

Ethics of Place in a High-Mobility Era from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

Kim Taehee

Abstract: Ethics, a necessary condition for intersubjective existence, would be impossible without a genuine sense of place. Around the contemporary globalized world, however, the sense of place is being undermined by more temporary, unsettled affects and perceptions that result in volatile intersubjective and ethical relations. Exploring how literary works may represent and establish the ethics of place, this article, drawing on ethical literary criticism initiated by Nie Zhenzhao, considers a collection of short stories by Korean novelist Pyun Hye-Young, titled *Evening Proposal*. In the eight stories included in this collection, monotony and mobility lead to a loss of authentic individual identity. A dull, dry life of pseudo-identity gives rise to depression, boredom, or fear. With these negative affects in mobile and monotonous places, social relations are fragmented, a logical consequence of which is ethical egoism. Beyond these negative ethical values, we nevertheless can also identify a dim possibility of reshaping positive ethical values. The sudden proposal of the main character in the title story, “Evening Proposal”, is a reversal of his ethical attitude, showing the potential of reconstructing the ethical order and intersubjective relations with others. In particular, it is the perception and recognition of human vulnerability that encourages this conversion; only one’s apprehension of own death is capable of causing the conversion of one’s overall ethical attitude.

Keywords: ethics of place; mobility; Ethical Literary Criticism; Nie Zhenzhao; *Evening Proposal*; Pyun Hye-Young

Author: Kim Taehee is Assistant Professor of the Academy of Mobility Humanities at the Konkuk University. His recent research is mainly focused on Mobility Humanities, Phenomenology, and Modern German Philosophy. This paper was supported by Konkuk University in 2020 (Email: thcomm@konkuk.ac.kr).

标题：高度移动时代的场所伦理：从文学伦理学批评的观点出发

内容摘要：伦理是相互主观的人类存在的必要条件，如果没有真正的场所感，就不可能存在伦理。然而，在全球化的现代世界中，短暂且不稳定的情绪和认知正在破坏场所感，因此相互主观和伦理的关系也在动摇。本论文是为探

求文学作品是如何再现和建立场所伦理的,运用聂珍钊的文学伦理学批评,集中分析了韩国小说家片惠英的短篇集《黄昏的求爱》。在该短篇集收纳的八部短篇小说中,单调和移动性让个人丧失了真正的自我认同。似是而非的自我认同让乏味枯燥的生活催生出抑郁症、厌烦和恐惧。在移动且单调的场所产生这种负面情绪的过程中,社会关系也变得支离破碎,这种逻辑的结果就是伦理的利己主义。尽管如此,我们也能看到超越这种负面伦理价值,重塑正面伦理价值的一丝可能性。《黄昏的求爱》的主人公突如其来的求爱颠覆了自身的伦理态度,表现出了重塑伦理秩序以及与他人的相互主观关系的潜力,引发这一转变的是对人类软弱性的感知和认识。只有对自身死亡的恐惧才会导致整个伦理态度的转变。

关键词: 场所的伦理; 移动性; 文学伦理学批评; 聂珍钊; 《黄昏的求爱》; 片惠英

作者简介: 金泰熹,韩国建国大学移动性人文学研究院助理教授,主要从事移动性人文学、现象学、德国近代哲学研究。

1. Introduction

Arguably, most societies around the contemporary globalized world are displaying substantial mobilities in contrast to previous more sedentary societies.¹ Mobilities in modern mobile societies involve highly fluid and liquid forms of life where “identities cannot but look fragile, temporary and ‘until further notice’” (Bauman 178). Among the various changes concerning forms and conditions of life, the fluidization of the place is particularly significant because the place is a fundamental condition of human life.

According to a phenomenological definition, the place is “any environmental locus that gathers human experiences, actions, and meanings spatially and temporally” (Seamon 2). Such a “gathering” is “the turning point of space and time, the pivot where space and time conjoin in place” (Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena” 38). A more traditional “anthropological place,” a place as “a principle of meaning for the people who live in it, and also a principle of intelligibility for the person who observes it”(Augé 52), is concerned with some solid identity of those living there by intimate intersubjective relations and relatively long-term history of their being-there. On the contrary, non-places, the “archetype” of which is “[t]he traveller’s space” (Augé 86), are permeating and substituting for permanent, static, and tranquil anthropological places. Thus, the sense of place, “the subjective

1 See Regarding the concept of mobilities, see John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) 6.

and emotional attachment people have to place” (Cresswell 8), or topophilia, “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (Tuan 4), is undermined by more temporary and unsettled affects and perceptions that give rise to volatile, anonymous intersubjective and ethical relations. “Ethics is impossible,” however, as Jeff Malpas properly states, “in the absence of a genuine sense of place” (Malpas 28). Ethics is, on the other hand, a *sine qua non* of any human intersubjective existence. Thus, the minimum adequate ethics of place in the contemporary mobile world are needed to meet the general necessary preconditions for human coexistence and sustainability.

In exploring how literary works may represent and establish the ethics of place, this article pays attention to ethical literary criticism initiated by Nie Zhenzhao (聂珍钊), a “critical theory for reading, analyzing, and interpreting the ethical nature and function of literary works from the perspective of ethics” (“A Basic Theory” 189). This theory may serve as an excellent methodological toolbox focusing on ethical aspects of literature as the “unique expression of ethic and morality within a certain historical period” (“A Basic Theory” 189), which “is produced out of the need of humans to express their views on morality or the desire to share their ethical experience” (“Its Fundaments and Terms” 14).

To explore the ethics of place, especially in the context of literary representations of contemporary uprooted and drifting forms of life, *Evening Proposal*, a collection of short stories by Korean author Pyun Hye-Young (片惠英), is considered as a representative work disclosing general changes in the sense of place and possible outlooks for an ethics of place in an elaborate and distinct literary language.

2. Place in the High-Mobility Era

As Michel Foucault famously puts it, “the descriptions of phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space,” but in “a heterogeneous space”; “we live inside a set of relations that delineate emplacements that cannot be equated or in any way superimposed” (Foucault 16). This “emplacement” has been highlighted as a fundamental human condition in phenomenological philosophy and, in part influenced by it, in humanistic geography.

Drawing on a Heideggerian description of relations between the human subject (Dasein) and place that “Dasein names that which should first be experienced, and then properly thought of, as Place” (Heidegger 373), Jeff Malpas emphasizes that “place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (*Place and Experience* 31-32). Thus, humans are inherently beings-in-place to the extent

that the place is a fundamental condition of human existence and human identity: “Who we are very much reflects where we are” (Casey, “J. E. Malpas’s Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography” 226).

However, due to “current trends toward globalization, cyberspace, and virtual realities,” which we may call high mobility, “real-world places are, in many ways, becoming increasingly irrelevant and obsolete” (Seamon 186). As everything travels and changes rapidly, the placelessness, “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place”(Relph, “Preface”) seems to be generalized.

Despite such diagnosis, however, the significance of place for human life could hardly be denied, given the fundamental fact that a human as an embodied being is always an embedded and, by so much, emplaced being. Even if “bodily mobility rather than rootedness and authenticity, was the key component to the understanding of place” (Cresswell 33), mobilities do not necessarily rule out a sense of place, for “place remains one of the great stabilizing constituents of human life” (Seamon 187).

In these contemporary contexts, two points are significant for the ethics of place. Firstly, we should take into account the sense of place or “identification with a place as a unique community, landscape, and moral order” (Agnew 327). Malpas puts it clearly as follows.

[A] true ethics of place is surely one that would look to the way in which our attachment to and sense of place is based in our concrete engagement with the particularity, the ‘singularity’, of place, and of the persons, environments and things we find within them. (“Is there an Ethics of Place?” 27)

Secondly, however, we should re-conceptualize the sense of place for more mobile forms of life to avoid conservative and even reactionary mindsets attached to a place. In this sense, Malpas’s concern is noteworthy.

[I]n asserting one’s own connection to place, and thereby taking one’s own identity to be determined by that connection, one also excludes the other from that same place, since the other is other specifically through being not “of this place.” (“Is there an Ethics of Place?” 11)

Being aware of this problem, we will explore the sense of place and ethics of place in mobile forms of life by analyzing a literary work, Pyun Hye-Young’s *Evening*

Proposal, which reveals a new sense of place and ethics of place in the era of high mobility.

3. Sense of Place in Evening Proposal

Pyun Hye-Young is a domestically and internationally celebrated novelist who was born in Seoul in 1972 and started her literary career in 2000. Pyun is well-known for her use of the grotesque in her writing. Her third collection of short stories, *Evening Proposal*, was published in Korea in 2011, with an international/English edition following in 2016.¹

The eight stories included in this collection have, overall, something in common. The main characters, who are all male and are never referred to by their full names, are mostly office or factory workers caught in meaningless, monotonous, though mobile life such as dispatches or business trips. In “Rabbit’s Tomb,” “he,” a man dispatched to another city to do meaningless, tedious things, picks up and raises an abandoned rabbit but abandons it when the dispatch work is over. In “Evening Proposal,” a florist named “Kim,” who is going to deliver condolence flowers to a funeral hall in a strange city, abruptly proposes to the woman on the phone after witnessing a fatal accident on the highway. The form of mobility in “Monotonous Lunch” is everyday commuting. “He” who runs a copy room on a university premises goes to work at the same time, does the same thing, and eats the same lunch every day, even after witnessing a deadly accident in the subway station. In “Would you like to Take a Tour Bus,” two men only referred to by the initials “K” and “S” are in charge of delivering unidentified bags to a place in another town, without knowing the meaning of their mission. “He,” the protagonist of “Out for a Walk,” is dispatched to a small city. His work life and relationship with his wife run monotonously like a workplace manual, until a catastrophic circumstance during his walk with a burdensome dog. In “Jungle Gym,” “he” is dispatched to China at the direction of his boss to avoid the audit process. This meaningless business trip leads to getting lost in a strange city and continuously returning to the same place. In “Room with a Beige Sofa,” the married couple referred to only by their surnames “Jin” and “Seo” are moving to Seoul, where a new house with a beige sofa is supposed to be awaiting them until some unfortunate things happen on the

1 See Hye-Young Pyun, *Evening Proposal*, trans. by Youngsuk Park and Gloria Cosgrove Smith (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016). Her other works translated in English include *The Hole*, trans. by Sora Kim-Russell (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017), the winner of the 2017 Shirley Jackson Award, *City of Ash and Red*, trans. by Sora Kim-Russell (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018), an NPR Great Read, and *The Law of Lines*, trans. by Sora Kim-Russell (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2020).

road. In “Canning Factory,” people mechanically continue to seal cans in front of the conveyor belt, even after the factory manager goes missing.

Regarding the sense of place, it is worth taking note of two aforementioned common features in these stories; monotony and mobility, which are unified almost seamlessly into one. Moreover, they lead to a loss of individual identity that is demonstrated by the peculiar fact that all the main characters are referred to merely by the personal pronoun “he,” some by initials, or surnames (meaning certain anonymity in Korea, where typically the full name is used to refer to a person). The characters essentially all live the same, monotonous life, which seemingly allows them a stable identity but is, in fact, an uprooted, insecure identity during a dispatch or a business trip.

The monotonous forms of life strikingly represented in these stories have both subjective and intersubjective aspects; monotonous sameness of individual life and among the lives of many individuals. First, the characters are living a monotonous life every day and doing the same thing in the same place at the same time. “It’s the same routine over and over that’s really hard. All day long, the only thing I do is hermetic sealing” (Pyun, “Canning Factory” 170). They commute to and from work by the same mode of transportation and have “[t]he same thing for lunch every day” (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 49).

This subjective monotonous sameness amounts to an intersubjective one, as this typical modern life does not allow for any relevant differences among individuals. Without knowing the meaning of what they are doing, they are living as parts in huge social machinery; “Sometimes, working at the branch, he felt that his whole life was an assembly-line item that the workers had made, destined to become a small part of a huge ship” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 146). These lives, indiscernible from each other, are always replaceable; “Everything went along fairly smoothly without the [missing] plant manager” (Pyun, “Canning Factory” 173). Therefore, the individual identity, if any, that this monotonous sameness manages to form is not an authentic, singular one based on differences; it would be, at most, a non-genuine, pseudo-identity, as it were, without any significant differences.

What does this monotonous sameness mean for a sense of place? Concerning the high mobility of the contemporary world, as is seen above, the places of these short stories continue to be the same monotonous place due to or despite extensive, constant physical mobility and uprootedness; they do not produce any authentic identity. This monotonous sameness as a universal condition of life in modern society disturbs the shaping of a sense of place with historicity and relationship, which are supposed to create authentic identities.

In the closed, monotonous place of “his basement copy room,” “today was the same as yesterday,” “tomorrow night would be no different than tonight” and, furthermore, it cannot be realized that “days and nights were passing differently for other people” (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 50).

Such a subjective monotony fails to create historicity, since historicity is founded not on a mere repetition of the same thing but on narratives with all the ups and downs that, taking place in a place, contribute to the formation of authentic identity. The places in these short stories lack these narratives, and therefore, authentic identity is grounded in historicity.

Moreover, the intersubjective monotony fails to create a relationship with other people in those places, since each person living a secluded life is unable to interact with others. If such a relationship is lacking, it is difficult to create a proper identity that is deeply rooted in a place. Hence, such a life cut off from communal interrelations is liable to be perceived as “an unnecessary or useless thing” (Pyun, “Would You Like to Take a Tour Bus?” 80). “[U]prootedness and superfluousness” have been “the curse of modern masses,” since “[t]o be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all” (Arendt 75).

Furthermore, in these stories, the main characters’ personal identities are pseudo-identities only during temporary movements, such as dispatch (“Rabbit’s Tomb”, “Out for a Walk”, “Room with a Beige Sofa”) or business trips (“Evening Proposal”, “Would You Like to Take a Tour Bus?”, “Jungle Gym”); as such, “[d]ispatched work isn’t that unusual” because “most of the people here are on temporary dispatched terms” (Pyun, “Rabbit’s Tomb” 75).

Then, what is the sense of place of a dispatch or business trip? In “Rabbit’s Tomb”, the protagonist’s accommodation during the dispatch period is only a temporary residence or, more drastically, a transfer station without any room for the attachment or intimacy which should form the foundation for unique individuality. “That meant that all the single-residence apartments in this city were roughly the same” (Pyun, “Rabbit’s Tomb” 18).

Furthermore, physical mobilities such as dispatches “are not voluntary but forced” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 147). For example, on the order form for the business trip, “[e]verything had been filled in except his signature and the date of his return” (Pyun, “Jungle Gym” 117). There is “no other option, since it was likely that he’d have had to accept an honorary retirement at a relatively young age if he hadn’t volunteered” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 147).

These forced mobilities could be an option to find “a good opportunity to

be promoted” or to “live somewhere else for a little while” (Pyun, “Out for a Walk” 95). Nevertheless, the men who reluctantly accept the dispatches cannot find genuinely new places; they iterate their old daily lives going back and forth on the same path, longing only to return to their hometown. “When his work was boring and he felt left out by his colleagues, Jin reminded himself that this dispatched position, which required him to live in this region, was only a temporary assignment” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 147). This dispatch in a strange city which should have been “only temporarily with hopes of going back soon” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 147), however, has extended to “eight years in a small city” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 136). The beige sofa, which “represented an immaculate and comfortable world far removed from broken springs and the smell of cheap sponge” (Pyun, “Room with a Beige Sofa” 152), did not fit into the new house in Seoul where they were on their way back; for the dispatched men, there seems to be no place to come back to.

In sum, through dispatch or business trips, monotonous sameness is not weakened, but is repeated and further strengthened. Despite hectic mobilities in late-modernity, we arrive all the time at the same place, without any notable differences. The same thing is repeated day after day, in monotonous places which are indistinguishable from each other.

4. Ethics of Place from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

As for the ethics of place in literary texts, in particular, ethical literary criticism may function as a relevant theoretical framework that analyzes literary texts based on the ethical nature of literature. Ethical literary criticism in the context of the “ethical turn” of literary criticism strives to restore the essential relationship between literature and ethics. Moreover, through developing beneficial concepts for ethical analyses of literary texts, rather than simply declaring the restoration of ethical values of literature, ethical literary criticism can provide a practical methodological toolbox for the current subject matter; ethics of place represented in literary texts.

According to Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism, reading literary texts should take place in two main ways. On the one hand, the ethical structure of a literary text is to be analyzed and interpreted; a literary text is, on the other, to be ethically appraised and evaluated. Nonetheless, one can never complete the task of ethical criticism by highlighting only the positive moral values in literary texts or praising only the character’s good behavior. The ultimate task of ethical literary criticism lies in discovering ethical values, both positive and negative. Furthermore, instead of “making an over-simplified judgment about literature by

determining whether it is good or bad” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 100), this task can be completed by identifying the ethical norms embodied in literary texts and understanding the ethical implications of the characters’ actions in the literary texts on that basis.

What is critical here is the concept of “the ethical environment, which comprises the historical conditions for the production and dissemination of literature” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 91). By this concept, a certain “historicism” is emphasized, to the extent that ethical values in a given work should be examined “with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84).

In this sense, how can the ethics of place in “the ethical environment” of the high-mobility era be captured in terms of ethical literary criticism? As places in the traditional sense seem to be shrinking, if not disappearing, in this era, the previous ethics that drew on closed and static places also seem to be shaking. Thus, many behaviors which present themselves in this new kind of place are sometimes incomprehensible or unacceptable from the perspective of the long-established ethics of place. However, beyond the customary practices of “some traditional ethical critics” analyzing “literature from their personal ethical values and moral principles or, at best, the moral principles of their contemporaries,” (“Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 84-85), or from the conventional ideologies blind to the changes currently occurring, we should attempt to find general ethical values in this rapidly mutating social world. Since the ethical appraisal and evaluation pursued by ethical literary criticism presupposes the discovery of ethical values in literary texts, we should carefully weigh the characters’ ethical values rather than convicting or judging them based on established ethical values and moral principles.

Thus, we should set the ethical scene of this era to discover the ethical values revealed in *Evening Proposal*. What kinds of ethical values stand out in the plots and actions of our short stories, mostly taking place in those places of mobility, that strengthen the monotonous sameness? If the ethical values sought in ethical literary criticism are not only positive but also negative, we can begin our analyses of ethical values in these stories by identifying negative values—more precisely, negative values in ethical relations since ethics is a matter of the intersubjective relationship between human beings.

In specific literary works, central to ethics are those about the recognized and accepted ethical relations between human beings, between human beings and

society, and between human beings and nature, as well as about the ethical norms and orders established upon those relations. (Zhenzhao Nie, Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism 13)

5. Ethics of Place in Evening Proposal

First of all, the affective sense of place is worth regarding because ethics is notably based on affect. Such affects attached to a place are often referred to as “topophilia” in a broader sense, which includes not only positive affects but “all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment” (Tuan 93). In this sense, the negative affects such as topophobia as the expression of negative meanings of a place can be clearly identified in these stories.¹ A dull, dry life of pseudo-identity in a monotonous place brings depression, boredom, or a feeling of one’s own uselessness.

Feeling depressed and finding nothing else to do, they ended up completing the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. It took quite a while for them to find a word with two syllables starting with “b” which meant an unnecessary or useless thing. Eventually they found it. (Pyun, “Would You Like to Take a Tour Bus?” 80)

Moreover, in those lives, they feel fear in a place, “like a little boy who was just starting to climb a jungle gym” (Pyun, “Jungle Gym” 133).

Or perhaps he felt that he’d already reached the top trembling with fear. He’d been thrown into a dull and dangerous game that he was compelled to play, and he found little joy in it because he was too afraid of being hurt. (Pyun, “Jungle Gym” 133)

Ironically enough, however, this life with its monotonous temporalities or everyday routines amounts to a self-deceptive relief or satisfaction to be caught in the same place doing the same thing.

The future would always be divided from the past, the present divided from the past, and the future from the present. It would always be this way. Thinking

1 See Petr Šimáček, Miloslav Šerý, David Fiedor, Lucia Brisudova, “To Fear or Not to Fear? Exploring the Temporality of Topophobia in Urban Environments.” *Moravian Geographical Reports* 28.4 (2020): 308-321.

this he sighed, but he also felt relieved. (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 64-65)

This isn’t the kind of job where it’s possible to think. Standing in front of the belt, holding ourselves always at the same angle, our bodies become part of the machinery. For some reason, that’s satisfying, but we’re not proud of it. (Pyun, “Canning Factory” 170-71)

With these negative affects in mobile and monotonous places, social relations are fragmented. Then, “perfect intimacy with another person existed only in the longing for it” and “a distance of more than two-meters was required for humans to coexist” (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 56).

He thought of the two-meter distance between the counter of the copy room and the corridor where the students and lecturers passed by. He maintained that distance. It was also the width of the counter that separated him from his customers. No one ever crossed to his side of the counter. (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 56)

This two-meter distance, which reminds us of forced social distancing in the pandemic age, alludes to the ethics of the monotonous, claustrophobic place. “They were strangers which whom he had no connection and therefore no occasion, no opportunity to socialize” (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 55-56).

The ethics of place represented in these stories is based on the feeling that “friendship has nothing to do with affection, but was a feeling valid only when it reaped benefits for one of the persons involved” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 28). Thus, “criticizing a person for being selfish makes no sense” because “everyone is selfish” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 28); ethical egoism seems to be a logical consequence of the lack of authentic intersubjective relations. Thus, in “Monotonous Lunch,” even casually witnessing the tragic death of another passenger at the station could not change the man’s overall ethical attitude; after the accident “nothing should be the same, but it appeared that everything was still the same” (Pyun, “Monotonous Lunch” 65).

So far, we have come to recognize that “[i]n some literary texts” such as these stories, the ethical presents itself in the negative “form of ethical chaos” (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 94). Beyond these negative ethical values, however, we can also identify the dim possibility of positive ethical values that can hint at “reconstruction of the ethical order” (Nie, “Towards an Ethical

Literary Criticism” 94). Only in one part of this whole collection can this potential of reconstructing the moral order by restoring the relationship with others in those mobile lives be vaguely glimpsed. It seems not without significance that “Evening Proposal”, the sole story in this collection that shows such possibility, is selected as the title story of this collection.

In this respect, the plot of this story is worth briefly describing. Kim, the main character of this story, is on the way to another distant city to bring a wreath to the funeral hall of an elderly acquaintance who is about to die. He roams around the funeral hall, waiting for a call from his friend that the elderly man is dead. Not being able to stand the situation, Kim calls the woman. However, when the woman’s phone call keeps getting annoyed, he declares her breakup. At that time, he witnesses the accidental (likely) death of a truck driver who looks just like him. Witnessing this unexpected accident, he calls her back to propose to her, without regard for sincerity.

Yet, because he had this feeling, he thought his confession might have some truth in it. | Regardless of the truth—regardless of her feelings—Kim knew without a doubt that he would soon be ashamed of the confession that providential fear had forced him to make. (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 46)

This sudden proposal as an abrupt reversal of his ethical attitude is an act of affect, showing the possibility of reconstructing intersubjective relations with others and a positive ethics in places of a monotonous and mobile life.

How can this unexpected emergence of a possible positive ethics be understood? How are people, who live an endlessly monotonous life in unsettled mobilities without holding any true identity and positive relationship, able to access these positive ethics? How can a place in the high-mobility era create an authentic identity and ethics of places under these new forms and conditions of life?

It is a perception and recognition of human vulnerability that encourages this conversion: “A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen” (Butler 46). Still, it is noteworthy that, caught in the attitude of ethical egoism, it was not the apprehension of other’s death but his own that could trigger this only act: “[t]he misfortune he feared was the misfortune that affected only him, while the rest of the world was well and safe” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 38). As aforementioned, in “Monotonous Lunch,” the death of others does not affect anything. And, even though, in “Evening Proposal”, Kim is forced to think iteratively about the death

because “there was nothing else for him to do in this town to keep this deathwatch” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 36), the death of an elderly acquaintance has hardly any influence on him; he impatiently “awaits his death,” feeling just that “[t]ime was moving so slowly” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 36).

Kim realized that he’d never thought seriously about death. He was living. He didn’t want to think about death. Not yet. Not until the time came, far, far off in the future. (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 41)

These idle thoughts about death set off by the imminent death of the elderly acquaintance never extend to a vivid emotional representation of his own death. Only the intense apprehension of own death, motivated by the car accident which leads to the death of the man who looks like himself, is capable of causing the conversion of his overall attitude.

This conversion in Kim’s mind is dramatically described by the changing consciousness of breathing. Beforehand, Kim had “never taken the time to notice this delicate everyday phenomenon taking place in his body,” just “as if it were completely unimportant” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 33). On the contrary, while he proposes, his own breathing becomes conscious and resonates with hers.

The sound of her shallow breathing reached his ears. It was a calm, rhythmic sound that calmed him. He imitated it, inhaling and exhaling, breathing faster than usual to keep up with her. Then, after several attempts and still finding it difficult, he abruptly confessed his love for her. The woman remained silent. (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 45)

Without a doubt, this conversion is equivocal or even suspicious. First of all, in our commonsense perception of civic responsibility, what Kim should have done first, on witnessing the accident, which he might have caused himself, would be to call “the police, the paramedic, or the emergency room.” Instead, “he called the woman” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 45). Besides, even this short proposal happens “regardless of her feelings,” i.e., without considering the other’s feelings. Moreover, it happens “[r]egardless of the truth,” i.e., without considering the truth or authenticity of his intention. He was uncertain whether “the confession that providential fear had forced him to make” was authentic, such that “Kim was like a stranger to himself as he spoke these words to her” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 46). “If Kim had been at home, with no such problems or fears, he’d have gone on being unkind to this

woman” (Pyun, “Evening Proposal” 46).

Notwithstanding such critical limitations of reconstructing the moral order in “Evening Proposal”, this scene represents a significant reorientation that cannot be ignored; it is an ethical reorientation achieved by recognizing human “ontological vulnerability,” the most radical and insurmountable form of which is the fate of the mortal, through “an unavoidable receptivity, openness, and the ability to affect and be affected” (Gilson 37).

Moreover, in this story, it is not the active proposal itself but the passive reception and subtle response, that is Kim’s attentive listening to, imitating, and keeping up with the woman’s breathing on the phone, that seem to be critical. Such a responsibility for the others drawing on “an apprehension of common human vulnerability” might be a principle “by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered” (Butler 30), reimagine “the possibility of community” (Butler 20), and return “to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (Butler 30).

6. Conclusion

By questioning the sense of place, this article attempted to capture the possibility of reconstructing the ethics of place in our contemporary, highly mobilized world. Place is a fundamental condition of human life, and correspondingly a change in place is associated with a change in ethics as a foundation for the human communal life. Exploring how the instance of literary works may establish the ethics of place, especially in the context of literary representations of contemporary uprooted and drifting forms of life, this article, drawing on ethical literary criticism as a theoretical and methodological framework, paid attention to a literary work, *Evening Proposal*, as a relevant instance.

This article identified some properties of the sense of place in these short stories as monotony and mobility, which amounts to a loss of genuine individual identity. Moreover, relying on the framework of ethical literary criticism, this article found the affects of depression, boredom, feeling of one’s own uselessness, fear, self-deceptive relief, and satisfaction, based on which the negative ethical values such as lack of relations with others and ethical egoism could be identified.

However, this article also identified the possibility of reconstructing positive moral values, especially in the title story “Evening Proposal.” The unexpected proposal of the protagonist and his willingness to attentively listen to and respond to the other was interpreted as a consequence of perception and recognition of shared human vulnerability, in this case, human mortality. This article concluded that this

perception and recognition might be a clue to reconstructing the ethics of place in a fragmented and mobile world.

Despite “the whole history of place as a center of meaning connected to a rooted and ‘authentic’ sense of identity forever challenged by mobility” (Cresswell 53), “the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness” is still significant for most people’s lives (Escobar 140). Thus, in such a changing ethical environment, “a proper sense of place” is not “a sense of something comforting and familiar”; it is rather “a sense of one’s own uncertain and fragile locatedness in the world, and to have to take responsibility for that” (Malpas, “Is there an Ethics of Place?” 28).

Furthermore, the reciprocal relations of place and ethics are at stake in this attempt to discover and evaluate the ethical values in a literary work based on ethical literary criticism. Not only that the proper sense of place constitutes, as we have seen, the sense of ethical responsibility; “[i]t is the sense of responsibility that shapes the relationships that constitute place” (Buchanan 91). The consideration of how to constitute place via responsible relations with others remains a future assignment for those concerned about the contemporary “form of ethical chaos” created, at least partly, by the lack of an ethics of place.

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