

Female Ethical Images in *The Thorn Birds*

FENG Xingyu

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Titled as the name of the main characters, the seven parts in *The Thorn Birds* together tell the story of the three generations of the Cleary family from 1915 to 1969. Fiona and Paddy are the first generation, Meggie and Ralph are the second generation, and Justine and Dane are the third generation. Although they are both thorny birds, they have different personal characteristics and life pursuits. Fiona, Meggie, and Justine, as women, are more and more rebellious from generation to generation. They are more and more daring to fight against the Almighty God and their cruel fates. But at the same time, in the process of pursuing self-happiness, there are also dislocations of ethical identity of these women who inevitably make wrong ethical choices. The author of this thesis tries to analyze the ethical identity of the three generations of women in *The Thorn Birds* from a relatively comprehensive perspective based on literary ethics, and then analyzes the round ethical image of these female characters.

Keywords: *The Thorn Birds*, female characters, ethical images

Introduction

The Thorn Birds is a novel written by contemporary Australian writer Colleen McCullough (1937-2015). On the basis of the love entanglement between the heroine Maggie and Father Ralph, the novel describes the story of three generations of the Cleary family, with a time span of more than half a century. With love and destiny as the clue, this story happens on the romantic Drogheda ranch. The reason why *The Thorn Birds* stands out in the contemporary literary world lies not only in the unforgettable love stories of the protagonists and heroines in the novel, but also in the fact that the novel describes the love stories of three generations with different characteristics. Through these stories, the author creates three women who dare to fight against fate and social customs. If love is the eternal theme of literature, then women are also an eternal topic. Being independently of women, no love story can exist. In the pure male perspective, even the most unique views are often shrouded in the shadow of social regulation consciousness. By describing the different situations of love and marriage of three generations, Colleen McCullough depicts the changing process of patriarchy from strength to decline, while female consciousness has been on the rise. Necessarily, the author exposes the arbitrariness of male power, criticizes its suppression of women, and promotes the promotion of female consciousness. However, the author does not blindly advocate feminism and completely deny the male group.

Literature Review

Since published in 1977, *The Thorn Birds* has intrigued great enthusiasm in the literary circle. A lot of scholars analyze this masterpiece from feminist perspective, tending to praise the female characters' growing consciousness of independence, courageous pursuit of love, and revolt of the patriarchal society. They are

inclined to argue that the change of ideas among these three generations is also the process of awakening women's self-consciousness through depiction of the unique love stories of three generations of women in the novel. Wang Shuo and his partners reach consensus that, "women should pursue their love bravely and challenge themselves so that they can truly master their own fates under the male and religion-oriented society". (Wang, Cui, & Ling, 2019, p. 389). In the opinion of Xie Na (2016), McCullough just wants to wake up women's self-consciousness through the love stories of these three generations of women, and calls on women in society to fight bravely against patriarchy and divine power, so as to "improve women's social status" (p. 71). The female characters "dare to fight against the fate, pursue their own happiness, and realize the value of life" (Du, 2016, p. 45). Although most scholars are devoted to analyzing the shining points of these female roles, the author of this paper finds that there are some different voices. Although the kindness and self-sacrifice spirit embodied in her pursuit of happiness deserve people's respect, Meggie "violates Catholic asceticism doctrine and social ethics" (Zhu & Jiang, 2016, p. 121) of that time because of her insist of loving the priest and stealing "forbidden fruit" to pursue her own happiness. "The forbidden fruit of love tempts them step by step to the abyss of crime and after experiencing the process of sin, the whole story goes to the stage of punishment." (Liu, 2013, p. 51). Bai Dan (2013) even argues that on the whole, *The Thorn Birds* fully demonstrates the "cultural atmosphere of logocentrism" (p. 42) and the feminism penetrated in the novel is a kind of feminism controlled by the patriarchal world, so it is called "pseudo feminism" (Bai, 2013, p. 42). Thus, it can be seen that the round image of the women characters needs more attention.

Theoretical Basis

First put forward by Nie Zhenzhao (2020, p. 14), ethical literary criticism emphasizes returning to the ethical scene of history and interpreting literary works from the ethical standpoint at a particular time. Ethical literary criticism "regards the educational function of literature as the basic function of literature with ethical selection as its theoretical cornerstone" (Nie, 2020, p. 62). Educational function means that every literary work should be a mirror to show the correctness and incorrectness of the behavior of characters and guide readers to judge their actions in their real life. "Ethical selection is made up of various ethical choices." (Nie, 2020, p. 9). Different ethical choices lead to different results. Only by making right ethical choices in line with moral norms can individual values be truly realized. At the same time, ethical literary criticism also emphasizes "individual's ethical identity and situation". (Nie, 2020, p. 238). In other words, ethical literary criticism pays attention to ethical responsibility by analyzing the ethical relationships between individuals and individual and society.

Chapter One: The Ethical Image of Fiona

Meggie's mother Fiona insists on her own way in the process of pursuing her secular love. As a married man, she is also greedy for the happiness between her pre-lover, a married man, resulting in the dislocation of her ethical identity and causing harm to her husband and family.

Born in an aristocratic family, Fiona has received a good education and is very proud and tough. Her father wants her to marry a person of equal rank. However, Fiona falls in love with the most famous politician Parkham, a married man. She persistently pursues her love and even gives birth to Frank for Parkham. In the scorn of the world, his father marries her to his worker Paddy for the sake of face. However, she "never regrets what she has done" (Xie, 2016, p. 71). She silently guards the illegitimate child and her selfish love. After she marries Paddy,

she also gives him children and takes care of the housework. However, she is “unable to accept the children that she and Paddy has conceived, devotes all her love to the illegitimate son Frank” (Du, 2016, p. 45). Children are innocent. Fiona does not take the responsibility of being a mother, cannot face up to her ethical identity as a mother, and cannot treat her children fairly. At the same time, she always ignores Paddy’s love for herself. It is not until Paddy’s accidental death that her feelings are released. She bursts into tears in her room. Although she has silently fought against the cruel patriarchal society with her own strength for many years, Paddy’s death makes her understand that she has lost the man who loves her most in the world.

Paddy, a penniless immigrant from Ireland, marries the beautiful and noble Fiona. Being gentle and considerate to her, Paddy deeply loves Fiona, and tolerates her indifference and eccentricity. However, it is a unilateral and unrequited payment because Paddy is always paying more in this relationship. He does not care about grudges and wholeheartedly tolerates Fiona. Even when he is scorched by the fire and the God of death is imminent, he keeps calling Fiona’s name. But Fiona is still cold to him. She does not wake up until Paddy dies. Paddy is a real good husband. In his lifetime, he deeply loves his wife with inferiority and respect. Fiona really loved only one person in her life, Parkham. She stays with Paddy because she needs to make use of him as her husband.

After all, Paddy maintains me and gives me a stable family, but I never loves him, he is the gentle and most worthy of love, but I did not understand this until I lost him, I love him, but I never have a chance to tell him. I’m so unlucky... (McCullough, 2013, p. 245)

Fiona’s love is misplaced. Fiona falls in love with a married man. Her misplaced love made her pay a painful price. She is forced to marry a worker of her own family, but she never regrets and reflects what she has done. Ignoring the children born to her and her lawful husband, she places her hopes on Frank, her illegitimate son with Parkham. She feels that loving Frank is equal to loving Parkham. This misplaced love is short-lived, but Fiona insists on waiting for this love with her whole life, immersing herself in the memories and dreams she weaves. Although her courage is very commendable, Fiona cannot effectively do anything to resist in a patriarchal society. She violates the traditional moral concept and falls in love with a married man. She does something that even modern people dare not do, which is against ethics and morality. Although her persistence and courage deserve the admiration of all women, but she also pays a painful price for her impulse of passion.

Chapter Two: The Ethical Image of Meggie

The time-span of the novel starts from the beginning of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. At that time, Australian society was oppressed by theocracy, patriarchy, and patriarchy, and “women were tightly bound by the traditional society from spirit to body” (Xie, 2016, p. 71). However, Meggie, who has “never gone beyond the limit of rules, is so unexpected when she pursues her love” (Du, 2016, p. 46).

Meggie’s pursuit of ideal love violates the ethics of that time. Meggie does not want to submit to fate like her mother. When she first sees Ralph as a child, she is attracted by the priest. After she grows up, she thinks that feeling is love, so she bravely chooses Ralph. However, although it was forbidden to choose a priest to make love at that time, but she kept fighting against God for her lover. Ralph finally chooses God. After Ralph leaves, she marries Luke, who looks like Ralph. But Luke belongs to a kind of hypocritical force. Maybe God gives Ralph a holiday, when Meggie and Ralph realize the combination of soul and body on the island of Metrau. Meggie argues that she gets the best gift, she and Ralph’s son, Dane, in the world. Meggie feels that “she has finally

defeated God.” (Xie, 2016, p. 72). She poured her love for Ralph into Dane. Although he and Ralph are emotionally involved, they do not have a legal marriage, and the unusual behavior between them is inappropriate. She also was eventually punished because she committed the ethical taboo at that time. Dane finally chose to be a priest and dies for saving people.

Meggie, the heroine of the novel, falls in love with Father Ralph and gives him her love without reservation. But the identity of Ralph is a priest, so he is very complicated. On the one hand, he vows to believe in God, and on the other hand, he is eager for power and money. But Ralph is very hesitant about love. He hovers between God and Meggie, responding to Meggie’s love with a vague attitude. It can be said that he loves both God and Meggie. But Meggie gives all her love to him. Later, Meggie found a man who looked very similar to Ralph, Luke, and marries him. It is a type of marriage that each takes what he or she needs. She wants to live an ordinary woman’s life with a man who looks like her lover. Apparently, her lover occupies her mind when she decides to marry Luke. Meanwhile, Luke marries her only for her money, and even does not want to live a normal married life with Meggie. This false marriage completely shatters Meggie’s fantasy. Finally, she leaves his vulgar husband and lives the life she yearns for such a long time and raises her children alone. Paying much more attention to Dane than to Justine, Meggie has the same dereliction of duty as a mother.

She tries many ways to achieve the goal of getting a child who looks like Ralph, when Meggie and Luke are on vacation. Just after giving birth to her daughter, Justine, Meggie, who is physically and mentally exhausted, is arranged by the kind-hearted Annie to take a holiday on the island. On this secret island, Meggie and Ralph meet. They quickly “open their hearts and fall in love with each other” (Zhu & Jiang, 2016, p. 120). They stole the “forbidden fruit” of love there. Meggie finally has Ralph, who is more important than her own life. “She is extremely happy, happier than any time in her memory.” (McCullough, 2013, p. 395). What makes her happier is that she got Ralph’s child. However, although Ralph gives up Meggie again and chooses to go to Rome, she is still fantasied by their brief reunion.

Falling in love with a priest was forbidden by the society at that time, and it was also against ethics. In order to give the unborn Ralph’s child legal status, she goes to spend the night with Luke in spite of the pain caused by the long journey and bumps. In fact, the author of this paper thinks that this behavior is another kind of unimmorality and irresponsibility. However, when her son Dane tells her that he has decided to become a priest and serve God completely, Meggie is desperate. “The expression in her eyes was as if he had killed her and left her in the dust at his feet.” (McCullough, 2013, p. 227). Meggie is deeply tortured by this idea of her son. The child she steals from God finally converts to the church, which makes her extremely painful. It may be a kind of punishment brought by her forbidden love with Ralph. In the last part of the novel, Meggie and Ralph’s son Diane uses his young life to help their parents redeem their “original sins”.

The hero and the heroine of the forbidden love story are penalized. Ralph endures the torment of love all his life. Meggie, on the other hand, has no family life and marriage that ordinary women should have. All she has is endless waiting for Ralph and heavy farm work. “And the death of Dane, the crystallization of their love, is the biggest punishment for them.” (Liu, 2013, p. 51). After experiencing the death of his own son, Ralph is greatly hit. He realizes the mistakes he has made in his life, realizes his hypocrisy and selfishness, and finally gets rid of himself in the arms of his lover Meggie. After experiencing the death of two of her favorite people, Meggie realizes that she is irrational in her youth, and finally completes her soul’s repentance and redemption in the hope and blessing of her daughter, Justine.

Chapter Three: The Ethical Image of Justine

Justine's view of love violates the ethics of that time and transcends the traditional love. She is the third-generation female in her family. She is destined to be a strong and independent woman from the beginning of her birth. Although she is a weak, skinny girl with very strange hair and temper, she tortures Meggie for 24 hours. She has a disharmonious relationship with her mother. Although Meggie tries to caress her daughter, she finds herself unable to do so. She always feels that Justine will not belong to anyone. She will only belong to herself. Justine is very strong and straightforward. She does not need a confidant, nor does she need praise, and even does not want to get married. She is very contemptuous of the love that her mother and grandmother has pursued all their lives. She says that she would not bow her head and frown in front of a man who is not half as good as her. "She thinks that love is unreliable" (Xie, 2016, p. 72). She puts her mind on her brother Dane. After Dane's death, she is almost caught in despair.

Justine's attitude towards love and sex is unethical. Justine's unwilling to get married does not mean she plans to live an abstinent life. On the contrary, her passion is even stronger and more rebellious than that of her mother and grandmother. She does not give up her pursuit of love. Since she is not the child that Meggie expected, she is snubbed by Meggie from the beginning of her life. Justine shows her independence and arrogance from an early age. She never gets close to anyone, even her mother, until her brother Dane appears. Perhaps it is a rebellion against her mother's love. She shows a strong possessiveness and sense of responsibility to Dane, as if Dane only belongs to her. Even after they grows up, she and Dane always maintain this close relationship. Dane is the most important man in her life. This is an important expression of her rebellious character. She despises secular love. Dane is everything to her. In her view, the love between men and women does not need any emotional factors, so that she easily even loses her virginity with some play proverbs. "She took off her clothes with dexterity and lightness, and then climbed into the bed without having to wriggle into pushing and pulling." (McCullough, 2013, p. 653). The reason is that: "if I don't even know about the affairs between men and women, how can I hope to become a good actress?" (McCullough, 2013, p. 654). It can be seen that she despises girl's virginity very much. She easily loses her virginity just to experience life and can be helpful to acting. In that era when the church was in the dominant position, a woman's remark like this was ahead of time. "It is unruly" (Bai, 2013, p. 43). Justine thinks that having sex with different men doesn't matter. Such boldness has broken the public's view of traditional women.

Conclusion

To summarize, although the female characters of three generations in *The Thorn Birds* occupy various shining points such as their growing consciousness of independence, courageous pursuit of love, and revolt of the patriarchal society, they make some wrong ethical choices in the process of chasing their self-happiness. Firstly, Fiona's love is misplaced. Fiona falls in love with a married man. Her misplaced love made her pay a painful price. Secondly, Maggie falls in love with a priest, which is totally forbidden by the society at that time, and it is also against ethics. She pays heavy price of her forbidden love, too. The illegitimate child of her and Ralph costs his young life to help their parents redeem their "original sins". Thirdly, Justine's attitude towards love and sex is even much more open than her mother and grandmother, which is unethical even in today's society. She does not only develop an unethical relationship with her brother, but also easily loses her virginity to exchange the experience of life and acting. The author of this thesis hopes to give a more comprehensive perspective of viewing the female characters in *The Thorn Birds*.

References

- Bai, D. (2013). *The Thorn Birds*: Pseudo feminism. *Youth Literator*, 21, 42-43.
- Du, Y. W. (2016). On *The Thorn Birds* from the perspective of feminist criticism. *Language Planning*, 15, 45-46.
- Liu, S. S. (2013). Criticism and inheritance—On Colin McCullough's religious view from *The Thorn Birds*. *Journal of Ningde Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 32(4), 51-54.
- McCullough, C. (2013). *The thorn birds*. London: Head of Zeus.
- Wang, S., Cui, Y. H., & Liang, X. Y. (2019). An analysis of the characteristics of female characters in *The Thorn Birds*. In *2018 international workshop on education reform and social sciences (ERSS 2018)* (pp. 389-392). Pairs: Atlantis Press.
- Xie, N. (2016). A solemn and stirring symphony—On the female images in *The Thorn Birds*. *Language Planning*, 15, 71-72.
- Zhu, Y. B., & Jiang, L. (2016). Meggie: The heroine of *The Thorn Birds* from the perspective of feminist care ethics. *Journal of Hubei University of Economics (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 13(2), 120-121.