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## SPIRITUAL SALVATION AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF PLAGUE IN MAUGHAM'S *THE PAINTED VEIL*

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### Abstract

In the novel *The Painted Veil*, the author William Somerset Maugham tells a story set in the 1920s. A British couple stuck in their marriage crisis moves from Hong Kong to Meitanfu, a remote village in China's interior ravaged by cholera. Under the vicious environment of epidemic situation, the heroine Kitty experiences multiple hardships in both physical and mental ways, and eventually obtains her spiritual salvation. In this work, Maugham in fact explores how human beings form a community of common destiny in the epidemic environment through the description of the protagonist's mental process. Besides, readers can also find out the several changes of the relationship between man and man, man and society, as well as man and nature in the face of the epidemic. This paper starts with Kitty's spiritual change process, focusing on the analysis of the changes in her attitude towards people, social values and the surrounding natural environment in the "island" environment created by disease. Thus it demonstrates the inseparable relationship between the bad epidemic environment and the formation of the community of human destiny. And finally it analyzes how the community of destiny will help human beings overcome the bad epidemic environment from the spiritual level and realize the salvation of the soul.

**Keywords:** William Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil*, cholera, community, spiritual salvation

### Introduction

The novel *The Painted Veil* presents mental suffering, struggle and dilemma of the heroine under cholera epidemic. In the past, scholars tended to focus on the orientalism style, the "other" position of the Chinese images, and the self-consciousness awakening of the heroine. The development and change of the heroine's inner world depicted in the novel actually reflects the author's deep thinking on the formation of the community environment of human destiny under the plague and how it helps people to obtain the

inner peace of mind and spiritual salvation. Following this line of thought, this paper analyzes the transformation of the relationship between the heroine and the people around her, that of her social values, as well as that of her understanding and attitude towards the nature under the background of cholera, so as to gradually explore the inseparable relationship between the epidemic and the formation of the community consciousness. Then it further explores how people should overcome the fear of the severe epidemic environment and obtain the inner peace as well as spiritual salvation.

The concept of community of common destiny has been widely recognized by society since it was put forward. The essence of this theory is changing man himself in the first, then the surrounding communities, and finally the whole world. It is based on the interests and development of all mankind, and deeply expresses the common will of promoting the development of human society. The community of shared future of human beings is the premise of building a harmonious society and civilized modern life. Its ideological content not only meets the needs of maintaining international interests, but also reflects the individual responsibility for the overall development of society and human beings. Besides, the ecological problems in any region may turn into disasters all over the world. Therefore, it is necessary for the construction of a community with a shared future under the ecological disasters.

Literature, as an important part of the humanities and arts, is an indispensable element in the ideological construction of the human community. As a literary text, *The Painted Veil* can arouse people's thinking of the common community, and help people effectively deal with the large-scale infectious diseases. Therefore, the spirit of harmony between man and all other things around revealed in this novel has a positive and far-reaching significance. There is no class or racial differences in the spread of epidemic disease. Virus is the common enemy of all people living in the epidemic area. In the face of rampant infectious diseases, human beings are in fact a community of shared destiny. Only with active and mutual help and support can people overcome terrible disasters and rebuild a new life.

#### **Changes in Kitty's relationship with others**

In the novel *The Painted Veil*, Kitty's most significant mental change in Meitanfu is her attitude towards the affair with her lover Townsend. Before reaching the plagued land, Kitty's inner world is quite desolate, pale and helpless, for her emotional needs cannot be satisfied from her families. She is just an ordinary woman who loves lively atmosphere and yearns for warmth, yet is unfortunately suffering from her family's

indifference and her husband's dull, inarticulate and workaholic characters. So she desperately turns to her lover's arms to obtain spiritual comfort, which eventually makes her interpersonal relationship and moral bottom line out of control in Hong Kong. However, the desperate feeling of witnessing other people's death in Meitanfu makes the death consciousness in Kitty's inner mind growing, ultimately creating a new understanding of her outlook towards life and values.

Spiritual reflection and renewal of values will urge people to reveal those appearances of hypocrisy. With the new insight, Kitty reexamines her own life and her real mental needs for relationships from the bottom of her heart. Through thinking, she realizes that the "love" between her lover and herself is actually not as meaningful as she used to think. The main reason why she cheated her husband in Hong Kong is that she loses herself in front of the cold utilitarian social rules and in desperation has to tightly hold the so-called "passion" in spirit. She used to regard "passion" as the whole pursuit of her life. However, after living in the epidemic area, she began to see clearly that there are so many valuable things to do in her life than put all her passion on a hypocritical and selfish lover. The feeling of empathy to those people around her is meaningful enough to give her a new understanding of her own life value choice. She gradually begins to let go of her past shallow values, control and restrain her actions, and stop falling into an immoral and meaningless relationship with Townsend, which can only give the ostensible spiritual consolation.

After getting rid of her blind thoughts on her lover, Kitty devotes more energy to helping the children in the monastery. She gradually realizes the importance of caring for each other living around as well as the necessity of giving love and warmth to others. This cognitive and emotional change also helps her to ease the relationship with her husband Walter. In the beginning of the novel, influenced by the general utilitarian mentality of society, Kitty's immature concept of mate selection led her to an unhappy marriage. She is not satisfied with her husband--the title of the novel also implicitly suggests the state of her marriage: "veil"

can usually be regarded as "a cover which shows purity of marriage" (Tjitrosoediro 9); however, Maugham keeps it "painted", which means "it has already been stained by betrayal" (ibid). It is exactly this situation of dishonesty, mistrust and inability to communicate that finally leads to the cold war and stalemate between this couple, which eventually led Walter make a retaliatory decision of bringing his wife to the terrible pestilent environment of Meitanfu. But now, after working in the epidemic area for a short period of time, although Kitty still does not love Walter, she gradually realizes that Walter has very valuable and noble human nature, which actually makes him an admirable person. His inner world is not as cold and sluggish as she used to think, but full of warmth and love. He always tries his best to save all the patients in need during his working days in Meitanfu. In the face of disease and death, Kitty and her husband now come into a common wish, that is, to help the local people ease their pain. This goal makes the couple improve their understanding and communication to a certain extent.

With the common efforts of helping to save patients, the emotional crisis between the couple has eased, and both sides have become more empathic and inclusive. Such a state of mind helps to alleviate the "emotional shackles" that they were originally burdened with, and helps their spirit to get out of dilemma. When Walter eventually dies due to the plague, both the husband and the wife felt regretful and sorrowful. At that time, both of them realize the noble and amiable parts of each other's characters, feeling sorry for their past behaviors and reaching the spiritual reconciliation. Compared with the chaos in the epidemic environment and the remarkable efforts of them to save the locals, the former resentment between the couple's own life seems not so worthy of consideration any more. Even if they don't love each other, they can respect each other and talk equally. The reconciliation and change of their relationship also make Kitty successfully acquire part of the spiritual "salvation" and liberation—she is no longer bound by the shackles of a painful marriage.

The experience under the Meitanfu epidemic changes the relationship between Kitty and her father as well. Like her mother and sister, Kitty used to complain about her father's incompetence and his difficulty in promotion, just taking his contribution to the whole family for granted, and regarding his expenses for the whole family as a matter of course. "...he had never counted in the house and had been taken for granted, the bread-winner who was a little despised because he could provide no more luxuriously for his family; but she had taken for granted that he loved her just because he was her father"(Maugham 234) However, when she returned home at the end of the story, the habit of caring for others and the ability to perceive the potential emotions of others formed in cholera environment finally makes her realize the mental pressure her father had been under. She is no longer as indifferent to other people's emotions as her sister does. On the contrary, she opens her heart, communicates with her father in time, and expresses her full love to him. This action timely melts the emotional estrangement between father and daughter, so that both of them obtain the spiritual comfort and emotional support, and finally can work together to meet the new life. This plot shows that the love and warmth in people's hearts needed to be expressed in time. The exchange of warm words can help people eliminate loneliness and despair, establish strong emotional ties, and help each other to overcome difficulties. It is with the help of the power of caring, understanding and warm words that Kitty finally finds the warmth of family after experiencing the hard test of life and death.

#### **Changes in Kitty's social values**

Living in such a disease prevalent area, Kitty's social values have also undergone some changes. In the face of disease, people have to rely on each other and support each other to get through the difficulties. As a result, the relationship between people and their surrounding social groups has become closer. In the book *Community and Society*, Ferdinand Tnnes pointed out that "all the praise of life in rural areas always shows that the community of their people is much more

stronger and vibrant ... The community is a lasting and real common life." (Tnnies 54) This is because people in the countryside live in a more closed environment and have closer ties with each other. Meitanfu is such an example. Its geographical environment and epidemic situation make it actually form an "island" situation. So people who live there connect more tightly than people elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the demand for survival linked by fate is exactly the spiritual link formed by the primitive community of human society, while fate and the common way of behavior were the practical guiding rules of the community of human social life. As Engels has analyzed, "to make up for the deficiency of individual self-defense ability with the group's joint force and collective action" (Engels 42) , is exactly the original intention of the birth of the community. It can be seen that human's "mode of common activities and mutual aid" is the foundation of helping human beings exist in the world and achieve common development.

As far as Kitty's personal actions are concerned, she makes some changes in her ways of getting along with people from other classes around her. Instead of being totally unconcerned with these people, she now takes the initiative to join them and together fight against the epidemic. She becomes active in making contributions to saving people in the epidemic area. Each day she takes the initiative to go to the monastery to help take care of homeless children. She begins to care about their fate, regard helping them reduce the pain as her own responsibility. She now becomes empathized and feels connected with their lives.

During this period of time, she also witnesses that every single member in the monastery does not hesitate for a second to risk her own life to save people. They leave their families, getting far away from their motherland, and try their best to fulfill their mission of God's salvation in this remote land dutifully. Kitty is deeply moved and influenced by their firm belief, strongly impressed by their words that life and death should be excluded to save other human beings. She feels that all these nuns' behavior of

leaving their home and devoting themselves to saving the suffering world has composed the most beautiful chapter in their life.

The "inner beauty" of the nuns is in sharp contrast to the western world where Kitty used to live and the world where material desires prevailed in Hong Kong's upper class society, which makes her realize how fragile and empty the previous way of life she lived. The nuns' firm belief toward life has influenced Kitty's understanding of her own life value as well as her social value. She no longer thinks and worries about death all day long, unable to do anything but fear about cholera. Now the kindest part in her soul is calling her, making her put all the energy into the work of the monastery. Busy work occupies her mind and becomes her new concern. She gradually takes love and care for people in need as the greatest contribution she can make to the surrounding society. "Love is a motive force of the harmonious society, an important factor in the human nature and a glaring shining glory."(Deng 41) To be one of the good people who can help the society to alleviate the suffering caused by natural disasters now becomes Kitty's greatest happiness towards life. Besides, to a great extent, "Fear comes from unknown, unseen and helpless."(Barry 16) Therefore when Kitty chooses to integrate into the nuns' group and work with them every day, she actually improves her understanding of the epidemic situation in the daily work. This helps to eliminate the unknown fear in her heart and help her to get a peaceful state of mind.

#### **Changes of Kitty's natural spirit**

Having no choice but to live in the plagued city, Kitty is inevitably facing with the threat of death each day.

The people were dying at the rate of a hundred a day, and hardly any of those who were attached by the disease recovered from it... The people died so fast that it was hardly possible to bury them. In some houses the whole family had been swept away and there was none to perform the funeral right.(Maugham 91).

It is totally a hopeless environment, the depression of disease and death is step by step approaching the living ones. In this situation, Kitty's subconscious response is to "escape". She instinctively tries to run away from that decadent, chaotic and gloomy doomsday scene. At this time, she continues the mentality that she once developed in Britain and Hong Kong. She is mentally passive, more inclined to wait for others to help arrange and solve problems, aimlessly relying on others to save herself from such a bad environment.

The depression and pessimistic emotion surrounded Kitty all day long after she has witnessed so many terrible situations and poor patients. Under such cruel and oppressive external and spiritual environment, she comes to realize the importance of finding a spiritual pure land for herself and the deep meaning of building a better living place. Only when she devotes herself to creating a beautiful and harmonious living environment, can she obtain a spiritual pure land to make herself feel calm, relax and happy. "Like any kind of extreme situations, people's good character and bad character were exposed by frightening diseases. However, a common description of epidemics focuses on the devastating effects of disease on personality." (Cooke 52) Therefore, when dealing with large-scale epidemic diseases, the most important thing for healthy people is to maintain strong spiritual support. And a good mental state is inseparable from the surrounding environment to a large extent.

Under the rose window and in the little prayer room of Meitanfu chapel, Kitty can easily feel at ease and calm, for there is a peaceful, quiet and clean atmosphere, which can keep people's mind pure and clean. Clean and pure environment not only plays a sheltering space for people between the chaotic epidemic areas, but also provides an irreplaceable "spiritual home" for devout people. The "spiritual home" can make people who have a strong belief find out their own calm and rational spiritual state in the complicated secular work, so as to obtain a kind of spiritual freedom and transcendental pleasure. People can use this kind of happiness to fight against the bad

environment around, and constantly encourage themselves, add more confidence, little by little make their hearts full of hope. In essence, the harmony of environment, the peace of spirit and the pleasure of mind are interdependent and inseparable.

When she paid more attention to the overall environmental construction of Meitanfu, she gradually began to gain new inner action power. She can be more energetic, restore her confidence and help Meitanfu's people, especially those children she gets in touch closely and deeply concerned, to rebuild a better living environment. She can also face her life with a positive attitude as well as trying her best to create a good natural environment and living environment.

At this time, Kitty has really got rid of her past degradation in Hong Kong. She is no more ignorant or concerns only about the cakes and ale. All her positive deeds gain herself the courage to live a clear and simple life. Instead of helplessly relying on others, she now concerns more about the surrounding environment, more aware of the inseparability between the individual and Meitanfu's overall environment. The environment will have a huge impact on people's life, mental state and fate. The problems caused by the bad environment also need people to deal with and solve with a positive attitude. She began to follow her inner thoughts, get more positive and optimistic action power from her heart, actively rely on her own actions to change the environment and get rid of difficulties, being more willing to help herself and others to get through them. Since then, Kitty has really broken the huge spiritual shackles and gained the spirit of "initiative" and "spontaneity", as well as the inner free thought. She has realized the inner sublimation and spiritual salvation, and also really gained the independent personality and free spirit. She can rely on her inner motivation to solve problems and guide herself to be a free person who can control her own destiny.

### Conclusion

In *The Painted Veil*, the heroine Kitty has made great changes and progress in her thinking and cognition when living in Meitanfu. The mutual

aid and self-help in the extreme environment makes her realize that there is an inseparable close relationship between people and people, people and the surrounding social groups, as well as people and the environment. Communication and connection with others and with the surrounding environment can help individuals to break through their own spiritual difficulties, gain confidence in overcoming difficulties and optimistic life, then finally achieve peace of mind. Meitanfu's "isolated island" environment, which is quite different from the other places, makes its people need to be more united to help each other rather than being alone. In that place, everyone's destiny is closely linked. No individual can survive alone in the face of the serious epidemic problems. During the process of actively working with other nuns to make some contributions to the city, Kitty gradually gains more courage to face life. She realizes that she can do many more helpful things for the city instead of just sorrowfully witnessing more and more patients die of infection. She helps to take care of the children in Meitanfu monastery, thus also finds out her own life meaning and life value, as well as a peaceful habitat of soul. She puts her energy and action into helping the local people to improve the surrounding environment. In the end, she not only helps to improve the local environment, but also makes a peaceful spiritual habitat for herself. By taking action, she gradually realizes the importance of "sharing common fate" with others, with the surrounding society, as well as with the environment, thus reestablishing her goal of life. With a new rational and positive attitude towards life, she gradually gains the ability to love and help other things around her with great enthusiasm, and finally achieves spiritual freedom and spiritual salvation.

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