

Evie's Ethical Choices in the World of Noir—Ethical Literary Reading of Judy Blundell's *What I Saw and How I Lied*

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In the novel *What I Saw and How I Lied* (2008), Judy Blundell presents readers a world of noir where so many lies are around the innocent protagonist, 15-year-old girl Evie. It is a challenge for Evie to probe into the heart of the deceptions and make ethical choices between good and evil. After experiencing the path from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, and unconsciousness to consciousness, Evie comes to realize the corruption and evils of the society and in an epiphany, obtains a self-knowledge which leads to her initiation. Through analyzing the ethical predicament and ethical choices of the protagonist Evie as well as the negative living environment around her, the present paper aims to interrogate the moral issues of truth, lie, justice, greed, fidelity, and betrayal so as to give readers a better understanding of the theme of initiation in the novel.

Keywords: *What I Saw and How I Lied*, ethical choices, the world of noir, initiation

Introduction

In the article *On Literature and Ethics*, Michael Eskin deals with the complex relationship between literature and ethics and asserts that:

Language is the sole medium in which other semiotic systems and media (e.g., music, painting, etc.) can be described, conceptually exposed and reflected, and made sense of. In other words, language is the most semiotically capacious medium. In analogy with Benveniste's view of language's capaciousness, we can say that, insofar as literature is said to be ethically exemplary, this is, fundamentally, due to its discursive capaciousness: it can incorporate, encompass, embody, engage in live contexts, illuminate from innumerable perspectives, and thus transform—in short, interpret—the propositions, problems addressed, and “truths” attained in ethics...In a way, then, literature could be viewed as ethics in the second degree, as ethics of ethics or criticism of ethics, as that discourse which literally interprets ethics. (Eskin, 2004, p. 587)

The validity of this assertion rests on the fact that ethical issues are a fundamental part of human interactions and literary works, like our lives, in general, are saturated with ethical considerations. Besides, no one can ignore the fact that the beliefs and feelings of a writer, particularly his moral beliefs, are not only involved in the creation of the work but are often the very subjects of the work.

As a book won the prestigious National Book Award for Young People's Literature, American writer Judy Blundell's novel *What I Saw and How I Lied* (2008) has received a lot concern from both critics and young readers since its publication in 2008. *Chicago Tribune* once commented that “This elegant, detail-driven tale smoothly segues into a whodunit page-turner” (p. 5). *Publishers weekly* called it “A stylish, addictive brew” (p.

6). The *Alan Review* also claimed that “Evie is fascinatingly multifaceted as she approaches adulthood in ways she and readers never anticipated” (p. 9). Set in America after the Second World War, the story is multilayered. It not only subtly explores issues of racism, sexism, and the dark side of humanity, but also realistically captures the headiness of first love and the perplexity of initiation. Through analyzing the ethical predicament and ethical choices of the protagonist Evie as well as the negative living environment around her, the present paper aims to interrogate the moral issues of truth, lie, justice, greed, fidelity, and betrayal so as to give readers a better understanding of the theme of initiation in the novel.

The World of Noir

In an interview with Judy Blundell, Daniel Handler, chair of the most recent National Book Award committee once said:

One of the things that excited our panel about your book was the fact it was diverting entertainment as well as having a real serious purpose. I always think that is a part of the tightrope of writing for children. In *What I Saw*, you dove into the world of noir, which is scarcely used in children’s literature, except in parody form. (Handler, 2009, p. 33)

Even though Judy Blundell was not “consciously using noir as inspiration from the beginning” (Handler, 2009, p. 34), obviously she wove the world of noir through presenting the dark side of humanity in the book.

The story is narrated by protagonist Evie, a naive girl at the age of 15. Evie longs for growing up and wants to be attractive to men and to be taken seriously. But when she gets a taste of this adulthood, it is not as sweet as she expected it to be. As Judy Blundell foreshadows at the beginning of the novel:

So that is how we were: a mother and a daughter sitting on a porch, laughing as the tree shadows stretched toward the porch and lights came on in the houses. Sounds cozy. But it was just like buzz bombs—the V-2 rockets the Germans launched at London near the end of the war. You couldn’t hear them, not even a whistle until your house blew up. (Blundell, 2008b, p. 15)

In the novel, the adult world Judy Blundell presents is a world of noir where so many lies are woven around Evie. “Enough lies to fill ten houses” (Blundell, 2008b, p. 212). The biggest lie is about the fortune Evie’s stepfather Joe made after he returned home from the war. Within two months of coming home, Evie’s stepfather Joe had opened his first appliance store in Queens. Then he opened another in Brooklyn, and he was planning to open two more. The money for him to open the business is not from the GI loan as he says to Evie but from the money belonging to the Jews. During the World War II, millions of Jews were killed by the Nazis and their properties were looted by them. Joe and other US GI found the place where Nazis stored the looted treasure. Instead of returning the properties to the Jews, Joe and other US soldiers kept these treasures for their own sake and used the money from the properties to do business. Evie’s mother and grandmother knew the dirty business except Evie.

The greed for money even leads to the death of Peter, an ex-GI, who fought in war with Evie’s stepfather. Peter involved in the loot during the war with Joe. After he got home, he came to Joe to get his part back. But Joe took all the money and didn’t want to sit on the cash, waiting for Peter to get back, so he buys a business, one after another. In order to dodge Peter, Joe took Evie and her mother to Florida and set a trap for Peter to disappear. When they had vacation in Florida, Peter also traced them there. One day, Joe proposed to have a fishing trip with Peter. During the fishing trip, they came across a hurricane. Peter died in the storm, but Joe and Evie’s mother survived. Joe and Evie’s mother were the suspects since “the coroner’s report had suspicious

markings that could be inconsistent with the natural battering that a body would be prone to sustain during such a hurricane” (Blundell, 2008b, p. 202).

In the world of noir, almost everyone around Evie seemed to wear a veil and deliberately hidden some secrets from her. On the surface, Evie’s parents were admirable and decent couple. They loved each other. They were the role models Evie wanted to follow. In Evie’s eyes “they were everything I knew about glamour. Everything I knew about Love” (Blundell, 2008b, p. 20). While after the veil was lifted, readers could find that Evie’s stepfather Joe was a greedy looter and a suspect murder. Underneath the beautiful looks and personal glamour, Evie’s mother committed adultery with Peter, who served in Joe’s company after he left the army. Even movie-star handsome Peter Coleridge, the first crush in Evie’s life also lied to Evie as the newspaper reported after the trial:

It was all in the next day’s morning edition. Peter was not loaded. They found that out pretty fast. He had never been to college, let alone Yale. He was an only child. All through high school he had worked summers at a country club in Oyster Bay. That is where he had borrowed his manners from and the blue convertible. The friend he had borrowed it from had reported it stolen when Peter had taken it and had not returned.

Everything he had told me about himself had been a lie. (Blundell, 2008b, p. 203)

Through exposing the dark side of humanity in a young adult book, Judy Blundell seems to convey the message to the adolescent readers that lie, greed, and betrayal are not incidental aspects of their existence but rather inevitable conditions of contemporary life. Young people need to learn how to face them and cope with them so as to obtain initiation.

Evie’s Ethical Choices

Gradually Evie began to realize that almost everything she believed was really a lie and she must probe into the heart of the deceptions and make ethical choices between good and evil. At this moment, she faced the ethical predicament of choosing between loyalty to her parents and feelings for Peter, the man she loved. Evie’s living environment determined that it will be a very hard choice for her to make.

As an adolescent grew up in an urban environment with a single mother, Evie was rather romantic by nature. Growing up without a father made, Evie cherished the love her parents gave her more than anyone in the world and wanted to believe in them no matter what they were. At the same time, the environment of the war instilled her ideal that love was going to save the world and made her more eager to embrace her first love with Peter. Both her parents and Peter were her loved ones in the world. Her inner conflict in the novel clearly displayed her fear and confusion of believing in the truth:

Peter was not who I thought he was. Could it be that Mom was not, either?

If everyone was wondering what had gone on between Peter and my mother, wouldn’t I be crazy not to wonder, too?

Joe Spooner, the man I had picked to be my dad.

This man who bent over to turn the key of a neighbor kid’s roller skate—could he have killed somebody? ...

This man couldn’t be a killer.

Killer didn’t snore in the bed next to you.

And Mom. Whatever had happened to her with Peter—which I could not, wouldn’t think about—she was still my mother. ...

She could not have been part of it, if it was the thing I kept seeing when I closed my eyes: Joe hitting Peter on the head, Joe pushing Peter into the churning ocean. (Blundell, 2008b, p. 205)

Fear and confusion are inevitable for Evie when she is struggling on her way from childhood to adulthood.

It is during this period of mental struggle that she reaches her epiphany, a sudden spiritual manifestation, that the adult world is not what she expected. She comes to realize the dark side of humanity and the corruption of the society. The loss of childhood illusions and awaking to the tragic nature of human life are her signs of maturing. This leads to her realization that she must sacrifice herself in order to save her parents. Thus she lies on the witness stand so that her parents are not charged with murder and sent to jail despite the guilt of lying tortures her deeply.

The significance of Evie's ethical choice lies in the fact that it symbolizes her transformation from naive to maturity. Evie's acceptance of qualified culpability is a mark of adulthood. Being a mature girl, she knows the meaning of self-sacrifice and forgiving. Finally she forgives Peter, since she knows that the world is complicated, not just simply good and bad dichotomy, and it is possible for a person to be good even though he does bad things. In her eyes, Peter "might have been a thief and a liar and a cheat, but he was a good person" (Blundell, 2008b, p. 278). She still believes and cherishes the true love between her and Peter in the past:

The first time he kissed me it had been an impulse he regretted.

The second time he kissed me it had been a man to woman. I was not too young. He was not too old. My mother had not existed for us. Everything had gone away except us.

There had been love between us at that moment. He had loved me, at that moment. (Blundell, 2008b, p. 276)

The maturity of Evie also displayed by the fact that the sudden revelation of the truth of the world does not result in her disillusionment of the good and justice and prevents her from taking the right action. As a compensation as well as a punishment of her parents wrong doing, she stole the money that her stepfather had gotten from the items he stole from the Jews and gave it to Mrs. Grayson, a trusted Jewish she met in the hotel, so that she could get it back to needy Jews.

After the ethical choice, Evie for the first time had the self-consciousness and built up self-confidence with a clear knowledge of what the good direction was in life. Even though she would still live with her stepfather and Mom, since she had no place to go, she determined not to lie again and prepared herself for a new journey in life as she said to herself at the end of the novel:

But while I would be their daughter, while I'd eat the roast and come home from dates and wash the dishes, I would also be myself. I would love my mother, but I would never want to be her again. I would never be what someone else wanted me to be. I would never laugh at a joke. I did not think was funny. I would never tell another lie. I would be the truth teller, starting today. That would probably be tough. But I was tougher. (Blundell, 2008b, p. 281)

Of course, Evie will encounter various unexpected hardships and failures in her future journey of life, but from the optimistic atmosphere created at the ending of the novel, it can be safely argued that Evie's experiences in Florida might alter the entire direction of her growing mind and eventually influence her whole maturity for better. Evie is no longer a naive and romantic girl; she obtains a deeper understanding of life as well as the wisdom of facing the challenges in the complex adult world.

Conclusion

Leslie Fiedler once defines the initiation theme as the "confrontation of adult corruption and childish perceptions" (Coyle, 1969, p. 57). Moral and psychological initiation of youth has always been one of the most important themes in American Young Adult Literature. Through vividly presenting the moral and spiritual development of the protagonist Evie from adolescence to maturity, Judy Blundell successfully explores the

theme of initiation from the perspective of ethics. Evie's inner conflict and pain in making the ethical choice suggest that adolescents are dealing with just as deep emotional issues in their lives as the adults around them. With her direct depiction of the dark side of humanity and the corruption of the society, the novel also invites "real" into the adolescent learning space and youth are thrown into the realities through fiction.

In sum, in *What I Saw and How I Lied*, Judy Blundell gives young people the opportunity to view the world and their lives from many different perspectives and empowers them to think more objectively about the moral issues of truth, lie, justice, greed, fidelity, and betrayal which are rather helpful for them to make positive choices in their future journey of life.

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