

# Being-Towards-Death: Anxiety and Hope in the Art of Western Modern Literature

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## **Abstract:**

This paper takes western modern literature as the research object, and starts with the anxiety phenomenon in the art of western modern literature, and analyzes the real features of western literature and art by using the research methods of analysis and literature research. Exploring the "Reconstruction of value" of western literature and art reveals that the literary thought of "Being towards death" in in the art of western modern literature is not just a literal expression, but a search for the meaning of life.

**Keywords:** *The art of western modern literature, Anxiety, Hope, Being-towards-death.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of globalization and informationization, anxiety is quietly spreading into people's heart, making them become anxious day by day. The increasing number of psychiatric patients and suicide victims is like a cluster of fire which tortures people's hearts and arouses a question: Is the anxiety depicted in the art of western modern literature really that desperate? In fact, anxiety arises from people's deeper perception and analysis of reality, and this perception and analysis indeed brings people anxiety while at the same time it motivates them to ignite new hope. This is the picture of "being-towards life" painted by modern western literary artists, enlightening people to find hope amid the anxious life in the mirror image of anxiety from the perspective of space and time.

## II. ANXIETY PHENOMENON IN THE ART OF WESTERN MODERN LITERATURE

In 1987, the American Psychiatric Association defined "anxiety" as apprehension, tension and uneasiness due to perceived danger. The frequency and intensity of anxiety varies with individual personality characteristics. Literary artists with more sensitive personalities tend to have stronger and more variable anxiety responses to environmental changes. This is particularly evident in modern western literature. *Waiting for Godot*, a play created by Samuel Beckett, focuses on people's confusion about the future in modern society, and people's experience is just like what Feng Jicai said in his work, *Lingxing* (means spirituality): life is like an old fisherman, most of the time, keeping an empty hope. There is no ultimate meaning in life, so we can never wait for the "Godot" that will allow us to completely settle down and stop waiting. Of course, there are countless examples like this in modern literature.

Space in modern society is divided into "closed boxes" that are not only expensive, but also branded with class. One's "status" is even measured by whether one has an independent living space with great size and quality. Space anxiety is also portrayed vividly in many modern literary works. From Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the main character Gregor is locked in a room after being transformed into a beetle and he keeps crawling around the room over and over again. Showing his inner anxiety to the fullest. In Kafka's other works like *Der Bau*, *A Hunger Artist*, *Das Schloss*, the characters are all in closed and narrow spaces, and his miniature novel *A Little Fable* also embodies the typical space anxiety - "Hey," says the mouse, "the world is getting narrower and narrower every day. ... I have reached the last house; and there is a trap in the corner and I run in." The cat responds, "You have to change the direction of running," and then reaches out his paws and grabbed the mouse. <sup>[1]</sup> This is a fable of spatial anxiety. As the "walls" of the city are growing wildly, people's living space becomes narrower and narrower.

The story in Sartre's *Huis clos* also takes place in a gloomy prison. Of course, spatial anxiety is not only caused by the confinement of physical space, but also by the mutual squeeze of living space among people which arouses the anxiety of value. People are part of the world. They have the ability to reflect, to see their own situation, and to see the helplessness and emptiness of existence, which is the opposite side between people and the world. Therefore, people will suddenly feel like a drifting and unsupported canopy. In Sartre's *Nausea*, the feeling of nausea on one's own body and the world is described as one suddenly sees the ugliness of existence itself. In this novel, "I" live a mediocre life in isolation. Days monotonously pass by without any change, leaving me nothing but the feeling of boring. Though I do not even think about this kind of life, I do feel lonely and it suddenly occurs to me that I have always expected to have some fortuitous adventures happen to me. <sup>[2]</sup> If people feel that the life is warm and beautiful, it is because they give their emotions to the incidents happened to them. In their mind, these things should be organized in an order way while in fact in reality they are often distorted, broken and vulgar. Therefore, when people's enthusiasm for everyday life disappears, the real world seems to be rather hideous and ugly. "I" exist in the world as weak, obscene and powerless as anything else, appearing without reason and disappearing without warning. To me, I see the absolute absurdity of existence.

The fragile face of grand human values like the history of war, dignity, political ideals, love, and kinship makes existence reveal an absurd and overwhelming nature. For example, the outbreak of war has had a devastating effect on the world, and the physical and psychological trauma suffered by those caught up in it is indescribable. The brutal killings, the treacherous environment, and the long trek seem like a never-ending journey; the hunger, the cold, the fear, and the confusion all intertwine together, posing a great challenge to the human's will to live. But when the heavy war becomes history, it only turns into light words. Take love as another example. Teresa always strives for advancement and soul; she is afraid of falling into vulgarity and always has a stubborn attitude. She does not want to bind Thomas' freedom and does not want to bring pain to him; but she can't help but feel painful when she finds that Thomas has other lovers. For her, love is a life-saver from the abyss of metaphysical vulgarity, and she wants to hold on to Thomas. But she is afraid that holding on too tightly will make the freedom-loving Thomas turn away from her. For Teresa, the price of love is heavy. <sup>[3]</sup> All these are deeply interpreted in Milan• Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

### III. VALUE RECONSTRUCTION IN THE ART OF WESTERN MODERN LITERATURE

Western modern literary scholars, with their highly sensitive sensibility and keen insight, have revealed the mirror image of anxiety from the perspective of space and time, destroying the classical dream of beauty based on the omnipotence of reason, and calling into question all the original classical values. However, if we look deeper into the modernist literature, we will find that the aim of the literary scholars is not just to bring out the absurd side of the world and make people fall into anxiety, but to seek the meaning of life.

Schopenhauer is one of the representatives at the turning point of modern western philosophy, and his doctrine of desire causes great repercussions. He once said: "The essence of existence is to have constant movement as its form. We often seek quietness but it is simply impossible to achieve. Therefore, our existence, like a person walking down a steep slope, must fall down as soon as we stop. Only by continuing to move forward can we prevent from falling ... if one asteroid stops running, it would immediately falls in space. -- so the form of survival is restless." [4] The thought of Schopenhauer reflects value anxiety prevalently existed in our life. It should be noted that many people consider Schopenhauer to have a pessimistic and misanthropic philosophical attitude. However, it may lead to misunderstanding to Schopenhauer if people's mind rests solely on these theses Although Schopenhauer sees the essence of life as "desire," his purpose is to free people from attachment to the material world, just as Buddhism exhorts people to remove greed, anger, and ignorance. The ultimate goal is to free people from the bondage of their will so that they can engage in immortal endeavors (like art, philosophy). If life is really just a constant pursuit of satisfying desires, then it has no value, Schopenhauer does not deny life, on the contrary, he stressed that the healthy beggar is happier than the sick king. In his opinion, "the most essential element of happiness in life ..... is the direct source of inner satisfaction aroused by human emotions, desires, and various thoughts." [5]

On the basis of the inheritance and development of Schopenhauer's thought, Nietzsche exclaimed that "God is dead!" which shocked the whole world. Nietzsche's "anti-morality, anti-religion, anti-culture, anti-tradition" is not to destroy traditional culture, but to "revaluate all values", to break old and rigid values, and to release human creativity. He regards art as the highest value of human beings and hopes that human life will be fully artistic. Of course, art here refers to all activities full of creativity.

Milan• Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not about debunking the "lightness" of grand values in human society, but rather about further questioning whether one can be absolutely free if one completely rejects these values. The answer is obviously no. Sabina, as a representative character, takes a sideways view of life, not wanting to be attached to the world, betraying her parents, husband, country and love, and leading to the passion and joy of adventure. Later, she loses her parents, husband, country, and love - what else is there to betray? "Sabina feels a void around her. Is this emptiness the ultimate in all betrayal? ... We are often totally unaware of what exactly gives meaning to our actions. Sabina is also unsure of what purpose hiding behind her rebellious desires. Is that the unbearable lightness of life?" [6] The responsibilities imposed by family and society often put us under great pressure, and if we turn our

backs on all this, life will also lose its support.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, Milan• Kundera is not denying the traditional values that underpin social life due to the absurdity of human existence, but reshaping life in the analysis of value anxiety.

Sartre's philosophy is also explained in his work, *Nausea*. In his novel, "my" former lover, Anne, is a woman in search of "fortuitous adventures". She used to fervently pursue perfect poetic moment in her life. My hopes were rekindled immediately after I received her letter, hoping that Anne would restore my passion for life. But the result of this meeting is disappointing. Anne has changed completely: She no longer has so many illusions about her life; she realizes that there is no such thing as a perfect moment; and she experiences that feeling of nausea. My hope is dashed completely. I no longer have anything to hold on to and I am completely free. But this kind of freedom is desperate.<sup>[8]</sup> When people no longer have poetic fantasies about life and no longer expect "fortuitous adventures" in their life, they lose the reason to expect the future. But at the end of the novel, when the jazz song "Some of these days, you'll miss me honey" plays, "I" really feel joy again, so there is something transcendent, such as music. There is something transcendent, such as music. If life is not caught up in history and the real existence of the present, but is born towards non-existence, seeking some changes, maintaining the passion for the ideal, pursuing transcendental values, then one is constantly reshaping the meaning of life.

Although Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kundera, and Sartre all reveal the absurd side of the human existence situation and embody strong value anxiety, they also deconstructs traditional morality, religion, and political ideals which are the important part in the human value system, and erased the ideal color of the human value system. They do not move toward the nihilism of denying everything, but refine the traditional values of human society after filtering them and reconstructs the hope of life.

#### **IV. THE "BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH" IN THE ART OF WESTERN MODERN LITERATURE**

Heidegger, one of the most influential western thinkers of the 20th century, puts forward the proposition of "being-toward-death". He believes that people are born in the process of dying, not in a step-by-step manner. In Heidegger's view, the essence of human existence is the manifestation of death. That is to say, man always lives in the way of "being-towards-death". He once said: The being-towards-death is ahead of itself--being already in a world--as being alongside entities within-the-world. In this way, various foundational natures of the Dasein's are expressed: being exists precedes itself.<sup>[9]</sup> People are often blinded by daily trivialities, overwhelmed by public consciousness, and addicted to the "noise" of daily "novelty" gossip, thus obscuring the character of death.<sup>[10]</sup> Although death is certain, the urgency of everyday life obscures its shadow. Only when people recognize the fact that death is always present can they follow their own inner calls, seek their own unique truths, and plan for the future. The "being" that Heidegger points out actually falls into the concern for the "beings", which itself is always obscure. His "being-towards-death" is to lead the human attention to the "true being".

## V. CONCLUSION

In the modern society of globalization and informationization, people's anxiety is increasing day by day. However, it does not mean despair, but the interweaving of deep despair and strong hope. Though deep anxiety is expressed in the art of western modern literature western the literary artists do not sink themselves into an eschatological complex. They make modern literature and art grow new hope in the soil of anxiety through "value reconstruction" and "being-towards-death". On paper they record their inner feelings and status, which is actually a reflection of the real world. Although they often deconstruct and reconstruct the two worlds between "reality" and "psychology," it does not mean that they are out of step with reality. In a sense, it is actually an awakening and expectation of the real world.

Through the deep interpretation of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Sartre's *Huis clos*, Milan• Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and other modern western literature, we can learn that anxiety exists in the art of western modern literature, and that such anxiety is not only in literature and art, but also a reflection of the real world. In the contemporary society with increasing competitive pressure, "anxiety" appears frequently in the life and work of contemporary human beings, which has seriously endangered people's physical and mental health. Therefore, by analyzing the anxiety phenomenon existing in the literature and art works, this paper hopes that people can face all the changes around them correctly so that they can follow and react to the changes properly.

As mentioned above, in depicting the mirror image of anxiety from the perspective of space and time, the modern western literary artists have given profound philosophical thoughts on human existence, given deep analysis on the meaning of human life and given birth to a number of emerging disciplines like environmental aesthetics, ecological aesthetics, urban aesthetics and so on. These have become the new base for accelerating the development of modern culture. Although anxiety is pervasive in the art of western modern literature works, we know that the anxiety in the symphony of life maps new hope.

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