

# How Ordinary People Become Perpetrators: The Ethical Dilemmas in *The Kindly Ones*

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**Abstract:** Adopting the perspective and methodology of ethical literary criticism pioneered by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao, this article explores how ethical dilemmas work in the process of turning ordinary people into perpetrators in collective violence in Jonathan Little's *The Kindly Ones*. By restoring the ethical environment and inspecting the three levels of ethical dilemmas encountered by the perpetrator-protagonist, Max Aue, this article explores into the impact of these dilemmas and the transformation of ethical identity on his behavior. It delves into the complexities individuals encounter in upholding moral principles and undertaking just actions amid the manipulation and distortion of collective morality by totalitarian regimes, in order to offer a new perspective for understanding the ethical challenges faced by ordinary people as perpetrators in collective atrocities such as the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** *The Kindly Ones*; Jonathan Littell; perpetrator; ethical literary criticism; ethical dilemmas

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**标题:** 普通人如何成为施害者: 论《复仇女神》中的伦理两难

**内容摘要:** 本文采用文学伦理学批评的视角与方法, 探讨美国犹太作家乔纳森·利特尔《复仇女神》中的伦理两难在普通人变成集体暴力的实施者时所发挥的作用。通过还原伦理现场, 检视小说主人公马克斯·奥尔作为普通人所遭遇的三重伦理两难以及伦理选择与其伦理身份的相互影响, 探究在集体道德被极权体制操纵与扭曲之时, 个人维持道德原则、采取正义行动的重重困境, 本文试为理解大屠杀等集体暴行的发生以及普通人成为施害者的罪与

责提供新的伦理解读和思考。

**关键词：**《复仇女神》；乔纳森·利特尔；施害者；文学伦理学批评；伦理两难

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## Introduction

Upon its publication in 2006, the novel *The Kindly Ones* by the American Jewish writer Jonathan Littell garnered both the Prix Goncourt and the Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française, sparking widespread attention and controversy within the realms of criticism and academia. This ambitious work employs a first-person narrative to chronicle the wartime experiences of Maximilian Aue, a high-ranking officer in the SS. Simultaneously, it positions this deeply culpable perpetrator as a representative of ordinary people, guiding readers to experience the most significant historical events of German atrocities during World War II from his perspective. In this way, it illustrates the tension between individual ethical choices and Nazi ideology and portrays the ethical dilemmas faced by an ordinary individual as he transforms into a perpetrator during the Holocaust. The novel boldly blurs the traditional boundaries between perpetrators, ordinary individuals and victims, challenging the established moral perceptions and revealing the volatility and ambiguity of collective morality under authoritarian regimes. In Littell's portrayal of this bleak world, the distinction between good and evil has long dissolved, and the minds and souls of the Holocaust perpetrators disintegrate alongside the crumbling ethical foundations, leaving them without the possibility of reconstructing ethical cognition or embarking on a path to redemption.

Aue was an intellectual with a distinctive personality, born into a middle-class family, with doctoral degree in Law and a passion for philosophy and literature. In order to escape the Nazi government's search and persecution for homosexuals, Aue had no choice but to join the Nazi department of SD, but still kept a psychological distance from the Nazi ideology. For his own moral stance, Aue still tries to use his authority to secretly improve the living condition of individual Jews in the German-occupied territories during the early stages of the war, but the order of the "Final Solution" threatens Aue's ethical identity as a ordinary man with conscience and brings about a profound moral crisis. Sent to the front, Aue is gradually consumed

by collective atrocities and his morality disintegrates. In the end, he transforms from a humanistic intellectual to a murderer responsible for multiple deaths. In his remembrance of the past, this Nazi perpetrator, however, claims to be no different from the ordinary man and makes a startling prediction about the ethical choices of the ordinary man in a totalitarian society: the innocence of the ordinary man is but a blessing, and no one in his situation can possibly make a truly moral choice, and is doomed to incite the potential for evil.

This seemingly transgressive viewpoint, despite coming from a fictional character, has brought great controversy for the author Littell. Scholars have examined the novel's ethics of representation mainly from the narrative perspective, questioning the credibility of the perpetrator's witnessing of the Holocaust and the voyeurism induced by the unadorned reproduction of violence. For many critics, the practice of putting oneself in the perpetrator's shoes may be considered an "uncomfortable and morally questionable perspective" (McGlothlin 253) because of its "almost automatic call to empathy that accompanies first-person narrative" (Suleiman 2). Robert Eaglestone, the renowned author of *Ethical Criticism*, has criticized the portrayal of Aue to be a swerver from the "absolutely central question of perpetration and evil" (22), considering evil as an inherent attribute of a Nazi. Robert Buch's perspective on the narrative viewpoint is also highly representative. According to Buch, the repeated emphasis by the perpetrator Aue on his own humanity lacks strong evidence and appears inflated as he "proudly and stubbornly reject any verdict from the reader" (273). Buch criticizes Aue's confession as manipulative, which "perversely and wickedly presenting himself as an everyman" (272) or even a "man of sorrows" (273), and "the ultimate purpose of this portrayal is to ascend to the moral high ground of the 'supreme victim'" (276).

However, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, these critiques tend to blur the ethical context within the novel itself and the ethical norms today. They overlook the ethical instructive function of flawed characters, and there is a perilous tendency to infer the author's ethical intentions while disregarding the text's own construction. As a more constructive critical approach, ethical literary criticism "focuses on the examination of literature from the perspective of ethics rather than provides a moral judgment of the text. As such, it requires that the critic enter the ethical environment of the text, living through the literary work—thinking, feeling, and acting as the agent of characters—to understand the characters' motives" (Nie 212). In regard of this particular novel, this approach stands in contrast to Wayne C. Booth's tradition that pays attention to the *morality of narration* and stays vigilant about how it may lead to moral degradation in readers, because "inside views can

build sympathy even for the most vicious character [...] works in which this effect is used have often led to moral confusion” (378-379). Such refusal of engaging in the narrator’s viewpoint is, in fact, to make an abstract moral judgment conducted within a *pseudo*-autonomous situation far removed from the historical context.

Then, if one listens to the protagonist’s one-sided account, can he/she perceive this seemingly extraordinary perpetrator as an ordinary person? And how should one assess the underlying ethical intentions of this potent yet risky empathetic narrative strategy? This article carefully examines these questions, attempting to offer a new perspective on interpreting the novel’s protagonist from the framework of ethical literary criticism.

### Representing the “Ordinary” Perpetrator

When studying the sadistic novels of Marquis de Sade, the French philosopher Georges Bataille writes: “Violence is silent and de Sade’s use of language is a contradiction in terms” (186), because he gave voice to the torturer who should have remained silent. Bataille believed that violence is anti-writing, confined within a double negation and opposition: reason regards violence as useless and dangerous, while violence itself resists the deconstructive function of writing. The attempt of retelling acts of violence from the perpetrator’s perspective reveals that the torturer must avoid narrating the process of perpetration; otherwise, he would have no place to hide in the language of violence. Thus “the torturer does not use the language of the violence exerted by him in the name of an established authority; he uses the language of the authority, and that gives him what looks like an excuse, a lofty justification” (Bataille 187). It is for this reason that the essence of violence is revealed as a “profound silence” (Bataille 188), submerging the perpetrator in a deliberate state of voicelessness.

As a follower of Bataille, Jonathan Littell believes that this unaccountable silence is the formidable barrier historians face when trying to understand the motives of perpetrators in mass atrocities. Littell clearly stated in an interview, “the more I read the perpetrators” texts, the more I realized they were empty [...] The only option was to put myself in the perpetrators’ shoes” (Blumenfeld, “Littell Interview with Samuel Blumenfeld”). Common language only acknowledges the illicit existence of violence and resists its specific representation, but as Bataille put it, “violence is as stubbornly there just as much as death” (187), within taboos and silence, violence does not disappear; it is language itself that is damaged and constrained.

From this perspective, one of the central aims of *The Kindly Ones* is to reveal

the true face of violence through narration, transforming perpetrators from abstract embodiment of violence back into ordinary people. Although the novel presents a rather unconventional type of “ordinary” Nazi perpetrator, I believe whether characters can be seen as ordinary primarily depends on the author’s ethical intent, determined by the relationship between their literary portrayal and the imagined reader, rather than factors such as personality traits, rank, or the magnitude of their crimes. In other words, the key factor that influences whether the protagonist-perpetrator can be understood by readers as “ordinary” lies in whether the author, based on the possibility of readers becoming the protagonist, employs a narrative strategy that fosters empathy, thus guiding readers to step into the protagonist’s shoes, to contemplate decisions made during their participation in the Holocaust, rather than drawing a clear boundary between them. In this regard, the scholar for perpetrator fiction studies Joanne Pettitt holds a similar view: “Ordinariness does not necessarily mean mediocre or uninteresting in character but stresses the common humanity and comprehensibility in relation to us as readers” (16). Through deliberate authorial shaping, such characters enable readers to gain a deep understanding and empathy, and their wartime choices mostly align with common human reactions, prompting readers to relate to “us” rather than perceiving them as devils and monsters.

In *The Kindly Ones*, the narrative does not present Max Aue as extraordinary or ambiguous, but rather as an Everyman figure who can represent general human understanding. The novel starts from the sentence: “Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened” (Littell 3) and ends its first chapter with the declaration: “I live, I do what can be done, it’s the same for everyone, I am a man like other men, I am a man like you” (Littell 24). While presenting the above declaration, Littell was also aware of potential opposition. Therefore, he attempted to explore the definition of “ordinary people” in a more concrete context. Through the voice of Aue, the author questions the traditional understanding of “ordinary” as merely “average” and “mediocre”. He points out the issue that lies therein, namely that “ordinary” lacks a standardized definition and inherently encompasses differences and individuality:

But why couldn’t an SS-Obersturmbannführer have an inner life, desires, passions, just like any other man? There have been hundreds of thousands of us whom you still judge as criminals: among them, as among all human beings, there were ordinary men, of course, but also extraordinary men, artists, men of culture, neurotics, homosexuals, men in love with their mothers, who knows

what else, and why not? None of them was more typical of anything than any other man in any other profession. (Littell 23)

Furthermore, the definition of “ordinary” can change over time and in different contexts. Just as Aue first witnessed the large-scale massacres by the Nazis in Ukraine, he realized that any atrocity could become a commonplace phenomenon within the historical context that allowed it to happen. Being ordinary does not imply the absence of any unique elements in a person’s character. The novel’s portrayal of “ordinary” actually points to the universally complex and multifaceted humanity embodied by Aue. While scholars like Dominick LaCapra and Jeremy D. Popkin view Aue’s sexual deviance as a traditional representation of Nazi bestiality,<sup>1</sup> it is precisely his concealed homosexual identity that keeps him psychologically distant from an ideal Nazi. In the novel, Aue does not suppress his homosexual desires to conform to the standards of National Socialist ideology; instead, he strives to preserve them in the most extreme violent environment, using them as a driving force of his life. This allows Aue to maintain his individuality among his fellow SS colleagues.

On the contrary, the stereotype of mediocrity often exists only in books and stories. Littell crafted a fictional meeting between Aue and Eichmann before the latter’s promotion, using Aue’s voice to depict an image of a middle manager who was “a very talented bureaucrat, extremely competent at his functions, with a certain stature and a considerable sense of personal initiative” (Littell 569-570) within the scope of his authority. This portrayal aimed to negate attempts to find some abstract evil in Eichmann: “A lot of stupid things have been written about him: he was certainly not the enemy of mankind described at Nuremberg [...] nor was he an incarnation of banal evil, a soulless, faceless robot, as some sought to present him after his trial” (Littell 569). In doing so, Littell challenged the common notion of viewing Nazi criminals as devoid of individual components within the bureaucratic system, as he explicitly conveyed his ethical stance once: by allowing perpetrators to express their inner voices, he attempted to promote an understanding of the complexity of perpetrators “along with the apparatus that activates him” so that “lessons can be learned that will affect the way we look at the world today” (qtd. in Uni, “The Executioner’s Song”). Therefore, understanding the ethical dilemmas faced by the protagonist and how he was changed by this situation from the ethical

1 See Dominick LaCapra, “Historical and Literary Approaches to the ‘Final Solution’: Saul Friedländer and Jonathan Littell,” *History and Theory* 1 (2011): 71-97; Jeremy D. Popkin, “A Historian’s View of *The Kindly Ones*,” in Liran Razinsky, *Writing the Holocaust Today: Critical Perspectives on Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012, 187-200.

context presented in the novel becomes particularly important.

### **The Three Levels of Ethical Dilemma in Collective Atrocity**

Ethical literary criticism is defined as “a critical theory for reading, analyzing, and interpreting the ethical nature and function of literary works from the perspective of ethics” (Nie, “A Basic Theory” 189). It views literature as a unique ethical expression within specific historical periods and contexts, which task is “to describe the issues related to the ethical relationships and their moral orders” (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 13) and the different results they lead to. Literature provides experience and instruction for human civilization upon its distinctive narrative ethical structure. By interpreting the “ethical line” in literary works, namely the “leading ethical track” that runs throughout the entire work and arranges the “ethical knots”, which refer to the main manifestations of contradictions and conflicts in the formation of ethical structure, critics can elucidate the comprehensive ethical framework of the text, as well as the specific ethical issues it addresses.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Kindly Ones*, the descent of Aue from a humanistic intellectual into a perpetrator of the Holocaust is presented as a series of insoluble paradoxes: whenever he finds himself in an ethical dilemma<sup>2</sup>, he attempts to make relatively just choices based on his conscience, yet he cannot prevent the worsening of the situation. As he progresses toward a deadlock, Aue’s moral compass gradually disintegrates, leading to a mental breakdown. The novel hints that he kills his mother and stepfather in a state of amnesia, and subsequently commits multiple murders driven by emotional impulses or personal interests. However, in his post-war recollection of these experiences, Aue displays an unexpected calmness and candor that appear inconsistent with his identity as a perpetrator: “I am not trying to say I am not guilty of this or that. I am guilty, you’re not, that is fine” (Littell 20). Littell does not deny Aue’s culpability; on the contrary, the very title of the novel metaphorically underscores the inescapability of Aue’s various crimes: the Furies in Greek mythology, the kindly ones, are relentless in pursuing those who commit matricide, regardless of any justifications presented in secular courts. By emphasizing the pre-existing personality and conscience of an ordinary person

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, London: Routledge, 2023, 219-220.

2 The premise of an ethical dilemma is the necessity to choose between two correct options. These two choices must possess three characteristics: (1) that both choices must be moral; (2) that each of the two alternatives is moral independently: that is, morally correct if the other is ignored; and (3) that no matter which alternative is chosen, it is wrong if viewed from the other choice that has been given up. This is an ethical dilemma; that is, either choice is moral, but once it is chosen, it will become immoral.

transformed into a perpetrator of the Holocaust, Littell attempts to dissect the underlying mechanisms behind this tragedy:

(I)t should be noted that in our century at least there has never yet been a genocide without a war, that genocide does not exist outside of war, and that like war, it is a collective phenomenon: genocide in its modern form is a process inflicted on the masses, by the masses, for the masses. It is also, in the case in question, a process segmented according to the demands of industrial method. Just as, according to Marx, the worker is alienated from the product of his labor, in genocide or total war in its modern form the perpetrator is alienated from the product of his actions. (Littell 18)

In line with some major conclusions in perpetrator studies as mentioned earlier in this article, Aue's statement emphasizes the societal context and collective nature of the Holocaust rather than viewing it solely as individual acts of extreme cruelty. Nie Zhenzhao points out that social identity carries ethical attributes, and in order to preserve a socially acceptable ethical identity, individual actions conducted within a certain social identity must conform to its ethical norms.<sup>1</sup> As members of Nazi society, the social identity of each person was built upon loyalty to the Nazi ideology's ethical identity. Therefore, participation in or acquiescence to the Holocaust was a precondition for obtaining an ethical identity in Nazi Germany. This manifestation of unethical conduct as ethical norms within the industrialized killing system led to the extensive alienation of individuals and further solidified their ethical identities. When the ethical principles of Nazi ideology coexisted with traditional ethical beliefs, the former based on the ethical identity as a Nazi and the latter on the identity as an intellectual, Aue was forced to confront the ethical dilemma resulting from their conflict, falling into the ethical paradox of "the choice is moral, but once chosen, it becomes immoral" (Nie 214).

In this context, individual moral principles were powerless to halt the machinery of collective violence. Being assigned to the role of an executioner or seemingly harmless positions was purely a matter of chance, and an executioner could "at most [...] try to change places with the guard or the driver" (Littell 19). Individuals within the collective violence could not find a genuinely innocent way out and were destined to be consumed and destroyed by the violence. To present this understanding more clearly, Littell intentionally made Aue go through a series of interlocking ethical dilemmas, forcing readers to engage in empathetic thinking.

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1 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, London: Routledge, 2023, 195.

The first ethical dilemma Aue encountered was that even if individuals within the collective violence refused to participate in the atrocities, they would be replaced by others. After receiving an order from Hitler himself to liquidate all Jewish prisoners of war, the officers all felt remorseful or incredulous, and Aue “felt invaded by a boundless horror” (Littell 100) as he realized that he not only had to become one of the perpetrators but also had to engage in this unprecedented and morally reprehensible ethnic cleansing for a long time: “I felt a great coldness come over me; Oh Lord, I was saying to myself, now that too must be done, it has been spoken, and we’ll have to go through that too.” (Littell 100) However, this internal conflict was undoubtedly in opposition to the leadership of the SS, so he struggled to “remain calm, nothing showed through” (Littell 100). The impending horrific massacre had a tremendous psychological impact on many officers who still had a sense of compassion. A colleague, Kehrig, told Aue that officer Schultz “broke down when he learned about the *Vernichtungsbefehl* (the Führer’s order)” (Littell 104), and they were both unwilling to execute the order, trying every means to request transfers. Faced with Kehrig’s offer to assist with a transfer, Aue chose to refuse, believing that these seemingly morally upright people who were avoiding direct participation in the genocide were merely engaging in escapism: being allowed not to participate was but a form of “privilege”; it did not reflect genuine moral virtue.

The ethical dilemma set up by Littell echoes the choices and conflicts of historical figures known for their humanitarianism within the Nazi medical establishment, such as Ernst B. and Eduard Wirths. Ernst managed to evade the gruesome task of selecting Jews for execution due to his favorable personal relationship with his superiors. This led to the idealistic young doctor Hans Delmotte taking his place, resulting in severe nervous breakdowns during his first participation in “the selections”.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Aue adopted a strategy reminiscent of Auschwitz chief physician Wirths, a seemingly humanitarian choice - to stay and let a relatively upright officer take the managerial position. As Kehrig sarcastically remarked, “because you think you can change something if you stay? You?” (Littell 104), Aue’s refusal to transfer implied that he believed his stay was meaningful in some way. Aue was acutely aware that even if he chose not to participate, he would be replaced, and the overall situation would not change. The only possibility for some influence lay in humanitarian attempts to prevent the concentration camp from falling entirely into the hands of those who actively engaged in the slaughter: “But if [...] all the honorable men leave, only the butchers will be left here, the dregs. We

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1 See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, 309.

can't accept that" (Littell 104).

When Aue didn't have to carry out executions personally, this moral strategy provided him with a perceived solace for his conscience and some individual prisoners, but it had already sown the seeds of tragedy. This is because "the shift in ethical choice will lead to the deconstruction of the previous identity and the formation of a new one" (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 195), so by making the ethical choice to be a member of the operation, Aue's former identity as an ordinary man is already being deconstructed. This ethical choice granted him the core ethical identity of a supervisor of the operation, which meant that his sympathy and concern for individual Jewish prisoners could only be exercised within the framework of not violating the genocide orders. Although he denied the rumors of the massacre that the young Jewish pianist Yakov had heard, promised not to kill Yakov, and even arranged for rare sheet music to be sent to him through a friend, he was powerless when Yakov lost his ability to play and was killed arbitrarily by other officers. When he felt sympathy for a Jewish girl searching for her deceased mother, he had to lead her to a death pit and hand her over to the executioner, causing him suffer immensely over his contradictory actions: "I caressed her hair. We stayed that way for several minutes. I was dizzy, I wanted to cry [...] I picked her up and held her out to a Waffen-SS: "Be gentle with her," I said to him stupidly. I felt an insane rage, but didn't want to take it out on the girl, or on the soldier" (Littell 109).

Then, when the large-scale massacre operation began, Aue's personal moral concern became utterly ineffective under the demands of his ethical identity as a supervisor of the operation. At this point, he confronted a second ethical dilemma: in the context of collective violence, should he prolong the lives of the victims who were destined to die, or should he hasten their deaths to reduce their physical and psychological suffering? Due to the sheer number of Jewish people who needed to be killed at one time, Aue, confronted by numerous prisoners in the trench who were desperately striving to survive, had no choice but to join the soldiers in a frenzy of shooting to overcome the overwhelming feeling of disgust and horror towards massive death. During this process, "an immense sadness" (Littell 129) in the eyes of a dying Jewish girl stimulated his nerves. Faced with this agony, Aue felt the insignificance and fragility of individual ethical concern in the face of the ethical principles followed by collective violence. In the intense conflict between the two, he began to deny the power of the former, attempting to integrate his own "ethical confusion", that is, the "chaotic state of ethical order and ethical identity, or the ethical predicament of choice-making caused by a change in ethical order, as well as ethical identity" (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 210).

(T)hat look stuck into me, split open my stomach and let a flood of sawdust pour out, I was a rag doll and didn't feel anything, and at the same time I wanted with all my heart to bend over and brush the dirt and sweat off her forehead, caress her cheek and tell her that it was going to be all right, that everything would be fine, but instead I convulsively shot a bullet into her head, which after all came down to the same thing, for her in any case if not for me, since at the thought of this senseless human waste I was filled with an immense, boundless rage [...] . (Littell 130)

Driven by this ethical confusion, Aue uncontrollably fired at the girl. At the same time, he experienced intense hallucinations where his hand of perpetration seemed to detach from his body, "it mocked me and shot at the wounded all by itself" (Littell 130). And just when he thought that his arm could no longer come back, to his astonishment, "it was there again, in its place, solidly attached to my shoulder" (Littell 130).

Collective violence transcend Aue's individuality psychologically but manifested as a result of his own volition physically. Here, Littell shows that Aue falls into the "healing-killing paradox" proposed by Helmut, the brother of Dr. Wirth.<sup>1</sup> Aue stayed in the operation out of a moral duty in the hope of improving the prisoners' situation, but in reality, he personally directed the Nazi soldiers to end the lives of thousands of Jews. In the process of reconciling his ethical confusion, National Socialism and humanitarianism merged into a twisted amalgamation—aiming to minimize the suffering of Jews while killing them. Although Aue attempted to replace the savage slaughter with a more humane form of killing, it could not alter the essence of perpetration, and this lie of conscience would eventually crumble. By making the ethical choice of "killing," Aue solidified his identity as a perpetrator. In practical terms, the ethical choice of killing Jews aligns entirely with the ethical identity of a Nazi officer. This choice simultaneously reinforces his Nazi officer identity, facilitating the smooth execution of the massacre.

Furthermore, the acts of perpetration driven by a rescue intent were, on the surface, entirely proactive. At this point, perpetrators lost the space to defend themselves and mitigate their guilt based on involuntary subjective intentions. The disappearance of this space meant that, in the eyes of the outside world, perpetrators following the ethics of rescue-perpetration appeared entirely brutal and evasive,

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1 See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, 149-150.

devoid of conscience—the only thing that distinguished them from willing killers. Dr. Wirth's experiences had long become a cautionary tale: it is a luxury to desire to retain one's morality and humanity while operating a slaughter machine. In the awareness of one's own crimes, a perpetrator who still held onto their humanity could not remain indifferent to the severe suffering of others and their own crimes. This acute awareness would drive perpetrators to seek to avoid inflicting pain on others and their own guilt, ultimately leading to acts of perpetration based on noble motives or humanitarianism. It is for this reason that the seemingly kind Nazi doctors like Wirth vehemently opposed others inflicting violence on prisoners: physical brutality would expose their true identity as perpetrators.

Lastly, what is even more fatal is that the rescue-perpetration ethics born in response to the healing-killing paradox ultimately blur the lines between means and ends, with the greatest violence—killing—turning into the ultimate salvation. Perpetration becomes a means to liberate the victims from a world destined for despair and suffering. It eventually evolves into the tragic act of the officer Ott in the novel. While searching for guerrillas on the outskirts of Kiev, Ott accidentally shot a pregnant woman. The squad nurse, Greve, immediately delivered the dying woman's baby and suggested finding a wet nurse, but Ott promptly smashed the baby to death. Ott accused Greve of doing something foolish and argued that it would have been better to let the baby die in the womb. However, Greve did not accept Ott's ethical perspective and, in a fit of anger, shot Ott before escaping with Aue's help. Although Ott's actions were scorned by other squad members, it is hard to deny that his hysterical outburst was born out of desperation and powerlessness. Greve's proposal was indeed naive, and in the cleansed rear area, it is impossible to find someone to care for the baby, so saving the baby only add to her suffering. In this incident, the novel presents the deep-seated paradox of the rescue-perpetration ethics: violence cannot bring salvation, even if it is violence born out of compassion. It only creates new acts of violence and perpetrators. Greve's rescue, Ott's act of killing, and Aue's deliberate release of Greve were all driven by compassion, yet they all committed sins: Greve prolonged the baby's suffering, Ott deprived the child of life, and Aue allowed Greve to kill Ott, establishing the former's survival on the latter's death. If one expects to achieve salvation through killing, regardless of the choice made, guilt is inevitable.

When the healing-killing paradox exposed the futility of the rescue-perpetration ethics, Aue, as a senior officer in the SS, had to face a third ethical dilemma: should he actively choose to disassociate himself from the system to reduce direct culpability, or should he endure the torment of his conscience and use his influence

within the high echelons of the system to improve the situation of the victims? In the novel, Aue chose the latter, but his attempt also ended in failure. Even with his initial humanitarian intentions, upon ascending to the upper ranks of the system, Aue could not change the course of events. He became lost in the intricacies of the bureaucratic machinery, desensitized to the moral principles of Nazi ideology, and burdened with greater moral culpability due to his deep involvement in the atrocities of the Holocaust. In this particular choice, Aue, with his ethical identity of a Nazi officer and a German citizen, seeks to contribute to the nation, follow Hitler's laws, and excel in his position. From the standpoint of his identity, his choice is entirely ethical. Furthermore, this choice reinforces his identity as a Nazi perpetrator, enabling him to rise to a high-ranking position within the Nazi system.

During a period of severe shortages in military provisions, Aue, through his logically argued reports, gained the trust of Heinrich Himmler and was tasked with the responsibility of revising the concentration camp nutrition standards to increase the productivity of prisoners in support of the frontlines. Initially, he held hope for improving the conditions of Jewish prisoners, believing that top-down reform was "a positive job, a way to contribute to the war effort and to the victory of Germany by other means than murder and destruction" (Littell 637). However, the progress of the Concentration Camp Nutrition Conference quickly stalled, mired in the endless disputes among experts over minor details and bureaucratic wrangling. Despite overcoming numerous obstacles to draft the plan and earning a promotion, Aue soon found himself entangled in countless bureaucratic meetings. After going through the bureaucratic machinery, the specific measures outlined in his plan were entirely disregarded and reduced by the higher-rank officer to a single order for all concentration camps: "diminish the mortality and morbidity rate by ten percent" (Littell 695-696). Later, as the frontlines crumbled, Aue, deeply entrenched in the system, had to follow Hitler's orders to participate in the recruitment of Jews from across Europe to be sent to Auschwitz. In this process, he maneuvered between Hungarian elites and German officials, further succumbing to the pressures of the bureaucracy brought by his new ethical identity as a high-ranking Nazi officer. Even though he never truly understood the motivations behind Hitler's genocide policy, he still carried out orders to acquire Jewish labor from Hungary.

Littell, through Aue's gradual descent into the identity as a Nazi perpetrator, reveals that collective atrocities are capable of reshaping wartime ethics. When maximizing the interests of German *Volk* and adhering to National Socialism became the new supreme moral code, everything has to yield to this "living law" of National Socialism (Littell 102). Ethical choices are bound by ethical identities, and

individual ethical pursuits here lead towards the endless abyss of Nazism. As Aue revealed in the novel, humanitarianism and democratic principles held little weight in Nazi Germany, “as for us, man counted for nothing; the nation, the State were everything” (Littell 102) and Hitler’s personal will prevailed above all else: “if the supreme value is the *Volk*, the people to which one belongs, and if the will of this *Volk* is embodied in a leader, then in fact, *Führerworte haben Gesetzeskraft*” (Littell 102). Although traditional moral values still lingered in the hearts of ordinary people, for the Nazi ideology, even the psychological resistance of slaughtering Jewish women and children was seen as the “temptation to be human” (Littell 101) and has to be overcome.

In the novel, Littell also guides the readers to contemplate the fluidity of collective ethics. Under the Nazi ideological framework, collective ethics can transform into a form of terrorism that people come to accept as routine. When the state apparatus itself becomes a colossal Auschwitz factory, individuals are unable to manifest justice within it. “It exists because”, as Aue put it, “everyone—even, down to the last minute, its victims—agrees that it must exist” (Littell 21). This gradual adaptation and eventual submission to the killing structure of Auschwitz is interpreted by the Nazi doctor Ernst B. as mysterious, something only to be experienced and “cannot be explained to anybody” (Lifton 197). He uses the analogy of a slaughterhouse to illustrate the phenomenon: when you first enter a factory where cows are being slaughtered, the bloody smell ruins your appetite for steak, but “when you do that [stay in the situation] every day for two weeks, then your steak again tastes as good as before” (Lifton 197). The failure to critically examine collective ethics, the lack of introspective spirit in collective ethics can lead to desensitization and wrongdoing among the masses during special historical periods, causing civilization to miss the opportunity for self-correction as it proceeds, just like Aue warns in the novel, for society as a whole, a few mentally disturbed individuals are not the threat; but “the ordinary men that make up the State—especially in unstable times—now there’s the real danger. The real danger for mankind is me, is you” (Littell 21).

Despite the controversial narrative perspective adopted by Littell, the perpetrator novel he created holds an indomitable ethical stance. In the novel, when Aue and the Nazi doctor Wirths, real historical figure, discuss the topic of physical violence, Wirths doesn’t attribute the abusive behavior of camp guards to the dehumanization of prisoners. Instead, the attempts to use violent actions to “try to make their shared humanity disappear” only take place when the guard discover that the prisoner is “actually at bottom a man, like him, after all” (Littell 624). In

the novel, this conclusion also applies to the executioners like Aue. Due to their inability to express their compassion, they can only transform it into an impotent, purposeless rage against the victims. The emphasis of this attribution is not to defend the perpetrators or seek forgiveness from the victims but to demonstrate that the ethical identity as perpetrators and victims cannot completely erase the universal connection of humanity and the indestructible image of the common man who resides within the other. "If the terrible massacres of the East prove one thing, paradoxically, it is the awful, inalterable solidarity of humanity" (Littell 147). In the novel, there is not a single perpetrator who does not think of his own family when killing Jews. Even if he is alone, he is connected to the victims through his own image:

Their reactions, their violence, their alcoholism, the nervous depressions, the suicides, my own sadness, all that demonstrated that the other exists, exists as an other, as a human, and that no will, no ideology, no amount of stupidity or alcohol can break this bond, tenuous but indestructible. This is a fact, not an opinion. (Littell 147)

By establishing bold connections between perpetrators and victims, the novel seeks to demonstrate the solid ethical foundation of humanity, even in the cruelest and most terrifying circumstances. It exists as a belief in the universal commonality between people, protecting human dignity and the meaning of survival.

### Conclusion

Examining *The Kindly Ones* through the lens of ethical literary criticism involves placing the novel's narrative back into its ethical context, avoiding abstract moral judgments, and sharing the protagonist's perspective to comprehend the ethical intentions of the novel. Portrayed as a representative of ordinary individuals, Aue's narration reveals the transformation of ethical identity from a conscientious ordinary man into a culpable Nazi perpetrator. His dual identity leads to a progressively deepening ethical dilemma, wherein his perceived correct ethical choices continually propel his ethical identity further towards that of a Nazi perpetrator. Through a careful analysis of Aue's behaviors, psychological activities and feelings throughout this process, it becomes evident that in the midst of collective atrocities, there is a conflict between individual and collective ethics. In the course of making ethical choices, personal moral views associated with the old identity inevitably yield to the collective ethics of the new identity. However, collective ethics does

not necessarily represent justice, elucidating the inexorable reasons why ordinary individuals inevitably transform into perpetrators amidst collective atrocities. Comprehending perpetrators, not through “us” versus “them” differentiation, but via a more empathetic and ethical literary approach, offers an inspirational perspective for contemplating the history of the Holocaust, gaining new insights into current global conflicts, and, more significantly, maintaining vigilance against the possible recurrence of human tragedies.

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