

Reading of *The Guiltless* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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The Guiltless is Hermann Broch's last novel, and it is also a work that embodies Broch's literary and artistic view. The novel takes place in a period of social and historical change, and the conflict between the old and the new ethical relations leads to the confusion of the ethical relations, which causes the relationship between the characters to become distorted. This paper tries to analyze the relationship between Baroness W and her family from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism in aspects of ethical environment, ethical selection and ethical identity. It reveals that in the period of social and historical change, in the environment of social ethics disorder, the distorted ethical selection of characters and the loss of ethical identity. Hermann Broch attempts to arouse readers' ethical reflection by depicting such an era and such characters.

Keywords: *The Guiltless*, Ethical Literary Criticism, ethical environment, ethical selection, ethical identity

Introduction

Hermann Broch (1886-1951) is a famous Austrian-American writer who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Milan Kundera named him one of the "four great novelists of Central Europe" together with Kafka. His principal works are *The Sleepwalkers*, *The Death of Virgil*, *The Guiltless* et al. (and others), of which *The Sleepwalkers* is his most famous work. Milan Kundera and Carlos Fuentes highly regard this novel. Because of his educational experience and social and historical background, Hermann Broch's works often involve a lot of philosophical and psychological content. In addition, his aesthetic concept is different from other modern novel writers, and ethical aesthetics is one of the essential themes of his works.

The Guiltless was the last novel Broch wrote during his lifetime. Broch adapted and integrated several short stories published in different magazines and newspapers, making them into a long and related novel, in which Broch depicted the struggles and sufferings of ordinary people in the era of ethical disorder. Although there are some historical limitations to this creative theme, the world is facing a significant impact of changes unseeing in a century. Under such a background, this novel still has practical significance for the constructing of the present ethical and moral system. Therefore, this paper takes *The Guiltless* as the research object and analyzes the misplaced ethical identities of the characters in the novel and their respective ethical choices according to the theories of Ethical Literary Criticism in the era of ethical disorder.

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Literature Review

As one of Herman Broch's most famous novels, *The Guiltless* has attracted the attention of scholars for its rich literary genre, varied writing techniques, and profound creative theme. Weigend (1953) argues that there is a projection of the author's self-consciousness not only in the protagonist, Andreas, but also in other characters, and that the use of symbolism in the novel implies a concept of totality. The most important symbol in *The Guiltless* is the triangle, and the artistic effect of the work as a whole relies heavily on the way it is structured and symbolized (Spuler, 1982). Hardin (1970), on the other hand, focuses on the mystical and empirical theme of salvation in the work. Characters modeled after saviors in Broch's novels often lead to moral salvation. His creative theme suggests that self-salvation is to overcome death, which can be dissolved by love. Other researchers have argued that Broch's obsession with musical form and compositional principles is reflected not only in his philosophical writings but also in *The Guiltless*. Peterman (1989) argues that the three poems in the novel, *Stimmen 1913*, *Stimmen 1923*, and *Stimmen 1933*, are similar to the three movements of the Baroque concerto grosso. Broch writes about a chaotic period through the use of musical counterpoint, representing the complexity of the world as fully as possible with a more complex and broader volume of material. As the world constantly develops and changes, Hermann Broch's creative themes are relevant to the current world. Lützel, in his new work *Hermann Broch und die Menschenrechte: Anti-Versklavung als Ethos der Welt*, gives a postcolonial interpretation of Broch's work that emphasizes a critique of colonialism and capitalism, opening up new perspectives for the study of Broch's work (Hudzik, 2022). It can be seen that scholars in Western countries mainly focus on symbolism, musical principles, mysticism, and salvation themes in their studies of Broch's works. Although the ethical issues in *The Guiltless* are more or less mentioned, few studies that systematically analyze the ethical factors in them with theories.

Ethical Literary Criticism is a method of literary criticism that is mainly used to read, analyze and interpret literary works from an ethical standpoint, and to study writers and issues related to literature (Nie, 2010). It is a theory proposed by Chinese scholar Nie Zhen-zhao in 2004. The literary foundation of literary ethics can be traced back to the ancient Greek period (Nie, 2004). "From the earliest days of humanity, literature was produced for teaching people to be moral humans" (Nie, 2021, p. 190). "Since the 1960s, propelled by the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, waves of student activism, and the women's liberation, counterculture, and environmental movements, there have arisen new schools of literary criticism with a common emphasis on ethics; these include feminism, neo-historicism, the Black Arts movement, and cultural criticism, together forming a virtual torrent of ethical criticism" (Nie, 2023, p. 1). The narrative power of the literary arts is undeniable due to its essential character, which implies ethical judgments (Booth, 1998), and any systematically developed ethical criticism needs to be concerned with the ethics of both the reader and the text (Booth, 1982, p. 73). Ethical criticism, despite a long history, has never developed a systematic body of theory, and ethical criticism has always lacked a clear methodology (Nie, 2023). Many Western scholars have defined ethical criticism in broad and vague terms (Posner, 1998). Ethical Literary Criticism is a theoretical innovation based on the Western traditional ethical criticism, which transforms literary ethics into the methodology of Ethical Literary Criticism and constructs its own critical terminology and discourse system, so that it can stand out from many literary criticisms (Nie, 2023).

Based on the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism, this paper analyzes the ethical theme of *The Guiltless* in order to make valuable supplements.

The Ethical Disorder in the Pre-Hitlerian Period

Ethical order is a spiritual, social order that interacts with other social relations. Disorganizing the economic order and loopholes in the political system can directly cause ethical disorder in society (Li, 2014). Hermann Broch (1933) has also suggested that the collapse of the material economic sphere can only be understood in connection with the collapse of the general value system, also known as ethical disorder. Such an ethical disorder in society is unavoidable when the society is in a stage of change. Ethical Literary Criticism attaches importance to analyzing the ethical environment of literature. The ethical environment of ethical disorder is inevitably linked to the loss of ethical identity and ethical selections of the actors and is therefore worthy of attention. The three time-period of 1913, 1923, and 1933, corresponding to the periods before the start of the First World War, after the end of the First World War and before and after Hitler's rise to power, were three crucial points in the history of the Nazi Party headed by Hitler, and a period of great change in the world and society. Both the upheaval of the political system and the collapse of the economic system led to ethical disorder as an inevitable process at this stage of history.

All kinds of social conflicts had emerged in Germany before the First World War, and ethnic minority groups had become a vital political force and a destabilizing factor in the country. In addition, with the development of industry, social stratification and antagonisms were very serious (Xu, 2017). Various values clashed during this period, causing people to lose their values, which was the first manifestation of ethical disorder. In 1923, after the end of the First World War, Germany was severely sanctioned. Massive oldwar reparations and a collapsed economy after the war put the economy of the Weimar Republic in crisis, with high unemployment and severe inflation, and the economic crisis eventually led to political instability (Zhao, 2021). In *Stimmen 1923* of the novel, Andreas and Zacharias met after a concert. They went to a tavern for drinks, and during their conversation, Zacharias delivered his speech as if he were lecturing from a lectern, which, despite Andreas' indifference, was filled with enthusiasm for the Nazis. At this time, many people in Germany began to pursue the Nazi ideology, and the economic and social chaos in this period seriously affected the ethical order at that time. In 1933, the Nazi Party came to power, and after Andreas' suicide, Zacharias and Hildegard met in the square with the Nazi flag already raised. The Nazi Party stabilized the domestic situation with its strong authoritarian power after coming to power. However, extreme nationalism made the Third Reich show a strong desire for outward expansion, which led Germany to the Second World War.

The author has chosen the first thirty years of the twentieth century as a time of great social instability, when the world and the domestic situation changed drastically, causing a significant impact on the old social and ethical system. As a result, the old ethical system tends to collapse and disintegrate, while the new ethical system has yet to take shape. Under such a background, people are confused and disoriented, and the relationship between people is distorted and deformed. Zacharias, who is passionate about the Nazis, educates his children to be extremely obedient to him, Andreas, a diamond merchant who has lost his mother, is insensitive to evil deeds. Zerline, the maid, out of jealousy of Baroness W, seizes her lover and educates Hildegard to oversee her. Hence, the ethical order becomes the central theme of the ethical environment of *The Guiltless*. Morally, these behaviors

cross a moral line, but when returning to the ethical setting of *The Innocents*, there is a reason why these behaviors occur.

Ethical Selections under the Influence of the Sphinx Factor

The viewpoint of literary ethics holds that there exists “Sphinx factor” in the human body. That is, human factor (or rational factor) and animal factor coexist and ethical consciousness and animal instinct coexist. “In normal circumstances, the human factor is superior to the animal factor. A man could become a person with ethical consciousness, as the former can take control of the latter” (Nie, 2021, p. 389). When human factor prevails, people can make rational selections. And when the animal factor takes the upper hand, people will make irrational selections so that the story has a different development direction. Baroness W’s family is the most important group of characters in *The Guiltless*. The collision of human factor and animal factor on them makes them make various ethical selections, and these ethical selections significantly affect the development of the story.

According to the maid Zerline, there is no love between Mr. Baron and his wife Elviren, and he does not want to have sex with her, which is the reason why Zerline says, “daß sie nie eine richtige Frau war” (Hermann Broch, 1950, p. 101). Under these circumstances, Elviren has an affair with Mr. Juna outside the marriage. The phenomenon of “extramarital affair” shows that there is “Sphinx factor” in the human body, which is the pull of human factor and animal factor. There is no love between Elviren and her husband, and she not only feels emotionally empty but also physically can not be satisfied, so after meeting the romantic Mr. Juna, Elviren’s yearning for feelings and physical lust overcome the constraints of marriage ethics. She wanted to get an emotional release, so the animal factor on her body overpowered the human factor at this time, making her make the irrational selection of an “extramarital affair.” This ethical selection made Zerline unhappy with her and caused Elviren to become a “prisoner” for many years.

Since her mother had an “affair” with Mr. Juna, Hildegard is very much concerned about her chastity, as educated by Zerline. However, the animal factor was stirring; she was not without desire for men, “Immer läuft sie davon, und wenn sie einen richtigen Geliebten hätte, mit dem sie schläft, wär’s schon in Ordnung; dann wär sie eben eine richtige Frau... aber sie ist eine Verkappte, wie kaum eine zweite” (Broch, 1950, pp. 96-97). Physical desire never went out of her. Andreas decided to take Baroness W away from their old house so that she could no longer guard her mother, which caused Hildegard to have a great revenge, which is also a manifestation of the animal factor. The combination of the desire that never disappeared and the psychology of revenge overwhelmed her human factor and made her make an ethical selection that crossed her moral line. She chose to seduce Andreas, which is not motivated by love, but revenge. Not only did she take revenge on Andreas, but she also fulfilled her desire, which is contrary to her concept of chastity.

Zerline was deeply in love with Mr. Baron, who in her heart was an exceptionally holy man. Even though she knew there was no love between the Baron and his wife, she still could not accept Elviren’s extramarital behavior. Her intense love for Mr. Baron led to jealousy of Elviren, and her animal factor grew. In the end, she chose to seduce Mr. Juna under the influence of the animal factor of jealousy, and this twisted act was, in her view, her victory: “es war trotzdem wie ein Sieg über sie” (Broch, 1950, p. 105). Human factors are rarely reflected in the role of Zerline. Most of the ethical selections she made are out of jealousy of Elviren and extreme love for Mr. Baron. Animal factors dominate her thoughts and behaviors, leading her to make many unethical selections.

The Dislocation of Ethical Identity

Ethical Literary Criticism focuses on the analysis of the ethical identity of the characters. In literary texts, ethical identities are categorized in various ways and can be based on blood relatives, ethical relationships, moral codes, social relationships, professions, et al. (and others). A person's ethical identity is the identifier of a person's existence in society. Once a person has a specific ethical identity, he or she has to take on the responsibilities and obligations that come with that identity (Wang, 2022). Making ethical selections that go against these responsibilities and obligations will result in the dislocation of ethical identity. The dislocation of the characters' ethical identity in *The Guiltless* also reflects the ethical environment of the time. This is also evidenced by the relationships in Baroness W's family. In this family, the maid is more like a controller than a servant, and the daughter is more like her mother's supervisor than a dutiful child. The distorted relationship between them is closely related to the dislocation of the ethical identity.

Dislocation of Elviren's ethical identity manifests itself in two main ways. In terms of ethical relations, she has two most important ethical identities. First, she is the wife of Baron W. The traditional view of marriage holds that husband and wife should respect and love each other and remain faithful to the marriage. Not only did she have an affair with Mr. Juna, but she gave birth to a daughter named Hildegard with him. Elviren violates the ethical obligations given to her by her ethical identity as a wife, resulting in a dislocation of her ethical identity. The dislocation of her ethical identity leads to the confusion of ethical choice for Elviren, who was both the wife of Baron W and the mistress of Mr. Juna. She wavered between telling Mr. Baron, but in the end, she did not. Elviren's second ethical identity is Hildegard's mother, and accordingly, Hildegard's ethical identity is Elviren's daughter. In the traditional family parent-child relationship requirements, children should obey their parents. Hildegard, however, did not fulfill the ethical responsibilities and obligations entrusted to her by her ethical identity as a daughter. "Hildegard' (sie bezeichnete sie zum ersten Male mit Namen) ... '...mich natürlich hält sie hier gefangen'" (Broch, 1950, p. 64). Under Zerline's education, Hildegard became the "guardian" of her mother in place of her Baron father: "was geschähe dann mit meiner Mutter? Wer soll über sie wachen?" (Broch, 1950, p. 81). As a child, Hildegard was not obedient to her mother but guarded her mother. It is not a regular parent-child relationship but rather a distorted one, in which Hildegard had to take the place of her father in order to maintain "peace" in the house and to keep watch over her mother, whose widowhood can only be guaranteed by keeping her in perpetual isolation. The dislocation of the ethical identity between the mother and daughter reflects the deformity of human relations in the era of ethical disorder. Even the closest mother-daughter relationship cannot escape such dislocation, and people's pain in such an environment can be seen.

The most prominent ethical identity of Zerline is maid. In the master-servant relationship, the servant should respect and obey the master's orders and try to maintain the master's privacy, which is the ethical obligation brought by the servant's identity. However, as a maid, Zerline did not protect Elviren's privacy, and she forcibly told Andreas about Elviren's past with her against Andreas' will. More than once in the process she showed her disrespect for Elviren: "Schockweis hat sie solchen Stunk von sich gegeben, die leere Wasserpute" (Broch, 1950, p. 113). Despite Zerline's ethical identity as a maid who should obey her master, she behaved differently in her relationship with Elviren. When Elviren was upset, she responded by berating her master, an act that was not in keeping with Zerline's ethical identity. Zerline was more of a true "master" in their relationship. While she still

took care of Elviren's life like any other maid for most of the day, Zerline seemed to be the one who was in control in many crucial matters: "meine Mutter wird ins Jagdhuas übersiedeln, sobald Zerline es befiehlt" (Broch, 1950, p. 228). Zerline's behaviors and actions that are not in line with her ethical identity are the inevitable result of the dislocation of her ethical identity and the concrete manifestation of the social ethical disorder.

Conclusion

The deformities and distortions of the relationship of this family epitomize a world of terrible ethical disorder. Not only them but all the characters in the novel are set in a time when, as the author mentions the word many times in the novel, there is hell everywhere. In this society, which is crumbling under the war, the old ethical system has collapsed, and a new ethical reconstruction is needed to restore social stability. Hermann Broch hopes that by describing the ethical issues in such an era, people can re-explore themselves, face up to the relationship between themselves and others and their responsibilities, try to establish a new sense of community, and find a way out for the future of all humankind.

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