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The Wasp Factory as a Thing and Its Ethical Meanings in *the Wasp Factory*

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Abstract: In Iain Banks's novel *The Wasp Factory*, Things are imbued with vitality, the most crucial of which is the wasp factory itself. Through the lens of thing Narrative, the factory emerges not merely as a passive cultural symbol but as an active, dynamic ethical medium. The "mobility of thing" encourages Frank to engage in ethical reflection through a resonance between self and thing. The interaction between the wasp factory and Frank generates a threefold ethical significance. First, as a death trap, the wasp factory reveals Frank's behavioral pattern of manipulating "living beings" toward death, embodying the erosion of humanity by his animal factors. Second, the factory functions as a distorted spatiotemporal entity in which the individual cannot situate themselves, leading to a distorted ethical order. Third, the factory extends into the hybrid reality of the island, where chaotic social relationships expose the crisis of ethical disorder and identity confusion. Things assist Frank in reconstructing ethical awareness and help readers grasp the critical role of things in the deconstruction and reconstruction of ethical relations and identities, offering a new perspective on the novel's exploration of human nature.

Keywords: *The wasp factory*; Thing Narrative; Ethical Literary Criticism

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标题:《捕蜂器》中的捕蜂器物叙事伦理

摘要: 在伊恩·班克斯的小说《捕蜂器》中，物充满了生命力，其中最关键的是捕蜂器本身。透过物叙事的视角，捕蜂器不仅是被动的文化符号，更是积极、动态的伦理媒介。

“物的流动性”鼓励弗兰克通过自我与事物之间的共鸣进行伦理反思。捕蜂器和弗兰克之间的互动产生了三重伦理意义。第一，作为一个死亡陷阱，捕蜂器揭示了弗兰克操纵“生物”走向死亡的行为模式，体现了他的兽性因子对人性的侵蚀。第二，捕蜂器是一个异形的时空实体，个人无法置身其中，催生出扭曲的伦理秩序。第三，捕蜂器延伸到岛屿与现实的混合中，混乱的社会关系暴露了道德混乱和身份混乱的危机。物帮助弗兰克重建伦理意识，也协助读者把握物在解构和重建伦理关系和身份中的关键作用，为小说对人性的探索提供了新的视角。

关键词: 捕蜂器；物叙事；文学伦理学批评

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The Wasp Factory marks the debut of celebrated British author Iain Banks. In 1993, it earned a place among the 100 greatest British novels of the 20th century. Narrated in the first person perspective, the tale unfolds the childhood and adolescent years of 16-year-old Francis Cauldhame (Frank), who makes use of the wasp factory to observe and carry out the shamanic rituals he has devised, which ultimately lead to his commission of three murders. Through its Gothic “carnavalesque and transgressive” narrative features, the novel expresses Banks’s concern with the instability of identity (Colebrook, 2010, p.219) and global contemporaneity (Crawford, 2007, p.675), engaging with postmodern debates on human subjectivity. Within this framework, the relationship between the human and the thing emerges as a crucial focus. Throughout the novel, a powerful bond exists between the narrative and the wasp factory as a thing. The story of protagonist Frank is woven together by the wasp factory, with his actions closely linked to it. Despite the wasp factory’s sophisticated connections to inquiries into human subjectivity, it has been seldom mentioned in existing academic studies, and its dynamic interactions with humans have received scant exploration. Jafari and Liu are among the few scholars who have paid attention to the wasp factory. Jafari, in their analysis, regards the wasp factory as “Gothic ‘paraphernalia of places’, a parodic reappropriation of the tradition that ironically becomes an enforcer of de-formation” (Jafari, et al., 2023, p.902). Liu interprets it as a metaphor for Frank’s upbringing environment (Liu, 2016, p.30). However, these related commentaries fail to delve further into the in-depth interactions between the wasp factory and humans.

Thing Narrative has emerged as a prominent area of inquiry in response to the broader “turn to things” in contemporary humanities scholarship. The approach advocates for moving beyond anthropocentric biases to return to the thing itself, emphasizing the investigation of its material reality. To pursue the authenticity of things, one must first clarify the concept of the “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich). This notion, introduced by Immanuel Kant, was constructed to highlight the limitations of human rational cognition. The thing-in-itself exists independently of human perception and remains inaccessible to human understanding. The rise of the

speculative realism movement has further propelled the turn to things, suggesting that humans may approach the thing-in-itself not through reason, but through imagination. Graham Harman's theory of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) suggests that the "real object" is never fully present and can only be indirectly accessed through allusion. In response, scholars such as Ian Bogost have proposed Ontography as a method for revealing relationships among things themselves.

In the field of literature criticism, Tang Weisheng introduced the concept of Thing Narrative to explore how literature imagines the thing-in-itself. Literature is not only a study of humans but also a study of things (Fu, 2014, p.161). Thing Narrative uses storytelling as a means to approach the thing-in-itself, examining how narrative enables things to manifest their "thingness." Although this remains within the bounds of human imagination, it seeks to weaken anthropocentrism through three aspects: the symbolic thing, the agentive thing, and the ontological thing. The symbolic thing uncovers the cultural meanings of objects within narrative; the agentive thing investigates how things actively participate in human actions and propel narrative development; and the ontological thing focuses on how the material being of things in narrative exceeds linguistic and cultural representation (Tang, 2024, p.16).

Through the wasp factory, the novel establishes connections among Frank, society, and ethics, conveying Banks' reflections on social relations and identity dilemmas. The novel is a typical example of thing narrative. Frank's wasp factory expands from bodily space to family space and then to social space, exhibiting mobility at different levels: it is respectively a "living" thing heading toward death, a thing of the past that restricts the future, and an illusory thing that reveals the truth. The mobile thing opens a window of reflection for the "thing-in-itself" in the narrative, not only presenting the symbolic characteristics of the wasp factory to readers but also bringing the agency of things into the scope of examination. The wasp factory moves within spatial boundaries while exhibits a mode of spatial transgression, constantly breaking thresholds and actively participating in human activities. In doing so, it calls upon humans to listen to the "thing story" from the perspective of the thing itself. To understand the thing story, one must enter the ethical domain of thing narrative. Ethical Literary Criticism holds that literature is an ethical art. Its fundamental purpose lies in offering moral paradigms that help humanity understand society and life from an ethical standpoint, providing moral warnings for both material and spiritual life, and contributing ethical experience for the self perfection of human beings (Nie 384). The relationship between human and thing approaches ethical responsibility through a mode of dynamic movement.

In *The Wasp Factory*, things are active. Among all the things, the wasp factory is one of the most crucial things. The wasp factory not only reflects the evolution of Frank's ethical consciousness, through its close connection with the family and social environment, it also reveals the central role of objects in ethical expression and identity construction, to shine light on the guidance of human nature. It mirrors the struggle of human nature in a complex environment and the possibility of its return, serving as a key for understanding the novel's ethical connotations and exploration of human nature.

1. “Living” Thing Heading Toward Death: the Emergence of the Sphinx Factor

The “living” things within the wasp factory carry a dual meaning: they refer both to entities that possess life and to those imbued with spirit or mind. According to Steven Shaviro’s (2015) advocacy of panpsychism, all forms of life possess a degree of mind or sentience. When things are endowed with force and agency, they begin to influence human action and narrative progression to become what Tang calls “vibrant things” (Tang 49). As a “living” being, the wasp actively delays the moment of death, rendering the thing moving between life and death. The threshold compels the protagonist Frank to displace himself into the operative logic of the wasp factory. The thing no longer functions only as a passive cultural symbol reflecting the subject’s inner world, it also becomes an active embodiment medium that enables human contact with the spatiotemporal context inhabited by the thing (Johnson, 2008, p.xxxviii). The interaction between human and thing propels the subject toward the process of ethical choice-making based on their moral awareness, through which the Sphinx factor is made manifest.

On a micro level, the wasp factory is a divination device crafted by Frank, which predicts the future by manipulating the way wasps die. Among its components, the wasp, as a “living” thing, is the core of this device. From its creation to its operation, the wasp factory relies on Frank’s body so much that it becomes part of Frank’s bodily space. Wasps may seem to be completely controlled by Frank, functioning as utterly mindless things. But in reality, they have a certain degree of initiative. As “living” things with “mind,” wasps have a sensory system and share some abilities similar to humans in sensing the external environment and internal states, embodying a certain degree of humanity-like traits. Under normal circumstances, wasps do not take the initiative to approach humans, maintaining a state where both life and death are possible. Only when Frank actively “engages” with the wasp factory, do the wasps respond. This response is not a simple transfer of information from the object back to the subject; instead, it is an active action with a certain time lag, endowing the thing with mobility. The reason lies in the fact that wasps have a biological sensory system similar to that of humans and thus exhibit specific processes of choice:

“...I have to tread very lightly when the Factory is doing its slow and deadly work -sometimes the Factory does not want the wasp in its first choice of corridor, and lets it crawl back out on to the face again...Most of the deaths the Factory has to offer are automatic, but some do require my intervention for the ‘coup de grace’, and that, of course, has some bearing on what the Factory might be trying to tell me.”(Banks, 1998, p.100)

The wasps’ entry into the wasp factory does not necessarily result in death. The wasp, guided by its sensory system and survival instincts, may either return to its original position or survive within the death trap. The wasp draws upon its mind aspect to speak for itself, resisting its reduction to inert matter. By navigating the threshold between life and death, the wasp compels Frank to participate directly in the movement of things, confronting his own ethical awareness and making moral choices.

The wasp, as a living being moving toward death, becomes a mirror that reflects Frank’s Sphinx factor, the tension between his human factors and animal factors. During the operation of the wasp factory, Frank is

presented with two opportunities to make ethical choices: at the beginning and at the end of the ritual, he can choose whether to spare the surviving wasps, and in reality the prophesied victims. Yet in both instances, he acts according to desire, choosing to deprive these lives of survival. In his eyes, all life beyond his own is insignificant—merely tools to satisfy his will. His killing of small animals serves the purpose of “get[ting] heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker”; his murder of Blyth is driven by revenge; Paul is killed because Frank realizes “he couldn’t stay. I knew I’d never be free of the dog until he was gone”; the killing of Esmerelda is “more or less on a whim”, rationalized as having “done womankind something of a statistical favour”. Overall, Frank reflects: “Like the death penalty, you want it because it makes you feel better” (Banks, 1998, pp.10-75). His acts of killing are arbitrary and self-serving.

Thus, through repeated wasp-factory divinations, Frank surrenders to his own desire, amplifying the animal side of the Sphinx factor. He cruelly kills small animals and even three human beings. In the process, he loses his mind core as a human. His identity as a “living” being gradually deteriorates, and he ultimately degenerates into a soulless killer, devoid of morality, and reduced to a mindless thing.

The mobility of the thing brings Frank an embodied experience, enabling him to perceive the thing’s situation and reflect on his ethical predicament. Frank is no different from a ghost: he has no identity of his own, so he needs to confirm his existence as a “living” being through the death of others: “A death is always exciting, always makes you realise how alive you are” (Banks, 1998, p.33).

The wasp factory expresses the desire for “living” by actively delaying death, conveying the predicament Frank faces and revealing his tendency to be controlled by instincts. This makes the role of the wasp factory transcend the thing itself, giving rise to a logic of producing the thing’s desire and agency, and turning it into a thing that manifests humanity’s Sphinx factor. The wasp factory, trapped in the dilemma of life closely bonding with death, exposes the problem that Frank’s ethical consciousness is controlled by instincts. To trace the root of this problem, we need to return to the ethical scene and understand the production of ethical relationships by the wasp factory.

2. Past Thing Restricts the Future: the Production of Ethical Relationships

Within the family space, Frank reconstructs his personal history through the operation of the wasp factory, attempting to locate his future self within a network of ethical relations. At this level, the wasp factory becomes a unique field of memory, grounded in tangible physical space, such as the altar in the attic which selectively curates and lists the material remnants of human activity to recreate specific historical moments. In this context, the things within the factory are endowed with temporal qualities, emotional resonance, and agency. The relationship between human and thing is mutually constitutive: humans imbue things with meaning, and things in turn help “convey ideas, establish relationships, and connect emotions” (Turkle, 2007, p.5). Through the juxtaposition of memory-laden relics, the wasp factory serves as a medium for preserving Frank’s lived experiences and attempts to translate them into guidance for the future. Following the clues embedded in these relics, Frank searches for his place within the family’s ethical structure, integrating his individual bodily space into the home realm. This act of merging self with thing manifests transgression, effectively dissolving the

boundary between the human and the nonhuman, resulting in a metamorphosis of the self. In process of objectification, Frank relinquishes his capacity to speak and positions himself alongside things, generating a narrative effect of equality between person and object. At this moment, the thing becomes what Tang calls a “thing of equality” (Tang, 2024, p.48).

Frank’s wasp factory is “about now and the future; not the past” (Banks, 1998, p.104)—a thing endowed with the power of emotional evocation and agency. Despite his denial, the wasp factory harbors the relics of his memories:

“I set the jar on the altar, which was decorated with various powerful things; the skull of the snake which killed Blyth (tracked down and sliced in half by his father, using a garden spade - I retrieved it from the grass and hid that front part of the snake in the sand before Diggs could take it away for evidence), a fragment of the bomb which had destroyed Paul (the smallest bit I could find; there were lots), a piece of tent fabric from the kite which had elevated Esmerelda (not a piece of the actual kite of course, but an off-cut) and a little dish containing some of the yellow, worn teeth of Old Saul (easily pulled) (Banks, 1998, p.105)”

The wasp factory is not merely composed of objects confined to the attic; rather, it consists of things trapped in the past. Frank must sacrifice his past and transform it within memory into proof of ethical relationships between himself and others before he can access any prophecy of the present or future. Through the offering of these sacrificial tokens, Frank re-enters the present and reactivates the ethical scene of the event. The snake skull is a trophy from Frank’s first act of killing, a symbol of violence and death, and a signifier of his misguided “faith.” When bullied by cousin Blyth, Frank receives no justice or moral support from his family, unlike his cousin, who has the backing of his father. Returning to that ethical scene of the past, the absence of the mother’s role and the overpowering presence of the father’s authority created a distorted familial field. The father’s authoritarian decisions deprived Frank of any possibility of receiving moral education, both within and outside the family, preventing him from developing a proper moral compass. Suspended within the familial ethical framework, Frank develops a fractured moral consciousness, and the inner suffering becomes irresolvable. Under the pressure of pain, reason collapses before the drive for revenge. The human factor is crushed by the animal one. And Frank chooses to unleash his emotions through acts of killing. This turn toward animalistic behavior proves satisfying to Frank: without the guidance of ethical awareness or the restraint of moral principles, he is able to position himself within a distorted ethical structure and transform from a ghost unacknowledged by society into someone perceived as sympathetic by the public. The wasp factory grants Frank’s personal identity a certain weight, and that weight originates in the disordered web of social interactions embedded in and behind these objects.

The act of returning to the present through relics of the past does not allow for a complete reenactment, but only traces of absent presence (Olsen, 2010, p.25). Frank is unable to locate himself accurately within ethical relationships; he remains suspended, entangled with the piled-up objects, trapped in the past and doomed to repeat the same mistaken choices. The skull embodies the anger resulting from the breakdown of

justice and the collapse of moral order, which are consequences of the disordered ethical relations during the formative stage of Frank's moral consciousness. It also triggers his escalating inhumane behaviors in the future. From then on, the killings continue, and his sacrificial tokens keep accumulating. These things lead him to repeat the same wrong choices under similar circumstances, allowing him to sustain the identity of the past in "I am me" (Banks, 1998, p.8, p.11, p.95) and to stabilize his disrupted relationships, with his victims, with those close to the victims, and with others at large to affirm "I am here" (Banks, 1998, p.8, p.11).

The wasp factory thus becomes a suspended spatiotemporal structure within the novel. Although Frank, through each act of divination, temporarily escapes the constraints of time and space by invoking memory, the factory remains the material condensation of dislocated emotions and misguided values, and a medium through which he seeks personal identity and attempts to establish ethical relations. Yet, because he cannot escape the controlling logic of his family's disordered ethical structure, his self-perception remains arrested in the past. As a result, the divinations derived entirely from past things can only predict a present and future already constrained by that past.

3. Illusory Thing Reveals the Truth: Reconstruction of Ethical Identity

From the perspective of macro social space, the island is essentially a large-scale wasp factory, where the people and things living within it collectively weave an anti-utopian predicament. At the very beginning of the novel, through Frank's first-person intervention, the island is described as a large wasp factory:

"At the north end of the island, near the tumbled remains of the slip where the handle of the rusty winch still creaks in an easterly wind, I had two Poles on the far face of the last dune. One of the Poles held a rat head with two dragonflies, the other a seagull and two mice. I was just sticking one of the mouse heads back on when the birds went up into the evening air, kaw-calling and screaming, wheeling over the path through the dunes where it went near their nests." (Banks, 1998, p.1)

The brief description highlights the uniqueness of the overarching wasp factory. It first establishes the reality of the isolated island, only to then deprive the things of their capacity to speak or act, shifting the narrative focus to a policeman arriving from beyond the island, which renders the island's existence mysterious and enigmatic. The novel employs narrative estrangement to create a gap between the surface of the wasp factory and its recessed truth, turning the factory into what Tang terms a "withdrawn thing" (Tang, 2024, p.44). The withdrawn thing, based on Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), emphasizes the ontological existence of objects. Through the mobile interplay between visibility and concealment, the concept underscores the inexhaustibility of things, pointing toward the deeper ethical intentions that lie beneath their surfaces.

Things possess an inherent reality, yet they resist any form of cognitive appropriation, unremittingly withdrawing from human and nonhuman perception. That is, neither human theories and practices nor interactions among things can exhaust the reality of a thing. Whenever humans presume they have grasped a

thing's truth, the thing destabilizes that presumed reality, revealing the impossibility of fully accessing its ontological core. The island, as the locus of the wasp factory, is undeniably real: a physically isolated space of habitation. Its seclusion lends it a utopian quality, functioning as a projected ideal, a tool for escaping the regulatory frameworks of the real world. Yet non-reality of utopian is repeatedly undermined by the encroachment of reality itself. In an environment devoid of order, the collapse of values and the erosion of moral codes become inevitable. The arrival of outsiders disrupts the island's idealized function, driving the factory's reality further into ontological withdrawal. Its truth can only be approached through "sensuous allusions," indirect cues that gesture toward, but never fully reveal, the concealed real. Representatives of social order, such as the police, are conspicuously absent. In their place, lethal weapons circulate unchecked, accessible even to children. On the island, figures like housekeepers and bartenders cooperate with Frank's father in conducting unregulated, inhumane experiments. These actions not only compromise any semblance of ethical normalcy but also fundamentally shape Frank's moral development and identity formation. The result is the production of a subject devoid of ethical grounding: a killer born from systemic moral abandonment and structured cruelty.

In Frank's narration, the authenticity he perceives in the wasp factory has been shattered:

"Perhaps it was because I thought I had had all that really mattered in the world, the whole reason - and means - for our continuance as a species, stolen from me before I even knew its value...Lacking, as one might say, one will, I forged another; to lick my own wound, I cut 'them' off, reciprocating in my angry innocence the emasculation I could not then fully appreciate, but somehow - through the attitudes of others perhaps sensed as an unfair, irrecoverable loss (Banks, 1998, p.159)."

The wasp factory constantly flows between the virtual and the real, receding into his cognition, and guiding Frank to contemplate the ethical truth beneath its appearance—that is, the ethical identity he once established within what he deemed the "real" social relationships of the island has also undergone transformation:

"Now it all turns out to have been for nothing. There was no revenge that needed taking, only a lie, a trick that should have been exposed, a disguise which even from the inside I should have seen through, but in the end did not want to. I was proud; eunuch but unique; a fierce and noble presence in my lands, a crippled warrior, fallen prince....Now I find I was the fool all along (Banks, 1998, p.160)."

Upon realizing the truth, Frank undergoes a profound transformation in the subject-object dynamic between self and thing. He shifts from the master of the micro-scale wasp factory to a constituent part of the larger, paradoxical wasp factory that is the island itself: a space where reality and illusion intertwine. Once, he was the controlling subject of the ritualistic divination process, or a fierce and noble presence, a crippled warrior, a fallen prince in his perception. But now, Frank becomes the object of observation and a fool. The island, as a withdrawn and ambivalent thing, is re-cognized through this reversal. Its material presence reconfigures the

boundaries between human and nonhuman agency. In the moment of epistemological collapse, the subject-object hierarchy between person and thing is dismantled and restructured.

The change of subject and object made Frank break away from his detached identity as a “viewer” and take part in the construction of social relationships as a “participant of life”. He re-examined his old ethical environment and order, understood the manipulated reality, reflected on his sins, and asked his heart, “Why? How could I have done those things”. Then, “Now the door closes, and my journey begins,” Frank decided to leave the island and reconstruct his ethical consciousness and identity. As a large factory, the island inspired Frank’s “attempt to construct life, to replace the involvement which otherwise I did not want” (Banks, 1998, pp.159-161) and at the same time, objects also gained new sensory characteristics in ethical identity reconstruction to further approach the reality of ontology.

4. Conclusion

By invoking the concept of “thing,” the novel proposes a possible interpretation of the wasp factory, as a symbolic thing, an active mediating agent and ontological thing for ethical expression. The transition of living creatures into death reflects the consequences of Frank’s animal impulses taking precedence over human reason restraint. His ethical choices are shaped by his inability to locate himself within the chaos of familial and social relations; thus, he projects his identity onto the relics of past killings, compulsively repeating ethically flawed relational patterns and identity constructions. As the reality of the island, the macro-scale wasp factory continues to withdraw, the object-self relationship is reversed. This reversal allows Frank to re-comprehend the manipulated reality around him, to reassess his choices, and to reconstitute his sense of identity. The wasp factory depicted in the novel is not a silent thing, but rather an object that incites ethical inquiry. It reveals the thing’s capacity not only to reflect but to provoke reflection within the tangled ethical relations between human and thing, and among human beings. Through this process, the novel suggests that even in the bleakest expressions of violence and alienation, there remains a latent hope for the ethical redemption of the human.

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