



Ethical Identity Construction in *A Father's Law* from the Perspective of Dual Narrative Progression Strategy

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Abstract

The exploration of identity is one of the major themes in Richard Wright's works. Focused on the ethical tragedy of Ruddy and Tom, *A Father's Law*, the latest work of Richard Wright, not only continues its exploration of this theme but also reflects the challenges of constructing black identity in the modern era. From the perspective of the Dual Narrative Progression Strategy, this paper focuses on Tommy's ethical dilemma in the overt plot of the story and the implicit narrative undercurrent underlying its development. The underlying narrative explores Tommy's compromised ethical identity as an African American and reveals that Tommy, driven by an uncontrollable rational will, attempts to eradicate his "whiteness" and embrace his "blackness" through acts of homicide. Composed, Tommy confesses and resorts to the authority of media discourse, accusing the legacy of racism. This act reconstructs his ethical identity. With Tommy's ethical tragedy, Wright reveals the problematic situation of cultural loss and identity crisis faced by African Americans, presenting a cautionary tale and urging readers to address these urgent issues.

Keywords

Richards Wright, ethical identity, dual narrative progression, *A Father's Law*

1. Introduction

As an important writer in the history of African-American literature, Richard Wright's most creative period he was concentrated in the 1940s and 1950s, with the marked imprint of that time. After WWII, the whole world began to be concerned about people's identity. During this crucial transition period, the issue of African-American identity also became the focus of worldwide attention. Wright's *Native Son* provides a key to revealing the mental state of African Americans in the 1940s and explores the identity crisis and its construction of black people in American racial society (Pang & Liu, 2013). Wright's later works, such as *The Long Dream* (1958), *The Outsider* (1953), and *Savage Holiday* (1955), though too existential, their focal point is the discussion of the character's ethical identity as an African American. *A Father's Law*, published by Wright's daughter Julia in 2008, not only maintains Wright's consistent narrative style, but centers on black middle-class families living in white communities in the United States, revealing the difficulties faced by African Americans in the new era. Julia wrote in the introduction, "In *A Father's Law* -- his attempt at psychological thriller--my father goes into one of his favorite fields of study since the portrayal of Bigger Thomas: the psychology of murder, i.e., the sociological, racial, political, cultural, and historical forces that, given a certain context, opportunity, and lack of communication, can lead to the act of murder in most of us" (Wright, 2008). Told in a limited third-person perspective, the novel is about the story of a father who rises to the police chief and discovers that all the clues lead back to his son while investigating a murder. In this novel, the

relationship between father and son is full of contradictions and paradoxes, swinging between the scales of love and control, trust and suspicion (Tan & Luo, 2016).

It ends abruptly at the moment when the case is about to break through and the son reveals his crime to the media, leaving an unsettled ending. What will be Tommy's eventual fate? How about the unlucky and miserable Ruddy? The unresolved story gives the reader much space to imagine but also provokes rumination. Considering the current research situation, the existing papers mainly study the tragedy between Tommy and Ruddy from the perspective of Neo-Historicism, and though some scholars interpret *A Father's Law* through Literary Ethics Criticism, yet stay in the overt plot interpretation of Tommy and Mary's aborted marriage. Albeit the aftermath of racism and other issues lurking behind the development of the overt progression build a hidden ideographic track. Demonstrating Tommy's ethical dilemma, Wright reveals the psychological issues and the crisis of ethical identity construction faced by African Americans in the new era.

Therefore, this paper, based on the method of Literary Ethical Criticism, combining the ethical dilemma Tommy faces in the overt plot and the ethical predicament Tommy confronts due to the incompleteness of his ethical identity in the covert progression, explains Tommy's impulse to become a serial killer and the reasons for his public confession as well as his reconstruction of ethical identity through irreversible media writing. In the narrative undercurrent of the covert progression, Tommy's ethical identity has been emasculated. After learning about the history of the black race, Tommy, whose cultural roots have been eluded, finds that he has been living in the "white shadow". He has become a "black skin" man wearing a "white mask" deliberately put on by his father, Ruddy. Extremely angry, Tommy killed Brentwood Park community residents for revenge. Calmed down, Tommy realizes that he has committed a serious crime that is not allowed by ethics, chooses to surrender himself, and returns to humanity, an act that reconstructs his ethical identity.

2. Criminal Impulse: The Incompleteness of Ethical Identity in the Covert Progression

In *A Father's Law*, the reader draws a conclusion from the overt plot of Tommy and Marie's aborted marriage-- Tommy's criminality due to his caught in an ethical dilemma. However, in the covert progression of the ideographic track parallel to the overt plot, the incomplete ethical identity hidden under the pressure of the ethical dilemma in the overt plot is Tommy's real motive for his unlawful acts. In this narrative undercurrent, the Literary Ethical Criticism of Tommy's crime motive has a profound signification.

According to the overt plot, Tommy's contradictory ethical responsibilities brought about by his different ethical identities put him in an ethical dilemma, so Tommy, who was tortured by his conscience, chooses to kill to vent his agony. However, in the implicit narrative undercurrent hidden beneath the plot development, Tommy's motivation for the crime is attributed to his passive defective ethical identity as an African American. Influenced by his parents, Tommy is a devout Catholic, abiding by the ethical responsibilities of a believer. "Ethical identity is the premise of moral behavior and moral norms, which imposes constraints on moral subjects" (Nie, 2014). Tommy and Marie, both Catholics, fall in love at first sight. After their relationship continues for a year, Tommy plans to marry Marie, following the guidance of the Catholic Church. However, the routine medical examination before marriage finds that Mary has genetic syphilis, which makes Tommy startled and depressed. In the interpretation of the Catholic Pastoral Charter: "Unmarried men and women nurture their marriage covenant with holy love and with transferable love". This requires that unmarried men and women must remain pure, and for Tommy, a Catholic, to marry Mary, who has syphilis, would be an open contempt for the Catholic Church. Tommy, as Marie's fiancé, should realize his promise, which is not allowed by his identity as a Catholic. The overt plot shows that the contradictory ethical responsibilities lead Tommy into an ethical dilemma, causing him to make a wrong ethical choice. However, in the hidden narrative undercurrent, Tommy's crime motive has a deeper ethical explanation -- Tommy's passive incompleteness of ethical identity because of his father, Ruddy.

"The covert progression of narrative has strong concealability and indirectivity, and stylistic analysis focusing on linguistic details is conducive to exploring the thematic meaning that the relevant language choices implicitly express on this ideographic track, as well as to see the complex interaction of double or even triple ideographic tracks" (Shen, 2016). The scattered memories of Ruddy's youth in the novel seem to be independent of the development of the plot. However, these dark memories are not only the direct cause of Tommy's incomplete ethical identity but also the scrounge that leads Tommy to commit the ethical crime of killing white people. In his days before becoming a police officer, Ruddy had a "strong sense of race" (45), and when he failed to get a job, he "often cursed the world that rejected him" and wanted to "beat up the well-dressed, polished white people" (46). Ruddy even dreamed of one day

leading an army to conquer the big city of Chicago. “Shoot everyone who disrespects racial equality” (47). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois famously referred to the concept of “double consciousness”. He thinks that “double consciousness is a strange feeling... Always looking at himself through the eyes of others, measuring his soul by the measure of another world, which in turn looks upon the Negro with derisive contempt and pity. Black people have always felt a duality -- one American, the other black; Two souls, two thoughts, two ideals that constantly collide in the Negro’s mind; The Negro by his own indomitable strength has kept his body from being torn apart” (Du Bois, 2007). The obscure psychological descriptions in the article show that Ruddy, who suffered from the hardships of his youth, understood the nature of white supremacy in American society and was troubled by “double consciousness”.

With Ruddy’s success, on the surface, the shadow of racial consciousness no longer seems to be hanging over him, but in fact, Ruddy has not got rid of the torture of “double consciousness”, and his success gained by avoiding blackness has made him mired in the dilemma of the white gaze, which is a scourge on Tommy’s life. As his work began to get on track, Ruddy became increasingly successful in a secular sense. “Yes, in a word, he -- Rudolph Turner, the police chief, a person of color, a Catholic -- succeeded” (62). However, under the success, Ruddy often felt guilty. “But there was another deeper guilt lurking in his heart, and the thought of this guilt made him sweat” (72). On the surface, this can be interpreted as guilt over his criminal mind. But in fact, Ruddy’s panic lies in his avoidance of blackness, which breeds unspeakable anxiety. “The deliberate marginalization of black people also leads them to be unconsciously influenced by white people in their resistance to white people, and the internalization of this consciousness is more terrible than the suppression by force” (Cai & Zhou, 2018). Ruddy’s success is based on his internalization of the laws and ideas of whiteness, and his acceptance of the collective unconscious ways of racial discrimination in American society. He knew that to live well in American society, one had to play by the rules of white people. He discriminated against Ed Siegel because “he was Jewish, and if he had too much association with him, people would think he was too close to an unpopular minority group” (90), while with his boss Bill, Ruddy is very respectful and even names himself as a “bulldog” (56). Ruddy places himself in the ethical vortex of the white gaze, playing the role of the white man in charge. However, in the covert progression, the guilt and insidious shame generated by avoiding blackness hidden in his heart are getting deeper and deeper. Only by arresting criminals can he obtain a brief peace of mind.

Therefore, Ruddy, who suffers from “double consciousness”, emasculates Tommy’s knowledge of racial history in order to prevent Tommy from being plagued by racial consciousness. Ruddy follows the white father and son ethics to raise Tommy in the way that white fathers raise their sons. As a result, Tommy living in the “Garden of Eden” is ignorant of the dark side of the Northern myth, leading to Tommy’s cognitive disability, which also foils the tragedy below. Under the protection of his father, Tommy’s world is completely “white”. Living in the ideal world constructed by Ruddy, Tommy takes for granted that the myth of the urban North of America is true, unaware of the darkness behind the myth, and unaware of his own lack of ethical identity as a black man. Mary’s syphilis in the novel is like a scar on the body of African Americans who do not want to be touched. It is the symbol of the historical racial trauma of African Americans. It tears the ideal world of Tommy’s life and makes him realize with sadness that the black belt in the northern city has always been a hell on earth shrouded by disease and death. And, as Tommy investigates the black ghettoism, he learns everything Ruddy doesn’t want him to know, realizes that he has been seeing the world through a white veil, that he knows nothing about his own racial history, and that he discovers his own lack of ethical identity as a black man (Li, 2019). He hated that he had been cultivated into a “white shadow” by Ruddy, and even more hated that he had internalized white racist ideas, and hated those “whiteness” which suppressed him. Tommy could not help but angrily say: “Damn the world, damn people, damn things” (108), extremely hatred for society, Tommy, whose rational factor was out of control, killed the “whiteness” that oppressed him, searched for “blackness” and then issued his desperate protest.

3. Eliminating “Whiteness”: A Quest for Ethical Identity in Overt Progression

Unlike Ruddy, who is trapped in the white gaze dilemma, Tommy begins to “gaze back at” white society. In works with double or even triple ideographic tracks, the text of the text also produces different “meanings in the narrative process” at the same time (Shen, 2020). The title of the work, “Father’s Law”, in the development of the plot, symbolizes Ruddy’s strict enforcement of the law, while in combination with Tommy’s incomplete ethical identity in the covert procession, the title has a new significance, which presents the cultural fact of the son’s rebellion against the paternity (Ward, 2008), symbolizing Tommy’s rebellion against the “whiteness” that oppress black people.

When Tommy investigates the Brentwood community, he gazes at the white society and finds that the shiny white

community is actually filthy. The community was inhabited by rich and wealthy white people, including bank managers, company presidents, newspaper representatives, politicians, and many white social philanthropists. On the surface, the white families of Brentwood are enviable, with servants in their villas and their children playing freely on the grounds. However, after investigating Brentwood for a year, Tommy discovers that the real neighborhood is a hellhole of rape, murder, alcohol, gambling, and child molestation. “No. They’re just people having fun,” Tommy corrected his father. “They don’t feel guilty. That’s the most important thing. It is hard to catch a criminal without guilt” (96). The crimes Tommy finds in Brentwood overturn his previous cognition of society, and what makes him angry is that Brentwood’s crimes have never been exposed, and the white bourgeoisie maintains its image with its own power and money and enjoys all these privileges. Thus, he has seen through the nature of white crime and understands that the law is only a tool for white people who makes to discipline the poor. So, he is ashamed of his “whiteness”, understands that he is only the product of white cultural hegemony, and tries to get rid of it. In *A Father’s Law*, Tommy murders four people, Ernie Hendricks, Eva Lansdale, Charlie Beard, and a white woman. The first three people Tommy kills are all metaphors for the ethical discipline that their ethical identities represent.

First, the victims, Ernie Hendricks and Eva Lansdale, are Protestant and nuns, respectively. Their ethical identities represent the religion behind them. African Americans are more strongly religious than any other ethnic group in the United States and are more enthusiastic about their religious activities. Of course, African Americans, who had long been enslaved by white Americans, were no doubt also influenced by white religion. White Americans used religion as a spiritual means to enslave and paralyze African Americans (Long, 2016). Since the beginning of the American slave trade in the early 16th century, white people have been trying to use religion to control and discipline black people, so that they would admit their second-class status and are willing to be subordinate to white people. In literary works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by white writer Mrs. Stowe, or in novels written by African American writers, there is no shortage of black people who are paralyzed by religion.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Uncle Tom, under the discipline of Christian doctrine, does not want to rebel against the vicious slave owner, but places his hope in the afterlife. When faced with being sold by a white man, he counsels his wife, “God is everywhere, including there, so don’t think it’s not so bad” (Stowe, 1851). It can be seen that under harsh racial oppression, religion brings only dull and temporary paralysis and escape to black people (Xing & Fu, 2022). Moreover, school and religion are important ways for the white ruling class to seize the hearts of black people, and they will instill the ideology of white people in the mainstream of society into the minds of black people so that they will always stand at the commanding heights of power (Wang, 2000). Charles Chestnut described the Stockholm effect of black people on white people in *Marrow of Bones*, and this kind of abnormal psychological representation is also related to the white ideology of religious indoctrination. Religion also leads to dysfunctional parent-child relationships in black families. In Wright’s famous work *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas’s mother takes religion as spiritual sustenance, ignoring her son’s psychological state, she believes that religion is the source of all power, and belief in religion can get the happiness you want. But she does not realize that it is this that makes Bigger gradually distance himself from her and even hate her (Zhang, 2019). The image of this mother also has something in common with Agne in *A Father’s Law*. When Ruddy reveals his estranged relationship with Tommy to his wife, Agne advises Ruddy to go to a priest instead of having a heart-to-heart conversation with Tommy to resolve the estrangement between father and son. Religion is the survival ethic and law of the white people in the society of WASP culture, and it is entirely for the white people. In contrast to history, although religion has brought spiritual sustenance to blacks, it has not fully adapted to the survival ethics of blacks. And no matter how much black people add to religion the characteristics of their own names, it is still “white”. Tommy was one of the victims of religious ethics. Tommy, who was keen by nature, saw through his ethical dilemma the religious oppression and spiritual mutilation of black people in history, so he premeditated the killing of Protestants and nuns.

Second, the third victim, Charlie Beard, has a special status, special in terms of being Tommy’s classmate and his inseparable white friend. By killing Charlie, Tommy is giving voice to the muted, who are under the “white shadow” oppression, and protests against the coercion of white culture. Gorden, in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*, defines self-hatred in this way: “Self-hatred refers both to the individual’s shame for having a characteristic of the group to which he belongs, whether real or imagined and to the individual’s aversion to other members of the group who have the same characteristic” (Gorden, 2020). Charlie and Tommy are alike in every way except for the color of their skin. Charlie’s family lives in Brentwood, but he is unaware of the evil in the community, and like Tommy, he lives in “the Garden of Eden” created by his father, Charlie is also a poor man with cognitive disabilities. Tommy kills him partly because Charlie is helping his father investigate the first two murders in Brentwood, but more because Tommy

sees the same traits in Charlie as he does in himself. Tommy was a victim of self-hatred. He felt anxious and self-resentful about his incomplete black ethical identity, his deep-rooted “whiteness” and his gradually awakening “double consciousness”. He projects this anxiety onto his own alien brother, Charlie, and kills him, violating the taboo of sibling mutilation in an ethical sense. In a deeper sense, Tommy hurts not only his interracial brother Charlie but also the man who has been forcibly brainwashed by white culture and holds the white American dream.

Finally, Tommy chooses an ethical content such as Brentwood to eradicate his “whiteness” in an attempt to restructure his ethical identity as an African American. After the return of his rational factor, Tommy realizes that “excitement is especially the weapon of the incompetent” (Fanon, 2019). In the game between rational will and free will, Tommy’s conscience gradually awakens. That part of his awakened goodness haunts him, culminating in the accidental killing of a white lady. Tommy realizes that in constructing his incomplete ethical identity, he has taken an inappropriate approach to protest, with the fact of crime hanging over his head like the “Sword of Dakomos”. He tried to appease his conscience by going to prison for robbery, but with Ede’s encouraging care, he made the right ethical choice. Tommy uses the power of media writing to surrender to society, thereby reconstructing his ethical identity.

4. Voice Sin to Warn: The Reconstruction of Ethical Identity in the Dual Tracks

In *A Father’s Law*, Ruddy and Tommy’s dysfunctional father-son relationship runs through the novel, they represent black people growing up in different times. The injustice suffered by Ruddy in his youth made him hate the racial society in the United States. However, with his success, Ruddy, who suffered from “double consciousness”, slowly internalized the racism that oppressed him, and even willingly became a defender of white laws. In the ethical content of American racial society, Ruddy’s youth experience strips him of his sense of resistance, and his behavior and thought represent the pathological psychology of white people producing Stockholm’s reaction. Different from Ruddy’s self-abandonment, Tommy, from the “white mask” black man deliberately cultivated by Ruddy, through killing the “white shadow” that oppressed him and returning to his humanity in the wake of his surrender, finds “blackness” and responds to the psychological anxiety caused by the identity construction crisis without being humble or overbearing, thus becoming a new era black man completely different from Ruddy and reconstructs his own ethical identity. Ruddy has experienced rampant racial discrimination in the South and has also witnessed the desperate life of black people during the economic depression in the United States, so he understands that as a second-class citizen, black people must obey the law of white people. He chooses to be silent. Tommy is a new generation of black people who have grown up in the post-modern era of the United States. After knowing the suffering history of the black race, Tommy does not choose silence and internalization like Ruddy, but bravely rebels against it, even at the cost of violating ethical taboos to find his own identity in American society.

In *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon writes of Juan the Negro, “The poor Negro is in such agony that he has only one solution left to prove his whiteness to them” (Fanon, 2019). Ruddy is in the process of constantly proving his “whiteness” to the white people, which causes his confused anxiety. In order to cater to white people, Ruddy shuns black roots culture and becomes a typical masked African American. However, although he has an enviable job and a happy family, and lives a bright life, the inner unease generated by the avoidance of black roots culture torments his psychology all the time. Wright uses Ruddy, a black father figure with extreme contrast between appearance and heart, to reveal the psychological crisis of black Americans to readers. Ruddy is also very conflicted about Tommy’s feelings, he is proud of his son becoming a student at the University of Chicago, but is always afraid of Tommy’s insights. Because Ruddy, who suffers from “double consciousness” poisoning, senses Tommy’s difference from him from the beginning, Tommy’s opinions on social issues always make Ruddy break out in a cold sweat. Ruddy loves Tommy, but the love is the missing love of a black man through the eyes of a white father. Ruddy, who lives in the “white shadow”, attempts to bleach Tommy’s “black soul” so that Tommy can succeed. It is through much of his personal unconsciousness and almost all of his personality that Tommy becomes white. “Ethical chaos is the ethical dilemma caused by the confusion of ethical order and ethical identity or the change of ethical order and ethical identity” (Nie, 2014). Tommy has passed the first 20 years of his life as a “puppet of his father”, he saw the world through a veil, and it was not until Mary’s congenital syphilis that he woke up like a dream. Black people have never got rid of the mutilation of racial discrimination in the United States, but also realized the lack of their ethical identity as black people, and understood that they live in the oppression of “whiteness”. The dirty and immoral activities of the white people in the Brentwood community make Tommy’s cognition collapse, but also has an unspeakable resentment of

his father Ruddy, and falls into ethical chaos, thus violating the ethical taboo. “Ethical identity determines ethical choice, and ethical choice can also construct ethical identity” (He & Nie, 2020). In order to avenge his castrated “blackness”, Tommy brutally kills the religious and cultural representations of “whiteness” that oppress black people and provokes the white law that Ruddy defends with his life. Tommy desperately wants to find his missing ethical identity, but he does it in an inappropriate way, becoming a murderer and falling into a new ethical predicament. Tommy, disillusioned, returned to his ethical consciousness and, under the control of rational factors, chose to surrender. “If another man strives to prove to me that the Negro is as wise as the white man, then I say that intelligence has never saved any man, and this is true, for if men by intelligence and philosophy proclaim the equality of men, men by this decision destroy men” (20).

Instead, Tommy redeemed himself by being “not smart”, reconstructing his ethical identity from a murderer to a human being. Having become a murderer, Tommy could have relied on Ruddy’s current power to allow his father to use his privilege to erase police records or to use his social death status for evilness, as in *The Man Who Lives Underneath*. However, Tommy bypasses his father and directly confesses to the *Global Times* that he is the real murderer of the serial killings. He uses the writing power and intimidation of the media to tell the paradoxical truth that the murderer whom Sheriff Turner is trying to pursue is his own son, thereby revealing the truth that African Americans most hate to face - the body is free, but the mind is forever bound.

Tommy’s choice is indeed a tragedy for his family, but for himself, it is the return of humanity under the control of rational will. He finally proves his return to humanity and his yearning for the new ethical restraint system by publicly surfacing, becoming a bold man, and then reconstructing his own ethical identity. Tommy’s final ethical choice is similar to that of Bigger Thomas, the hero in Wright’s protest masterpiece *Native Son*, which also forms a signifying inheritance and transcendence. “*Native Son* lifted the black veil that separates African American culture from white culture, allowing white people to see the fear, hatred, and violence of African people behind the veil for the first time, and witnessed the hearts of African Americans distorted by racial discrimination and racial prejudice” (Pang, 2013). 20 years after the release of *Native Son*, Wright uses Tommy in *A Father’s Law* to tell American society that the harm of racial discrimination is not clear, so there are more black young people who see that the nature of society is distorted. However, Wright is generally optimistic about black-and-white race relations. Bigger in *Native Son* finally makes the right ethical choice under the sincere persuasion of white lawyer Max, just as Tommy in *A Father’s Law* uses the mainstream media as the representative of white discourse to reveal the psychological crisis and identity crisis of African Americans. This led to the rethinking of the black and white races on the issues left over from history.

5. Conclusion

This paper tries to interpret the social and historical origin of Tommy Turner’s crime in *A Father’s Law* by using literary ethical criticism and combining the dual narrative process of the story. The reason for Tommy’s crime can be seen from the hidden process. Because of Ruddy’s excessive protection, Tommy in the novel knows nothing about the racial history and the dark side of the northern urban myth. Marie’s congenital syphilis destroys the “Eden” built for him by Ruddy. Tommy is exposed to the trauma left by the racial history, sees the truth of American society, and realizes the lack of ethical identity.

At the same time, the narrative undercurrent of the covert progression is helpful for readers to interpret Tommy’s behavior from a deeper level. In the overt plot, Tommy, a Catholic, is caught in an ethical dilemma caused by his double ethical identity. The ethical dilemma in the overt procession and the lack of ethical identity in the narrative undercurrent finally make Tommy choose to retaliate with blood for blood in the case of extreme anger and psychological anxiety to oppress the “whiteness” of black people. After returning to rationality, Tommy realizes that this approach has not had any substantial effect on the distortion of his social structure, but has left him with a guilty conscience and a new ethical dilemma.

Finally, integrating the dual narrative track, Tommy surrenders to the media and makes the right ethical choice, not only highlighting his masculinity but also symbolizing the recovery of human nature. Using Tommy’s ethical predicament in *A Father’s Law*, Wright warns that if African Americans want to construct a sound ethical identity and get rid of “double consciousness”, they need to face the shadow of history and eliminate the sense of inferiority of cultural loss, and they should also keep up with the time and build a set of survival ethical laws suitable for black people.

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