Review of the Protagonists in Joyce Carol Oates’s *The Falls* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes the protagonists in Oates's novel *The Falls* from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism and expounds that the protagonists have experienced anomie of ethical identity, chaos of ethical choices and dislocation of ethical space on the three levels of ethical relationship between people and self, people and people, and people and society. Thus, the paper highlights the teaching purpose of the novel: it is the mistakes of ethical confusion that hinder the heroine's pursuit of happiness, making her life fall from the spiritual heights into the secular abyss like *The Falls.*

*The Falls* is another masterpiece published by the prolific American writer Oates in 2004 and is considered to be her best work. The novel takes the protagonist Ariah's honeymoon, marriage, and family as the timeline, and describes the tragic fate of Ariah and her two husbands of Gilbert and Dirk. Many critics pay more attention to the garbage pollution incident described in the novel of which Dirk died. Chinese articles tend to analyze the environmental incident from the perspective of naturalism and ecological criticism (Zhang Shengmao, 2008; Liu Ke, 2011); while foreign articles focus on the historical background of the incident (Sharon. L. Dean, 2006). In fact, environmental issues imply social ethical problems, and their historical connotations would reflect precisely the personalities of the protagonists and their complex relationships, because "all environmental issues are ultimately the issues of development, and the issues of development are essentially reflexive problems of human beings" (Liu Xiaoting, 2004). In the development of human society, different human attitudes and their handling measures towards the environment reflect human values; and the crisis of the relationship between humans and the environment is essentially the crisis of human nature. By analyzing the three main protagonists in Oates's novel *The Falls* from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, the paper expounds that the protagonists have experienced anomie of ethical identity, chaos of ethical choices and dislocation of ethical space on the three levels of ethical relationship between people and self, people and people, and people and society. When the ethical relationship cannot help the heroine's growth and sustain her pursuit of happiness, her life falls from the spiritual heights into the secular abyss like *The Falls.*

**Gilbert: Spiritual Depravity in the Anomie of Ethical Identity**

Gilbert is a clergyman. His death is caused by the anomie of his ethical identity, which he has suffered long chaotic ethical consciousness and could not be relieved. Enviable in the eyes of others, he has three ethical knots in his self-consciousness: love, emotion and faith, so his three related identities: husband, lover and pastor have mixed, resulting in his ethical confusion.

First of all, being a husband, Gilbert shows abnormality to his wife. As a husband, especially a newly-married husband, Gilbert should be fully aware of his wife’s intimacy and be pampering her on his wedding night. Gilbert is fully aware of this, because his teaching principle *Talmud* requires "men to respect their wives then in turn to enrich themselves. Men should always give their wives the respect they deserve, because all happiness in the family depends on their wives" (Abraham Cohen: 187). But Gilbert's behavior is abnormal. He does not enjoy the joy of making love with his wife, but looks disgustedly at the drunk bride. "The bared gums, damp exposed teeth... She was ugly to him, repulsive." (35). His unbelievable feeling for his wife stems from his being a homosexual, "I can't love any woman, God help me I've tried. I can only love you" (29). He is in a
state of mental breakdown, and with all thoughts lost, he "collapses" (5) into The Falls, leaving Ariah with the identity of "The Widow-Bride of The Falls".

Besides, he fails to give his lover a status. Gilbert's homosexual is Douglas, a top student in the seminary. They share similar interests and love each other heartedly. Such a love affair is considered perverted at the time, and is despised by the world. Some scholars have discussed the persecution of homosexuals based on the "queer theory" in the 1990s, but the story of the novel happened in the 1950s. We cannot use the later moral and ethical standards to judge the previous social phenomena. "The understanding of any literary work is to return it to its original ethical environment and ethical context, which is a prerequisite for understanding literature" (Nie Zhenzhao, 2010: 19). Therefore, we cannot come to the conclusion that Gilbert's death is the evident "to fight against social injustice with the subject of self" (Zhang Wei: 109), we can only know that Gilbert knots in the ethical relationship due to the confusion of ethical identity. In fact, in the face of social exclusion, Gilbert and Douglas not only do not resist, but on the contrary, they try to conceal their "immoral" consciousness with concrete action. Douglas gets married to an opposite sex before Gilbert's marriage and has two-year-old girl twins. Although Gilbert understand Douglas, his own combination with the opposite sex could not be "normal".

Furthermore, there is the disillusionment of his priesthood. Gilbert is a young and promising pastor, and his faith in God has penetrated into the deepest part of his soul. But he has a hobby to search for fossils. He finds some fossils with the age more than 65 million years, and couldn't help but doubt Genesis, which is only 6,000 years old: "If God had created the earth, what about the fossils of sixty-five million years? What good is 'faith' if it's based upon ignorance? I want to know."(30) Gilbert's thinking deviates from his pastorship, because science and religion are incompatible. As a priest, he should serve for the divinity of Christ. However, he begins to do scientific research like a scientist. The more fossils he finds, the more he suspects that God creates everything in the world. His ethical confusion verifies Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s theory: "Changes in ethical identity often directly lead to ethical chaos" (Nie Zhenzhao, 2010: 21). The scientific rationality represented by the theory of evolution has fundamentally shaken his belief in God and caused his extremely painful personality split in ethics.

Gilbert’s behavior has deviated from his original ethical identity as a husband, lover, and priest. He died not because he "wants to abandon life" (Zhang Wei: 110), but because he gets into ethical confusion on the relationship between man and self. He does not abandon life but tries to make his three identities in order. The harder he works on it, the deeper he falls into the ethical fast knot which he could not solve anyway. So, his ending could only be death. Oates gives Gilbert a social identity as a "priest", which implies that in the course of Western history with a strong religious theological system, once a human being abandons his ethical beliefs and moral order, he would lose the spiritual life and the peace of mind.

Dirk: Unbalanced Survival in the Chaos of Ethical Choice

Dirk is upright and kind, and his actions are in full compliance with his identity of litigator. He is entrusted by a woman in black and takes over a lawsuit called "Love Canal". This is a real garbage pollution incident in American history: a chemical company named “Swan” near Niagara Falls dumped 21800 tons of industrial waste containing 82 carcinogens such as benzene into the abandoned Grand Canal from 1947 to 1952. During the war, the city government dumped nuclear waste related to the Manhattan Project in the canal. After the war, the canal was landfilled, and Swann Chemical Company sold it to the Municipal Education Commission at a low price, where the Municipal Education Commission built residential areas and primary schools. When it rains, sewage flows and smells, black sludge seeps out of the basement and soft grass to burn children and small animals, and there are frequent miscarriages and stillbirths in the surrounding area. The government favors the chemical company, regardless of the pollution. Out of his justice and conscience, Dirk helps the poor residents in the region of The Falls to sue the lawsuit, bring relevant companies and government departments to court, and ask them to apologize and improve the living environment for residents. However, the government and various forces colluded with each other to
create incidents in the courts, delay the lawsuits, and use police to pursue Dirk. Dirk is forced into The Falls by the joint interception of police cars and Swann Chemicals trucks.

The outcome of the Love Canal lawsuit is the result of the disparity in strength between the two parties, and is also the result of Dirk's ethical choice made by subjective and objective factors. Subjectively, he despises the opponent in this lawsuit. When Dirk holds a heart of "justice" to play a game with an irrational society with "no conscience" in power, the outcome can be imagined. But Dirk doesn't realize the danger of his environment. Before the court, he went to communicate with the Swann Chemicals chief attorney Brandon Skinner. He heard Skinner saying, "No hypocrisy between you and me." Dirk is actually "feeling hopeful, optimistic", and thus produced "the excitement preceding a good, fair fight" (220), which shows that he is politically naive and has no experience with the law of the jungle, thus making Dirk a tragic character on the ethical level of people and society. In order to protect the vested economic interests, the opponent forces have lost their humanity factor and follow natural ethics to deal with Dirk, not the ethical norms of human society. Natural ethics is also known as the law of the jungle without soul and fair, only the weak will stand as an easy prey to the strong. According to this rule, they deal with innocent ordinary residents who are deeply affected by the garbage pollution. They also kill Dirk who is previously a member of the "factory owner or investor" family of vested interests. Proceeding with a lawsuit means that Dirk has become a traitor who has betrayed his class. From this, it can be seen that the principle of natural ethics is a vicious competition of life and death. There is no human ethical goodness, let alone "conscience". As the literary ethics criticism points out: "Once the body loses its soul, it will lose the essence of man, leaving only the empty shell of the person without a soul. The person without a soul is entirely dependent on instinct to survive, without ethics, without distinguishing good from evil, and makes no difference with beasts."(Nie Zhenzhao, 2011: 10)

Objectively, Dirk ignores the influence of family endowment. Ariah once reminded him not to take over the case, otherwise it would be like "crossing the immense Niagara Falls on a tightrope" (120). Dirk's ancestors were killed in such adventures, so the tightrope walking on the cliff across the waterfall is the fate of the Burnaby family. But when he sees the misfortunes of residents and elementary school students with his own eyes, his human factor defeats the animal factor. He challenges the public and chooses to accept the Love Canal lawsuit in spite of almost all betrayal. He told the "friend" Clyde Colborne (later alienated him): "What I’m doing, Clyde, is following my instinct for once. Not the money trail. My conscience."(248) The endowment of "goodness" makes him follow his own nature and forget the rationality that a lawyer should have.

Dirk’s death is a failure to contend social power with personal power. He once again witnessed the motif that Oates wants to express in the relationship between man and society: Man is a "lonely individual", should be submitted to fate and helpless to the arrangement of his fate (Xu Yingguo: 126). Dirk's death indicates that Ariah's rational life disappears.

**Ariah: A Lonely Life in the Dislocation of Ethical Space**

Ever since Ariah becomes "The Widow-Bride of The Falls", she is constantly shrouded in the shadows of death. She is convinced that she is spelled and treated strangely. The anxiety about the spell makes Ariah wrap herself tightly, and her relationship with others becomes tenser. To the first husband Gilbert, she has an ethical guilt: "I am a spelled person, please redeem me. I let my first husband commit suicide because of me, but I am glad he died!" (124) Her guilt of the first marriage causes confusion in her ethical consciousness.

When Dirk, handsome and wealthy, living in the upper class of society, proposes to her, Ariah instinctively remembers the spell, and replies thoughtfully: "But maybe you’d leave me, too. On our honeymoon." (108). "Thoughtfully" shows her inner desire for marriage and the fear of the spell. But she does not take into account their two different social strata, only worries that Dirk would abandon her. Paradoxically, after Dirk represented the Love Canal lawsuit, she drove him out of the house because she believed: “Marriage is a sustained folie a deux. Like crossing a tightrope without a safety net beneath, and not looking down. So the more we know of each other, the less it signifies.” (240)
Her relationship with both of the husbands is tough, and her relationship with other people is also difficult. Here in Ariah, the idea of death not only means the end of life, but also the end of all codes of conduct and moral principles that life follows. As a daughter, Ariah deserves to obey her parents, but she is anxious to get rid of them, and she never takes the initiative to visit them after marriage; as a daughter-in-law, Ariah calls her mother-in-law Mrs. Burnaby like an outsider. Even if her mother-in-law tells her they cannot both be “Mrs. Burnaby”, and reminds her that she can call her name “Claudine”, Ariah still insists on calling her Mrs. Burnaby (153); as a neighbor, Ariah refuses the neighbors’ care, even if they are out of kindness, she all understands it as a mockery of her; as a mother, she is stubbornly sticking to staying at the “home” which she considers to be protection, while in the eyes of her children, the home has already become an image of death. Ariah’s practice of violating the social ethics and morals shows her inconfidence in her ethical identity. We take her main living space “home” as an example to analyze.

Home “is a powerful social metaphor” (Corstorphine, K. 4). In the novel home refers to the ethical identity of characters, then the transformation of space is the transformation of the identity of the characters, and it also shows the transformation of the relationship between people. Ariah lives in Troy, New York before marriage. She was the daughter of the devout pastor Littrell and her family belonged to the middle class. Her first groom, Gilbert, has just been appointed as the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Palmyra, New York, which has great prospects for development. Their honeymoon chose the Rosebud Honeymoon Suite at the luxurious Rainbow Grant Hotel next to The Falls. Most of the people in and out belong to the upper class. For those in the hotel lobby, Ariah “seemed the one singled out as extraneous; the one who was extra, unwanted; the one with no place to be.” (50) The waiter says ”It was like speaking to a zombie” (42). One can imagine Ariah's disturbed mood when she feels that she does not belong here. In the second marriage, she moves to 7 Luna Park with Dirk. Mrs. Littrell, her mother, is "terrified" when she comes to see her grandson. The outdoor layout, indoor furnishings, and senior domestic helpers made Mrs. Littrell "disoriented, as if she’d wandered into the household of another woman’s married daughter" (147). The mother’s reaction shows that Ariah’s ethical identity has changed, but her life habits have not changed, so she produced a “spatial anxiety” that violates the new ethical relationship. She insists on doing household chores, bringing her own children, and teaching her students to play the piano. She is afraid of the upper club activities that Dirk often participates in. After having children, Dirk has purchased the more spacious 22 Luna Palace, and Ariah has continued to strongly oppose it. Instead of thinking that she was a thrifty housekeeper, it is better to say that her identity from the middle class is not suitable for a wealthy upper-class life. The more luxurious "home" is, the less she feels of belonging. The ethical space of the upper society makes her frightened. She feels "that is a life without oxygen" (104). After Dirk’s death, although the pension could support her life with children at 22 Luna Palace, she takes her children to a "collapsed and ugly" (227) residence.

Ariah is a terminator of love for Gilbert; a stranger familiar to Dirk; inaccessible to her children; old-fashioned and mysterious to neighbors and acquaintances. People are curious about her and have to keep a distance from her, just like watching the Fall and keeping it away. Ariah’s dislocation of the ethical space and her life ethics reflect the general indifference between people, verifying the philosopher Kierkegaard’s idea that human beings are "lonely individuals".

Gilbert shows anomie in the three ethical identities of husband, lover, and priest. He cannot make the right ethical choice and has to kill himself. His death takes away Ariah’s spiritual life. Dirk follows his nature and loses reason when he chooses to contend with powerful evil forces. His failure shows Ariah’s unbalanced rational life. Due to her class, Alia cannot find her ethical position in the marrying life, which leads to tension in relationships with others and can only live a lonely life in reality. Ariah has shifted from pursuing a spiritual life to a difficult but rational life, and can only live alone in the end. Her trajectory in life is just like Niagara Falls, falling from the high point of spiritual life into the lowest abyss of secular chaos.
Note:
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