



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


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**Abstract:** In their article "Ethical Dilemma and Nihilism in Munro's 'Passion'" Xiyinq Liu and Hongbin Dai discuss ethics in Alice Munro's short story "Passion." When attempting to escape the shackles of multiple ethical identities, the short story's protagonist Grace encounters dilemmas and in consequence makes wrong decisions with regard to the principle of ethics. The other protagonist of the story, Neil, commits suicide demonstrating that he breaks off all relationship with the world. Liu and Dai argue that Neil's death deconstructs Grace's ethical dilemmas and thus the narrative constructs a sense of nihilism. Liu and Dai posit that Munro's short story reveals the humility, fragility, and complexity of human nature.

## Xiying LIU and Hongbin DAI

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

As Zhenzhao Nie points out, "in literary texts, ethical issues are often associated with people's ethical identity. There are many ethical identities, such as blood-based identity, relationship-based identity, morality-based identity, collective and social relations-based identity, occupation-based identity, etc." (Nie, Introduction 263-64, unless noted otherwise, all translations are ours). Nie also suggests that "from the standpoint of ethical literary criticism, all literary texts are accounts of people's moral experience. Ethical lines, ethical knots, or ethical complexes exist in almost all structures of literary texts" (Nie, Ethical Literary 20). Alice Munro's 2004 short story "Passion" is a text with ethical issues. As Michael Trussler writes in "Pockets of Nothingness," Munro's short story is a "self-conscious portrayal of nihilism [that] offers one possible response to this metaphysical and ethical conflict" (184). The protagonist of the story, Grace, confronts ethical dilemmas and thus arrives at making wrong decisions. Another protagonist, Neil, commits suicide showing that he discards his ethical relationship with the world. However, the sense of nihilism accompanying Neil's death affects Grace's future life and deconstructs her individual ethical demands thereby conveying to people a sense of nothingness. Munro's character Grace, however, shoulders her ethical responsibilities. Grace possesses multiple ethical identities. Grace is an abandoned daughter, but is favored by her adoptive parents. She is a craftsman of wicker chairs and a hotel waitress. As far as her emotional relationship is concerned, she is both Maury's fiancée and Neil's future sister-in-law. When she tries to throw off these shackles of ethical identity, she has to confront ethical dilemmas.

Grace's ethical identities are intertwined and lead to complicated ethical lines and entanglements. The main ethical entanglement arises from Grace's decision to abandon her fiancé and run away with his brother Neil. In addition, there are also other ethical lines such as the mother-daughter relationship between Grace and Mrs. Travers, Neil's mother, and the affectionate relationship between Mrs. Travers and Neil. As an abandoned daughter, Grace loses her mother when she is a little girl and, as a consequence, leads a lonely life. Her father remarries another woman and starts a new family. Grace never lives with her parents, but instead grows up in a foster home aided by her relatives. While Grace has an independent personality, a gap exists between her high spirits and the inadequacy of material life. As an impoverished girl, "she just wanted to learn everything you could learn for free" ("Passion" 166). Grace's poverty is the cause of her unusually high self-esteem and her aspirations. Grace cannot easily identify with her own gender and hence she resists the gendered cultural norms of mainstream society. Grace disdains women's image as shaped by mainstream media especially in popular movies. According to the way she perceives popular culture, women are perverse and selfish, they are spoiled, and willful because they are ignorant. Although her adoptive parents love her, they simply do not know much about her and as a result, they do not have any spiritual connection with her. Grace feels naturally intimate with and dependent on mature, wise, and elderly women: "In fact, she fell in love with Mrs. Travers, almost exactly as Maury had fallen in love with her" (165). Such a meaningful mother-daughter relationship appears in many of Munro's stories including "The Progress of Love" (1986), "Friend of My Youth" (1990), "My Mother's Dream" (1998), "Family Furnishings" (2001), and "Three Stories" (2004).

Despite the fact that Mrs. Travers is not Grace's biological mother, Grace treats her as her mother. Mrs. Travers is an independence-minded woman. Reflecting on Mrs. Travers's past at a "useful" business college rather than a "real college," the narrator says that "she now wished like anything ... that she had crammed her mind first with what was useless" (167). Through Mrs. Travers, the narrator juxtaposes valueless spiritual education with useful things treasured by secular society. For example, Mrs. Travers brings Grace to the living room and lets her immerse herself in her own fantasy world by reading the books there. Reading provides not only a habitat for Grace's soul, but also the possibility to wander across time and space in the spiritual world. Mrs. Travers and Grace also discuss the novel *Anna Karenina* and discover their gender-specific interpretation. Depending on class and education meaning similar social status, a similar political environment and culture, women's reading experience can be different from men's as they tend to be more aware of a male-centered worldview. This also means, among other factors, that gender and identity are built during the process of reading.

Mrs. Travers has an independent spirit and a sense for freedom. She never forces Grace to accept her point of view. She usually regards people of the same sex as being of equal value and respects them as independent individuals, which, to a certain degree, flatters Grace. However, when Grace leaves her fiancée, Grace and Mrs. Travers's relationship becomes intricate. Mrs. Travers even wants Grace to resolve the confusing ethical dilemmas between herself and Neil, a change in their relationship Grace finds irritating: "She was too dismayed by the change in Mrs. Travers, by what looked like an increase in bulk, a stiffness in all her movements, a random and rather frantic air of benevolence, a weepy gladness leaking out of her eyes" (181). Mrs. Travers seems fairly rational, but is actually crazy and this becomes evident when Grace remembers Mrs. Travers "delivering in a whisper and with a strange shamed giggle, her last message. You'll know how to do it" (183). In fact, Mrs. Travers would

like to take advantage of Grace and hopes that she could help stop Neil's alcohol abuse. Thus an unresolved ethical knot exists between Mrs. Travers and Neil. Further, the suicide of Neil's father casts a long shadow over mother and son. Although the story does not drop a hint as to the reason for Mrs. Travers's ex-husband's suicide, this event turns into an obstacle and lies at the heart of their indifferent relationship. It can be inferred from the text that Mrs. Travers suffered from the suicide to such an extent that she is driven mad and has to be treated in a hospital. Mrs. Travers has three children and an extraordinary kindness toward Neil. Two reasons explain this close connection: first, Mrs. Travers feels guilty and intends to make compensation for Neil who is in need of a father's love and second, she excessively projects her emotions on Neil due to her pain of losing her husband. Nonetheless, Neil refuses to have verbal communication with his mother. For example, on Thanksgiving Day "he had not spoken a word, as yet, to his mother, who now repeated that it was such a good thing that he had come along just when he did" (180). Invoking a metaphor from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Mrs. Travers comments on her son Neil that "he's deep. Deep unfathomable caves of ocean bear" (174). She cannot get close to Neil because of the failure in their parent-child bonding. With a mother's intuition Mrs. Travers judges that she "think[s] he's special. I don't mean he can't be fun. But sometimes people who are the most fun can be melancholy, can't they?" (175) Why would a married man feel so depressed? This is a secret between the mother and the son.

From the indifferent relationship between Mrs. Travers and Neil, we can infer that they both suffer from the trauma of Neil's father's suicide. The difference between them is that Mrs. Travers establishes a harmonious relationship with her second husband. Neil, in contrast, never has the courage to face his trauma directly. The trauma exerts a strong influence on his contradictory views on marriage and everyday life in the future. He stays at one point in time unable to get out of the past to face the reality and ultimately loses the will to live on. Not only is the intimate relationship between Neil and his father damaged, his relationship with others also suffers. The bereavement is so strong that Neil can no longer establish emotional relationships with others. He opts to ignore his own feelings and seeks to protect himself so as to avoid pain. When Neil indulges himself in alcohol, he no longer feels panic, anxiety, helplessness, emptiness, and loneliness and this dilemma seems to be resolved by his suicide. Nevertheless, this also means that mother and son will never reconcile with each other, which inflict incurable pain upon Mrs. Travers.

Grace, too, is confronted with the dilemmas of ethical choice in her adulthood. She can choose to either marry Maury or become a craftswoman. Obviously, compared with the latter, which offers no sound job prospects since she lacks experience and competitiveness in the job market, the former presents an opportunity to transform her fate. Still, she hesitates to marry which derives from three reasons: first, there is a difference between her dream companion and Maury. Although Maury appreciates Grace's independence and self-respect, this is not enough for Grace. Maury is one of her peers who is loved and sheltered by his parents. He could not shoulder the responsibility to protect Grace at the crucial moment. Despite the fact that Grace perceives herself as an independent woman, this does not mean that she does not depend on anyone emotionally. The second reason for Grace's hesitation to marry is that Maury fails to meet Grace's sexual needs. To some extent, Grace has an Electra complex: a mature man can attract her with masculinity. When she is communicating with Neil, Grace notices "the smell of liquor edged with mint" (180). This is one sign of the mature man. Compared with Neil, Maury is boring, obedient, and traditional. Third, Grace thinks: "How strange that she'd thought of marrying Maury. A kind of treachery it would be. A treachery to herself" (190). This is a betrayal of her own class and Grace has a vague sense that marrying Maury would violate her class-consciousness and thus her identity.

By fleeing with her fiancé's brother Neil, Grace dismisses her principles of ethics and makes a wrong ethical decision: "an airy surrender, her flesh nothing now but a stream of desire" (183). This decision exemplifies Nie's concept of the Sphinx factor: "The so called Sphinx factor is made up of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. The two factors are combined organically and constitute a complete person. In the human body, these two factors are indispensable, but the human factor is superior, while the animal factor is inferior. Therefore, the latter can be controlled by the former which fills people with ethical consciousness" (Ethical Literary 5). The Sphinx factor describes the contradictory unity present in each human being, the coexistence of good and evil. Grace is controlled by her own desire which leads her to a path of transgression and violation and her behavior is driven by sexual desire and curiosity. As Peter Brooks writes in his *Body Work*, "sexuality belongs not simply to the physical body, but to the complex of phantasies and symbolizations which largely determine identity" (xiii). The body is the object of imagination: it brings to the subject endless imagination and joy, but is also the source of pain and struggle. Hence we posit that the body serves as both a metaphor and a physical presence in "Passion." In traditional realistic novels, women are objects for the male gaze and desire is expressed through the male gaze. Women adopt their identity in relation to it. As a woman writer, Munro employs a third-person point of view and subverts the traditional narrative ethics according to which female bodies tend to be gazed at. Neil's perspective is restricted in that not only does Grace contemplate her body and feelings from her own perspective, but she also conjectures Neil's psychology and desire as well. The narrator experiences and describes Neil's body, odor,

appearance, and sound: "The changed tone of his voice, which had become intimate, frank, and quiet, and the memory of his lips pressed, his tongue flicked, across her skin, affected Grace to such an extent that she was hearing the words but not the sense of what he was telling her. She could feel a hundred flicks of his tongue, a dance of supplication, all over her skin" (185).

The above excerpt from "Passion" reveals that Neil plays a leading role in regard to desire. The other characters only perceive Grace's body, in other words she can only achieve self-awareness through other people. Neil's body, however, is the object of Grace's desire. In contrast to how Grace perceives Neil, Grace comments on Maury in non-eroticized terms: "it seemed to her that she saw the whole of him in that moment, the true Maury. Scared, fierce, innocent, determined" (163). Grace is on intimate terms with Maury, but she longs to have further physical communication with Maury, because she is driven by her own desire. A correlation exists between one's body and ethical identity. The body discloses signs of one's social status, education, family environment, occupational background, etc. Grace's young body and her appearance are described as such: "Grace always remembered what she was wearing on that night. A dark-blue ballerina skirt, a white blouse through whose frills the upper curve of her breasts was visible, a wide rose-colored elasticized belt. There was a discrepancy, no doubt, between the way she presented herself and the way she wanted to be judged. But nothing about her was dainty or pert or polished in the style of the time. A bit ragged around the edges, in fact. Giving herself Gypsy airs, with the very cheapest silver-painted bangles, and the long, wild-looking curly dark hair that she had to put into a snood when she waited on tables" (165). Grace's body and her attire reflect an important part of her self-awareness. The body not only shows Grace's social status owing to her appearance of a young woman from the lower class, but also displays her lack of taste. As a waitress in a hotel, she is marginalized and her future appears bleak. When Grace chooses to run away with Neil, she gives up her own identity of being Maury's fiancée and Neil's future sister-in-law. She does not think of her fiancé Maury or Neil's wife Mavis and thus becomes an unethical person.

When Grace discards the principle of ethics, she considers Neil to be her ally hoping to establish a close relationship with him. She thinks it is "not a treachery to be riding with Neil, because he wasn't fortunate—he knew some of the things that she did. And she knew more and more, all the time, about him" (190). Consequently, Grace does not follow the moral principles of mainstream society. She is a traitor with a burden in the process of interaction with Neil. She tries every means to please him, "trying to show herself as worldly as he was" (192). Additionally, Grace hopes that Neil would disregard his ethics and informs him that she is not his future sister-in-law. Grace does so intentionally to imply that they can do whatever they like without constraints and this suggests that Neil has no conscious awareness of ethical identity. Otherwise, he would not lie to a nurse in order to flee with his brother's fiancée from the hospital in which he has been treated. Perhaps Neil only needs a young girl's companionship and he has no further thoughts, but we can infer that he tries to escape from the established mode of life and abandon his own identity.

Apart from being subject to the Sphinx factor and abandoning her ethical identity on her own initiative, Grace's decisions are also based on the following three reasons: First, Grace and Neil experience "metaphysical loneliness" and thus they are spiritually close to each other. Just as Grace, Neil has multiple ethical identities: son and father, husband and brother. Because he is estranged from his family, his life, too, lacks stable relationships, which contributes to his loneliness. As a son, he does not communicate with his mother and his alcoholism and depression are the result of being spoiled by his mother and the neglect by his father. He also fails as a father and lacks what Erich Fromm calls "fatherly qualities—discipline, independence, an ability to master life by himself" (45). He does not like to keep company with his children pretending to be busy. He also has a strained relationship with his wife, as the reader can conclude from the fact that he rarely participates in family gatherings, and is even late at the Thanksgiving family dinner. As a sibling, Neil betrays his little brother Maury, and flees with his girlfriend Grace. It is only with Grace that Neil feels tranquil, relieved, and develops fatherly behavior. "What a relief ... For letting me teach you to drive. It calmed me down" (189). Neil longs to be needed and to win someone's approval in order to build a fatherly authoritative position, which he has not been able to accomplish while staying with his imperious and fierce wife. The innocent and lovely Grace, however, allows him to express his needs and identity. The second reason for Grace's decision to escape with Neil is that she can feel Neil's desire to protect her which gives her a sense of security and her relationship with him holds for her the promise of trust, courage, freedom, and independence. Grace learns to drive from Neil who wants to teach her basic skills in life and sees her gain confidence while driving. When they stop in a parking lot, Neil "didn't show any surprise at where they were, or at what she had done. In fact, he told her, the honking had woken him, miles back, but he had pretended to be still asleep, because the important thing was not to startle her. He hadn't been worried, though. He knew she would make it" (194). The third reason behind Grace's life-changing decision is her wish to escape from her marginalized living situation in a patriarchal society and passion is her pathway out of this marginalization. Grace is eager to obtain the free space and time in which she can fully develop her personality and realize herself. Despite the irrationality associated with the notion of passion, Grace is also reasonable: "she did this both foolishly and seriously,



the way you would pull petals off a flower, but not with any words so blatant as he loves me, he loves me not" (189).

Then Neil's sudden death ends all, undermines the individual ethical demands other people made on him, and conveys to the reader a sense of nothingness. With the recognition of nothingness (nihilism), we embrace in Simon Critchley's words "the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value becomes null and void" (7). Thus, nothingness does not only negate an ordered life, but also ethical rules. Neil meets the end of his life by suicide. This means that he breaks off all ethical relationship with the world. He extricates himself from life just as his father did. He leaves all the contradictions, all ethical dilemmas, pain, despair, and nihilism to other people. On the surface all ethical dilemmas are resolved by Neil's death including Grace's attempts to escape her unwanted ethical responsibilities. But a sense of nihilism and death will have a considerable influence on her future life. In order to overcome nothingness, people search for meaning by revisiting memories, deconstructing ethical confusions, and restoring what one could call an authentic sense of identity and this applies to Grace as well. Grace has been confronted with ethical confusion when she ran away with Neil. After experiencing the ups and downs of life, she is now full of sorrow about Neil's death: "as a matter of fact, she does not know to this day if those words [of goodbye] were spoken, or if he only caught her, wound his arms around her, held her so tightly, with such continual, changing pressures that it seemed more than two arms were needed, that she were surrounded by him, his body strong and light, demanding and renouncing all at once, as if he was telling her that she was wrong to give up on him, everything was possible, but then again that she was not wrong, he meant to stamp himself on her and go" (195). Grace will never forget Neil's death and thus "ethical dilemmas that Grace confronted during her summer with the Travers family, dilemmas ... still remain unresolved when at the beginning of the story she returns to the Ottawa Valley, forty years after that fateful summer" (Winther 199). Grace has no choice but to confront herself with her ethical problems. Because Neil kills himself when drunk, Grace does not need to shoulder any direct moral responsibility. However, either as Neil's future sister-in-law or as fellow traveler, Grace does not accept admonitions from Mrs. Travers and does not prevent Neil from drinking. Nonetheless, Grace's ethical choices do not satisfy her own desires. On the contrary, the desire is permanently lost. Many years later, she has an epiphany: "she'd thought it was touch. Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone on bone. Inflammation. Passion. But that wasn't what had been meant for them at all. That was child's play, compared to how she knew him, how far she'd seen into him, now" (193). This connects to George Bataille's explanation of the erotic as the momentary overcoming of existential loneliness: "each individual feels himself or herself as discontinuous, and the erotic—the attempt to know another through breaching the lonely confines of one's own body—marks an effort to know, if only momentarily, a kind of continuity with others" (Bataille qtd. in Brooks 8). If Grace desired for Neil's body many years ago, then she is later eager to know Neil himself to explore the depths of Neil's soul.

Life and death, passion and nothingness are opposite poles rather than dualisms. Grace gains the opportunity to choose a new life at the price of Neil's death. In the mean time, she separates herself from all her past ethical relationships. This "unbearable lightness of being" makes her feel solemn. Still, she cannot cast off the sense of guilt brought about by Neil's death and her life remains in ethical confusion. We submit that the title of the story, "Passion," has an ironic meaning: Grace has much passion for Neil, her object of desire and follows him in an illusion for a more fulfilled life. Yet her decision to follow her passion leads to Neil's death and destroys her illusion. She tries to experience the meaning and value of love and passion, but as a paradoxical consequence, this meaning becomes void. Further, a passionate life holds the promises of meaningful existence and infinite joys. Nevertheless, passion cannot be eternal for it is always dependent on the concrete flesh. Passion will eventually retreat because it is attached to the body, which in turn is haunted by death. Grace's behavior leads to Neil's death in an indirect way because it does not merely convey a sense of emptiness: it gives Grace a new moral responsibility and she must take good care of herself before exploring the true value and meaning of life. Grace shoulders her ethical responsibilities when Maury urges her to put the responsibility on Neil: "Just say he made you do it. Just say you didn't want to go" (196), but Grace resists: "she wrote back five words. I did want to go. She was going to add I'm sorry, but stopped herself" (196). Moreover, Grace breaks away from her ethical relationship with Maury and thereby also loses the opportunity to transform her humble destiny and enhance her class status through the marriage.

Grace's choice toward the end of the story reflects pragmatist ethics, that is, wisdom of life. After Neil's death, Mr. Travers gives her a check for one thousand dollars in order to compensate for or appease her wounded psychology: "immediately she thought of sending it back or tearing it up, and sometimes even now she thinks that that would have been a grand thing to do. But in the end, of course, she was not able to do it. In those days, it was enough money to insure her a start in life" (196). With this decision as with her overall behavior, Grace is a victor to some extent, but she is a loser with regard to her morality and sense of justice. Though she does not deny and evade her moral responsibility, she fails to compensate for the loss caused by her wrongdoing. She does nothing but follow others' arrangements passively. Ultimately she succumbs to her fate, makes ethical choices in her favor, and accepts some financial assistance. Money serves as a bridge leading to the final value.

Thus the final conversion of the relationship between Grace and Maury happens: the previous lovers turn into strangers using money to end their relationship and the relationship ceases to exist between Grace and Maury. Money has a double effect on Grace, humiliating on the one hand, but liberating on the other. The affection between Grace and Maury and the intimate mother-daughter relationship between Grace and Mrs. Travers are equal to one thousand dollars. This induces the humiliation and contempt for Grace to the maximum. In contrast to these negative consequences, money also grants Grace freedom as she is able to better protect her independence and autonomy. Moreover, money assists her in developing her personality and securing her liberty.

Memory cannot reproduce the spiritual trauma and so Grace returns to the old place many years later looking for her lover's home: "and what if you find it gone altogether? ... You make a fuss. If anybody has come along to listen to you, you bewail the loss. But mightn't a feeling of relief pass over you, of old confusions or obligations wiped away?" (161). Here, the third person point of view is converted to the second person narrative. As the new addressee, "you" has a double meaning. First, "you" refers to Grace: the narrator is imagining her thoughts. She is eager to find the house that is the symbol of love and death. At the same time, she hopes that the house disappeared, so as to reduce her pain and to relieve her of the confusion and remorse that have been troubling her. Second, "you" also means that the reader assumes the role as the addressee. The narrator is speaking to the reader. Thus the reader is confronted with the same ethical dilemma as the protagonist. As James Phelan points out, "most writers who employ this technique take advantage of the opportunity to move readers between the positions of observer and addressee and, indeed, to blur the boundaries between these positions" (137): "Passion" is a story about Grace's spiritual growth as it recounts how and why Grace can extricate herself from ethical dilemmas. In sum, Munro's short story reveals the humility, fragility, and complexity of human nature.

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