

Henry Shackleford's Identical Dilemma in The Good Lord Bird

Li Zhang^{1*}, Huijuan Li²

¹Professor, Studying American Literature, Literary and Non-Literary Translation, North China Electric Power University, China

²Post-Graduate Student, Majoring in English, North China Electric Power University, China

DOI:10.21276/sijll.2019.2.6.2

| Received: 14.08.2019 | Accepted: 20.08.2019 | Published: 23.08.2019

*Corresponding author: Li Zhang

Abstract

As the National Book Award winner of America in 2013, *The Good Lord Bird* plays an important role in depicting the inner world of ordinary people, especially slaves. The young slave narrator, Henry Shackleford recreates John Brown's raids on Harpers Ferry on the eve of the American Civil War. His role changes and choices in his life reflect the identical dilemma and awakening of the black slaves in that era. Based on Ethical Literary Criticism, this paper displays Henry's identical dilemma in *The Good Lord Bird* from two aspects of gender dilemma and social dilemma. It explores reasons for Henry's dual identical dilemmas and the ethical choices, which is to be a girl in bondage or a boy in freedom. Therefore, this paper reveals the inefficiency and blindness of the black slave's ethical choices in the context of slavery, representing the loneliness and alienation faced by the black slaves on the eve of American Civil War. It awakens people to recognize the hypocrisy and evilness of Slavery, and makes human beings re-examine history, giving important enlightenment to American racial issues.

Keywords: Gender Dilemma; Social Dilemma; Ethical Literary Criticism; *The Good Lord Bird*.

Copyright @ 2019: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

As a masterpiece of the American writer James McBride, *The Good Lord Bird* has aroused people's attention since its publication and has won the 2013 National Book Award of America.

This novel recreates John Brown's raids on Harpers Ferry on the eve of the American Civil War from the perspective of a slave Henry Shackleford. In 1857 Kansas was torn apart by war. The narrator, Henry Shackleford, is a 12-year-old slave living in Kansas. When John Brown, the historic leader of the abolitionist movement, arrived there, he got into an argument with Henry's owner, which eventually turned into violent conflicts. It was that afternoon that Henry's father was killed. Therefore, Henry was orphaned at that time and mistaken for a girl to stay with abolitionist John Brown. Because of Henry's curving hair, slender body and weak voice, Brown mistook him for a girl and called him "little Onion". Henry, in order to better survive, went from place to place with Brown as a girl, hiding his true gender. In Missouri he went to live in a brothel; In Philadelphia, he marveled at the free black citizens who carried crutches, brooches and rings like whites and cared nothing about Slavery. In Boston, he attended an abolitionist rally, where everyone spoke on black issues except blacks. It was not until 1859 that they

reached Harpers Ferry, Virginia, where John Brown revolted there. At that time, Henry found himself at last.

The Good Lord Bird isn't the first literary work about John Brown, but it does have its originality. *The Good Lord Bird* is a lighthearted book, full of funny scenes. This is unusual for historical fiction, especially about slavery and the civil war. The author gives readers a historical picture of the turbulent history from the perspective of Henry, the Onion. With exaggeration and ironic narrative techniques, James McBride makes readers see different historical figures and events. In the novel, John Brown is a crazy old man, but he is more heroic than ever. In the face of failures again and again, John Brown still chooses to fight relentlessly, until the last moment of life. The narrator Henry himself has grown from a coward who used to escape from reality and complain about the injustice of his fate to a warrior who dares to fight against his fate and fight for love and freedom.

Since its publication, *The Good Lord Bird* has attracted more and more attention in academic circles at home and abroad. Researches of *The Good Lord Bird* aboard can be classified into two types: textual analysis of the novel and journal reviews.

As for the textual analysis, one is the theme study, the other is theory study. One of the most important themes of *The Good Lord Bird* is mobility, uncertainty and reconstruction of gender and history. Yuan-Chin Chang in his *Gender, Race, Mobility and Performance in James McBride's The Good Lord Bird* discusses the little slave, Onion's passing gender and performance, exploring the plurality and hybridity of performed identities in *The Good Lord Bird*, mentioning performance, mobility, fluid and constant change of the novel [1]. Then, Gerald David Naughton in his *Posthistorical fiction and postracial passing in James McBride's The Good Lord Bird* examines *The Good Lord Bird* from the perspective of Post-historicism regarding to factors of post-historical novels and postracial passing [2]. It mentions that the ambiguities between factors of post-historical novels and postracial passing structure in James McBride's eo-slave narrative, displaying the the inherent ironies of race, gender, and historical construction. Both studies focus on the changing identity of the protagonist Henry, revealing the confusion caused by slavery.

Journal reviews include the comparative study and the appreciation of historical construction. Researches aboard of *The Good Lord Bird* have received positive reviews to mixed reviews from critics. Reviewers compare this novel to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, finding the similarities and differences between them. In a review for *Salon*, Laura Miller [3] explores the moral awakening of Finn and the journey of Henry in these two books, pointing to their similar growth process in the whole story. Héctor Tobar [4] in the *Los Angeles Times*, revealing the defects of this novel, noted the lack of humanity of *The Good Lord Bird* in comparison to *Huckleberry Finn*. As for the originality of *The Good Lord Bird*, novelist Amity Gaige states that James McBride successfully changes real historical events into fiction without boredom and dullness, which is a rare combination both breezy and sharp.

Researches of *The Good Lord Bird* in China are at the stage of germination because of its short publication time. As a whole, there are 4 papers related this book based on the CNKI and Wanfang Database, and two of them are translation orientated papers, which are not introduced here.

For one thing, it is the introduction of *The Good Lord Bird*. As a newly published work aboard, this novel hasn't aroused people's attention in China. In 2013, Chen Yanying in her *A Mixture of History and Fantasy* firstly gave a brief introduction of this book to the public in *Journal of Literature and Art*. She presents James McBride's life, a rough sketch of this novel and the originality of this award-winning work. This indeed provides scholars an effective way to know and study *The Good Lord Bird*.

For another thing, it is theme study of *The Good Lord Bird*. Li Qiaohui in her *The Good Lord Bird: the Path to Black Freedom* analyzes different attitudes to freedom of black people before the Civil War, reveals reasons for the failure of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and points out the importance of black awakening [5]. This is a more in-depth study of *The Good Lord Bird*. It discovers the disjunction between Blacks and John Brown's Abolition Movement, indicating the importance of writing to black people.

Although the studies on *The Good Lord Bird* have made some achievements, the domestic attention to *The Good Lord Bird* is insufficient, which leaves lots of room for scholars to interpret. Therefore, by interpreting *The Good Lord Bird* from the Ethical Literary Criticism, this paper will enable people to understand the novel more profoundly.

Ethical Literary Criticism

Ethical Literary Criticism is a literary criticism method put forward by professor Nie Zhenzhao of Central China Normal University in 2004, which has been improved continuously since then. In his opinion, it is which is "a critical theory that reads, analyzes and interprets literature from the perspective of ethics so as to identify its ethical nature and moral teaching function" [6]. It is needless to say that this literary criticism exerts great importance on foreign literary circles in China, which has once again narrowed the distance between literature and reality. Literary ethical criticism takes the imaginary art world as the object to study the so-called ethical connotation of literary works, that is, whether the relations between people, people and society, and people and nature described and expressed in the works conform to the recognized ethical standards of that society and era.

Ethical Literary Criticism is a method of literary criticism that reads, analyzes and interprets literary works from the perspective of ethics. It regards moral and ethical factors as the core factors of literature, and attaches great importance to the educational function of literature and the moral responsibility of critics [7]. In the view of literary ethics criticism, it is the moral and ethical factors that really distinguish human beings from beasts and form the essence of human beings. The most basic ethical consciousness makes writers have the impulse and desire to educate others and try to make others have the same ethical consciousness as themselves. This function is education. Teaching is the essential attribute of literature. There is no literature without the teaching function. In the theory of Ethical Literary Criticism, ethics mainly refers to the social system, the ethical relations and the ethical order between people and society. In specific literary works, the core content of ethics is the accepted and recognized ethical order formed between man and man, man and society, and

man and nature. It also includes the moral concepts formed on the basis of this order and the norms that maintain it. People form different ethical identities in different ethical environments. Status is not only a symbol of people, but also carries the responsibilities, obligations and rights stipulated by the ethical environment at that time.

Ethical identity is composed of identity and ethical environment. From the beginning of human society, people have a variety of identities, and ethical identity is composed of identity and ethical environment. In many literary works, the emergence of ethical problems is often related to the change of ethical identity, which will make the characters in some social rules trouble. Therefore, characters in literature always face ethical dilemmas. In literary criticism, literary ethical criticism focuses on the analysis of the ethical identity of characters. In the process of reading literature, we will find that almost all ethical problems are often related to ethical identity.

The family relationship is not only a marriage and blood relationship, but also an ethical relationship. Family ethics is the basis of social ethics. It is called *tianlun* because of its natural characteristics, and *Renlun* because of its social characteristics. Love is the link that maintains family ethics, love is the highest value standard of family ethics. Therefore, love is based on the premise that an individual has a clear family ethical identity and can fully own and interpret the responsibilities, obligations and rights of different ethical identities.

Moreover, Ethical dilemma is a contradictory situation of moral principles, including spiritual conflict of moral obligation. It happens in certain situations where people who follow certain principles may violate another, which is also known as the moral paradox. Ethical dilemmas may lead to responses to moral codes or ethical systems to deal with this paradox. At this point, people must make their own moral choices. Ethical choice is the choice of human nature, an important difference between humans and animals, and the "source of human rationality".

Henry Shackleford's Identical Dilemma in *The Good Lord Bird*

In *The Good Lord Bird*, it is clear to see the physical and mental transformation of little slave Henry from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism. On the one hand, Henry ties himself to gender dilemma, which is to disguise as a girl or to be a boy. On the other hand, Henry gets himself into social dilemma, which is to choose to be a slave or a free man.

Henry Shackleford's Gender Dilemma

Born as a boy, Henry disguises as a girl for many years in *The Good Lord Bird*. Generally speaking, due to different gender roles, men and women

have different characteristics in many aspects, such as posture, manner, tone of voice and manner. After taken away by John Brown from the slave-holder, Henry is dressed up and treated as a girl for his curly hair, fair skin and girly features. When quarreling with others, he could use his tears to get sympathy to have the upper hand. He could use the girl's identity to swindle without the physical labor of other slaves. In times of danger, someone always stands up for him and helps him out. He not only needn't fight dangerous battles, but sometimes could run away as a deserter. These are the changes that woman's identity brings to him. That is the reason why Henry persists in the woman identity for many years, which seems to be easier for him to survive in that world. At the beginning of the story, Henry has admitted that he has posed as a girl for 17 years. However, his chronicler claimed that it was not until 1947 that people around Henry noticed that he is a boy. That means Henry persists in this disguise for decades.

Henry's gender transformation is a slow gradual process. As time goes on, Henry's inner masculinity begins to emerge. His first thought of being a man happens when he met the whore Pie. Pie is so beautiful that Henry fell in love with her at first sight. Henry imagined marrying pie and protecting her a million times. When he finally plucks up courage to confess to Pie, Pie is not in the room coincidentally. The next time, Henry wants to be a man because of some heroic acts of black people. In Missouri, Henry saw the heroic acts of the black people who fought against Slavery, especially Sibonia goes to her death unflinchingly, which gives Henry a shock in heart. Before execution, Sibonia was braver than a man. When everyone came to the gallows, Sibonia stepped forward to set an example for others. Faced with a frightened young man, she grabbed his collar and pushed him to stand up, she said "Be a man" [2]. Her calm righteousness has caused a lot of disturbance among the crowd, including Henry. From then on, Henry has really begun to think about Slavery, real freedom, self, death and a series of other issues. Another heroic character is Harriet Tubman, who is a prominent female soldier of the abolition movement in the United States.

In the history about Slavery in America, there have been at least 250 recorded black plots and insurrections. This fact leaves no doubt that the organized struggle for freedom is neither 'uncommon' nor 'rare,' but a regular and constant occurrence of life in the old south" [8]. Tubman tells Henry that heroic outward acts are important, but the inner mind must also accept changes. "But dying as your true self is always better" [2]. Later, the affected Henry repeatedly expresses his desire and determination to be himself and be a brave man, and begins to think about his life and the freedom of black people from the bottom of his heart. These are just signs of Henry's inner growth and changes, because he didn't take off the girl's disguise.

In his relationship with Brown's daughter Annie, Henry also has a new understanding of skin color. Brown's daughter never discriminated against him, chatting and talking with him like a friend. It makes the Onion realize that the heart is important and the appearance is not as important as people say. But the Onion still dares not tell Annie his true nature. At last, what really shakes Henry is the death of John Brown. John Brown is a god-being in Henry's mind, but Henry himself failed to tell Brown that he is a boy. All of these show Henry's hesitation and the gender dilemma.

As a whole, Henry's identity changed in several aspects: the slave, the free man, and the teacher. Among them, he has assumed the social status of girls for about seventy years in his life. The reasons for this long-term disguise are very complicated. One of the important reasons is his own character defects.

Henry's parents died at an early age and they are absent from Henry's crucial period of character development. Everyone has his own ethical identity, but he is born without some kind of ethical identity, which means that he is deprived of relevant rights and obligations, as well as lack of social recognition and due dignity and security. The lack of ethical identity will certainly bring anxiety and pain to people. As a young black boy, Henry lost his mother in his childhood. And then, as a teenager, he lost his father, becoming an orphan totally. Without parents to rely on, Henry becomes a little cunning and childish under the harsh living conditions. For example, he thinks that white people can be fooled, because black people seem to move ahead of white people in Henry's opinion. Blacks consider every possibility and make sure that every lie to satisfy the white people. These were Henry's first ideas about slavery, an incomplete idea.

As a growing teenager, Henry's personal consciousness is constantly improved with the continuous enrichment of social experience, which is also the cause of his gender dilemma. His imperfect knowledge is embodied in two aspects: one is identity, the other is freedom. Henry has dressed as a girl for several years and gradually lost his true self. Being a girl not only gives him the chance to survive, but gives him too much convenience. Although he just looks like a girl in appearance, his inner desire and personality are the same as those of a boy. The inner inconstancy caused the conversion and hesitation between the two identities. In addition, Henry, lacking experience in life, equates freedom with food and clothing, which is a superficial understanding. This realization made Henry hesitant about freedom. He firstly wants to return to his master's tavern, believing that is his freedom. Secondly Henry is persuaded to follow John Brown because he has nowhere to go. Then he saw the slaves' struggle for freedom in the slave states and began to think deeply about the meaning of freedom. Finally, he fights not only for his own freedom, but for the freedom

of the majority of blacks. By the end of the story, Henry has undergone a complete transformation, realizing his freedom and becoming a real man.

Henry Shackleford's Social Dilemma

Henry's social status, to be sure, is a lowly slave, a octoroon black. Living in Dutch Henry Sherman's tavern, Henry was born as a slave. Because his family are slaves, thus Henry never knows what freedom is. He is brought up to believe that serving white people is a natural thing and never thinks of struggling against his master Dutch Henry Sherman or Slavery. This explains why, after being taken away by John Brown, Henry was intent on running away.

Henry's social dilemma is to be a slave or a free man. The contradictions are becoming increasingly acute between abolitionists and slave-holders during that time. The slave who chooses freedom cannot enjoy freedom yet, but must give up the relative comfortable life as a slave [5]. Abolitionists did not have adequate supplies or weapons, like John Brown. That means that he must snatch food from slave-holders. John Brown and his followers have to sleep in the open without food or warm clothing. Once slaves left their masters and joined the abolitionist movement, they would be frightened and even die. In this case, although some people chose to follow Brown in the abolitionist movement, some blacks stayed away from him for fears of being implicated. This is Henry's early state. As a slave, Henry grew up working in his master's Dutch Henry's tavern. Although there is no freedom, it can provide food and clothing in Henry's opinion. After running away with John, Henry suffers hungry, cold, and homeless. It is no doubt that Henry said "I was hungrier than I ever was a slave" [2]. The Onion is only twelve years old, and has never left his master's tavern. Limited by his own knowledge, Young Henry is only concerned with food and clothing, and he doesn't understand the cruel way that white people punished runaway slaves. On his way to escape, Henry meets a slave Bob. Bob is so envious of Henry that he asks him to introduce him to John Brown. In Bob's life experience, he holds that the loss of freedom was the saddest thing. "If I could get Old John Brown to favor me and carry me to freedom, why, I'd dress up as a girl every day for ten years" [2]. Bob, a married slave, has seen the dark and evil of society and the sad fate of runaway slaves. The difference in their understanding of freedom stems from their differences in age and experience [5].

The change in John's thinking about freedom was a gradual process. The contradictions in his mind are best reflected in Missouri and in Virginia. In Missouri, Henry meets the prostitute Pie. It is Pie that first gave Henry the idea of love. For the first time, Henry firmly holds the idea of leaving the slave states to live a happy life with Pie. As the plot continues, Henry really saw the evil of slavery. The slaves not

only lived a miserable life, but also suffered the threat of death. When the slaveholders heard that some of the slaves might rebel, they ordered nine slaves to be hanged without finding the rebels. White people cherish their lives, but treat the lives of slaves like animals. In that hanging, Onion saw the heroic action of Sibonia. Moved Onion have expressed his desire and determination to be himself and a heroic man many times. After Sibonia's death, Onion realizes that the oppression of slavery is not the reason why he pursues freedom. It is his heart that longs for freedom. In Virginia, Henry follows John Brown again to fight battles throughout the length and breadth of the country. Later, they travel to Canada to attend the abolitionist conference, hoping to win the support of the participants. But no one wants to sign the agreement, as John Brown would not reveal the details of the uprising. At that moment, Henry stands up and says, "I'll follow the Captain to the ends of the earth! Count me in!" [2]. This is John's true feeling. For one thing, it shows his trust in John Brown; For another thing, it displays his support for slave's freedom. After John Brown's rebellion failed, Henry became a free man with the help of other abolitionists.

As a whole, the emergence of Henry's social dilemma is ultimately due to the absence of freedom and social disapproval. Ethical Literary Criticism attaches importance to the analysis of the ethical environment of literature and stresses that literary criticism should return to the ethical field of history. It should interpret literary works from the ethical standpoint at that time, to find out the objective ethical reasons for the production of literature and to explain why it is established. People should analyze the ethical factors that lead to social events and affect the fate of characters in the works, and explain the events, characters and literary problems from the perspective of ethics [9].

To some extent, *The Good Lord Bird* can be regarded as an abolitionist novel on the eve of the American Civil War. At that time, there are two economic systems existing in America, one is capitalist industrial and commercial system, and the other is plantation economic system. The north needs a lot of free labor, but most slaves are locked up in the south because of Slavery. The existence of Slavery greatly promotes the development of plantation economy in the south, but hinders the development of capitalist industry and commerce in the north with free labor force. However, the founding of the United States is based on the freedom and equality of the bourgeoisie, and it does not allow the long-term legal existence of Slavery. In the southern plantations, black slaves live a worse life than cattle and horses. They work 18 to 20 hours a day and are often beaten by slave owners. They are traded in the market like animals. Sometimes they wear fetters to pick cotton in plantations. This barbaric and cruel system aroused the strong resistance of the slaves.

Unable to endure the cruel rule of slave owners, Slaves fled plantations, killed supervisors, burned plantations, and even staged armed uprisings. Sibonia's uprising in *The Good Lord Bird* is a revolt against Slavery. Black slaves have held many uprisings for liberation. Their struggle has also won the sympathy and support of the American people, especially the north people. Since the 1930s, mass slavery campaign has been carried out in the United States. But most of these uprisings failed for various reasons. The social environment encourages black people not to rebel, to be cautious, just like Henry. At the same time, the northern states also launched a vigorous campaign to abolish slavery, in which workers, peasants, blacks and conscientious bourgeois intellectuals joined. They gave speeches everywhere, published books and pamphlets, exposed and criticized slavery, advocating the liberation of slaves.

The opposition of interests between abolitionist and slave-holders leads to the escalation of conflicts, which may prompt the slave owners to impose more discipline and oppression on the slaves. The slaves in Miss Abbey's brothel toil every day without freedom, live in squalid shacks and are worried about being beaten by overseers constantly. On hearing that they were going to rebel, the judge hanged nine black slaves. This is why the slaves in that world at that time did not have a mind of their own, just like Henry. Their survival is difficult and there is no deeper pursuit to consider.

CONCLUSION

In short, James McBride gives black slave Henry a multiple meaning to interpret. By the analysis of Henry's identical dilemma in *The Good Lord Bird*, it can be clearly seen that how the little slave Henry undergoes a radical change to a boy and a free man. Study on Henry's identical dilemma also sheds lights on the alienation of human beings, especially the American black people, caused by the false values of the priority of material wealth. At the same time, this paper discovers the incompetence and blindness of the black slave's ethical choices in the context of Slavery, represent the loneliness and alienation faced by the black slaves on the eve of the American Civil War. Therefore, it is not only a dilemma for a certain man, symbolizing all people in a dehumanized society with their aspirations and frustrations, but the American society filled with the shattering of dreams pursuing freedom, poverty, happiness and self-recognition.

The most inspiring line in the declaration of independence is that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." However, in such a free country, African Americans have been struggling between slavery and freedom. Many works by American African-American writers like James McBride show the evolution of African American

social life and spiritual life in the past 100 years with profound and delicate techniques, compassionate feelings and strong consciousness of national culture existence. This process is not only the treatment of black Americans, but also the process of their overall racial psychology gradually towards freedom. As the descendants of slaves who were destroyed and tortured by the colonial rule, African Americans must correct the historical memory of slavery that has been covered up and even distorted, because such rewriting is an important prerequisite for the culture of minorities or disadvantaged groups to obtain its own legitimacy.

REFERENCES

1. McBride, J., & Sergie, M. A. (2017). NAFTA's economic impact. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24.
2. McBride, J. (2013). *The Good Lord Bird*. New York: Riverhead Books.
3. Miller, L. (2013). Rachel Kushner's *Ambitious* New Novel Scars Male Critics. *Salon*.
4. Buggedo, G., Tobar, E., Aguirre, M., Gonzalez, H., Godoy, J., Lira, M. T., ... & Castro, J. (2013). The implementation of an analgesia-based sedation protocol reduced deep sedation and proved to be safe and feasible in patients on mechanical ventilation. *Revista Brasileira de terapia intensiva*, 25(3), 188-196.
5. Li, Q. (2017). *The Good Lord Bird: the Way to Black Freedom*. *New Perspectives on World Literature*, 2:52-60.
6. Nie, Z. (2014). *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
7. Fan, X., & Lei, D. (2014). Theoretical construction and practice of literary ethical criticism: an introduction to ethical literary criticism by professor nie zhenzhao, 3:168-172.
8. Aptheker, H. (1958). *Slavery and Capitalism*. Trans. Yang, Jingyuan. Shanghai: Life, Reading, New Knowledge Joint Bookstore.
9. Nie, Z. (2010). *Ethical Literary Criticism: Basic Theories and Terms*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 1:12-22.