

Introduction to Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century

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## Introduction to *Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century*

### Zhenzhao NIE and Biwu SHANG

*Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century*, guest edited for CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/>> by Zhenzhao Nie and Biwu Shang, is intended to reflect on fiction from an ethical perspective. As defined by Nie, ethical literary criticism is "a critical theory that approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics ... to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works" (Nie, 84; see also Shang, "Ethical," "The Rise"; Baker and Shang). *Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century* contains the following articles.

In "McCarthy's *The Road* and Ethical Choice in a Post-Apocalyptic World" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/2>> Jingjing Guo analyses ethical choice and its implications in McCarthy's *The Road*. After examining the deterioration of the ethical context and the prevalence of evil reflected in cannibalism, Guo highlights the father's ethical choice and dilemma. Different from most others, the father chooses to keep alive to protect his son, and to stay man and stay good in a physically devastated and morally bankrupted world. Through discussing the meaning of the metaphor "fire" and "carrying the fire," Guo further explores the significance of the father's choice in passing the "fire" to a new world.

In "Perspectives of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/3>> Hui Su examines Fae Myenne Ng's and Gish Jen's novels. In the novels, the protagonists make different decisions: in *Steer Toward Rock* Jack after displacement in China adopts US-American identity and in *Mona in the Promised Land* Mona, a second generation Chinese American, selects Jewish identity. Owing to their different situations, the two protagonists reflect challenges of identity building in the case of the "Other" in US-American culture and society. Su argues that Ng and Jen, although varying in their perspectives, suggest enlightening views in their configurations of identity building in order to re-examine US-American literature and culture.

In "Indigeneity, Diaspora, and Ethical Turn in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/4>> Hsinya Huang discusses indigeneity *vis-à-vis* diaspora, two concepts often used as if they were necessarily antagonistic and antithetical to one another. While in diaspora studies Native people are marginalized, Huang resituates the figure of the Native to the core of diasporic discussion by tracing the movement, migration, or scattering of Native people from their established or ancestral homeland. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's life narrative in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Huang advances the concept of the ethical turn in diaspora studies by questioning the master narrative regarding the diasporas. Huang argues that the othered Native should be re-deemed to the center of diaspora studies not as alterity within the self, but as a subject that comes to meet us face-to-face.

In "Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/5>> Nora Berning analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel through the lens of a narrative ethics of alterity. Focusing on the notion of alterity, Berning argues that a specific turn-of-the-century ethics emerges in contemporary fictions of migration in general and in intercultural novels in particular. An ethical genre in its own right, such twenty-first century fictions as *Americanah* generate a particular kind of ethical knowledge that revolves around questions of identity and alterity and around individual and collective perceptions of self and other. By addressing the interplay of "the ethics of the told" and "the ethics of the telling" in the novel, Berning contributes to a conceptualization of narrative ethics of alterity in fictions of migration highlighting their ethical and political value in an age of migration and globalization.

In "Human Cloning as the Other in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/6>> Wen Guo analyzes Kazuo Ishiguro's novel with focus on Ishiguro's analogy between human cloning and people of marginality in contemporary society. Guo discusses the novel's ambience of doubt and suspense and elaborates on how the theme of otherness is addressed by Ishiguro's mock-realism in a landscape of science fiction. Further, Guo analyses the "unhomely" Hailsham of the novel, the clones' self-pursuit, and their ethical attitudes. Guo argues that in Ishiguro's novel a person's ethical choices are determined by his/her situation which confirms Ishiguro's beliefs with regard to one's responsibility, loyalty, and destiny by his/her ethical choices.

In "Ethics of Counter-Narrative in DeLillo's *Falling Man*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/7>> Qingji He analyzes Don DeLillo's counter-narrative in his post-9/11 novel *Falling Man*. He's objective is to show how ethical dimensions function fundamentally in formulating an appropriate counter-narrative and why DeLillo's counter-narrative echoes views expressed in his "In the Ruins of the Future." He argues that DeLillo's counter-narrative entails the necessity of ethical consciousness and responsibility. It is Giorgio Morandi's still life paintings instead of media representation that become pivotal in Lianne's transformative and redemptive process after the terrorist attack. Similarly, David Janiak's performance art and Richard Drew's picture of "The

Falling Man" help her stand ethically apart from what happens and to disbelieve, acts which both Keith and the terrorist Hammad are incapable of.

In "Ethical Dilemma and Nihilism in Munro's 'Passion'"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/8>> Xiyinq Liu and Hongbin Dai discuss ethical issues in Alice Munro's short story "Passion." When attempting to escape the shackles of multiple ethical identities, the short story's protagonist Grace encounters dilemmas and in consequence makes wrong decisions with regard to the principle of ethics. The other protagonist of the story, Neil, commits suicide demonstrating that he breaks off all relationship with the world. Liu and Dai argue that Neil's death deconstructs Grace's ethical dilemmas and thus the narrative constructs a sense of nihilism. Liu and Dai posit that Munro's short story reveals the humility, fragility, and complexity of human nature.

In "Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's 金城一紀 (Watershed Above) and Kaneshi-ro's 金城一紀 (GO)"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/9>> Inseop Shin and Jooyoung Kim discuss the ethics of father and son as they appear in two novels by Kaisei Ri and Kazuki Kaneshiro. In both narratives the protagonists suffer from ethical conflicts with their fathers during their struggle to find their identities. The father is portrayed as a figure who determines the ethical choices the protagonists face when they pursue their own lives. Shin and Kim argue that Korean Japanese fiction is a narrative that folds these choices back on oneself. This ultimately connects with the universal theme of literature, namely that each book urges its readers to reexamine their own ethics when they encounter others and their ethics.

In "Ethical Discourse and Narrative Strategies in Yan's 老师, 好美 (To My Teacher, with Love)"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/10>> Zhuo Wang discusses the way in which narrative converges with ethics at the site of a radical "ethical environment" in Geling Yan's novel. Wang focuses on how the novel's first-person confessional narration, third-person reflective narration, and online narration dialogue with and interrogate one another working together to bring forth Yan's reconsideration of the ethical dimensions of her text. Wang argues that the novel's personal and social ethics are embodied multiple narrative voices which altogether reflect on the close relationship between novels and ethical discourse in contemporary Chinese society.

In "Ethical Transformations in Yan's 陆犯焉识 (The Criminal Lu Yanshi)"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/11>> Weihong Zhu uses ethical literary criticism to explain the reason for the change in attitude which the novel's hero undergoes. Zhu argues that in Geling Yan's novel the turning point lies in the protagonist's realization of his inner "animal" factor. Subjected to severe tests by the extreme circumstances in a northwest prison in China, this realization helps him transform from a proud man to a humble human being, so that he learns to love his family. Although set in a grand historical background of important political events, Yan's novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* is not political. Disguised under a romantic story there is a serious inquiry into the nature of humanity.

In "Ethical Dilemma and Ethical Epiphany in McEwan's *The Children Act*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/12>> Biwu Shang attempts to explore the ethical nature of the child's welfare in Ian McEwan's novel. Shang examines the various legal cases processed by the British High Court Judge Fiona Maye and the blood transfusion case of Adam Henry in particular. Shang argues that Maye adopts ethical criteria throughout the cases she deals with. More significantly, Adam's blood transfusion case and his consequential death lead Maye to her ethical epiphany related to the child's welfare: life is the fundamental welfare of the child and to protect the child's welfare is, first and foremost, to protect and sustain his life and a judge's duty should not end in the courtroom walls, but be extended to the entire society.

In "Hesse's *Steppenwolf* as Modern Ethical Fiction"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/13>> Michał Koza discusses the significance of "ethical fiction" in modern literature. Such fiction, according to Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, are not only milestones of ethical thinking, but more importantly offer a narrative for self-creation as an ethical subject. Harry Haller, the protagonist of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, is a man living on the border of modern subjectivity embodying a cultural and existential crisis. Koza argues that "ethical reading" enables one to see the relation between philosophy and literature that not only enter in a dialogue with each other, but also share their crises, with the crisis of *mimesis* at the fore.

And in "Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's *Pow!*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/14>> Zhenzhao Nie examines in Mo Yan's novel the protagonist's experience of self-discovery in the process of natural to ethical choice. Nie's analysis of the novel rests on the theoretical framework of "ethical literary criticism" he developed. In the novel Luo's life is narrated in retrospect when he is attempting to become the disciple of a monk and although Luo does not find what he is searching for in religion, he arrives at a new stage in his life which is based on ethical principles. The young Luo is unable to make ethical choices as his decisions stem from his "animal factor." His craving of meat is a metaphor of the novel for materialism. Towards the end of the narrative, Luo's attempts at firing mortar shells are a symbolic gesture of breaking away from the past and of beginning a new life.

Compiled by Wenying Jiang *Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century* includes a "Selected Bibliography for the Study of Fiction and Ethics" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/15>>.

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