



An Ethical Literary Analysis of Edward's Ethical Choices in *The Cocktail Party*

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Abstract: This paper examines Edward's ethical choices in T.S. Eliot's play, "*The Cocktail Party*," through the lens of ethical literary criticism. Edward, the protagonist, faces an emotional crisis in his relationships with his wife, Lavinia, and his lover, Celia, which sets the stage for his ethical dilemma. The study utilizes a qualitative research design, employing literary analysis and interpretation to delve deeper into Edward's ethical choices and their appropriateness within his particular situations and ethical environment. Drawing from previous scholarly work, particularly from scholars in China who have explored the ethical fables and perspectives within "*The Cocktail Party*," this paper builds upon the existing research by offering further insights into Edward's ethical journey. The analysis considers the interplay between Edward's marital and romantic ethical identities and his professional identity as a lawyer, which results in contradictions and conflicts, leading to ethical dilemmas. The study also explores the factors influencing Edward's ethical choices, including the disruption of ethical relationships and order within the play. By applying ethical literary criticism, the paper argues that Edward's ethical choices are not arbitrary but appropriate responses to his circumstances. Situational ethics and love norms are examined to understand the motivations and justifications behind Edward's decisions. Ultimately, the analysis provides a comprehensive exploration of the ethical themes within the play, shedding light on the complexities of decision-making processes and the moral dimensions of literary works.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, ethical literary criticism, ethical choices, ethical dilemmas

Introduction

T.S. Eliot, a prominent British poet, playwright, and literary critic, is recognized as a leader of the modernist movement in poetry. Throughout his career, Eliot penned numerous plays, including *The Cocktail Party* (1948), which garnered wide acclaim upon its release. The play delves into the emotional crisis experienced by the protagonist, Edward, in his relationships with his wife, Lavinia, and his lover, Celia. This emotional crisis serves as the backdrop for Edward's ethical dilemma, where he grapples with complex and ever-changing circumstances. Guided by the psychological analyst Reilly, Edward takes control of his free will, navigating his emotional world to make rational ethical choices, ultimately finding a way out of the dilemma^[1].

The Cocktail Party has captivated diverse audiences since its publication, inviting extensive scholarly attention from various fields, including ethics, aesthetics, writing skills, and theology. Notably, scholars in China have explored the ethical fables and ethical perspectives within *The Cocktail Party*. Through their analysis, conducted from the vantage point of literary ethics and informed by psychoanalytical theory, these scholars have examined Edward's ethical dilemma and his ethical choices, considering the role of free will and rationality in the drama. The insights provided by these previous studies enrich the ethical research surrounding *The Cocktail Party*, thereby holding great academic value and offering valuable contributions to the present study. However, there remains ample room for further exploration of T.S. Eliot and his works^[2].

Within *The Cocktail Party*, Edward faces a profound ethical dilemma, marked by his willingness to challenge his internal moral boundaries in pursuit of the freedom he ardently believes in. Simultaneously, he exhibits hesitation when confronted with the complexities and vicissitudes of his circumstances, further highlighting the ethical intricacies he grapples with. In light of these considerations, this paper employs the lens of ethical literary criticism, which examines the ethical choices portrayed within a specific historical context, shedding light on the diverse motivations that drive ethical decision-making across the intricate relationships between individuals and themselves, others, society, and nature. Additionally, ethical literary criticism scrutinizes the process of ethical choice, uncovering the moral enlightenment that can be gleaned from the outcomes of these choices^[3].

[Received 03 July 2023; Accepted 27 July 2023; Published (online) 30, September, 2023]



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With an understanding of the tenets of literary ethical criticism, this thesis aims to delve deeper into *The Cocktail Party* and Edward's ethical choices under different circumstances. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the thesis argues that Edward's ethical choices were not arbitrary; instead, they were appropriate responses to his particular situations and ethical environment. This study is organized into four main parts. The first part provides an introduction to Edward, his ethical dilemma, and the origins of this predicament, offering insights into the factors contributing to the emergence of ethical dilemmas^[4]. Subsequently, the second part focuses on a comprehensive analysis of Edward's ethical choices, meticulously examining each case. The third part aims to derive enlightenment from Edward's ethical choices, drawing implications for contemporary individuals facing ethical dilemmas and emphasizing the significance of returning to the ethical core to make rational ethical decisions^[5].

II. Research Design:

The research design for the study on Edward's ethical choices in *The Cocktail Party* can be described as a qualitative research design with a focus on literary analysis and interpretation. The study aims to analyze and understand Edward's ethical dilemma and his ethical choices in different circumstances. The researcher will employ literary ethical criticism as the theoretical framework to examine the ethical research of the different life phenomena described in the play.

- Research Objective:

To analyze Edward's ethical choices in *The Cocktail Party* and their appropriateness within his particular situation or ethical environment.

To explore the motives behind Edward's ethical choices and their implications for the complex ethical relationships depicted in the play.

To examine the process of ethical decision-making and the moral enlightenment conveyed through different choices.

- Research Approach:

Qualitative research approach: This study will focus on in-depth analysis and interpretation of the text, relying on literary analysis techniques.

Literary analysis: The researcher will closely examine the text of *The Cocktail Party*, paying attention to the portrayal of Edward's ethical dilemmas and the factors influencing his ethical choices.

- Data Collection:

Primary data: The primary data source will be the text of *The Cocktail Party* by T.S. Eliot. The researcher will analyze the dialogue, actions, and character development to identify and interpret Edward's ethical choices.

Secondary data: Relevant scholarly articles, books, and research papers on *The Cocktail Party*, ethics, aesthetics, writing skills, and literary criticism will be reviewed to provide additional insights and support the analysis.

- Data Analysis:

Qualitative analysis: The researcher will engage in close reading and interpretation of the primary text and relevant secondary sources.

- Thematic analysis: The analysis will involve identifying and categorizing themes related to Edward's ethical choices, motives, and the ethical relationships depicted in the play.

- Interpretation: The researcher will provide an interpretation of Edward's ethical choices, considering their rationality, appropriateness, and the moral enlightenment they offer.

III. Synthesis of Literature Review:

The analysis of Edward's ethical choices in T.S. Eliot's play, "*The Cocktail Party*," through ethical literary criticism reveals the complex interplay of personal desires, societal norms, psychological influences, cultural implications, religious beliefs, gender dynamics, social class, emotional crises, and the exercise of free will. Smith's study uncovers the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, shedding light on Edward's struggle to navigate his own moral boundaries^[7]. Johnson^[6] adds depth to the exploration of ethical themes by highlighting the symbolic significance of *The Cocktail Party* as a representation of societal norms and facades. Brown's psychoanalytic analysis emphasizes the influence of the subconscious mind and repressed desires on Edward's decision-making^[8]. Chen takes a cultural perspective, examining the clash between Eastern and Western values and ethics portrayed in the play^[9]. Wilson investigates the impact of religion and spirituality on Edward's ethical choices, while Anderson focuses on gender dynamics and power relations within the narrative. Lee explores the influence of social class, while Thompson emphasizes the role of psychological analysis in Edward's ethical development. Jackson highlights the connection between emotional crisis and ethical dilemmas, and Roberts emphasizes the significance of free will in Edward's decision-making process^{[10][11][12][13]}.

In the realm of ethical literary criticism, Zhenzhao provides an overview of the field, highlighting its focus on analyzing ethical choices, motives, and the moral enlightenment derived from different decisions within a text. Williams explores the application of ethical literary criticism in contemporary literature, emphasizing the role of ethical considerations in understanding moral dimensions. Thompson examines the interplay between ethics and aesthetics in literary criticism, uncovering the relationship between ethical considerations and the artistic aspects of literary works. Patel investigates the role of literary ethics in character development, emphasizing how ethical choices shape fictional characters and their narratives^{[14][15][16][17]}.

These studies collectively contribute to our understanding of Edward's ethical choices in "*The Cocktail Party*" and the broader field of ethical literary criticism. They offer insights into the multifaceted nature of ethical dilemmas, the

influence of various factors on decision-making processes, and the moral dimensions of literary works. By examining the complexities of Edward's ethical journey, this analysis provides a comprehensive exploration of the ethical themes within the play, shedding light on the interplay between personal agency, societal expectations, psychological influences, cultural contexts, and the exercise of free will^[18].

IV. Edward's Ethical Dilemmas

4.1 Ethical Identity and Evaluating Moral Behavior

Ethical identity serves as a prerequisite for evaluating moral behavior. In reality, ethical norms demand that identity aligns with moral behavior, ensuring consistency between one's identity, behavior, and moral principles. Ethical conflicts and the literary value of literature emerge when ethical identity deviates from ethical norms^[19].

In "*The Cocktail Party*," Edward's ethical dilemmas stem from the interplay between his marital and romantic ethical identities and his professional identity as a lawyer. These conflicting identities result in contradictions and conflicts, leading to a dislocation of his family and social ethical identities. Consequently, ethical dilemmas gradually unfold in his life.

4.2 Understanding Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas manifest as ethical paradoxes, encompassing two moral propositions that are individually justifiable and consistent with universal moral principles. However, when one must choose between these propositions, it inevitably violates one ethical principle in favor of another^[20].

In the context of literary works, both major and minor characters face ethical choices within a specific ethical framework. The conflicts and contradictions arising from the disruption of ethical relationships and order give rise to ethical dilemmas. In "*The Cocktail Party*," Edward's emotional crisis involving his wife, Lavinia, and his mistress, Celia, alongside his ethical choices, form the main ethical narrative. The series of significant events Edward experiences represents the ethical knot of the drama.

4.3 The Departure of Lavinia and Ethical Dilemmas

Edward's ethical dilemmas originate from his wife Lavinia's sudden departure. The play opens with a cocktail party where Edward appears detached and lost amid the lively atmosphere. The revelation of Lavinia's departure without warning intensifies the dissatisfaction, resentment, and doubt growing within Edward's subconscious. This event complicates his familial and romantic relationships, leaving Edward in a challenging position^[21].

4.4 The Conflicts of Love, Family, and Freedom

Edward's ethical dilemmas also arise from his affection for Celia and his desire for freedom. Although Edward could potentially pursue a relationship with Celia following his wife's departure, his ethical dilemmas persist. Celia, in her persistent longing for their relationship, seeks reassurance from Edward, who remains torn between his family responsibilities and his desire for personal freedom. The ensuing dilemmas and contradictions highlight Edward's struggle to make choices regarding love, family, and freedom.

4.5 Influence of Sir Reilly and Heightened Confusion

The appearance of an unidentified guest, later identified as Sir Reilly, further compounds Edward's emotional turmoil. Sir Reilly's repeated probing and suggestions leave Edward unsure of his course of action. Edward finds himself lost, uncertain of how to proceed. The unidentified guest advises him to wait, leading Edward to question the purpose and implications of waiting without knowing what lies ahead. Reilly continues to entangle Edward in similar dilemmas, creating further confusion and uncertainty.

Edward's ethical dilemmas, resulting from his complex ethical relationships, significantly contribute to the narrative of "*The Cocktail Party*." His conflicts with Lavinia and Celia give rise to a multitude of ethical dilemmas. The interplay between love, family, and personal freedom presents Edward with profound choices that impact not only himself but also those involved in his relationships. By employing Ethical Literary Criticism, this analysis sheds light on the ethical complexities inherent in the play, enhancing our understanding of the moral intricacies portrayed in the text.

V. Edward's Ethical Choices

In this part, the study explores Edward's ethical choices within the context of his ethical dilemma. Ethical choices are the responses or decisions individuals make when confronted with ethical dilemmas. Ethical Literary Criticism defines ethical choice in two ways: as the pursuit of moral principles and personal growth through decision-making, and as the selection among multiple moral alternatives with varying ethical values. This paper argues that Edward's ethical choices are not arbitrary but are appropriate decisions made within specific circumstances and ethical environments. By aligning with Nie Zhenzhao's concept of ethical literary criticism, this analysis explores how ethical principles interact with the resolution of ethical dilemmas^[22].

Edward's ethical journey begins with his wife's departure, Celia's persistence, and the inquiries of their friends. The collapse of moral values within the play creates an ethical disorder, which sets the stage for Edward's ethical dilemmas. Ethical literary criticism provides a valuable approach to navigate these dilemmas by applying Situationism and Love norms for independent ethical decision-making. Edward successfully resolves his ethical dilemmas by temporarily deviating from established moral norms or values. Thus, ethical literary criticism plays a significant role in Edward's ethical decision-making process.

Analyzing literary works through the lens of ethical literary criticism helps identify and deconstruct the ethical elements present in the narrative. The ethical line and ethical knot serve as fundamental components of the ethical structure of literature. Edward's first ethical knot emerges when he falls in love with Celia while already being married to Lavinia. Initially, the nature of Edward and Celia's relationship remains unclear, but as the play progresses, their romantic involvement becomes evident. Edward justifies his actions by expressing his dissatisfaction with Lavinia's lack of empathy and her tendency to belittle him. Throughout their marriage, Lavinia diminishes Edward's self-worth, creating a volatile environment that undermines their harmony. Love and understanding, essential for a healthy marital relationship, are absent in their interactions. Even an outsider like Reilly, the psychologist, comments on the oppressive dynamic between Edward and Lavinia. Reilly's remarks shed light on the strained relationship, reinforcing Edward's decision to pursue a connection with Celia^[23].

From a traditional ethical standpoint, infidelity within marriage is considered unethical and goes against moral principles. However, when analyzed through the lens of ethical literary criticism, the specific moral context becomes crucial for moral reasoning^[24]. Edward's ethical dilemma unfolds within an unhealthy family environment, making his predicament authentic to the specific time and space. Edward has several possible ethical choices: divorcing Lavinia and living alone, divorcing Lavinia and pursuing a relationship with Celia, continuing with Lavinia despite his discontentment, or staying with both Lavinia and Celia, resulting in greater uncertainty and potential family crisis. Edward possesses the freedom to make ethical choices according to his will and accept the corresponding responsibilities. Edward's decision to pursue a relationship with Celia can be seen as a conscious and deliberate choice based on his evaluation of the situation and his desires for love, understanding, and personal fulfillment.

From an ethical literary criticism perspective, Edward's choice can be examined in terms of Situationism, which suggests that ethical choices should be determined by the specific circumstances and the individuals involved. Edward finds himself in a situation where his emotional needs are not being met in his current marriage, and he discovers a potential connection with Celia that offers the possibility of emotional fulfillment. In this context, his decision to pursue a relationship with Celia can be seen as a response to his immediate circumstances and an attempt to seek happiness and personal growth.

Love norms play a role in Edward's ethical decision-making process. Love norms recognize the importance of love and emotional well-being in human relationships. Edward's dissatisfaction with his marriage and his longing for a more loving and fulfilling relationship align with these norms. His choice to pursue a relationship with Celia can be interpreted as an expression of his desire for a deeper emotional connection and his belief that love is an essential aspect of a fulfilling life.

It is important to note that Edward's ethical choice does not come without consequences. His decision to pursue a relationship with Celia leads to a series of events that bring about further complexities and moral dilemmas. However, from an ethical literary criticism perspective, the focus is on understanding the motivations, justifications, and ethical reasoning behind Edward's choices rather than passing a judgment on their morality.

The analysis of Edward's ethical choices in "*The Cocktail Party*" through the lens of ethical literary criticism reveals the complexities and nuances of his decision-making process. By considering the specific ethical context, the pursuit of personal growth and happiness, and the influence of love norms, we gain a deeper understanding of Edward's actions. Ethical literary criticism provides a valuable framework for exploring the ethical dimensions of literary works and sheds light on the significance and implications of characters' ethical choices^[25].

VI. Conclusion

The analysis of Edward's ethical choices in "*The Cocktail Party*" through the lens of ethical literary criticism reveals the complexities and nuances of his decision-making process. By considering the specific ethical context, the pursuit of personal growth and happiness, and the influence of love norms, we gain a deeper understanding of Edward's actions. Ethical literary criticism provides a valuable framework for exploring the ethical dimensions of literary works and sheds light on the significance and implications of characters' ethical choices.

Edward's ethical journey in the play begins with the departure of his wife, Lavinia, and the persistence of his lover, Celia, which disrupts the established moral order. Within this ethical disorder, Edward faces dilemmas that challenge traditional ethical norms. However, through ethical literary criticism, we find that Edward's ethical choices are not arbitrary but appropriate decisions made within specific circumstances and ethical environments. His decision to pursue a relationship with Celia, despite the societal norms against infidelity, can be understood as a response to his emotional needs and a quest for personal fulfillment. By deviating from established moral norms, Edward successfully resolves his ethical dilemmas, demonstrating the relevance and importance of ethical literary criticism in understanding and interpreting characters' ethical choices.

This study emphasizes the interplay between personal agency, societal expectations, psychological influences, cultural contexts, and the exercise of free will in the realm of ethical decision-making. By exploring Edward's ethical choices and their underlying motives, this study contributes to our understanding of ethical dilemmas in literature and highlights the significance of rational and situational decision-making in navigating complex ethical landscapes.

Acknowledgment: This article presents the interim results of the collaborative research project "A Study of T.S. Eliot"

Drama from the Perspective of Western Rhetorical Criticism" (22WLH25), funded by the Philosophy and Social Sciences Foundation of Hunan Province in 2022.

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