

On Featherhoughton Residents' Ethical Dilemma and Choices in *Fludd*

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In Mantel's *Fludd*, the ethical dilemma and choices faced by the residents of Featherhoughton in England have been explored. With English Reformation, the townspeople face an ethical dilemma between "maintaining tradition" and "innovating for change". Driven by the "ghost" Fludd, people choose "innovating for change", transforming their old beliefs and social order and constructing an ethical utopian world that aligns with the development of the times, resonating with Mantel's consistent theme of "transformation".

Keywords: an ethical utopia, *Fludd*, ethical dilemma, ethical choices, transformation

Introduction

Hilary Mantel is a noteworthy female writer in contemporary British literature. Her eighth novel, *Fludd*, was set in the small English town of Featherhoughton in the 1950s. It presented the life stories of the townspeople, offering insight into their psychological changes and social dynamics within the context of supernatural phenomena. During the English Reformation, the residents of the town showed reluctance to change their established religious beliefs and practices, and exhibited strong resistance to external influences. However, the arrival of the "ghost", Fludd, precipitated a profound transformation within the community. Under his tutelage, the collective anger and uncertainty that pervaded the populace gradually dissipated. The characters ultimately chose to discard the constraints of their past and adapted to the evolving realities of the present, thereby entering a more optimal ethical environment. In the novel, Mantel employed the "ghost" as a metaphor for the concealed uncertainties, prompting reflection on the underlying social, cultural, and moral issues. Through the figure of the "ghost Fludd", she portrayed the despondent atmosphere and warped psychological state of the populace during this period. By utilizing the "ghost's hand", she encouraged them to make logical ethical decisions and adjustments to accommodate the incoming reforms and transformations. Ultimately, she presented a vision of an ethical utopia.

The Townspeople's Ethical Environment in *Fludd*

The ethical environment is the historical context in which literature arises and exists. In order to engage in literary ethical criticism, it is necessary to return to the historical scene and to critique literature in a specific ethical environment (Nie, 2014, p. 5). Featherhoughton was a 20th-century English town shaped by Roman

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Catholic ethos and the feudal system. It was nestled in northern England, bordered on three sides by moorland, making it difficult to access. The architectural style of the town was Gothic. The Church of St. Thomas Aquinas stood on

a kind of pimple of higher ground, and this fact occasioned little flights of stone steps and cobbled ramps, slippery and mossy underfoot; clustering at the base of the tower, they looked like household terriers running at the feet of some dangerous, dirty tramp. (p. 183)

The image evokes a sense of claustrophobia and isolation, along with a pervasive atmosphere of despondency and despair. This powerful metaphor reflects the uneasy and fearful psychological and spiritual state of the town's residents, reflecting the repressive social environment of the era. The local populace was poorly educated, devoutly Roman Catholic, staunchly conservative, and notably resistant to the Protestant Reformation. The nuns in the convent were subjected to rigorous dogmatic discipline and were only allowed to eat fruit bread mixed with gravel. Their lives were marked by repression and pain. By default, local children were sent to the convent school of the Diocese of St. Thomas Aquinas, managed by the Sisters of Perpetua, to receive Roman Catholic ideology and education. The majority of the population leads a monotonous and unfulfilling existence, maintaining unchanging social relationships. The majority of residents were impoverished laborers, and the Church's authoritative reinforcement of doctrine and strict moral codes directly interfered with the spiritual lives of the town's inhabitants. The residents were deeply influenced by the concepts of heaven and hell, sin and salvation in their religious beliefs. They eagerly sought salvation, forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation with the divine through active participation in the Church's sacraments of confession and mass. This participation provided them with spiritual solace and peace, relieving their inner anxieties. Constrained by their social class and living environment, the townspeople were reluctant to embrace new concepts and exhibited a tendency to be discriminatory and resistant to anything that might disrupt their established way of life, including new ideas and aspirations.

The Townspeople's Ethical Dilemma in *Fludd*

Ethical dilemma is defined as "the unresolvable contradictions and conflicts brought to the characters in a literary text due to ethical confusion" (Nie, 2014, p. 258). This understanding highlights the importance of ethical order and ethical identity as key elements in analyzing ethical dilemmas. By thoroughly examining the ethical quandaries faced by the inhabitants of Featherhoughton, Mantel delves into the intricacies of the social structure, moral principles, and ways of life depicted in the work, expressing her own disquiet and critique of the tangible reality. In *Fludd*, residents in the town, including those who adhered to religious beliefs, the suspected demonic tobacconist, discredited and impoverished nun, Father Angwin and Sister Philomena in particular, faced a range of ethical challenges as a result of the prevailing social and ethical turbulence, as well as the evolving nature of their ethical identities. Furthermore, Father Angwin, grappling with a crisis of faith, encountered many people facing the ethical dilemma of whether to persist in a monotonous and unchanging existence or to seek transformation. This led to the question of whether they should continue to lead their everyday lives in a blind and uninteresting manner, maintaining the same social relationships, or whether they should choose to make changes to adapt to the social development and changes. The characters must decide between pursuing their personal interests or fulfilling their social responsibilities. Mantel's experience in Africa changed her perspective of observing and transformed her into a different kind of writer (Arias, 1998, p. 286). "Transformation" becomes an important theme that she tries to explore.

Fludd began with the arrival of Bishop Aidan Raphae in the small town of Featherhoughton, bringing a “wind of reform”. Initially regarded as a modern clergyman and a Reformation trailblazer, his ethical identity defined his responsibility: To encourage the townspeople to move away from Roman Catholic authority and to reshape their religious beliefs. Featherhoughton was a stronghold of the existing ethical order, where the inhabitants adhered to long-established ethical norms and social orders. Raphae initiated his reforms by asking Father Angwin, the local priest, to modify traditional Catholic rituals and oversee the removal of the saints’ statues. Consequently, the contradictions and conflicts between new and old social orders are evident. On the one hand, the bishop condemned the town’s church and people for engaging in “idolatry” (Mantel, 2000, p. 21), which was a manifestation of blind and old-fashioned thinking. On the other hand, the townspeople insisted that these icons were just symbols, powerful things and should be honored and worshiped as they should be (p. 79). The implementation of Raphael’s reform ideas was fraught with difficulty. Even his fellow reformer, Angwin, exhibited skepticism regarding the ethical value system espoused by Raphael, considering him as “a man beyond my experience” (p. 9). The contradictions and conflicts between the old and new values during the Reformation promoted social emancipation of ideas, but they were also accompanied by fierce battles. To forestall the resurgence of traditional ideas and practices among the townspeople, Bishop Raphael even threatened to appoint an associate priest to assist Angwin in implementing a more comprehensive reform of the town, which set the stage for the appearance of Father Flood and the subsequent identification of his identity, as well as the ethical challenges that the townspeople would soon confront.

As the winds of the Reformation swept across Europe and reached this once-tranquil town, the inhabitants responded with hostility, as if confronted by an unwelcome intruder at their doorstep. Despite the constraints of their class and the pressure for reform, the populace was forced to suppress their individuality. Nevertheless, their inner discontent and complaints persisted. In response to Bishop Raphael’s directive to dismantle and inter the effigies of the saints, the townspeople engaged the services of professional gravediggers to prepare the sacred ground and “attended the statues’ funerals with expressions of mourning” (p. 27). The townspeople held that the statues of the saints were not merely illusions, but rather, the tangible representations of individuals who passed away. As Miss Dempsey posited, the statues were perceived “like people, like my relatives” (p. 27). The act of burying the statues into the ground and subsequently walking over them evoked a visceral response, making people to feel “shivers, as if they were walking over dead people” (p. 79). The townspeople’s reliance on the status quo and rejection of change could be felt as a defensive posture against the unbalanced ethical environment. In a society characterized by “liquid modernity”, great changes are common. In an era of such rapid changes, small-town residents often found themselves uncertain about how to live or what to believe in, trapping in the feelings of loss, fear, and a gradual erosion of subjectivity.

In *Fludd*, most of the townspeople faced ethical dilemmas to some degree, primarily due to the challenge of “changes”. Facing the religious reformation, if people clung to the old traditions, social development and progress would be hindered and those factors such as poverty, ignorance, rigidity, and backwardness would fall. If they chose to “change” themselves, it meant abandoning their traditional values and embarking on an uncertain path that could have a profound impact on their lives. At last, the arrival of Fludd became their ethical salvation. With his guidance, they underwent a process of personal growth and ethical awakening, striving to build a better society by transformation and self-transcendence.

The Townspeople's Ethical Choices in *Fludd*

Fludd's Ethical Obligation

In the history of Western philosophy, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer are credited with developing the modern concept of human self-redemption. They suppose that humanity's path to salvation lies in the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-creation (Yang, 2020, p. 206). Obviously, the ultimate goal of self-redemption is to determine one's true social obligations and responsibilities after a thorough examination of self-worth, enabling the soul to achieve genuine tranquility, and consequently, self-redemption. Man's individual quest, believed to be the most significant and ethically redemptive action (Shiran, 2018, p. 16), has become an ethical trajectory that many writers have explored in their works. In the novel, Fludd can be considered as both a symbol and channel for Mantel's epistemology. Mantel represents Fludd as a manifestation of her ethical responsibilities. He exemplified the fulfillment of his social obligations by guiding the individual pursuits of Father Angwin, Sister Philomena, and others. The metaphor of the "ghost" Fludd reflected an essentially utopian moral imagination, embodying the uncertainty of nothingness. Mantel tried to express a despair as well as a desire for a utopian heaven through this character. Meanwhile, this character signaled a possibility of human's understanding of himself and the world.

In the story, Mantel privileged "those invisible things with her anti-modernist epistemology" (Davis, 2005, p. 373) in order to make people oppose the imagined surrealism and guide the readers to fulfill their transformation. The protagonist, the 15th-century alchemist Fludd, appeared just like a "ghost" and possessed a powerful magic that not only transcended the limitations of space and time, but also disrupted the very fabric of reality (Davis, 2005, p. 373). Fludd was also able to "disrupt" the past, present, and future. The image of the mysterious "ghost" was fully traceable. In a night of thunderstorms, Fludd appeared out of nowhere in the town, causing confusion and panic among the townspeople and sparking a multitude of speculations and imaginations. His arrival introduced an ethical dimension to the narrative, and hence, the character became a prominent figure in the story line throughout the novel. His image was multifaceted and those who had seen him found it hard to recognize his physical appearance. Neither did Father Angwin who engaged in a long discourse with Fludd. After the conversation, he could clearly recall the contents but forgot the young man's face. His behavior was highly mysterious and incomprehensible. For instance, when he drunk, the water in his glass never diminished, and when he ate, there was always more food in his plate. Besides, he was also frightening. When he fell asleep, it was as if he were dead, and even his breathing seemed to stop (p. 167). Generally speaking, Fludd behaved like a "catalytic converter" (Horner & Zlosnik, 2000, p. 146). He did not directly change people's lifestyles and personal beliefs. Instead, he encouraged them to break free from the oppressive religious system and achieve a fundamental transformation of self-awareness. This is the ethical significance of the character. Driven by his influence, the townspeople made various ethical decisions and struggled for an ethical utopia.

The Townspeople's Ethical Choices

Returning to the ethical context of history, this approach involves interpreting and explaining literary works from the ethical standpoint of their time, seeking the objective ethical reasons for their creation, and explaining why these reasons were established. It also entails analyzing the ethical factors in the works that led to social practices and influenced the fate of the characters, and providing ethical explanations for practical issues and literary themes. (Nie, 2010, pp. 12-22)

In *Fludd*, Bishop Raphael arrived at the town for the purpose of providing spiritual guidance and disseminating Protestantism among the local residents. As a pioneer of the Protestant Reformation, he provided spiritual guidance and spread Protestantism to the local people. However, the Roman Catholic tradition had long

been deeply entrenched in the local population, and most of the residents held profound beliefs and emotional ties to the authority of the Pope and the sacramental system of the Church. Bishop Raphael aimed to alter these deeply ingrained beliefs and customs. But his reforms encountered considerable psychological and emotional resistance from the local population. For the majority, maintaining stability in their daily lives was of greater importance. The potential for social unrest and the disruption of beliefs caused by sudden religious reforms led to distress and apprehension among the residents, who feared that such changes would disrupt the social order and increase uncertainty in their daily lives.

The reformation was imperative. It met the needs of socio-economic change in the 20th century. Fludd's ethical obligation was to help the local people adjust to the new changes. By showing his magical power, Fludd persuaded them to step out of their comfort zones and change their traditional concepts. "Ghost" Fludd was a mysterious transitional figure between past and present, death and life, and disparate cultural contexts (Brogan, 1998, p. 6). He was an uncertain factor in the town. His unpredictable behavior influenced the townspeople's ways of thinking and living. He inspired them to break the traditional doctrines and customs, and adapt to the socio-economic changes. The novel started with an ethical scene in which the townspeople, under the guidance of Father Angwin, were compelled to dismantle the icons and bury them in the ground, signifying the coming of the great Reformation.

Initially, people were resistant to the reforms. Only through Fludd's efforts did the townspeople ultimately change their minds and accept the new values. On the midnight, Fludd initiated his alchemical process, drawing the townspeople to the cemetery, where they appeared to lose consciousness and self-control. It seemed that they were influenced and controlled by the magic power of alchemical catalyst. Father Angwin suddenly woke up from his bed and left his room unconsciously (Mantel, 2000, p. 130). Sister Philomena acted as if she had been electrocuted, and upon standing, she experienced a sudden, sharp pain in her joints, as if her bones had been filed with sharp knives. Miss Dempsey, who had been in a state of shock since the beginning of Fludd's alchemical process, was at a loss and out of control. And she was also caught by "an inexplicable chill" (p. 129). The "alchemy" here referred both to the illusions Father Fludd used in his rituals and to alchemist Fludd as a "catalyst for change". It is also a symbolic exploration of deeper themes, such as spiritual growth, soul purification, and cosmic order. The anomalous physical and sensory responses observed in individuals under the influence of "alchemy" serve as a warning: Imminent change is likely to bring about a significant impact, leading to widespread social anxiety and painful disorders. The townspeople were worried and uneasy about the unknown outcomes of the impending changes. They were in a state of unease and apprehension and decided to follow Fludd to the cemetery, watching him dig up the statues with shovels. Fludd's actions were just like an attempt to reshape their belief system and order of life. A series of "magic tricks" performed by Fludd prompted the residents to re-examine their beliefs and adapt to the new changes, freeing themselves from the constraints of traditional thinking mode. In this way, Fludd "did what he had to do" (p. 140), fulfilling his ethical obligation as a "ghost" and reshaping the collective belief structure of the town's inhabitants.

In the final part of the novel, Mantel skillfully employed the metaphorical imagery of "light" to reinforce the process of establishing an ethical order and to elucidate the concept of "transformation". The metaphor of "light" evoked notions of knowledge, revelation, and life. It was associated with themes of renewal, recovery, and hope, symbolizing the spiritual awakening of the townspeople. This process represented a transition from ignorance to enlightenment and from darkness to light. Furthermore, the entire town underwent a great change, becoming more civilized and flowering. The frost on the ground refracted brilliantly on the sidewalks, and the

grand buildings and towering churches glittered. The inhabitants freed from their sour dispositions and thriftiness and walked gracefully through the streets with smiles, as if they were the great sun with the power to ignite the soul. It is evident that the town had undergone a significant transformation, presenting a new and reinvigorated look. The residents effectively shed the constraints of their minds, moving into an expansive realm of self-development and achieving a deeper sense of fulfillment in life.

Conclusion

The novel *Fludd* exemplifies Mantel's theme of "transformation", with the "ghost" serving as the primary path for this theme. Set against the backdrop of the Reformation, the novel enables the "ghost" Fludd to transcend the boundaries of time and space, life and death, and to illuminate the ethical and moral issues embedded in the society of that era. It also serves to liberate individuals from the constraints imposed by traditional doctrines, restore the moral order of society, and construct the ethical utopian world she has ever envisioned. Mantel concentrates on historical figures and depicts the ethical issues of the society with great imaginations. She also addresses the crisis of faith faced by people and explores the ways they might find salvation, thereby fulfilling her ethical obligations.

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