

Spiritual Imbalances of Characters in Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* from the Perspective of Spiritual Ecology

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Abstract—William Somerset Maugham is a well-known writer and playwright, and he is also among one of the most popular writers in Britain. *The Razor's Edge*, published in 1944, is one of his representative novels. Set in Chicago, this novel reflects characters' spiritual imbalances, i.e., crazy pursuit towards material life, alienated relationships between people and increasingly assimilated life style, featuring historical events like the booming economy in America after the First World War and the Great Depression in 1933. Considering characters' problematic spiritual world, spiritual ecology could serve as a suitable and effective method to explain this phenomenon. Spiritual ecology mainly investigates people's spiritual world that will go through many changes in the face of our society's development. By applying the theory of spiritual ecology, this paper has analyzed characters' spiritual imbalances in *The Razor's Edge*. It is found that characters mainly encounter three kinds of spiritual imbalances: spiritual materialization, existential alienation and assimilation of the life style. The characters' unhealthy spiritual world reflected in this novel displays Maugham's reflection towards economic development and people's imbalanced spiritual world in the face of material abundance. And in the rapidly developing 21st century, we also meet some spiritual dilemma. By interpreting characters' spiritual imbalance in the novel, this paper hopes to offer some insights to the modern people.

Index Terms—*The Razor's Edge*, Maugham, spiritual materialization, existential alienation, assimilation of the life style

I. INTRODUCTION

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) is a famous English novelist, playwright, and short-story writer. His works have been widely circulated, involving novels like *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), *Of Human Bondage* (1915), *The Razor's Edge* (1944) and so on. The novel named *The Razor's Edge*, has enjoyed good popularity among readers and it has even received the praise from the strict writer Virginia Woolf [1]. When it comes to the story of this novel, it is mainly set in Chicago and characters of this novel are mostly Americans. The major characters, i.e., Larry, Isabelle, Gray, are Americans living in Chicago. This novel features some important historical events while telling the story, i.e., the First World War and the Great Depression. Set in the period between the two World Wars, the United States had been seeing a rapid economic take-off then. However, as the theologian Albert Schwartz points out: “our disaster is that its material development excessively exceeds its spiritual development. The balance between them is disrupted. In places where strong spiritual culture is indispensable, we

neglect it” [2]. It is true of the characters in this novel who are blindly obsessed with the material comforts but pay no attention to their inner life. Maugham displays characters' many spiritual symptoms. For example, the heroine, Isabelle is really a material girl. She should even give up her pure love towards the hero Larry. When she learns that Larry cannot provide her with wealthy life, she turns around then and get married to the son of the millionaire called Mr. Maturin, i.e., Gray. How badly people's spiritual ecology has been polluted by the materialism! What's more, Maugham reveals unsparingly the alienated relationships among the high classes and their hypocrisy. And Maugham also shows people's similar pursuit of lifestyle in the face of the material abundance. In short, this novel offers a vivid description of the extravagant life of the upper classes, and it shows the problematic characters' spiritual symptoms.

Spiritual ecology mainly investigates the relationship between man and self as well as man and environment. Spiritual ecological criticism focuses on how humans maintain balance and harmony in the spiritual world, and through interpreting the text, it calls for attention to the spiritual ecology, exploring a harmonious human spiritual ecology that conforms to ecological concepts [3]. Since the industrial revolution, the economy has been rapidly developing and people's living standard has been greatly improved. As everything is a double-edged sword, however, industrialization has also brought several undesirable effects. Utilitarianism, materialism and other spiritual issues are unpleasantly worrying. People's spirit has been polluted by the negative side of capitalism, as Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the founder of system theory, sums up: “In short, we have conquered the world, but we have lost our soul somewhere on the journey” [4]. Maugham is a sharp observer of his time, and in this novel, he reveals characters' problematic spiritual issues. Considering their imbalanced spiritual world, spiritual ecology could serve as a suitable and effective way to explain their spiritual problems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although Maugham has received mixed criticism and he puts himself among the second-rate writers, his works are widely welcomed at home and abroad [5]. When it refers to the existing literature of the novel *The Razor's Edge*, researchers mainly approach it from the following three aspects. First, some articles and essays analyze “Orientalism” and Indian religion issues in this novel. In “Crossing *The Razor's Edge*: Somerset Maugham and Hindu Philosophy”, the author explores Hindu mysticism and Oriental spirituality [6]. And some domestic researchers also pay attention to oriental elements and Hinduism [7]. For example, Dong [7] in the essay has discussed Upanishad in Indian religion and

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point out that life is disturbing and hard as Upanishad shows (ibid). Second, researchers are interested in philosophical views and thoughts in this novel and try to interpret the novel through lens of the philosophy. For example, Peng [8] has discussed the protagonist Larry's choice by applying Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Will. She illustrates characters' enslavement of the will and their ways to get out of it. Third, as for the studies from ecocriticism, there are very limited essays and articles. Xiao [9] has investigated the ecological awareness based on more than six works of Maugham. She expounds on the novel by applying Lu's ecological trichotomy [12].

Through reviewing previous studies, it is found that researchers mainly centers on the oriental elements, religion, and philosophy of this novel. As for the ecocritical studies of the novel, they often combine this novel with Maugham's other ones to analyze it, and thus lack a more thorough and detained analysis of this novel. In addition, there are no studies which approach the novel through the lens of spiritual ecology. Considering the research gap of existing literature, this essay intends to interpret this novel from the perspective of spiritual ecology. Hopefully, it will offer some insights to the future studies of the novel.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the Industrial Revolution, the environmental problems have become more and more noticeable and even devastating. Faced with increasingly severe environmental issues, people come to realize the urgency and importance of protecting our environment. And the environmental movements have been successively initiated, such as the famous movement of 1960s and 1970s. These movements have motivated the "greening" of literature, and critics start to examine ecological implications from literary works. In 1978, "ecocriticism" was first used by William Rueckert in his thesis "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" [10]. He advocates "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" [11]. Later, Glofelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment", which "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies". Around in the middle of 1990s, ecocriticism has established its firm position as a fresh approach to literary criticism. In 1992, The Association for the Study of Literature Environment (ASLE) was founded, gathering scholars and writers worldwide to explore the issues related to ecocriticism.

Spiritual ecology, as a branch of ecocriticism, mainly investigates the interrelationship between human beings (as the subject of spiritual existence) and the living environment i.e., natural, social, and cultural environment [12]. Lu [12] further points out that there are two relationships in the study of spiritual ecology: firstly, the relationships between various factors within the spirit, including beliefs, desires, motivations, emotions, outlooks on life, values, etc.; secondly, the relationships between the spirit and its external factors. Lu [12] maintains that if people's spiritual ecology remains in an imbalanced state, then natural ecology and social ecology would be accordingly influenced like the Domino Effect.

Lu [12] concludes that modern people usually are faced

with the five spiritual symptoms: spiritual materialization, alienation of existence, assimilation of life style, the spiritual vacuum, incompetence of behavior. In this novel, it mainly features the former three symptoms, i.e., spiritual materialization, alienation of existence and assimilation of life style, which will be elaborated in the following part.

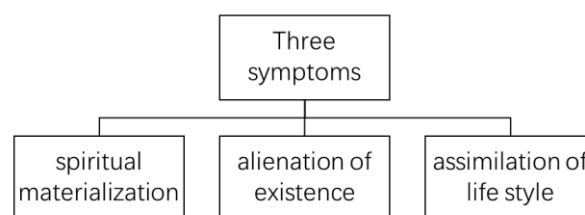


Fig. 1. Three spiritual symptoms featuring in the novel.

IV. SYMPTOMS OF SPIRITUAL IMBALANCE

A. Spiritual Materialization

Spiritual materialization refers to the spiritual symptom that people are so obsessed with products that their spiritual space is overwhelmingly occupied by material desires and money [12]. Since the Industrial Revolution, the economy has gained enormous development. Many factories have been set up and productivity has been greatly improved. Standardized, efficient and large-scale production makes more products available to the public. Surely, people's life become more convenient and they can consume various products to make their life more comfortable, such as cars. The scholar named Luo Gang observes the mass consumption emerged in around 1913, marked by the emergence of the Ford production line [13]. People's pursuit towards material comforts is reasonable and understandable in a rapidly developing society. However, if people are addicted to chasing wealth and their sole concern in life is the material comforts, then this phenomenon becomes problematic. When people are crazy about material life, their soul is polluted by the corrupt consumerism.

The novel *The Razor's Edge* covers the history of the late First World War and the Great Depression. To be mentioned, the period between 1918 and 1929 actually is the golden time for America. After the first World War, many European countries have been severely struck and suffered great economic loss. Different from these countries, America has greatly benefited from the war, and its economy has been prospering. It is worth pointing out that the period (1918–1929) also overlaps the Jazz Age of the 1920s. In the book *The American Spirit*, H.S. Commager describes the United States in the early 20th century. He maintains that the the 1920s is a decade of economic prosperity, material comforts, and cynicism [14]. It is true that many people then become intoxicated by the prosperous economy. Maugham has vividly depicted many characters in this novel who are indulged in pursuing money or material comforts. The following is Isabelle's paraphrasing of Henry Maturin's words, which shows her pursuit of the wealth as well as many other people then.

"Henry Maturin was saying only the other day that we were beginning an era that would make the achievements of the past look like two bits. He said he could see no limit to our

progress and he's convinced that by 1930 we shall be the richest and greatest country in the world. Don't you think that's terribly exciting?" (Maugham, 26)

From this paragraph, it can be seen that American people are optimistic about the flourishing economy after the First World War. Following the booming economy, people are greatly motivated to earn as much money as possible. The phrases, "the richest and greatest country" and "terribly exciting", are vivid display of people's fascination or even madness towards material wealth.

However, they are so addicted to luxury life that they neglect or abandon their inner voice. The heroine Isabelle is a material girl who regards wealth and money as the most important thing in her life. Isabelle is so addicted to luxury life that she can give up her pure love in exchange. In the novel, Isabelle falls in love with the hero Larry. And she is willing to wait Larry for two years, as Larry wants to pursue the meaning of his life. In the novel, Isabelle's love towards Larry can be found in the novel. For example, in the fourth chapter, Maugham writes:

"She loved Larry. She wanted to marry him. She wanted him with all the power of her senses." (14).

From the above, it is obvious that Isabelle does love Larry wholeheartedly. However, Isabelle's mind has been polluted by the corrupt luxurious life. She would rather abandon her love towards Larry in order to lead a comfortable and extravagant life. When Isabelle learns that Larry is unwilling to follow the trend to earn as much money as possible, her attitude towards Larry has changed as shown in the following.

"She slowly slipped her engagement ring off her finger. She placed it on the palm of her hand and looked at it. It was a square—cut ruby set in a thin platinum band and she had always liked it." (15)

Actually, Isabelle's action shows her decision. She cannot stand the simple or poor life with Larry and would rather give up her love. Taking the above sentences more closely, it can be found that Isabelle really likes her engagement ring. The ring not only stands for their love, but more importantly, it also shows wealth for it is a ruby. From Isabelle's decision, it can be concluded that Isabelle's mind is occupied by the material comforts and she leaves no room for the pure love. To be honest, it is sad or ironic that the pure love should be defeated by the so-called wealth or money.

"The fetishism makes people's spirit materialism, followed by the dullness of their ability to experience and imagine, and the degradation of their ability to appreciate beauty" [12]. In the novel, there is a sharp comparison between two characters, i.e., Isabelle and Sophie. Isabelle, unquestionably, represents for the people whose mind has been polluted by materialism, while Sophie as a young lady stands for the people who haven't lost the soul in an age of extravagance. Through the comparison of the two female characters, Maugham shows the influence of material life on people's mind.

Sophie, when she was young, hadn't lost her pure soul yet and could feel the beauty of the natural life. In other words, she endows the ability to feel the natural world. Larry's words vividly show Sophie's sensitivity towards the natural world when he comments on her poetry, as the following shows:

"She had a delicate ear and a sense of rhythm. She had a feeling for the sounds and scents of the country, the first softness of spring in the air and the smell of the parched earth after rain" (219).

Different from the young Sophie, Isabelle never can appreciate the beauty of the natural world, because she has been indulged in the material life and has lost the ability to feel the beauty. In the novel, it is evident that Isabelle doesn't have the sensitivity to feel the beautiful natural world. The things that Isabelle can see are expensive jewels, costly clothes and the like.

In short, in the face of booming economy, many characters' soul in the novel have become materialized: Henry Maturin is crazy about making as much money as possible; Isabelle should give up her pure love towards Larry in order to lead a more comfortable and luxurious life and she has lost her sensitivity to appreciate the beautiful natural scenery compared with young Sophie.

B. Existential Alienation

Lu [12] summarizes that existential alienation refers to three pairs of alienation, i.e., the alienation between man and nature, the alienation between man and other, the alienation between man and self. With the rapid development of the society, people are feverishly keen to earn money and become more and more greedy. Consequently, driven by desires, people immoderately exploit the natural resources. The uncontrolled exploitation causes the deterioration of the environment. The human beings are deprived of the mental home, leading to the alienation between the mankind and nature. What's worse, the natural disaster also affects the social and spiritual ecology. In the social ecology, the exploitative mindset leads to the indifferent and cold interpersonal relationships, while in the spiritual ecology, this mindset makes people even cannot hear their inner voice. In this novel, it mainly features two pairs of alienation, i.e., alienation between man and nature, as well as alienation between man and others, which will be elaborated in the following part.

First, the alienation between man and nature is vividly featured in this novel. Owing to the rapid industrial development, however, people are blinded by the technological advances and huge wealth. Greedy human beings are crazy about making money and enjoying extravagant life. Consequently, man and nature become increasingly alienated. In this novel, the following typically shows the alienation between man and nature.

"I daresay you're right. The Armours and the Swifts will pack more and better meat, the McCormicks will make more and better harvesters, and Henry Ford will turn out more and better cars. And everyone'll get richer and richer" (10).

The utterances are from Larry, who speaks out the prevailing views of the American people then. From these sentences, it is known that people want to make more money. However, it is worth pointing out that producing more cars and the like means that people are less close to nature. More cars implies that more concrete roads need to be built and people would have less chance to get in touch with soil. In short, people's link with nature become looser and people are increasingly alienated from nature.

With the development of industrialization, people are infatuated with artificial objects produced by the industry. What's more, people now pursue so-called civilized life. In the novel, the heroine Isabelle can serve as a good example. She loves the artificial products, such as exquisite gowns, strings of pearls, diamond bracelets, costly rings. Besides chasing these artificial objects, Isabelle also leads a so-called civilized life. In Chapter 3, Elliot tells the author that the couple, i.e., Isabelle and Gray frequently throw or take part in lavish parties and luncheons as the following shows:

"He told me with satisfaction that Isabel and Gray hadn't dined by themselves once in three months" (36).

It is obvious that Isabelle and her husband really lead an extravagant life, leaving little or no room to connect with nature. Ironically, they should even have not dined by themselves once in whole three months. The lavish parties and luncheons have become their major business. Pursuing artificial products and extravagant life does alienate Isabelle from nature.

Second, the alienation between man and others is also evident in this novel. In previous agricultural society, the human beings' exploitation towards nature keeps in a balanced state and the relationship between man and others is relatively harmonious. People in the agricultural society are kind, friendly and caring, and they have less suspicions and reservations towards each other. With the rapid development of industrialization, people enjoy the convenience and advances. However, people are also blinded by the prosperity and become increasingly greedy. The excessive chase towards material wealth causes people to become more and more indifferent and cold-blooded. People prioritize money as their sole purpose, leaving no room for empathy or love towards others. Surely, the relationship between man and others grows more and more loose and alienated. In this novel, Maugham vividly depicts the alienated relationships. The following is excerpted from the first chapter, which shows the author's comments of Elliott's friends.

"People laughed at him behind his back and called him a filthy snob, but nevertheless accepted his invitations with alacrity" (16).

Obviously, the relationship between Elliott and his so-called friends are not solid. His friends are rather hypocritical, who would flatter Elliott in his parties, but would also tear him to pieces behind his back. Actually, as Maugham points out that Elliott's friends come to his parties just because they want to have a free dinner. In other words, the bond linking Elliott and his friends is just the benefit or interest, which is surely weak compared with sincere relationships. And the following is Elliott's comments on his friends or guests, which also shows the distant relationship between people.

"I hate them, I hate them all. They were glad enough to make a fuss of me when I could entertain them, but now I'm old and sick they have no use for me. Not ten people have called to inquire since I've been laid up, and all this week only one miserable bunch of flowers" (201).

From Elliott's words, it is known that Elliott's so-called friends ruthlessly abandon him when he has no use for them. Lamentably, Elliott has done numerous things for his friends,

only to find that they don't hold any gratitude towards him. The phrase "only one miserable bunch of flowers" vividly displays his friends' indifference towards him. It is true that in that rapidly developing society, people focus solely on wealth or interest. As Marx sharply points out, there is no longer any relationship between man and man except the naked interest as well as the cold and ruthless cash transaction [15].

C. *Assimilation of Life Style*

Karl Jaspers, the famous German philosopher, observes in his book *Man in the Modern Age* that he watches with horror: in the tropical plantations and in the fishing villages at the north end of the earth, films from the metropolis are shown. What's more, people are dressed in a similar way to each other and the custom of daily communication is common in the world. And most horribly, people hold similar way of thinking [12]. The observations of Jaspers best explain the assimilation of life style. In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Kheimer and Adorno further expound assimilation of life style: People's spare time is occupied by the unified cultural concepts, leaving no room for personal thinking and the display of personality. Such a society encourages people to give up their own individuality and independent thinking.

With the fast development of industry, people are lost in the flood of desire. Their desire towards material comforts and wealth has reached at an unprecedented level. And wealth becomes the sole measurement of success in people's life. Consequently, people's way of living has become increasingly similar. In the novel, assimilation of the style mainly features in the two aspects: first, it is in the people's habits, customs and their following towards the trend; second, it lies in the people's way of thinking.

When it comes to the first aspect, there are many vivid examples in the novel. Taking the decoration of characters' houses for example, their houses, are all exquisitely equipped. The house of the Princess Novemali is a good example in this regard as the following shows:

"She had brought marble from Italy with which to line the walls of her great reception rooms and imported painters to paint the ceilings. Her pictures, her bronzes were uncommonly fine..." (205).

The above is the description of the Princess Novemali's house. Undoubtedly, her house is well furnished. Similar to this old lady's house, the heroine Isabelle's house is exquisitely decorated as well:

"That spacious room with the Savonnerie carpet on the floor, the lovely drawings on the richly paneled walls, the petit point chairs on which they sat, the priceless pieces of marquetry, commodes and occasional tables, every piece worthy to go into a museum; it must have cost a fortune, that room, but it was worth it..." (46).

From the houses' decoration of the two female characters, it can be known that the two both love exquisite and costly houses. It can be further referred that the decoration of the upper classes' houses is similar, as long as it is extravagant and delicate.

Besides characters' similar pursuit and taste towards the decoration of their houses, they also take part in similar

activities and engage with similar people. Isabelle, her uncle Elliott and other so-called distinguished people would all frequently participate in lavish parties. And surely, they would arrange parties as well to invite guests to their own parties. Actually, parties play an important role in their life. Elliott regards parties as his life who would even drag his weak body to attend parties. In other words, Isabelle, Elliott and other people from high society all frequently join or arrange parties. The activities in which they participate and people they meet are all similar.

Many characters in the novel have similar customs and habits, which belongs to the tangible or superficial level. As people constantly follow the trend, their way of thinking will subtly become assimilated. In a rapidly developing society, people's desire towards wealth or material life reaches at an unprecedented level. Money become the sole standard measuring people's success. As a result, people's way of thinking grows simple, which prioritizes wealth or money over the sincere and pure love.

In this novel, it is such an irony that there should be more than five couples whose marriages are based on money or interests. The first couple is the marriage between heroine Isabelle and Gray. As it is illustrated in the above, Isabelle gets married to Gray for pursuing a materially abundant life. The second couple is the marriage of Gray's father, who gets married to Mrs. Maturin:

"For her connection when he was making a place for himself in the city to which his father had come as a country bumpkin" (36).

In addition, it is a big irony that there are even totally three loveless marriages in Monsieur Achille's family. Monsieur Achille himself doesn't marry her wife from inclination but for good business. As for his children:

"His son is suitably married... and now a marriage has been arranged between his daughter and a count, ... with a very pretty château in the neighbourhood of Namur" (205).

Unquestionably, the two marriages of his son and daughter are based on material consideration instead of love. The phrase "suitably married" vividly displays the truth that sacred marriage has been trampled by the corrupt materialism. Actually, aside from the above loveless marriages, there are still more similar ones. From these reasonable or reciprocal marriages, it is worth pondering over the people's way of thinking. Why are there so many people choose to lead a loveless married life? Surely, the answer is very simple, because people want to sacrifice their marriages for material benefits. From all these similar choices, it is found that people hold similar way of thinking. As long as their choices can help them obtain more wealth, it doesn't matter what kind of sacrifices they can offer. It is true that people are lost in the flood of the rapidly developing society. And people are blinded by the wealth, prioritizing material comforts over anything else. Under this circumstance, people's way of thinking is quite simple and unified: to gain as much wealth as possible.

V. CONCLUSIONS

By applying Lu Shuyuan's theory of spiritual ecology, this

essay has analyzed spiritual problems in *The Razor's Edge*. It is concluded that characters in the novel mainly are confronted with three spiritual symptoms. First, this essay explores the spiritual materialization by the examples of Mr. Maturin's wild pursuit towards wealth, Isabelle's decisions of giving up her pure love and her degradation of sensitivity towards nature. Second, in terms of existence alienation, this essay investigates it from two aspects: for one thing, it illustrates the alienation between man and nature with the help of the examples i.e., the major trend then developing economy and Isabelle's so-called civilized life; for another, it discusses Elliott's superficial and loose relationships with his friends. At last, when it comes to the assimilation of life style, this essay illustrates this symptom from two aspects: First, it points out that the aristocracy in the novel will decorate their houses in the similar manner, as long as it is costly, exquisite, and well-furnished. Second, it reveals people's similar way of thinking by virtue of five loveless marriages in the novel. It mirrors that people are overwhelmingly enslaved by material wealth.

Maugham is often praised for his clinical way of writing, who writes in a calm and objective way. In this novel, as a sharp observer, he reveals spiritual imbalances of the upper class in the face of economic booming. Through the lens of spiritual ecology, readers can gain a deeper insights towards characters' spiritual symptoms and have a more complete understanding of the period, especially in the 1920s and 1930s of the United States.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yan Tiaomei analyzed the novel and wrote the paper. Sun Yu, the supervisor of Yan Tiaomei, offered insightful suggestions and helped improve this paper. All authors have approved the final version.

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