncovers the leprosy of modern people's ethics and morality and the disintegration of modern family and individuals.

6. Conclusion

The Lighthouse of Alison Moore tells the tragic stories of many families and individuals, making the readers feel the melancholy and loneliness as the characters in the novel. This book has profound ethical connotations, and the ethical theme of it determines its profound ethical value. This thesis tries to study it from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, mainly through the analyzing of the ethical choices of two main characters, their failure to construct their own ethical identities and the ethical relationships between Futh and his surrounding people, which hopefully could provide a new perspective to the research of this novel.

By the analysis of the main characters' ethical choices, their construction of ethical identities and their personal relationships between their surrounding people, this thesis intends to uncover the underlying theme hidden from the text—that is the trend of disintegration of the moralizing function of modern family, which can be confirmed by the relationship between Futh and his family members; the other deeper theme is the decline of the modern male and female's morality, they cannot get satisfied emotionally and sexually, which will ultimately cause devastating damage to everyone.

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