



MOTHERHOOD, LEGAL ETHICS AND ETHICAL COMPLEXITY IN “HANDLE WITH CARE” BY JODI PICOULT

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies the ethical dilemmas related to motherhood and legal responsibility in Jodi Picoult's novel Handle with Care. The story centers on the O'Keefe family and their daughter Willow, who suffers from osteogenesis imperfecta. The novel raises serious moral questions about parental responsibility, truth in the courtroom, and the cost of love.

Jodi Picoult's novels are known for their psychological depth, social relevance, and ethical complexity. In *Handle with Care*, Picoult confronts the reader with an almost unimaginable moral situation: a mother who loves her disabled daughter sues her best friend, a doctor, for not having diagnosed the condition early enough for her to terminate the pregnancy. This lawsuit, rooted in the concept of wrongful birth, poses difficult moral issues: is it morally acceptable to claim in a court of law that a child should never have existed? Does the act of litigation contradict maternal love? What is the cost of telling a painful truth in the name of justice. This article seeks to unpack these complex moral questions through the lens of ethical literary criticism. It investigates how Picoult navigates the spaces between personal pain and public responsibility, love and legal obligation, and looks into the broader cultural implications of Charlotte O'Keefe's choice. The article will concentrate on narrative structure, character dynamics, and the legal framework as central to understanding the ethical stakes of the novel.

Ethical literary criticism offers a framework for interpreting literature through the lens of moral philosophy, focusing on human agency, conscience, and responsibility. Nie Zhenzhao, a prominent figure in this field, argues that literature should not merely reflect ethics but serve as a “moral trial” where both characters and readers engage with dilemmas of right and wrong. Several studies have examined Picoult's use of legal and ethical conflict. Thomas (2020) explores courtroom literature as a space of social reflection, while Smith (2018) focuses on the emotional realism in Picoult's female characters. In both cases, *Handle with Care* is recognized for its layered narrative and emotional ambiguity. The wrongful birth theme itself has received significant ethical commentary in legal and medical literature (Miller, 2017), yet literary analysis of how fiction transforms this concept into narrative drama remains underdeveloped. This work adds to bridging this gap by applying ethical

criticism to *Handle with Care*, evaluating not only what happens but why it matters ethically—both to the characters and to the reader.

This study applies a qualitative literary analysis method with a concentrates on ethical criticism. The primary source is Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* (2009), and secondary sources include scholarly literature on bioethics, motherhood, legal theory, and narrative ethics. Close reading is used to examine pivotal scenes—particularly courtroom testimony, parental reflection, and moments of internal conflict. The methodology also involves character analysis and thematic mapping to identify how legal discourse and moral emotion intersect. Special attention is paid to the structure of alternating first-person narratives, which offer multiple ethical viewpoints and emotional registers.

The moral structure of *Handle with Care* is fixed in paradox. Charlotte sues not because she regrets her daughter's birth, but because she believes she has no other financial option to care for her. This contradiction—loving someone while asserting in public that they should not exist—forms the core of the ethical tension. Picoult's use of multiple narrators adds depth to this tension. Each chapter is told from a different character's point of view—Charlotte, her husband Sean, Amelia (Willow's sister), and others. This polyphonic style fosters empathy and confusion: readers are pulled in many ethical directions simultaneously. Charlotte's testimony is heart-wrenching; Amelia's isolation is painful; Sean's quiet disapproval is understandable. Amelia's subplot is especially crucial. Her self-harming behavior reflects a moral cost rarely addressed in courtroom discourse: the toll on the "healthy" sibling. Her silence becomes another form of ethical protest. In one key moment, Amelia says, "No one asked if I wanted a sister so perfect she had to be broken to matter." This bitter irony encapsulates the emotional damage inflicted by idealizing suffering. Further complexity arises from the character of Piper, the doctor and former best friend. Her betrayal—whether real or perceived—adds a layer of personal grief to legal conflict. The lawsuit turns intimate relationships into public trials. The courtroom becomes not only a place of justice but of emotional exposure. The final moral turning point comes when Charlotte wins the case but loses her family's trust and social standing. Willow's accidental death after the trial further blurs the meaning of justice. The novel ends without resolution, leaving readers in an ethical grey zone. This ambiguity is not a flaw—it is the point.

"I would give anything for her to be whole. But would I give her away?" [3:198]

This quote appears when Charlotte reflects on the emotional burden of the wrongful birth case. Her voice carries the weight of love and guilt. She recognizes the contradiction between the legal necessity of arguing that her daughter should not have been born and her unconditional love for Willow. The dilemma is not merely legal—it is deeply maternal, pitting her moral responsibility as a caregiver against her ethical discomfort in declaring her child's life a mistake.

"Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't slipped on that ice. Would I still love her this much? Or is it because she hurts that I love her harder?" [3:211]

This moment reveals Charlotte's inner confusion between love and guilt. The ethical weight lies in the question of whether suffering intensifies affection, or whether it distorts it. By portraying this ambiguity, Picoult invites readers to interrogate whether ethical love must always be pure, or if it can be tangled in trauma.

“What kind of mother sues her best friend? The kind who would do anything for her kid.” [3:154]

Charlotte’s justification of her lawsuit shows the complexity of ethical action. It frames her decision as a sacrifice, not a betrayal. This statement challenges readers to reconsider the binary of right and wrong and to understand that ethical choices often come from a place of desperation, not malice.

Jodi Picoult’s *Handle with Care* is not simply a novel about disability or legal dispute. It is a moral document that challenges assumptions about love, justice, and ethical consistency. Through its intricate narrative structure and emotionally resonant characters, the novel forces readers to grapple with questions that have no easy answers. The ethical conflict in Charlotte’s decision is not just personal—it is societal. It mirrors larger debates about the value of life, parental sacrifice, and truth in the courtroom. Ethical criticism allows us to view literature as a space of active moral thinking, where stories are more than entertainment—they are tests of conscience. Future research may compare Picoult’s other novels (such as *My Sister’s Keeper* or *Nineteen Minutes*) to trace a broader ethical pattern. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies involving law, bioethics, and literature can deepen our understanding of how fiction shapes public opinion on controversial issues.

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