

“The Hell of the Same”¹: On Ethical Confusions of Human Cloning in *A Number*

Wang Zhuo

Abstract: Caryl Churchill’s five-act play, *A Number*, presents the subject of human cloning and the subsequent ethical confusions both in human relationship and human identity. This essay, from the perspective of ethics, will focus on four issues embodied in the following four questions. 1) Is *A Number* in the tradition of science fictional imagination or in the tradition of social drama? 2) Is human cloning in *A Number* Medicine or Metaphor? 3) Is human cloning an “identity-preserving” action or “identity-erasing” action? 4) Is a cloned man a man? Through the lens of ethical mirror, the fantasy of human cloning reveals something both charming and serious about the deep level structure of the society. More than that, what has been dramatized in *A Number* perfectly foregrounds the ever-lasting argument about man’s biological meaning and ethical meaning as well as man’s nature as a man.

Key words: Caryl Churchill; *A Number*; human cloning; ethical confusions; self-identity

Author: Wang Zhuo is Professor of English at Shandong Normal University and Director of Research Center for Foreign Literature and Culture at Shandong Normal University (Jinan 250014, China). Her major research area is modern and contemporary English and American literature (Email: wangzhuo_69@sina.com)

标题: “相同的地狱”: 《一个数》中人类克隆的伦理混乱

内容摘要: 卡瑞尔·丘吉尔的五幕剧《一个数》表现的是人类克隆和由此造成的人类关系和身份的伦理混乱。本文从伦理视角聚焦于以下四个问题: 1) 《一个数》是遵循科幻想象传统还是社会戏剧传统? 2) 《一个数》中的人类克隆是医学问题还是隐喻? 3) 人类克隆是“保存身份”的行动还是“抹杀身份”的行动? 4) 克隆人究竟是不是人? 通过伦理滤镜, 人类克隆揭示出关于社会深层结构中既令人着迷也令人担忧的伦理问题。不仅如此, 《一个数》还完美地前景化了关于人的生理意义、伦理意义以及人之所以为人的本质的永恒争论。

关键词: 卡瑞尔·丘吉尔; 《一个数》; 人类克隆; 伦理混乱; 自我身份

1 See Jean Baudrillard, “The Hell of the Same,” *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, Trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1993):113-123.

作者简介：王卓，文学博士，山东师范大学外国语学院、外国文学与文化研究中心教授，博士生导师，主要从事现当代英美文学研究。本文为国家社科基金重大招标项目“文学伦理学批评：理论建构与批评实践研究”【项目批号：13&ZD128】阶段性研究成果。

The fantasy of human cloning has been haunting both the life and imagination of our time. In some sense human cloning, far beyond the sphere of biotechnology or medical practice, has become an issue of ethics, as this new technology has been challenging commonly held perceptions of man, of body, of family and social relations for a long time. The concept of human cloning has been provoking deep and often contradictory feelings, from fear to anxiety to fascination. The likely advent of a cloning era forces writers all over the world into a serious and philosophical meditation on human cloning both in terms of medical practice and social issue. Caryl Churchill's *A Number* is the product of this reflection. As a widely acknowledged playwright in English language and one of the world theatre's most influential writers, Caryl Churchill is always curious about the events which will decide the fate of human being and takes great effort to explore into the nature of those events and their relations both with the psyche and the body of man, which in some sense explains why human cloning will find its way into her works. Thus Churchill, together with her *A Number*, has been involved in an ever-lasting debate about the ethical nature of human cloning. This essay will focus on four issues proposed by Churchill in this play from the perspective of ethics. Or more exactly, this essay will attempt to answer four questions all of which have something to do with clone and its ethical meaning: 1) Is *A Number* in the tradition of science fictional imagination or in the tradition of social drama? 2) Is human cloning in *A Number* Medicine or Metaphor? 3) Is human cloning an “identity-preserving” action or “identity-erasing” action? 4) Is a cloned man a man?

A Number: From Science Fiction to Social Drama

The first performance of *A Number* was at the Royal Court Theatre in London on 23 September 2002. This five-act play presents the subject of human cloning and the subsequent ethical confusions both in human relationship and human identity. The story is structured around the conflict between a father, Salter and his sons, Bernard 1, Bernard 2, and Michael Black — the latter two are clones of the first one.

The play is far from interesting in terms of plot or characters. It is for two actors merely. One plays father, the other his three sons. And the scene is the same

throughout in Salter's living room. The story is revealed completely through the fragmented dialogues between the father and his sons. And a story about a series of cloned sons sounds surrealist and a little absurd. So in the 2002 production, the stage was described by a critic as a "bare blank design" (De Jongh). And the play was criticized for having "no relation to domestic realism" (De Jongh). But is that true? Is this play a mere absurd and meaningless fantasy of Churchill? After ten years' precipitation and with the rapid development of cloning technology, it seems that the critics are a little sloppy and incomplete. When cloned sheep and cloned monkey have already been claimed by scientists all over the world, cloned man is no longer an absurd fantasy in scientific fiction, but a serious social problem in social drama.

It is true that clone has been a fantastic issue in literary imagination ever since Mary Shelley gave birth to Frankenstein in 1818. For hundreds of years, many cloning literary productions follow "Frankenstein's footsteps" in science fictions (Turney 133). And with the development of movie industry, "Cloning has inspired many films and much concern" (Hope 1). Just as Derrida sums up neatly that the progress in genetics liberates our imagination (69).

But from the birth of Dolly, the cloned sheep on July 5, 1996, fiction becomes true and then the terrible possibilities are raised. When we realize that "Frankenstein myth becomes a reality" (Gaylin), and "SF effect" is no longer an imaginary one (qtd. Parrinder 8), we have to treat it seriously and in a matter of fact way. It is worthwhile to note that *A Number* was produced in the same year that the cloned baby Eva was produced.¹ Therefore to Churchill and to contemporary readers, Cloning is no longer the monsters in the Gothic strand once powerful in the Western world nor is it the frightening shadowy figures in science fictions in Western literary tradition. Against this background, *A Number* does have "relation to domestic realism" and is pertinent to domestic reality. The characters are "fully textured human beings, with ideas, feelings, personalities, passions, and foibles" that are very similar to our own, making the characters very "lifelike" (Rush 187).

In truth, Churchill in this play raised a few questions concerned with the ethical dimensions of human cloning, ranging from the ethical application of clone, the family ethic in a "posthuman" era to ethical identity of cloned man (Ferreira 1).

1 The Raelians, a religious group believing cloning is the key to achieving immortality, claimed that the first cloned baby Eva, was born on December 26, 2002 in the U.S. and a few days later they claimed another cloned baby was born in The Netherlands. See Anne Berryman, "Who Are the Raelians?" *Time*, Saturday, Jan. 04, 2003. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,404175,00.html>.

And above all she made clear her negative attitude towards clone application in a dramatic way. In fact there are many writers, critics and scientists who retrospect cloning application from the perspective of ethics. Though a few do try to think about cloning in a positive way and try to see its potentially positive sides¹, most of writers and critics tend to judge it negatively. And Churchill is obviously one of them. The difference might be that Churchill presents cloning not as a pressing medical problem but as a metaphorical device serving to draw audience's attention to identical problems. The tragic event, characters and mood of the play elevated *A Number* to a social drama with heavy moral load and classic tragic beauty, which in turn enforces the ethical power of the play.

Clone: From Medicine to Metaphor

Once science fiction is transformed into social drama, “we’re at the start of a new ball game and that’s why we’re all real nervous” (Barr 193). And this is what Maria Aline Ferreira called “millennial anxieties” (3). As far as *A Number* is concerned, this anxiety is more about the unethical application of clone technology than about the clone itself as a medical innovation. And the “millennial anxiety” is artistically exteriorized from two different aspects in this play. One is the ethical relations in the human society; the other is the ethical identity of man and cloned man.

Once we realize that clone is no longer a fantastic imaginary production, it is meaningless to be obsessed with the issue whether clone as a technology is ethical or not. And Once clone technology is fully developed, it is no use to appeal human being to “ban human cloning” (Kass 26). It is true that the ethical dimension of clone has always been the major concern of medical practices. Just as Tony Hope, professor of Medical Ethics at the University of Oxford and founder of the Oxford Centre for Ethics and Communication in Health Care Practice, observes, “the ethical values lie at the heart of medicine” (Hope 2). But when both the innovation and application of clone become unavoidable, it is more significant to go beyond the sphere of medicine to think about cloning. To Churchill and many contemporary writers and philosophers as well, clone is more than a medical technology, and its ethical dimensions are also beyond the medical order. As a technology, cloning is not a right or wrong choice. But once clone technology is used in an unethical way, it will become an evil seed. The way Salter, the father, used clone is far from ethical. He deserted his son in order to forget his painful past and had a son cloned

1 For example, Naomi Mitchison, *Solution Three* (1975); J.B.S. Haldane, *The Man with Two Memories* (1976); Davie Brin, *Glory Season* (1993). These books all imagine a future society in which cloned men are an integral part of the population and fully accepted by man and society.

in order to start a new life, so in some sense Clone helped him realize his evil and selfish wish. Salter's unethical act caused a series of tragic events he could hardly imagine and had no way to control. As a result, both his life and his sons' lives degraded into a chaotic state, and eventually ended with tragic deaths of his two sons.

But if we do believe that what Churchill concerns about in *A Number* is really or merely clone or the medicine practice of clone, we might have simplified her writing and her philosophy. Churchill is never so simple and direct. No matter in her *Cloud Nine* (1979) or in her *Top Girls* (1982), what the simple stories embody is Churchill's profound philosophical meditation on man, society and universe. For example, in *Cloud Nine*, a family story reveals how the way of imperialist thinking influences the interrelationship between men and their sexual desire. When Churchill tells us an extremely complex story about cloned sons, a series of cloned sons, we have ample reasons to read the story beyond the sphere of medicine. The ethical chaos caused by the unethical application of clone is only one of the inner conflicts of the play. On the much deeper level, *A Number* transformed Clone from a medical practice to a metaphorical philosophy about the ethical relations in human society through the subverted relations among family members. Clone in *A Number* is the "ethical thread" running through the play which influences everyone's life and Salter's action of having a son cloned is the "ethical knot" (Nie Zhenzhao 258). This twisted ethical knot has no way to clear but death. Tony Hope puts the question of cloning ethics in this way: "This question leads us beyond medicine to consider our responsibilities for the future mankind" (4). What Churchill does in *A Number* is such an ethical reconsideration about our responsibilities for man.

A Number in particular depicts such chaotic state of man resulted from clone technology in a "posthuman" society. Cloned man no matter legally or illegally created challenges the stable family relationships. Against the background of "posthuman" era, several issues foreground themselves: 1) the relations between mother and son. Mother is totally absent in this play, as she was dead when her son was only 2 years old. And because of her death, the husband cloned their son in a desperate mental state. So in a world where a son could be cloned without a woman's womb, the Oedipus complex, the founding stone and deep structuring device of societal coexistence will disappear altogether. 2) the relationship between man and woman. Human cloning, "through spontaneous parthenogenesis of cloning," could not only fulfill the female fantasy of bearing children without men, but also the male dream of "producing children without the help of women" (Ferreira 213). This potential of taking the reproduction away from women's bodies might cause greater imbalance between man and woman in terms of social states. 3) the

relationship between father and son. Father does not hold the authoritative position and no longer an authority figure in a post-Oedipus society. In this case we might have to reconsider the Symbolic Order proposed by Lacan (Rabate). 4) the relations between man and cloned man. When Bernard 2 learned somehow he was one of the cloned sons of his father, he was seized by panic. He cried to his father, “a twin would be a surprise but a number” (4). Bernard 1, the original son had to kill the cloned man in order to reserve his unique being in the world. The four different relations in a family are all at stake in a “posthuman” era in which “nothing then prevents its serial reproduction in the same terms Benjamin used when speaking of industrial objects or images” (Baudrillard, *Seduction* 171).

Family relation is an epitome of the society. The ethical confusions of the family in some sense are the reflection of the society. By imagining a chaotic picture of “posthuman” society in the near future, Churchill sends out an ethical warning to the world. This chaotic family tragedy was impressive enough to arouse man’s serious meditation on ethical dimension of clone application.

From A Man to A Number

Churchill’s philosophical meditation also stretched to cover the ethical identity of man against the background of genetic innovation. Or put it in another way, this play exteriorizes the “millennial anxieties” about human identity in a “posthuman” era. Maria Aline Ferreira once put, “I see the posthuman era dominated by the identity crisis of new, genetically engineered people, principally clones” (3). As to the relations between clone and identity, Tony Hope claims, Cloning is an “identity-preserving and identity-affecting actions” (Hope 51). Churchill in *A Number* shows that cloning does affect one’s identity, but as to whether it will preserve one’s identity, it is doubtful. Or it is very likely to be the opposite. Instead of a preserving action which gives man “nine lives,” Cloning might be an identity-erasing actions which causes identity confusions (LeGuin 205).

With the development of the plot in *A Number*, we learn that the reason Salter had his son Bernard 1 cloned is to preserve his perfect son. Just as Salter said to Bernard 1:

I’ll tell you a thought, I could have killed you and I didn’t. I may have done terrible things but I didn’t kill you. I could have killed you and had another son, made one the same like I did or start again have a different one get married again and I didn’t, I spared you though you were this disgusting thing by then anyone in their right mind would have squashed you but I remembered

what you'd been like at the beginning and I spared you, I didn't want a different one, I wanted that again because you were perfect like that and I love you.
¹(40)

Salter cloned a son instead of getting married and having another son simply because he believed that the cloned son could preserve the same identity of his original son. He had never realized that even if this would be true, he might have caused identity confusions to his sons with same faces, same cells and same names by making them all "a number" of the many sons.

Human clone brings identity confusions which are clearly reflected by the pronoun confusions in the play. When Salter was blamed by his original son B1 for his being cloned, Salter tried to defend himself, but the confused use of pronouns betrayed him:

Salter from you too they it's you they, just so they can do some scientific some research some do you get asthma do you have a dog what do you call it do you (19)

Critics tend to attribute the "weirdly stylish" (Myerson) chat to Churchill's innovation of a "futuristic" style (De Jongh). But they fail to notice the root of this "futuristic" innovation is the identity confusions resulted from clone technology, as the pronouns are in truth have the functions of realizing the interpersonal meaning in discourse (Li Zhanzi124). What Salter's "unnatural narrative" tells is exactly his confused "narrative comprehension" about himself and his sons as well (Shang Biwu, 108).

Baudrillard once meditated on this confusions of double identity, and observed that when our fantasy of one's double "by genetic means" becomes true (Baudrillard, "Clone Story" 97), it was not fantastic at all. "The fear of losing one's identity and uniqueness, becoming one in an endless series of duplications" is becoming a nightmare haunting man nowadays (Ferreira 4). And theoretically, "this new technique of generation would in theory enable us to create as many identical individuals as might be desired. A living creature would be printed in hundreds, in thousands of copies, *all of them real twins*" (Rostand 14). The potential threat of cloning to our way of life is come into being. "Clones could thus come to be perceived as a menace in the sense that they might become the very embodiment of

1 All quotations from *A Number* are from Caryl Churchill, *A Number* (Royal Court Theatre, 2002) except the otherwise mentioned.

a more perfect ‘you,’ while encapsulating the capacity of infinite reproduction of the same”(Ferreira 32). The tragedy that Bernard 1 killed Bernard 2 and then killed himself was in essence a reflection of this identity crisis brought about by clone. Baudrillard observes that, the “disqualified original” would sooner or later “take revenge on his clone” (“The Clone or the Degree Xerox of the Species” 201). What happened between Bernard 1 and Bernard 2 justifies Baudrillard’s statement.

Churchill in *A Number* smartly plays the philosophical game of Cloned man being “in appropriate /d others” by presenting how hard it is to define the relations between man and his copies (Haraway 320). Salter believes that the copies belong to the original son (6). Bernard 2 himself believes that he is just a copy and not the real one(14), while Bernard 1 thinks that the clones are a threat to this bond with his father. The ethical confusions about self-identity brought about by clone raise an ever-lasting philosophical question about self and other, which since the late eighteenth century expressed the “modern intimations of inner demons,” and “the monstrous threat of the ‘many-in-the-one’” (Warner 165). Ursula K. LeGuin asserts that “the duplication of anything complex enough to have personality would involve the whole issue of what personality is — the question of individuality, of identity, of selfhood” (205). Scharzt appeals, “we are not identical, nor do we wish to think of ourselves as clones” (Schwartz 212). This is the crucial question which lies at the core of human cloning and it is exactly the starting point of Churchill’s meditation in *A Number* which illustrates what Baudrillard means when he claims the process “from same to same” is terrifying (“The hell of the Same” 96).

From Man to Clone Man

Churchill tries to answer a crucial question about clone man: Is a Cloned Man a Man? The reason that she creates Michael Black, the illegal cloned son of Salter is to imagine in what way a cloned man might be different from man. Black looks the same with Bernard 1. But he behaves different from man in the sense he fails to do any ethical selection. Black is a mild-mannered teacher and a happy family man. But peeling this beautiful skin of man, we find that there is something missing in Black as a man. Salter is the first one who notices the problem with Black. Black seems normal, but also seems shallow and like everyone around him. When Salter, losing both Bernard 1 and Bernard 2, hopes desperately to learn something about Michael’s personal life, Michael talks eloquently about everything, war, politics and his wife’s ears but himself (46). Michael’s “quiet contentment” is “utterly baffling to the tormented Salter” (Jones). Michael had nothing specific to himself, nothing from deep inside his life to tell and he could only tell something about

somebody else. And even worse, he could not tell good from evil, nor could he make any ethical judgment on man or the world. All these suggest that Michael is a biological man but not a man in the real sense, because he couldn't make his "ethical selection."

The difference between biological selection and ethical selection is what professor Nie Zhen Zhao most concerned in his construction of Ethical Literary Criticism. Nie once turns to Bible to illustrate the distinction between the two selections. He observes that what God creates in the Garden of Eden is man in its biological sense. Only when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruits from the Tree of Knowledge, had they acquired knowledge and the ability to tell good from evil, and became man in the real sense. Ever since Adam and Eve make their ethical selection, they are completely different from their born selves in the state of ethical chaos. The different selves are the symbols of distinction between biological man and ethical man. The ways man realize biological selection and ethical selection are different: biological selection is the result of evolution, whereas ethical selection is the result of cultivation. Or put it in other words, biological selection is realized through man's struggling for survival, while man's ethical selection is fulfilled through cultivation by overcoming man's "animal factor" and consummating man's "human factor" (38).

In light of the above mentioned distinction between "animal factor" and "human factor," Black is a cloned man who has not overcome his "animal factor." His own identity recognition confirms this point:

Michael We've got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We've got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We've got thirty percent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the Lettuce. It makes me feel I belong. (50)

It is obvious that Black feels that he belongs to plants and animals rather than man. The other characters in the play are also confused about whether a cloned man is a man or an animal. Salter tended to use "things" to call his cloned sons (4), which was strongly opposed by his cloned son Bernard 2:

B2 yes I know what you meant, I just, because of course I want them to be things, I do think they're things, I don't think they're, of course I do think they're them just as much as I'm me but I. I don't know what I think, I feel terrible. (5)

Cloning causes serious cognitive confusions of both man and cloned man. It seems that “the programmed reproduction of man will, in fact, dehumanize him” and both man and cloned man lost their self identity in a “posthuman” era (Kass 27). In this way, Baudrillard’s “the hell of the same” curse is artistically and realistically presented in *A Number*.

The story in *A Number* occurred in the near future is not only pertinent to a society in which cloning technology is developing in a dazzling speed, but also relative to man’s self identity, man’s inner demon and man’s relations in a philosophical and ethical sense. *A Number*, different from the fantastic sound and fury in some science fiction, is a serious meditation on some important ethical issues brought about by cloning technology. Through the lens of ethical mirror, the fantasy of human cloning reveals something both charming and frustrating about the deep level structure of the society. More than that, what has been dramatized in *A Number* perfectly foregrounds the ever-lasting argument about man’s biological meaning and ethical meaning as well as man’s nature as a man.

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