

Equality, Friendship and Harmony Interpretation of Postmodern Ethical Thought in Lessing's *On Cats*

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Abstract. British post-modernist writer Doris Lessing paid close attention to the changes in the moral order of society in the 20th century, answering the value and meaning of the proposition of “ethics” in the formation of the times in her works, and constantly reflecting on the ethical relationship between human beings and various subjects in society. This idea is fully reflected in her novel *On Cats*. *On Cats* adopts a first-person narrative style, and through a series of storylines such as “I” witnessing “my” family dealing with a flood of sick cats, de-sexing cats, and rescuing and caring for sick cats, it vividly shows the daily life of people and cats and the realistic picture of the life in that times. In addition, through “my” mother’s repression and resistance, the miserable life of working people, and urban air pollution, *On Cats* also reproduces the “new problems” in the development of the relationship between human beings, human and non-human creatures, and human and nature in a comprehensive manner. Therefore, from the perspective of postmodern ethics, this paper interprets the ethical relationship between humans, animals and nature as expressed in *On Cats*, thus criticizing a series of modern qualities such as masculocentrism, upper class centrism and anthropocentrism. In addition, this paper aims to break the dichotomy between the subject and the other, and to build a “community” in which husband and wife respect each other, people are friendly and supportive of each other, and people live in harmony with nature. This paper also has implications for the harmonious and stable development of modern society today.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *On Cats*, postmodern ethics, community, the Other, nature.

1. Introduction

Nobel laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013), who produced many literary works throughout her life, is considered the most influential British woman writer of the 20th century after Virginia Woolf (Wang Lili, 2005: 35). She was concerned with issues of social life and the development of the times, realizing that the tumultuous society under the changing ethical and moral order of the 20th century was challenging and dissolving the subjectivity of human beings, and further reconceptualizing and reconstructing the connectedness and communal relationship in human society and between human beings and nature. Lessing’s novel *On Cats* also reflects these ideas.

At present, there are some limitations in foreign research on *On Cats* itself, and scholars have focused more on Lessing’s other works. Through works such as *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), *This Was the Old Chief’s Country* (1951), and *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing conveys her anti-colonial ideas (Bill Schwarz, 2016: 127-136) and gives voice to women (Mine ÖZYURT KILIÇ, 2017: 265-280). At the same time, she incorporates communist ideas, adding a political dimension to the novel’s protagonists (Jonathan Arac, 2021: 6-16). Some scholars have also chosen to combine literature and psychology to analyze Lessing’s works from an interdisciplinary perspective, exploring the psychological portraits of the groups depicted therein through Lessing’s adolescents (Patricia Louw, 2009: 139-149) and the elderly (Oró-Piqueras M, 2013: 47-51).

Domestic research on *On Cats* is mainly concentrated in the past ten years. Scholars have mostly explored it from three perspectives: feminism, ecological philosophy, and alienation. Duan Xianghuai (2014) analyzed the text from a feminist perspective, arguing that the novel profoundly conveys Lessing’s claim of feminine consciousness as a female writer. Yue Guofa and Wang Yuan (2015) explored the dilemmas and solutions of the natural and spiritual dimensions of the ecological crisis problem revealed in the text from both cat and human perspectives, and analyzed Lessing’s literary ecological vision and ecological ideals. In addition, Guan Lizheng (2012) studied the relationships

between the human whole, women and animals presented in *On Cats* from ecofeminist perspective. Song Li (2015) used alienation theory to conduct a textual study of *On Cats* and concluded that nature is not an enemy of human beings but should be a friend. Notably, Ma Jingjing (2016) used the ethics of care theory to analyze *On Cats* and excavated the animal ethics that Lessing embodies in it, enriching the research perspective of this text.

Lessing's novel *On Cats* adopts a first-person narrative perspective, narrating the daily life of humans and cats from the perspective of the human "I" and depicting a realistic picture of the times. As a so-called "domestic cat", "my" cats have a safe living environment and are carefully taken care of by "me" in times of illness. However, at the same time, they have to submit to human arrangements in terms of de-sexing and cub rearing, and to a certain extent lose the freedom of a "wild cat". In addition, the narrative also touches on some social life issues worthy of consideration, such as "my" mother's pain when taking involuntary family responsibilities, the managers' indifference when witnessing the winter plight of toilers, and the consequences of human pollution of the air, etc., showing the changes and challenges faced by human society and ecology in the 20th century.

As a postmodern novel, the ethical and moral relationships between human beings, human beings and non-human creatures, and human beings and ecology embodied in *On Cats* has a profound commonality with the connotation of postmodern ethics. In the novel, under the influence of male centrism, "my" mother in "my" family is in a vulnerable position; under the influence of upper classism and interpersonal indifference, working people are trapped in a difficult situation and cannot get out; under the anthropocentric mode of thinking, people rule cats with the idea that people rule people, ignoring the differences of cats and neglecting the ecological balance in the pursuit of human development. In the process of pursuing human development, ecological balance is neglected. Unlike most studies that have been conducted from a single perspective, this paper synthesizes the multidimensional relationships embodied in the novel, places them in the moral and ethical framework of postmodern ethics, and elaborates on the thematic ideas of mutual respect between men and women, mutual understanding between people, and human beings shouldering responsibility for creatures other than humans and nature to build a multidimensional and harmonious community advocated by the work.

2. Building Equality: Mutually Respectful Family Relationships

The modern ethic of "exclusion, rejection, and denial of difference" (Zygmunt Bauman, 2003: 1) has perpetuated the disadvantaged position of women in family relationships, and women are considered less valuable than men in both the division of roles and voice in the family, thus women are forced to take on tasks that men are not willing to take on. Women are forced to take on household chores that men are reluctant to do, and are dominated by men in making decisions about family matters.

In *On Cats*, "my" mother, as an established role in the family under male authority, has long been involuntarily responsible for heavy domestic chores and for killing the animals that proliferate in the house, a task that "my" father does not want to undertake. At the same time, Lessing also intentionally portrays the resistance of women in the face of this reality. The episode of "my" mother leaving the house because she no longer wants to bear the moral guilty of killing the sick cat shows that the traditionally disadvantaged women do not stop fighting for their equal status in the process of forming and running the family.

Postmodern ethics advocates that individuals should "recognize differences, respect the other, and assume absolute responsibility for the other in order to achieve democracy, equality, and fraternity in the true sense" (Chen Shidan, 2017:215). In family relationships, husband and wife should maintain a virtuous cycle of mutual understanding, and the husband should see his wife's hard work in family management and understand her, rather than just shirking family responsibilities and taking her contribution for granted.

Through the family relationship between “my” parents and the mapping of male and female in the world of cats to human society, Lessing exposes the phenomena of male authority centeredness and oppression of women in society. It also deepens the reflection on the above themes through the episode of “my” mother’s rebellion of leaving the house, and conveys the ideas of abandoning the male authority center and building gender equality in family relations.

2.1. The Oppression of the Husband under Multiple Shackles

In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone Beauvoir talks that “the man is the subject, the absolute; the woman is the other” (Simone Beauvoir, 2012: 9). In *On Cats*, Lessing uses matter-of-fact writing to show the imbalance of gender status in family relationships and the vulnerability of women in the dichotomy. The language and plotting are not harsh and intense, but actually show the salient and poignant realities.

humorous, humorous if it killed her; but resentful of course, for it was not my father who drowned the kittens, shot the snake, killed the diseased fowl, or burned sulphur in the white ant nest: my father liked white ants, enjoyed watching them. (11).

There are multiple reasons why mothers are in a vulnerable position in the family and are forced to take on family matters that their husbands are not willing to take on.

First, in traditional beliefs, women are considered a symbol of weakness, inferior to men in ability, and play the role of male appendage in family relationships. This social perception acts as a shackle, confining women to the family. Women, represented by “my” mother, are constantly repeating tedious household chores and daily chores, while men, as a symbol of strength, are able to develop their careers outside the home. This situation is clearly expressed in *On Cats*.

A year, less, of my mother’s refusal to act her role as regulator, arbiter, balance between sense and the senseless proliferations of nature, had resulted in the house, the sheds around the house, the bush that surrounded the farmstead, being infested by cats. (11).

Growing up in such a social environment, women’s thinking modes are influenced by social attitudes and they are always forced to grow up to be the ones who handle family affairs, devoting most of their time and energy to household chores. And over time it becomes a habit, and they themselves take it for granted, losing the environment to develop like men and willingly submitting to the dictates of marital power.

“My” mother cannot bear to see the death of the cat in the depth of her soul. When a cat was accidentally killed for snake catching, she looked at the dying female cat and “wept and petted it” (9); when the sick cats were flooded and needed to be exterminated in large numbers, “my” mother was even more helpless, and she stayed with one of her favorite old cats, “crying while gently stroking the cat’s head” (13).

However, in the long-established social division of labor, “my” mother has to make herself “loving and sensible, a good housekeeper, especially pragmatic, and rarely emotional” (11). She “would not waste time on sentimental issues” (11), but the helplessness and pain of not wanting to be a killer always haunted her.

Second, in terms of the distribution of power between the husband and wife, the father is always the dominant power, while the mother is in a dominated position. “My” father knows clearly that “my” mother is unwilling to do the execution of sick cats, but because “my” father himself is unwilling to face up to the internal guilt that comes from killing living creatures, he imposes the suffering on his wife with an aloof attitude.

As stated in the novel, “when something had to be done, steps had to be taken, a final stand was being made—and my mother was making it” (11). From this we can see that “my” father has decision-making power over family affairs, while “my” mother is only the executor of decisions and is subject to the dictates of “my” father.

In addition, we can also sense in the human view of the cats’ world a deep-seated male self-identification with the centrality of the husband. It is this identification that manifests itself in their dominant behavior toward women in family relationships.

Regarding the courtship of cats, the Grey Cat original female owner, S, considered it “frightful” and “unfair” (42) that female cat cannot decide her own mate, while the original male owner, H, “said that was entirely as it should be” (42).

The leading contemporary French feminist Luce Irigaray criticizes patriarchal society by stating that “because women have traditionally represented the use value of men, that is, the exchange value between men; in other words, a commodity. For this reason, she remains in the role of regulator of material entities.” (Luce Irigaray, 2013) At this point, the woman’s role is nothing more than “the focus of a competitive transaction between two men, including even the competition to seize the Mother Earth” (Luce Irigaray, 2013).

The male master’s words and actions reveal the dominance and control that men mostly take for granted in the construction of the family-couple relationship in human society.

In the dichotomy of the couple relationship, men see themselves as the center and neglect to respect women’s right to choose as the “other”, which undermines women’s rights and interests and negatively affects the construction of harmonious and happy family relationships.

2.2. Self-rescue Against Centralism

It is noteworthy that Lessing does not portray “my” mother here as a flat character who is comfortable with the oppressed status quo. Faced with unequal family relations, “my” mother does not choose to keep holding her tongue, but to rebel in her own way and achieve self-redemption.

After years of suffering from the killing of living creatures, “my” mother chose to leave home when faced with another mass slaughter mission of sick cats for “she would not drown kittens, or have put to death the cats who badly needed it”. (12) “My” mother knew in her heart that the time had come to concentrate on the execution of the sick cats, but this time she did not allow her husband to impose the moral torment of killing lives on her, but “left alone” (12) with “a year, less, of my mother’s refusal to act her role as regulator, arbiter, balance between sense and the senseless proliferations of nature” (12).

It is this absence of “my” mother that allows “my” father to finally choose to take responsibility for the problem of superabundant sick cats in the house and to stop sitting idly by the following.

The moment she had gone, my father said several times, ‘Well, it’s got to be done, hasn’t it?’ Yes, it had; and so, he rang up the vet in town. (13).

From here we can see that “my” mother’s departure prompted “my” father to take over the responsibility of healing the family and start looking for a solution for the sick cats. The subsequent episode also shows that when the veterinarian’s advice did not work, “my” father picked up a gun, as “my” mother often did, and put the cats to death in a bloody way.

When “my” mother returned home afterwards, “my” father “murdered, and felt it” (15). His hands trembled, he looked up to his wife and said, “that must never happen again” (15).

“My” mother’s resistance makes “my” father take responsibility. Through this cat slaughter, “my” father feels the bloodshed of the abuse of life and has a real reverence for life from the bottom of his heart. At the same time, “my” father also feels the guilt and torment of being a killer, understands his wife’s dedication, and tries to respect and protect her from her point of view, actively looking for ways for the family to live in peace in the future.

It can be seen that, in the face of the unreasonable factors in the current system, simply holding back does not change the state of affairs. The disadvantaged party should make a reasonable rebellion at the right time and make their own voice heard, in order to break the authority and establish a fair family relationship that recognizes the differences and respects the other, and achieve self-redemption.

Lessing also projects this idea of resistance onto the cat.

In the traditional husband-centered family relationship, both the formation and continuation of marriage are the main field of men, and the initiative of women is regarded as not self-respecting. The authority of the husband demands that women are always passive and controlled.

However, the author tries to break this unfair situation by using the Grey Cat, a female cat, as a symbol of femininity.

The Grey Cat is enthusiastic and proactive in her courtship, “she rolls and cries, and calls, and invites.” (43), and then freely “revert to her haughty, unpleasant appearance” (45). Such active control of one’s marital relationship is a biological instinct in the world of cats. However, Lessing’s intention here is more to use the cat to enlighten people, especially the female group, in their domestic relationships.

As citizens who also exist in social relationships, women should enjoy the same rights as male citizens to control their body’s desires, determine their lifestyles and think and act in the same way. Women should have the courage to pursue “new life” and not settle for the status quo of being controlled.

Through the above analysis, we can appreciate the postmodern ethical tendency of Lessing in shaping family relationships. Lessing calls for breaking down the male-centeredness of family relationships and bridging the gap by means including women’s own awakening and resistance. Both spouses, especially the male one, should take absolute responsibility for the other and promote the construction of a harmonious family community with mutual respect and equality between husband and wife.

3. Inclusion of Others: a Friendly and Helpful Humanitarianism

In the development of capitalist society, the nature of exploitation and self-interest had led to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, a proliferation of social conflicts, and challenges to the basic rights and interests of workers and their livelihood protection. Therefore, moral ethics advocating freedom, equality, fraternity, civil rights and human rights came into being.

According to postmodern ethics, the power class of capitalist society under the capitalist political and economic system adheres to the self-centered ideology of “exclusion of dissidents” and neglects its responsibility to the working class, which has led to social injustice and severed the ties between human beings. Postmodern philosopher Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes the uniqueness and otherness of the Other and calls for a socially constructed humanism of the Other. People should insist on self-respect for the Other, understand differences, remain friendly, and assume absolute responsibility for the Other.

In *On Cats*, Lessing denounces the social injustice through the miserable life of the people at the bottom and the indifference of the managers in the face of the people’s pleas for help; at the same time, through the arrangement of mutual understanding and respect between the pet owners in the veterinary hospital and the greeting of “I” to the neighbors, she shows the ideal state of human society and the interpersonal relationship. The story also shows the ideal state of human society and the close relationship between human beings by arranging the episodes of mutual understanding and respect between pet owners in the veterinary hospital and the care and greeting of neighbors.

3.1. Unjust Society under Class Division

In the process of social development, differences in economic situation, social status and cultural level divide different classes. The differences in economic bases among the classes lead to class differentiation with different moral standards and ideological codes and gradually generate class conflicts. The power class is bound to squeeze the resources of the working class because of its strong economic power, resulting in the phenomenon of unequal social relations. At the same time, the inevitability of the power class’s appropriation of resources and the exclusivist idea of “others are hell” will make the power holders indifferent to the plight of others, thus fostering the indifference of human society.

In *On Cats*, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) is forced to interrupt the water supply in a cold winter due to a burst water pipe, and the residents are trapped in a long walk to get water and no hot water. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry was indifferent to the situation and ignored it. “Their voices were lugubrious, but they were deeply fulfilled” (33). By failing to take

practical action to repair the plumbing and respond to the demands of democracy, they failed to shoulder their absolute responsibility to the people.

These houses are mostly L.C.C. owned, and by the first week of the cold, the pipes had burst and frozen, and people were waterless. The system stayed frozen. The authorities opened a main on the street corner, and for weeks the women of the street made journeys to fetch water in jugs and cans along pavements heaped with feet of icy slush, in their house slippers. (33)

Here, through the specific encounters of several households, Lessing brings to life the hardships and misery of the people in an indifferent society ruled by the center of the power class, where no one can be asked for help.

The old man, middle-aged woman, and a child live in the store, which is unheated in the cold winter months. The old man, who has just recovered from a serious illness, is weak; the middle-aged woman, a mother, is wearing thin clothes and her hands are covered with frostbite to hold up the shop; the child is freezing and crying, but for the sake of the store's business, the mother has to slap the child to make him stop crying.

This is not an isolated case; Lessing's visually striking group portraits expose the universal plight of working people.

The old man next door who works as a market porter slipped on the ice outside his front door, hurt his back, and was for weeks on unemployment pay. (34).

Lessing also contrasts this with the secure and safe life of the middle class, highlighting even more the misery that class divisions and managerial indifference bring to the lives of the people.

In middleclass streets, of course, snow was cleared as it fell, and the authorities responded to angry citizens demanding their rights and threatening lawsuits. In our area, people suffered it out until the spring (34).

Ordinary workers played the role of "drudgery" in the development of the industrialized British society at that time, they endured tremendous work pressure, but were in a weak position of domination and oppression in the society.

The managers represent the interests of the middle class and above, and these power classes appropriates almost all the resources for development and most of the basic resources for survival. The strong egocentric and exclusivist ideology makes the social managers hard-hearted. They are indifferent to the working people as the other, failing to assume their responsibilities to the people as managers, and severing the harmonious ethical relations of human society with their differentiated treatment.

Here Lessing uses the helplessness of the toiling masses in front of the managers for help and the importance of the managers to the middle class to distinctly criticize the indifference, exploitation and oppression of the ruling class to the working people in the development of capitalist society, and calls on human society to raise the humanitarian consciousness for the others, restore the absolute responsibility of self to the others, and rebuild the warm and equal social relations.

3.2. Restoring a Spirit of Camaraderie that Respects Differences

The idea of "democracy and fraternity" that prevailed in 20th century British capitalist society was a political discourse generated under the influence of traditional "metaphysics". Such a discourse contains a distorted tendency to authoritarianism, which makes the practice of social ethics strongly unjust and exclusive.

In such a social environment, people naturally seek to identify with their own kind, trying to build a "community" within human society from the level of thinking, and are hostile to others with differences, thus intensifying social conflicts and alienation of human relations.

Jacques Derrida, a contemporary French deconstructionist, defines human relations as "relations without relations" and "community without community", thus highlighting the need for "otherness" and "difference". By defining human relations as "relations without relations" and "community without community", Jacques Derrida highlights the respect for the "other" and "difference" (Hu Jihua, 2005: 121-123).

In *On Cats*, Lessing also sets up a warm episode to show the practice of ordinary democracy in respecting the differences of the Other, and the effect of social fraternity generated.

“I” remember seeing a middle-aged, haggard woman in a veterinary hospital who was dependent on a large dog. Even though she was suffering, the woman devoted most of her income and time to maintaining a healthy life for her pet. While not everyone could value their pets more than themselves, everyone was understanding of her situation and willing to let her cut in line and get into the house early to get out of the cold ——

The way they looked at her, shivering there with her pampered beast, and then invited her to jump the queue to get out of the cold into the building while we waited for the doors to open, said that they understood her situation and were sorry for her. (73).

In such a street, where most of the “poor” live, people are relatively short of material goods, but always uphold the spirit of friendship. Unlike the exclusive middle class, people here choose to respect and understand others and give them friendly help when facing the differences between individuals. People choose to let the woman into the house early to get warm, which shows the warmth of human society.

In addition, “I” is also willing to help others in the novel, showing the natural connectedness between people.

The thin brother wore, invariably, an overcoat over a bundle of clothes... I suggested he wouldn’t be so hot if he didn’t wear so many clothes. (29)

Here, through the concern of “I”, Lessing shows the beautiful scenery of a warm society. Faced with the difficulties in others’ lives, “I” actively offers advice to others with the idea of caring for them. When realizing that there are differences in the living habits of others, “I” can also think from the perspective of others and respect and understand their life choices.

At this point, pet owners and “I” actually abandon their egocentric thinking and break the chains of measuring others by their own way of thinking. These people see and understand things from the perspective of the other, treating others with full inclusiveness and a sense of responsibility for them, and spontaneously fulfilling a moral responsibility of self-respect for the other and absolute responsibility for the other.

By describing the episodes of mutual respect, mutual help and friendship among people in different situations in the veterinary hospital, as well as the narrative of mutual concern among people, Lessing concretely demonstrates the feasibility and necessity of the spirit of friendship and respect for differences in the development of society.

Lessing arranges these examples of mutual care among people in the general social environment of interpersonal indifference, which contrasts with the aloof episode of the working class in the preceding text when no one asks for help when they are in a deep winter plight, and inspires the reader to think more.

The harmonious atmosphere in the veterinary hospital and the caring behavior of the neighbors are the projection of Lessing’s ideal environment for the society after the reconstruction of the spirit of fraternity, and are the strong voice of Lessing calling people to respect differences and build a “minimal post-modern ethical community” so as to realize a common society.

Although Lessing’s *on Cats* focuses on the world of cats, the interspersed discourse on human relations still profoundly reveals the injustice faced by the working class under the rule of the capitalist power class at that time, showing the miserable life of the toiling masses and criticizing the indifference of the managers who lacked humanitarianism toward their fellow workers. At the same time, through the plot of respecting differences, treating people kindly and helping each other within the working people, Lessing praises the spirit of responsibility of the people towards others and inspires more people to regain the spirit of fraternity. Here, Lessing calls on people to increase the connectedness of human relationships, to make human responsibility to the other more basic, original and unconditional, and thus to promote the construction of a social model of fraternity and democracy and the harmonious and sustainable development of human society.

4. Respect for Nature: the Harmonious Coexistence of Man and Nature

In modern Western ethics, man has always been at the center, conquering, ruling and dominating the natural ecology in the process of his own existence and socio-economic development, neglecting ecological ethics at the level of ethics and morality, and failing to take responsibility for the natural other. At the same time, human beings and natural ecology are absolutely connected, and any breakage of nature will eventually backfire on human beings themselves. Therefore, postmodern ethics advocates that human society should respect nature, assume absolute responsibility for nature, cultivate a moral model of living in harmony with the natural environment, and build a sustainable community of human and nature.

In *On Cats*, Lessing describes the relationship between humans and the cats, a kind of non-human creatures that is a part of the natural environment, to expose the self-centered neglect of the cats' self-esteem and their negative consequences. In addition, Lessing also narrates human attempts to respect cats as the Other and to build a harmonious community that recognizes differences, respects the Other, and achieves diversity.

In addition, Lessing highlights the linking relationship between human confrontation and symbiosis with the entire natural ecosystem. From a more macroscopic perspective, Lessing shows the danger of the environmental crisis to human beings themselves, and criticizes the ecological destruction when human beings act entirely from their own needs and ignore the ethics of nature. At the same time, Lessing also calls on people to uphold the concept of the holistic connection between human beings and nature, to abandon the dichotomous confrontation between the two, and to explore the balance between personal and social development and ecological protection, so as to build a community in which human beings and nature live in harmony.

4.1. 3.1 Individual Respect for Non-human Species

Things are inherently diverse and rich, and one should not impose one's own subjective choices on the other, forcing "alien things to submit to the hegemonic ambition of one's own will" (Chen Shidan, 2017). Postmodern ethics rejects the "metaphysics of presence" (Chen Shidan, 2017), the "ontology and epistemology of eternal and unchanging truth and ultimate value" (Chen Shidan, 2017) pursued by modern ethics. In this regard, postmodern ethics argues that human beings should not "explain and rule the world with a single, fixed logic, formulas and principles and universal laws" (Zhang Guoqing, 1998: 45). Human beings should take the initiative to dissolve the central authority, recognize differences, and respect the other.

Lessing paints a harmonious picture of human and cat life to us in *On Cats*.

Cats as creatures have the same emotions as humans, and will care about the people they care about. When "I" was sick, a bluish-grey Persian cat, "arrived purring on my bed, and settled down to share my sickness, my food, my pillow, my sleep." (17), giving "me" warm companionship. Even in the cold and windy winter, "the wind lifting and laying the dust outside the door was cold—but in the crook of my arm, a light purring warmth, the cat, my friend" (17).

Here, "I" use the word "friend" to describe the cat, indicating that "I" put the cat on an equal footing with myself and give it respect. To a certain extent, this shows the behavior of "I" in breaking the superiority of human thinking in the spiritual level.

At the same time, human beings with a friendly heart will also lend a helping hand to cats when they are in trouble. "I" have kept and helped many cats throughout my life, providing them with a shelter from the wind and rain, so that they are protected from the storm outside.

When the black cat was sick, "I" spared no effort to save and care for her. In "my" opinion, she is not just a cat, but a life as precious as human life. "I" did my best to shoulder the absolute responsibility for the cat as the other.

But she was not just a cat. For a variety of reasons, all of them human and irrelevant to her, she must not be allowed to die. (70)

"I" took good care of the black cat, feeding her a liquid food every half hour. I treat the black cat with respect as an individual, rather than putting the cat in a position below humans. Thinking of the

image of myself as a sick and disheveled person who feels “shut inside a shell of sickness” (74), “I” picked up a hot towel and cleans the black cat’s fur. “I took a light towel wrung out in hot water, and rubbed her with it, gently, all over, to get rid of the dirt and fluff and stickiness” (74). By taking care of the black cat with all my heart, “I” finally let the black cat recover from the disease and become “a normal cat, with normal instincts” (78).

In addition, when the frail Rufus suffered from several illnesses, “I” also made great efforts to take care of him, and “under our hands, his tough, muscled body, a strong old cat, in spite of his ailments” (168).

Although “I” try to understand and respect the cats and put their lives on an equal footing with human life, in many cases, “I” can hardly avoid the tendency to “rule” the animal with the idea that man rules man, and to impose “my” will on the cats, which are different from man, ignoring the plurality of the internal logic of things.

Lessing uses a lot of ink to portray the inevitable self-centered superiority and arrogance of humans when facing cats and other non-human creatures.

The act of keeping cats as pets forcibly changes the living environment of cats, and the resulting changes in their nature and skills in turn become evidence for “I” to conclude that domestic cats are less skilled and more delicate than wild cats; cats become pet cats and lose the naturally dominated environment for cub selection, so that in most cases, all litters have the possibility of survival, but people forcibly execute extra litters to control their numbers for the convenience of raising them, and complain that nature cannot regulate the number of litters the mother cat breeds. Human behavior breaks the original survival pattern and order of the natural biosphere, but in a superior posture, we judge the negative phenomena that arises afterwards.

But then, how inflexible is nature, how unpliant: if cats have been the friends of man for so many centuries, could nature not have adapted itself, just a little, away from the formula: five or six kittens to a litter, four times a year? (22)

Lessing focuses here on the de-sexing of cats.

For a long time, people have judged cats by their own thinking on the grounds that de-sexing extends the life of the cat, ignoring the differences of the other and taking for granted that de-sexing is a good thing for the benefit of the cats’ life.

For cats, the loss of reproductive organs means physical mutilation, and they may experience discrimination among the same sex. At the same time, the quality of life and the physical and mental health of cats are also greatly compromised by the loss of body shape and temperament after de-sexing.

At this time, the ethical concepts practiced in the human world do not adapt to the inherent ethical needs of animals. Faced with the various problems brought about by de-sexing, even the always confident kitten, the Grey Cat, could not maintain her original state of mind.

But it did change. Her confidence had been struck. The tyrannical beauty of the household had vanished. (65).

Lessing explores the mindset and ethical implications behind the human act of de-sexing cats through the different views of various people.

The veterinarians are unconvinced about de-sexing cats and advocate de-sexing cats and removing “all reproductive organs” (62); “I” am divided on the issue of de-sexing cats, feeling that forcibly de-sexing cats does not respect their sense of subjectivity and reduces their trust in humans. The cab driver reflects on the issue of de-sexing cats, stating clearly that it is wrong to “to steal their real natures from them, to suit our convenience” (64). And he hopes that those doctors can invent a birth control for cats.

From the human point of view, de-sexing cats is a “win-win” option that reduces the pressure on humans to keep too many pets and prolongs the life of cats to a certain extent; however, people often neglect to respect the nature of cats as other people.

The three views shown in the novel are actually the three views that people often hold about non-human creatures in life. One group insists on thinking about the relationship between humans and

nonhuman species from the perspective of the self, one group is influenced by deep thinking and mass consciousness and cannot insist on “a high degree of coherence between body and mind, action and awareness” (Chen Shidan, 2017), and another group tries to respect the differences between nonhuman species and humans from the perspective of the Other. There is also a group of people who seek to respect the differences between non-human species and humans and explore ways to take responsibility for the Other.

From the results of forced de-sexing of cats by humans, the forced application of human social ethics to cats will hurt their self-esteem, reduce their quality of life, undermine their trust in humans, and be detrimental to their own growth and the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between humans and cats.

Therefore, Lessing calls for humans to realize individual respect for non-human creatures from the perspective of respecting and understanding the differences of others.

4.2. Confrontation and Symbiosis with Ecological Environment

In Britain in the 20th century, as industrialization continues to advance, the need for human socio-economic development has become increasingly reckless in its encroachment on and breaking of ecological and environmental resources, and the confrontation between man and the natural environment has come to the fore. But in fact, the world is connected among its components, and excessive damage to the ecological environment by human beings will eventually cause harm to human beings themselves. Humans should not neglect their absolute responsibility for the ecological environment by focusing only on their own development needs.

In *On Cats*, the domestication of wild cats into domestic cats has increased the number of cats of similar groups near the same residence, destroying the native ecosphere of cats, resulting in a large number of inbreeding cats and the formation of many disabled cats, which is an example of human survival territory development breaking the natural order.

As the gardener in the novel complained when he was hired to trim the sycamore trees-- modern people dictate the natural ecology for their own lifestyles, cut down trees for their own roses, cut down trees for a table, but disregard the fact that trees take a hundred years to take shape, and disregard the natural law that birds need to rely on the natural habitat provided by trees. Here man has put his own needs at the center of his life, ignoring respect for and protection of the natural environment.

he says, is anti-tree.

‘Every day,’ he said, bitter, bitter: ‘they ring. I go. There’s a fine tree. It’s taken a hundred years to grow--what are we, compared to a tree? They say, cut it, it’s spoiling my roses. (88-89)

In addition to the damage to the ecology of plants and animals, the rapid development of big machine factories creates serious air pollution. This pollution does not only attack nature, but also threatens humans themselves.

In *On Cats*, the machine-based production in London produces too much air pollutants, triggering severe air pollution that suddenly makes London seem like nightfall in the afternoon. “From full daylight to full heavy dark took ten minutes, less.”(26), and the sky was “a heavy, breathless, sulphurous sky” (26), “yellow with black, black with yellow” (26). The polluted air “burned our throats, as it does in a mine shaft after an explosion.” (26).

However, nature, as the environment on which human beings depend, should have a symbiotic rather than a severed relationship with humans. When people embrace nature and seek a code of harmony with it, humans will reap a better experience than ever before.

Lessing again uses cats to inspire people, and by setting up the episode in which the Grey Cat, the family cat who lives in the city, gains a happy experience in the countryside that it never had in the city life, she depicts to the readers the beautiful situation brought by nature to human beings——

And from there, on her first visit, grey cat did not return at once. It was high with nettles, thistles, foxgloves; full of birds and mice. Grey cat crouched at the edge of this little wilderness, whiskers, ears, tail at work--listening and feeling. (97)

Humans are also children bred by nature. When humans leave the city and return to nature, they will embrace their true nature. As a result, human beings should respect and protect nature and maintain a harmonious symbiotic relationship between the two.

The ecosystem is an organic whole, and the fate of human beings and the ecological environment are always intertwined. Whether human beings or non-human creatures or even nature as a whole, all have their value of existence. Only by clearly establishing the ecological ethics of respecting and protecting nature, clarifying the symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature, reasonably developing nature and protecting nature in the process of personal growth and social development, restraining the production and life style of exploitation and encroachment on nature, and building a community of harmony and coexistence between human beings and nature, can human beings achieve sustainable social development.

To sum up, this paper places *On Cats* in the general framework of postmodern ethics and analyzes it comprehensively. By exposing the gender inequality in family relations in the society of man and cats shown in the novel, the plight of working people's lives caused by class division and human indifference, and the domination and threatening behavior of anthropocentric ideology over non-human creatures and nature as a whole, it attacks the dominant husband's power over women in the formation and management of the family. Moreover, by analyzing the novel's descriptions of women's active resistance to equality in family relations, people's insistence on helping each other in the spirit of friendship, and human beings' respect for and protection of animals, this paper achieves a critique and structure of male-centeredness, upper-class centrism, and anthropocentrism, as well as a reconceptualization of the relationship between human beings, human beings and non-human creatures, and human beings and nature. These strong postmodern ethical ideas embedded in *On Cats* are, specifically, for men to respect women in family relationships; for managers to act positively and safeguard the interests due to members of society; for humans to respect the individual differences of animals in the process of living with them, and to consciously respect and protect the natural environment in the process of developing themselves. Only when these understandings are put into practice will it be possible for human beings to harmonize the relationship between human beings and the external environment in the process of development, and to build a harmonious and coexisting community of destiny with sustainable vitality.

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