

# Ethical Dilemma and Ethical Choice in D. H. Lawrence's *The Trespasser*

**Wang Aisu & Gao Fen**

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University

Yuhangtang Rd. 668, Xihu District, Hangzhou, 310058, China

Email: 157339549@qq.com; gfed2002@163.com

**Abstract** *The Trespasser* focuses on the story of the main character Sigmund's extramarital affairs, addressing ethical dilemmas, ethical choices, and ethical tragicality. Sigmund's ethical dilemmas reflected in two aspects: One is the imbalance between Sigmund's emotion and social morality, namely, the disequilibrium between physical pleasure and social moral norms, aesthetical freedom and social moral responsibility, individual experience and social moral cognition. The other is the conflicts between his multiple ethical identities, including the conflicts between the identities of husband and lover, and between the identities of father and lover. Additionally, it reveals his ethical choice of emotional freedom over social morality in the former ethical dilemma, as well as its constant escape via space transfer in the latter ethical dilemma. The former choice reflects the preference of physical pleasure, aesthetical freedom and physical experience over social moral norms, social moral responsibilities and social moral cognition. While the latter choice displays the ethical path of "lover-family-suicide" through the spatial framework of "leaving home-returning home-abandoning home," which is intended to present the tragic outcome of individual's ethical dilemmas. The ethical tragedy has two causes. On the one hand, man is incapable of truly knowing his own body and of incorporating social morality into the experience of self. On the other hand, man disregards what the society demands of him. Meanwhile, these ethical dilemmas and choices reveal not only Lawrence's critique of the industrial capitalist society's suppression of humanity, but also his compassionate values of life.

**Keywords** D. H. Lawrence; *The Trespasser*; Ethical Dilemma; Ethical Choice

**Authors** **Wang Aisu** is a doctoral candidate at the School of International Studies, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). Her main research interests include English and American literature; **Gao Fen** is Professor at the School of International Studies, Zhejiang University (Hangzhou 310058, China). Her major research

interests include English and American literature.

## **Introduction**

Through the depiction of Sigmund's extramarital affairs, D. H. Lawrence's early novel *The Trespasser* (1912) explores the ethical dilemmas and ethical choices of the protagonist, Sigmund. Its ethical writing has attracted literary critics from around the world. For instance, Louise Wright believes that the novel's plot is largely autobiographical (230-248); Evelyn J. Hinz notes that it presents the tragicomic mode of authenticity and falsity (122-141); Wang Zhengwen and Cheng Aimin believe that the novel focuses on social reality and presents the irreconcilable contradiction between individual pursuit and social morality through psychological description (53-54); and so forth.

Ethical choice is the selection of two or more moral alternatives. "Different decisions will yield various outcomes. Consequently, different options have distinct moral values" (Nie Zhenzhao 266-67). While ethical dilemmas result from the conflict between two moral propositions: "If the chooser makes moral judgments about each of them separately, each choice is correct and consistent with universal moral principles. However, once the chooser makes a decision between the two options, it will result in an ethical violation of the other option, namely the violation of universal moral principles" (Nie Zhenzhao 262). Lawrence describes in *The Trespasser* how Sigmund makes ethical decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas, namely the conflict between one's emotions and social morality and the conflict between one's multiple ethical identities. Using literary ethical theory and embodied ethical theory, the thesis will address the following questions. What moral challenges did Sigmund face? What moral decisions did he make? What were the tragic consequences of his ethical choices?

## **Ethical Dilemma: Contradiction between the Individual and the Society**

Ethical dilemma refers to the contradictory situation in which an individual must choose between his or her own preferences and the demands of society. According to Giddens, "our bodies are not only physical but also social. Our bodies are influenced by the social norms and values to which we belong, as well as by our social experiences" (182). The multiple connotations of ethical dilemmas in *The Trespasser* can be clarified through the contradiction between an individual's emotion and social morality, as well as the conflicts between an individual's multiple identities.

Firstly, Sigmund's ethical dilemma is the conflict between an individual's emotions and social morality. Emotion includes "rough emotions and subtle emotions" (Matthew, P. Spackman, and David Willer 370). "Rough emotions include happiness, anger, sadness, and fear, which are physical responses to the stimulus. Subtle emotions, such as the sense of morality, beauty, and reason, are the higher emotions" (James 201). Physical emotions are required to conform to social moral norms to achieve harmony between body and mind, so, when one's physical pleasure, aesthetical freedom and self-experience are in conflict with social moral norms, social responsibilities and social moral cognition respectively, ethical dilemmas will arise.

The imbalance between an individual's physical pleasure and social moral norms causes Sigmund's ethical dilemma. During the Victorian era, the traditional British cultural concept is characterized by strong moral principles and social norms. Therefore, Sigmund was subject to the concept of social morality, as he feared that others would discover his immorality. Sigmund was humiliated when his relationship with Helena was revealed to the landlady. He believed that it "remains tightly wrapped around something within me, constantly reminding me of what others think of me" (Lawrence 73). But Sigmund values his own physical pleasure and emotional satisfaction which could be obtained from Helena. "He quivered at the caress. She put her arms round him, reached up her face yearningly for a kiss. He forgot they were standing in the public footpath, in daylight" (Lawrence 21). Although it is reasonable to satisfy one's physical desires, infidelity which is against the law of marriage is condemned by social ethic. Sigmund's ethical dilemma is caused by his inability to balance the conflict between physical desire and ethical norms.

Lawrence is more concerned with a person's physical pleasure than with social moral standards. Lawrence does not shy away from describing the naked body and the pursuit of physical pleasure in his novels. His detailed account of Sigmund and Helena's sexual behavior on the island vividly illustrates Sigmund's preoccupation with physical pleasure. In addition, Lawrence himself had an affair with Professor Weakley's wife, Frida. He violated social morality by pursuing his love despite the constraints of social morality. He demonstrates in both the novel and his life that he prioritizes individual needs over social obligations.

Sigmund falls into the ethical dilemma of the incompatible contradiction between his aesthetical freedom and social moral responsibilities. Sigmund plays the violin for a living and tries to make money to relieve the multiple pressures imposed on him by the society. In a personification, Lawrence wrote in the novel that "the

violin had sickened for rest” (9). Because in a capitalist society, man is considered as “a technical means to achieve a project.....” (Schilling 34). Therefore, Sigmund struggles in overburdening responsibilities and obligations for his family. Under the pressure, he desperately needs to enjoy the aesthetic freedom in nature, where “the moon was wading deliciously through shallows of white cloud. Beyond the trees and the few houses was the great concave of darkness, the sea, and the moonlight” (Lawrence 29). When living in nature, “people’s sense of vision, touching, hearing, smelling and tasting are all active” (Berleant 27), and “the objects being appreciated strikingly affects all senses” (Carlson 5). While in the industrialized society, man’s body becomes exhausted in the heavy work, it is impossible for man to find beauty under the pressure. Lawrence was similar to Sigmund when he fell into the dilemma of how to balance one’s aesthetic freedom and the social moral responsibility. Lawrence was always trapped in the conflicts between his filial piety to his mother and his love for his girlfriend when he was young. Lawrence integrated his soul into the character Sigmund, since they both pursued esthetical freedom while bearing great social moral pressure.

Sigmund also faces the ethical dilemma posed by the disparity between a person’s physical experience and social moral awareness. As William James proposed in his body philosophy, people recognize and perceive the world based on their knowledge and experience, respectively. Sigmund’s life is filled with contradictions due to the discord between his physical experience and moral understanding. Is it moral for him to take a vocation with his girlfriend Helena? Should he send a telegraph to his wife informing her of his impending return? Should he spend the night with his young daughter if she requests it? Sigmund lacks the courage to make sense of the world in terms of moral knowledge because he is aware of his violation of moral norms and is afraid of condemnation and indifference from others. It appeared that his soul was susceptible to insanity. “He felt that he could not, come what might, get up and meet them all” (Lawrence 133). However, Sigmund cannot honestly face the world with his own physical experience. “He thought imaginatively, and his imagination destroyed him” (Lawrence 118). “People’s subjective feelings and physical experience are the basic content of thought” (Dong Jingjing, Yao Benxian 202), while physical movement is the premise of psychological phenomena, which in turn cause physical movement. Sigmund failed to follow the balance of physical experience and physical movement, and constantly falls into the dilemma of “yes or no,” and “do or not.”

Lawrence hopes that his emphasis on physical experience will enable him to resist ethical constraints. James’ theory of embodied ethics, which focuses on the

relationship between cognition and experience, has similarities with Lawrence's ideas. Lawrence believed that the human experience of the world was crucial in determining the state of man's life. For instance, he describes Sigmund's condition upon his return from vacation: "all his unnatural excitement, all the poetic stimulation of the past few days, had vanished. He sat flaccid, while his life struggled slowly through him. After an intoxication of passion and love, and beauty, and of sunshine, he was prostrate. Like a plant that blossoms gorgeously and madly, he had wasted the tissue of his strength, so that now his life struggled in a clogged and broken channel" (Lawrence 136). Then, the rise and fall of Sigmund's body and mind are blended and integrated.

Secondly, Sigmund's ethical dilemma is compounded by the conflict between his multiple ethical identities. One type of man's ethical identity is innate, such as parent-child and sibling relationships determined by blood; the other is acquired, such as spouse-spouse relationships, etc. "Social ethics requires that each identity correspond to its moral actions. If the ethical identity is incompatible with ethical standards, then ethical conflicts occur" (Nie Zhenzhao 263-64). This is why Sigmund falls into the dilemma of having so many identities.

Sigmund is confused about his marital and romantic identities. As a husband, he must adhere to the ethical standards of marriage and be faithful to his wife, whereas his identity as a lover entails less responsibility and obligation and provides him with greater emotional satisfaction and independence. If he chooses the former, he cannot achieve emotional fulfillment and independence, while if he chooses the latter, his family and society will condemn him for betraying his marriage. The plight of workers in a capitalist society causes Sigmund's husband-lover conflict. Sigmund lives under extreme social pressure at the bottom of society, and has already lost the spiritual resonance of appreciating music and art with his wife as they were in love. Sigmund's survival dilemma is presented numerous times in the novel. The dialogue between the landlady and Helena, for instance, reflects Sigmund's work pressure. Helena said, "he had been working hard" in response to the landlady's remark to Sigmund that "you appeared so exhausted when you arrived" (Lawrence 98). In addition, Sigmund's evasive approach to life, in which "he shrank away and beat about to find a means of escape from the next day and its consequences" (Lawrence 90), demonstrates his working pressure. His husband-lover identity conflict is also rooted in the struggle between "animal factor and human factor" (Nie Zhenzhao, *Literary Ethics Criticism: Ethical Choice and Sphinx Factor* 6). His extramarital affair with Helena was caused by animal factors prevailing over human factors. He followed his instinctual desire and escaped social

constraints. However, once the human factors took over, he became self-condemned. He believed it was cruel to “abandon her to such a burden of care while he took his pleasure elsewhere” (Lawrence 119).

The conflict between his identities as father and lover prevents Sigmund from escaping an ethical dilemma. As a father, Sigmund must establish an emotionally healthy parent-child relationship with his children and assume the associated responsibilities and obligations. As a lover, he is encouraged to flirt with his partner for the purpose of physical satisfaction. Unfortunately, he was unable to effectively communicate with his children when he was working to provide for his family. Then, after he became involved in an extramarital affair, he abandoned his children to date his lover, causing them to feel even more resentment. Therefore, he desperately realized, “if I have the one, I shall be damned by the thought of the other. This bruise on my mind will never get better” (Lawrence 118). In this dilemma, Helena is the key figure who is like a cocoon egoistically wrapped around Sigmund to control him, which eventually led to his suicide.

Lawrence had similarly experienced multiple identity conflicts. Even though *The Trespasser* is based on the story of Helen Cork, Lawrence’s own life is evident in the novel (Louise Wright 230). Helen Cork also stated that it was a Lawrentian tale, and that Sigmund resembled Lawrence greatly (235). Obviously, fiction and reality are not identical. “In literary works, paradoxes can be resolved to promote positive thought and moral enlightenment. Therefore, paradoxes in literary works have ethical significance” (Nie Zhenzhao 255-56). The ethical choices in the novel reveal Lawrence’s ethical orientation, which is to be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Ethical Choice: The Preference for an Individual’s Freedom over Social Morality**

In choosing his ethical identities, Sigmund opted for an individual’s emotional autonomy over social morality and adopted the way of spatial transfer. His ethical choice reveals the working conditions of the capitalist working class and demonstrates Lawrence’s concern for life.

Sigmund’s selection of emotional freedom can be depicted as follows. He chose physical pleasure over moral values. Lawrence’s preference for satisfying physical needs over social moral norms is a challenge to moral tradition. Maslow classifies human needs into five categories, namely, physiological needs, security needs, belonging and love needs, respect needs, and self-actualization needs, with physiological needs being the most fundamental. People are only able to pursue higher needs once their fundamental needs are met. So does Sigmund, who has the

freedom to satisfy his physiological needs for sure. Lawrence believes that social morality should not take precedence over a person's physical enjoyment. This is why he attacks Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* for his moral condemnation of Volynskiy and Anna (Lawrence, *D. H. Lawrence Selected Literary Critiques* 72). In addition, Lawrence created the character of Sigmund, who endured a great deal of pain in his marriage and yearned for physical pleasure that "all his past and future in a passion is worth years of living" (Lawrence 18). However, Sigmund failed to rebel against social morality thoroughly enough, which is attributed to his cowardice.

Sigmund chose the aesthetic freedom over social responsibility. He pursues aesthetic freedom in two ways: one is to enjoy the beauty of nature, the other is to appreciate the beauty of art. For the former, Sigmund comes to an island to enjoy the beautiful scenery and temporarily put aside the financial pressures, since "he had suppressed his soul, in a kind of mechanical despair doing his duty and enduring the rest" for years (Lawrence 21). For the latter, Sigmund, who was good at playing the violin, liked to appreciate music with "his whole self, beating to the rhythm" (Lawrence 203). However, Sigmund cannot truly accomplish his aesthetic freedom, because labor as man's responsibility blocked his appreciation for the beauty. Then the beauty of art has become a means of making a living for him. Sigmund chose aesthetic freedom over social responsibility, which reflects Lawrence's positive attitudes towards aesthetical freedom. As we know, only when man touches the essence of nature, can he truly perceive the beauty of nature and art. For this reason, most of the sexual behaviors in Lawrence's novels take place in nature, for example, Birkin and Ursula have sex on the grass in *Women in Love*, and Connie and Mellors in the woods in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

Sigmund, chose physical experience over moral cognition. His choice, however, contradicts contemporary notions of rationality. In contemporary society, rational moral cognition focuses on the influence of external factors on individuals while ignoring their internal emotions. Since Kant, who argued that "moral laws must be expressed as commands and actions that conform to them as duties" (60), the rational moral cognition has evolved. Therefore, individuals should consider rationality when choosing between freedom and responsibility. While the origins of irrational thought can be traced back to Aristotle in ancient Greece, irrational cognition is a more recent phenomenon. He believed that "every man's practice and choice is for the purpose of kindness" (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* 3), which means that truth, goodness, and beauty can only be presented when one's actions are guided by irrational cognition of sensibility. Sigmund's irrational choice of physical experience reflects Lawrence's yearning for freedom of body and mind, but

his contradiction and confusion also reflects Lawrence's hesitation and the external resistance he encounters. And then, Lawrence's concept of respecting physical experience is difficult for others in modern rational society to comprehend, and he became a social outcast as a result (John Watson 1).

Sigmund selected his ethical identity via continuous spatial transfer, by leaving home, returning home, and abandoning home. Sigmund fell into two difficult homeless states. One is that he could not solve the dilemmas in the family and needed to leave home to seek relief; the other is that he is unable to establish spiritual community with his family, being in a state of homelessness. Sigmund's two states exactly correspond to the two "homelessness states" mentioned by Heidegger: one is the homelessness state of the existent who wanders because there is no way out; the other is the homelessness state of the existent who are short of sense of belongings (Heidegger 147). The two states are opposite and interchangeable. Sigmund assumed the identity of a lover when he was homeless. He was unable to establish spiritual community with his family members or resolve family conflicts, causing him to wander aimlessly through the social space, which is the "basic place of behaviors" (Lefebvre 190-91). Thus, Sigmund decided to leave his home for a brief poetic existence in nature. However, when there is no escape, leaving home is not a permanent option because the natural world is not universal, whereas the man-made world is. Since "man is not only a political animal, but also a family animal" (Aristotle 141), Sigmund and Helena are unable to find spiritual refuge in the rented island house. The artificial world will eventually dispel the illusion of the natural world. For Sigmund, his sense of responsibility as a father haunts him with anxiety, and the deadline for his return prevents him from appreciating the island's breathtaking scenery. Sigmund tries to forget who he is as a husband and father, but his dreams are continually dashed by the harsh realities of his life.

Then Sigmund chose his marital and paternal identities and returned home. However, his return is too negative for him to fulfill the responsibilities of those identities or mend his relationship with his wife and children. "His sensitiveness had passed off; his nerves had become callous..... He was indifferent to his wife and children. No one spoke to him as he sat to the table. That was as he liked it; he wished for nothing to touch him" (Lawrence 135). The negative attitude of Sigmund's wife and children correlates closely with his unfavorable homecoming. Home is traditionally a heaven of peace and a poetic abode, where the personal experiences of all family members influence their life circumstances. Because of Sigmund's marital infidelity, his wife is extremely cold to him at home, and

she spreads her anger and resentment to their children. Since Sigmund returns home with negative attitudes and behaviors, with his family members treating him indifferently as response, Sigmund's return home foreshadows his eventual abandonment of his residence.

Finally, Sigmund chose to abandon his home, renouncing all his ethical identities. Sigmund was unable to withstand the pressure of "human factor" and "animal factor," so he decided to relinquish his ethical identity and commit suicide. He pondered his predicaments but saw no way out. If he divorced, his children and ex-wife would morally condemn him, leaving him with nothing but humiliation; if he stayed, he cannot find his belongings. Following his instincts, Sigmund chose to abandon his home, as returning there would not have eliminated his guilt. Sigmund abandons his home primarily because he is unable to satisfy the demands of his ethical consciousness. "With the emergence of ethical consciousness, human beings begin to eliminate ethical chaos and move toward ethical order, comprehend the significance of ethical order for human survival and reproduction, and adhere to the most fundamental ethical rules, such as taboos, responsibilities, and obligations" (Nie Zhenzhao 13-14). After returning home, Sigmund faced the ethical pressure and was bound to make ethical choices once more. However, he was unable to choose the physical love with Helena or bearing the condemnation of moral ethics. Due to his disability, Sigmund was ultimately forced to abandon all ethical identities and killed himself.

Lawrence uses Sigmund's death to illustrate the conflict between an individual's freedom and the constraints of modern social morality. Sigmund's preference for physical pleasure, aesthetical freedom and physical experience reflects Lawrence's respect for life. His ethical choice of his identities in space transfer is the projection of sociality on man. On the one hand, Sigmund's ethical choice shows the individual's fate affected by the moral and ethical consciousness. On the other hand, it reveals the social roots hidden in the ethical behaviors. Sigmund's death is Lawrence's panoramic presentation of the conflict between an individual's freedom and the bondage of social morality in modern society, which also expresses his attempt to challenge traditional morality, and his reflection on life consciousness.

### **The Origins of the Tragedy of Ethical Choice**

Although Sigmund ends with death, his choice of respecting for man's instinct reflects his consciousness of respecting for life. The tragic origins of Sigmund's ethical choice are traced to his characters and the society.

Sigmund's tragicality of ethical choice lies in that he is incapable of self-knowledge and the incorporation of social morality into the experience of self. His lack of self-awareness causes him to experience an existential crisis. The basic premise of survival is to have a complete and correct cognition of the self, otherwise, it will lead to survival crisis. James points out that the embodied self consists of "subject I" and "object I" (James, *The Principles of Psychology* 479). Sigmund did not comprehend the "subject I" or "object I." "Subject I" refers to the self that has worldly experiences and knowledge (James, *The Principles of Psychology* 480-81). Sigmund wed at the age of 18, prior to having truly experienced or comprehended the world. The identity conflicts were due to his lack of survival skills. Sigmund has no expectation regarding his ability to assume family responsibility or resolve conflicts. "Object I" refers to one's competence, personality, and character as perceived by others (James, *The Principles of Psychology* 479). Sigmund is belatedly aware of his wife's expectation that he provides for the family, as well as Helena's desire to exert control over him. Sigmund has moral knowledge, but he lacks experience. His physical response to environmental stimuli is blunt as a result of his low cognitive ability. Once the conflict escalates, he tends to overreact when faced with a survival crisis. It is impossible for him to respond appropriately in actual ethical situations and integrate moral concepts into his personal experience, resulting in the tragic outcome. Sigmund is overpowered by his wife's complaints, his children's rejection and alienation, and their estrangement. His moral knowledge indicates that his relationship with them is inharmonious, but he is unable to devise a remedy. His moral knowledge informs him that his affair with Helena is unacceptable: "I know I am a moral coward" (Lawrence 73), yet he continues the affair.

Then, Sigmund's inability to cultivate himself was another cause of the tragedy. Ethics cultivation is mainly embodied in two aspects, namely, skill cultivation and morality cultivation. On the one hand, Sigmund's artistic skill of playing the violin is the embodiment of his skill cultivation, which has given him keen intuition and aesthetic ability, and also brought him love and marriage as a young man. However, with the erosion of human nature by social life, Sigmund is no longer the one, who could be engaging in perceptual art, but becomes a labor machine. When art cultivation is overwhelmed by social pressure, it cannot bring people aesthetic pleasure, but survival crisis. On the other hand, Sigmund's lack of moral cultivation leads to the tragedy of ethical choice. When individuals make ethical decisions in specific ethical situations, they should take morality as the criterion and consider the social impact. However, Sigmund only follows his emotion and his desire for love.

Sigmund violates the principle of moral cultivation and ignores man's sociality, which will naturally lead to tragedy.

Finally, Sigmund disregards the society's demands on man. His transgression of "existential norms" precipitates his tragedy. Merleau-Ponty formulated the theory of existential norms and interpreted it using "existential analysis" (Merleau-Ponty 138). On the one hand, individuals develop their communication skills. This means that when two people are approaching each other, they can effectively avoid a collision by making eye contact. As long as individuals adhere to social norms, they can succeed in society. By having minimal physical contact and communication with his family, Sigmund violates this principle. His lack of presence in his family life had a fundamental impact on his later suicide. On the other hand, certain norms are constructed or realized through the objects. GPS, for instance, constantly reminds drivers of driving regulations while they are driving. Throughout the process of information interaction, drivers confirm their identity and establish "survival norms." So, when individuals make ethical choices in specific ethical situations, they should take morality as the criterion and consider its social impact. However, by failing to communicate with his family members, Sigmund fails to integrate himself into the family. He disregards the principle of social morality by pursuing sexual love solely for his own pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

In *The Trespasser*, Sigmund's ethical dilemma and ethical choice reflect Lawrence's view that, when constrained by ethical morality, man can only achieve a harmonious self-state by focusing on positive life consciousness. Lawrence examines the ethical dilemma and ethical choice by focusing on the following three points: First, as members of industrial society, individuals must consider the relationship among self, other, and the world. Lawrence pointed out that it is a long way for us to construct an ideal society, so man has to find the balance between himself and others, with the target of living a harmonious life in the world, in the way of fighting against the constraints from traditional society. Second, it is necessary to solve individual's dilemmas of the contradiction between their freedom and the social requirements, and their multiple identities conflicts. Man is free to enjoy his physical desire, aesthetical freedom and physical experience, and choose his social roles as he like. However, when dilemmas arise, man should face them and find a way out positively. Ultimately, it is advocated that both man's body and mind be liberated. Body theory has discussed the priority of soul to body since the Greek period, while Lawrence believed that man's liberation begins from both his body and the soul.

Sigmund's ethical dilemmas and ethical choice presented in *The Trespasser*, reveal not only Lawrence's critique of the suppression of humanity by the industrial capitalist society, but also his compassionate life values.

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