



# Ethical Interpretation and Children's Growth of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the ethical dimensions of Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, focusing on the protagonist Karana's growth and ethical choices through a comprehensive analysis of its characters, natural and social ethics, and the protagonist's self-identity. In character analysis, Karana's interactions with animals symbolize her moral development and identity positioning, highlighting her respect for nature and life. The study of natural ethics reveals Karana's sustainable use of resources and harmonious coexistence with nature, reflecting her environmental ethic. Social ethics are examined through Karana's cultural integration amid conflicts, showcasing her adaptation and identity affirmation. Her self-identity is shaped by inner struggles and ethical decisions, leading to personal growth and transcendence. The research concludes that the novel offers valuable ethical insights, emphasizing harmonious coexistence, cultural integration, and self-reflection. These findings provide guidance for adolescents' ethical choices and contribute to building a harmonious society, highlighting the novel's significance in addressing contemporary ethical challenges.

## Keywords

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*; Scott O' Dell; Ethics; Children's Growth; Character Analysis

## 1. Introduction

*Island of the Blue Dolphins* (Scott O'Dell, 1960) is the representative work of American writer Scott O'Dell (1898–1989). Since its publication, it has attracted widespread attention and affection due to its unique narrative and profound themes.

The novel depicts the challenging life of Karana on a deserted island, showcasing the survival struggle of an individual in adversity and reflecting the profound ethical relationships between humans and nature, as well as among people. The ethical themes that run through the story make it a representative work of adventure and philosophical contemplation in literary ethics.

The novel's success in winning critical acclaim and the effective portrayal of the female protagonist are closely related. The author's wife believes that the "enduring popularity of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is partly due to Karana's character, which combines the best traits of both genders. She is not a traditional woman (Hazel Rochman, 2007)." Domestic scholars (Yu Qiaoyun, 2009) have analyzed the novel using ecocritical and feminist theories (Guan He Feng, 2009; Li Dongfeng, 2013) and argue that the novel reflects the author's ecological awareness and ideas of

female independence.

This paper explores the ethics in *Island of the Blue Dolphins* from multiple perspectives. It analyzes how Karana's survival choices on the deserted island reflect the ethical relationship between humans and nature, discusses the ethical values of human relationships in the context of cultural conflict, adaptation, and integration, and examines her inner loneliness and ethical choices that lead to her ethical growth during her life on the island. Through an in-depth analysis of these ethical themes, we can better understand the profound connotations of this classic work.

## 2. Character Analysis: Symbolism and Karana's Identity Positioning

In *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, the adolescent protagonist Karana's journey of growth is filled with challenges and ethical choices. Left alone on a deserted island, she must confront the dangers of survival in a harsh environment while also dealing with her relationships with nature, society, and herself. This reflects the identity positioning and recognition of humans in extreme environments, as well as their ethical choices.

Animals are both Karana's companions and projections of her spiritual world. The symbolic significance of animals provides important insights for Karana's moral growth and spiritual exploration.

Dolphins evoke a sense of awe in Karana towards nature. The grace and free-spirited demeanor of dolphins bring great comfort and inspiration to Karana, who lives alone on the island. The dolphins, freely soaring and living contentedly in the ocean, symbolize freedom and wisdom. Through her interactions with dolphins, Karana learns to respect life and pursue freedom, encouraging her to live as strong and optimistic as the dolphins in the harsh environment. This also arouses her sense of awe towards nature.

Wild dogs inspire Karana to meet survival challenges in her loneliness. The interactions between Karana and wild dogs are full of drama and tension. The presence of wild dogs makes Karana feel threatened, but it also teaches her to persevere in solitude. The confrontation between Karana and the wild dogs reflects the loneliness and fear deep within her heart, symbolizing the struggle between humans and nature. However, Karana is not defeated by the wild dogs; she overcomes them through wisdom and courage. This demonstrates Karana's resilience.

Other animals help Karana develop a sense of a community of shared destiny. Seals and sea elephants provide Karana with resources for survival and also serve as her emotional anchors. Through her interactions with these animals, Karana gradually understands the fragility and resilience of life, realizing that every life has its value and is part of a community of shared destiny that deserves respect. Karana recognizes that as the only higher beings in nature, humans should bear their ethical responsibilities and establish a world where humans and nature coexist, co-prosper, and thrive together (Nie Zhenzhao, 2009).

The symbolic significance of animals provides insights for Karana's growth. Karana's self-identity also helps shape her ethical views and moral development.

Karana respects nature and values life. She sees nature not only as a provider of resources but also as a community of life that needs to be revered and protected. Although she needs the skin and oil of sea elephants for warmth and lighting, she does not hunt indiscriminately. She only kills one sea elephant, and after the hunt, she feels deep remorse, even holding a simple ceremony for the animal. This shows her respect for life and her sense of awe towards nature, reflecting her ethical view of the natural world.

Karana lives in harmony with animals. She does not regard animals as mere prey or tools but as part of a community of life. She befriends dolphins, plays with sea otters, and tames wild dogs. Through these interactions, she builds deep emotional connections and gradually understands the fragility and resilience of life, achieving an ethical relationship of harmonious coexistence.

Karana's ethical growth and redemption on the island. From initial fear and loneliness to eventual strength and independence, Karana learns to communicate with nature, animals, and herself, achieving redemption and growth. Her inner world becomes richer as she begins to contemplate ethical questions about the meaning of life and the mission of humanity. Karana's resilience and courage reflect the spiritual strength of humans in extreme environments and serve as an example for adolescents to learn from. Like Karana, adolescents need to clarify their identity roles, set goals, and realize their life values and ideals after understanding their positions.

Karana's growth journey and her interactions with animals demonstrate the survival instincts and ethical choices of humans in extreme environments. They reflect the ethical relationships between humans and nature, as well as among people, and together constitute the profound connotations of the work. This provides a typical case and inspiration for the growth of adolescents and is a literary classic worth reading and contemplating repeatedly.

### 3. Natural Ethics: The Value of Nature and Harmonious Coexistence

Karana's survival experience on the deserted island reflects the ethical values of the natural world. On the island, Karana had to establish a deep connection with nature. She learned to utilize natural resources, understood the law of the jungle in which only the fittest survive, and gained insights into the consequences of overexploitation of dolphins, which led to their near extinction. Through these experiences, she cultivated an environmental ethic that respects and values nature.

Karana used natural resources wisely. For survival, she had to rely on the island's resources, such as wood, seaweed, and algae, to build shelters and make tools. However, she did not take these resources indiscriminately. When crafting bows and harpoons, she carefully selected suitable wood to minimize tree-cutting. She wove mats from seaweed and used the leaves of female seaweed plants to cover her house. These actions not only demonstrated her intelligence but also showed her care and reasonable use of natural resources.

Karana believed that harmonious coexistence with nature was the way to survive. She regularly collected algae and shellfish but never overharvested to ensure their continuous regeneration. She used the island's resources to build shelters and make tools but always maintained a sense of awe and respect for nature. This ethical perspective was both a respect for nature and a responsibility for her own life. During her adolescence, Karana's development was influenced by free will and rational will. Children at this stage need to use the rationality of adults to control their animalistic instincts and achieve ethical development under the guidance of adult rationality (Li Lian, 2016). Influenced by her father's rational education and decision-making during her early life with her parents, Karana was able to make rational choices and live in harmony with nature even when she was alone on the island.

Karana revered life and got along well with animals. While surviving on the island, especially when hunting and gathering food, she gradually realized the importance of sustainable living. She did not overfish or overhunt but obtained food according to her needs. She only killed animals when necessary and always expressed gratitude towards them. For example, after killing a sea elephant, she felt deep remorse and held a simple ceremony to show her respect for life and her sense of awe towards nature. This was an expression of her natural ethical values. Dolphins, sea otters, and other animals became her friends and companions, with whom she built deep emotional bonds. Karana even shared food with the animals, a behavior that not only reflected her respect for life but also demonstrated her philosophy of harmonious coexistence with nature.

Through the depiction of Karana's survival on the island, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* vividly illustrates the ethical value of nature and the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Her experiences show the survival wisdom of humans in extreme environments and prompt reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. In today's world, with increasingly prominent environmental issues, Karana's story reminds us that only by respecting nature and protecting the environment can we achieve sustainable development for humanity. Just as Zhang Shengzhen believes Children's literature promotes the generation of empathy in children, providing a more positive way of thinking about the relationship between humans and animals, and gaining significant meaning in each other's relationships (Zhang Shengzhen, 2022).

### 4. Social Ethics: Cultural Conflict, Identity, Adaptation, and Integration

In *Island of The Blue Dolphins*, the conflict between Karana's tribal culture and the incoming culture profoundly reflects the ethical dilemmas that human society faces when confronted with change. An ethical dilemma refers to the unsolvable contradictions and conflicts brought to characters in literary texts due to ethical chaos (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014). In her interactions with outsiders, Karana is both attracted to the new culture and faces a crisis of identity with her own tribal culture.

Karana's tribal culture faces an unprecedented impact from the incoming culture. Karana's tribe has a long history and unique cultural traditions, which form the core of its identity through its way of life, beliefs, and values. The tribal culture emphasizes harmonious coexistence with nature, respect for life, prioritization of collective interests, and reverence for ancestors. However, the arrival of outsiders has brought an unprecedented impact on the tribal culture. The outsiders' indiscriminate slaughter of dolphins, their contempt for life, and their genocidal policies towards Karana's tribe have caused devastating damage to both the tribal culture and the community itself.

Karana questions and becomes aware of the differences between her own culture and the incoming culture. Although the incoming culture has had a significant impact on Karana's people, in the process of encountering the new culture, she begins to question whether her own culture is outdated and whether it needs to be replaced by the

incoming culture. This internal conflict plunges her into ethical confusion. For example, during the conflict between the outsiders and the tribe, Karana witnessed the mass death of tribal members and was shocked and terrified by the violence and destruction. She began to reflect on whether her own culture could withstand the impact of the incoming culture and became confused by the destructive nature of the new culture, while also recognizing the differences between the two cultures.

Karana gradually recognizes and absorbs the advanced technology and culture from the outside. Having witnessed the tribal conflicts caused by racial differences and the resulting deaths, and having personally tried the new technologies and ways of life brought by the new culture, such as the metal tools and weapons introduced by the outsiders, which are more efficient and powerful than the traditional stone tools of the tribe, Karana realizes the benefits of the new culture. The introduction of the new culture also triggered a crisis of identity with her own culture, as her tribal culture emphasizes harmonious coexistence with nature and respect for life, while the incoming culture focuses on technology and the display of power. However, the new culture also helps Karana survive on the deserted island. After a series of conflicts and challenges, facing the decline of her own culture and the impact of the incoming culture, Karana gradually finds her own path of identity: to preserve her own culture while absorbing the strengths of the incoming culture to achieve cultural integration. This integration not only affirms her personal identity but also leads to a profound understanding of the ethical relationships between different cultures.

Karana begins to adapt to and integrate the two cultures. Forced to stay alone on the island, she realizes that the conflict between the two cultures is not only reflected in the material level but also in the spiritual level. She tries to maintain the continuity of her own culture by recalling and practicing tribal traditions, but she also realizes that she must face the issue of cultural adaptation. She needs to adapt to the new environment and learn new skills in order to survive. She needs to use the technology and tools brought by the incoming culture to enhance her survival capabilities, but she also realizes that she cannot completely abandon her own cultural traditions. She begins to try to combine the incoming culture with her own culture. For example, she uses metal tools to make more efficient weapons and tools, but she also preserves the traditional methods and rituals of her tribe. She uses metal blades to carve wooden tools, but she also holds traditional ceremonies for these tools to express her reverence for nature and ancestors.

Karana practices the integration of the two cultures in her daily life. She learns to utilize the advantages of the incoming culture while preserving the essence of her own culture. She no longer sees the incoming culture as a threat to her own culture, but as a complement and enrichment, and applies it in every aspect of her life. Through cultural integration, she finds her own identity and achieves a profound understanding of the ethical relationships between different cultures. Cultural conflicts are not irreconcilable. Through understanding, respect, and integration, individuals can find a balance between different cultures and achieve self-identity. Karana's experience not only provides valuable experience for her personal growth but also offers profound insights for humanity when facing cultural conflicts.

Through Karana's story, the exploration of cultural conflict and adaptation essentially reveals social ethics. When confronted with the impact of the incoming culture, Karana experiences a crisis of identity and ethical confusion, but she ultimately finds the principles of social ethics through cultural integration. When facing cultural conflicts, one should not simply reject or accept the incoming culture, but achieve coexistence and prosperity of cultures through understanding and integration. This profound reflection on cultural conflicts is not only of great significance to Karana's personal growth but also provides valuable insights for dealing with cultural diversity in the era of globalization.

## **5. Self-identity: Inner Loneliness, Struggles, and Ethical Choices Leading to Growth**

The biggest difference between humans and other animals is that humans have reason, and the original meaning of reason is to guide newly emerged people to think about how to be human (Nie Zhenzhao, 2022). Karana's solitary life on the deserted island forces her to confront her inner loneliness, struggles, and self-reflection. It is through these experiences that she begins to contemplate the meaning of life and gradually forms her self-identity. This self-identity is an affirmation of her existence and a re-evaluation of her own worth.

Left alone on the island, Karana endures intense inner loneliness and struggles. She must not only face the challenges of the harsh natural environment but also confront her inner fears, helplessness, and turmoil. However, she gradually learns to communicate with nature and with herself. Through interactions with animals, she finds emotional solace. Dolphins, sea otters, and other animals become her friends, making her feel less alone. Karana forms a deep bond with an injured sea otter, nursing its wounds and sharing food with it. These interactions not only bring warmth to her life but also lead her to re-examine her relationship with nature. She begins to engage in self-dialogue,

contemplating the meaning of life and her own value.

Living on the island teaches Karana independence. The experience of being alone on the island is initially filled with fear and anxiety, but she must learn to make tools, build shelters, and hunt and gather food to survive. This process strengthens her mentally. On the island, she constructs a small hut using seaweed for the roof and wood for the walls, and she builds the walls from stones. This not only tests her survival skills but also hones her willpower, gradually transforming her into a strong and brave woman.

Karana faces numerous ethical choices on the island. Each decision she makes directly impacts her survival and growth. Through these choices, Karana not only enhances her survival capabilities but also achieves ethical transcendence. She evolves from a girl dependent on others to an independent and confident woman, embodying the spirit of individuals who constantly pursue self-worth in adversity. She must choose to use natural resources wisely, treat animals with respect, and confront her inner world. These choices test not only her survival wisdom but also her ethical values.

Natural disasters force Karana to make ethical choices. During a storm that destroys her shelter, she must rebuild. Instead of exploiting more natural resources, she opts to repair her shelter using existing materials. She also learns how to protect herself during storms. These ethical choices reflect not only her survival skills but also her ethical consciousness.

Karana respects and holds animals in awe. When hunting sea elephants, she feels deep remorse. She realizes that while she needs their skin and oil for warmth and lighting, overhunting would damage the ecosystem. Therefore, she kills only one sea elephant and holds a simple ceremony to express her respect for life. She forms deep emotional bonds with dolphins, sea otters, and other animals, sharing food with them and helping them when they are injured. These actions demonstrate not only Karana's kindness and compassion but also her ethical awareness and respect for nature and life, as well as a strong sense of social responsibility (Li Lian, 2016).

Living in solitude prompts Karana to deeply contemplate the meaning of life. She begins to understand that the meaning of life is not just about survival but also about self-awareness and a love for living. Through her experiences on the island, she gradually forms her self-identity. She is no longer a girl dependent on others but an independent and confident woman. Her growth process not only showcases her survival skills but also her ethical transcendence. Karana's story shows that even in adversity, individuals can realize their self-worth through ethical choices and self-reflection.

Karana's lonely life on the island forces her to confront her inner struggles and engage in self-reflection, exploring her self-identity. Through contemplating the meaning of life, she gradually forms her self-identity. Ethical identity not only determines an individual's ethical responsibility, but also serves as an important basis for judging whether their ethical choices are correct (Lyu Hongbo, 2024). Her ethical choices on the island not only strengthen her survival capabilities but also lead to her ethical transcendence. Karana's story illustrates the spirit of individuals who constantly pursue self-worth in adversity and reminds people to uphold ethical principles when facing challenges in order to achieve self-growth. Through understanding and inheriting their own ethnic culture, child protagonists gain insight into the immense power contained within their own culture, in order to achieve self-identity and identity recognition, and strive to obtain equal and subjective social status (Zhang Shengzhen, 2024).

## 6. Conclusion

Through Karana's story of growth, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* explores the ethical relationships between human nature, nature, and society. It reveals the ethical choices individuals make when facing adversity and emphasizes the importance of harmonious coexistence with nature, cultural integration, and self-identity. By analyzing these ethical themes, we can better understand the survival wisdom and moral responsibilities of humans in complex social environments.

Karana grows up in solitude on the deserted island. Facing the challenges of nature, she learns to respect life and use resources wisely, embodying the concept of harmonious coexistence with nature. In cultural conflicts, she experiences a crisis of identity but ultimately finds her self-worth through the integration of different cultures. By reflecting on the meaning of life and making ethical choices, she achieves self-transcendence and grows into an independent and confident woman. These experiences not only enrich her life and lead to her growth but also provide ethical insights for readers.

In today's society, which faces environmental crises and cultural conflicts, the ethical reflections conveyed by *Island of the Blue Dolphins* have significant practical implications: they remind people to maintain reverence and

respect for nature, to pursue sustainable lifestyles; to understand and integrate different cultures to achieve coexistence of multiculturalism; and to reflect on oneself to achieve inner peace and value enhancement. We should learn from Karana's courage and wisdom in adversity to better meet current challenges and achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and among people. These ethical reflections are beneficial for the personal growth of adolescents and also provide valuable references for building a more harmonious and sustainable society.

The ethical analysis of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* allows for a deeper understanding of the work's connotations and the wisdom that can be drawn from it. This wisdom can guide adolescents in making wise ethical choices in the complex and changing modern society.

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