

## The Study of *Bay of Souls* From the Perspective of Postcolonial Ecocriticism

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### Abstract

American writer Robert Stone’s literary works are profound and unpretentious, faithfully reflecting the historical background and social culture, as well as revealing the artistic charm of transnational themes. This thesis studies the fish in Robert Stone’s novel *Bay of Souls* from the Perspective of Postcolonial Ecocriticism. It not only explores the relationship between animal and the current American but also reveals the secrets of contemporary American politics by using the metaphor.

**Key words:** *Robert Stone; Bay of Souls; Postcolonial ecocriticism; Animal*

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### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary American writer Robert Stone (1937-2015) is an important representative of the American neorealist fiction. “Stone has succeeded in projecting very powerfully a vision of America, delineating his view of Americans, their present condition, and their cultural landscape” (Finn, 1993). Just take the people of middle

class for example, who is lack of faith which leads to the congenital deficiency from the beginning, and who is preached by politicians of the upper and manipulated by the American values later on. Even if the United States has caused injury to other countries, and even if the object being hurt is also the real people like themselves, American citizens still pay no attention or think further more on that. “In Stone’s *A Hall of Mirrors*, it is the murderous or destructive consequences of violence that trump the creative, and racial minorities are singled out for suffering” (Hamilton, 2009). The characteristics of such group of American people have been reflected by the fish image in *Bay of Souls* because the habitat of fish likes the living environment of Americans and the fish’s current plight is also the American’s. Fish is a typical community animal and the monomers are generally associated with the collective action. When fish is mentioned, the first impression in people’s mind is the massive schools of fish merging into a torrent. Although this is the evolution of nature, it often brings people with an optical illusion: Fish is not an independent animal. The lower species have no independent actions or independent judgment, only slavishly follow the direction forward when they linger on the world. Compared with the first two animal images, the image of fish is unique. For one thing, it is to survive in the water, totally different from the terrestrial organisms. While apparently fish itself has no verbal communication, nor has the higher thinking skills seemingly. It has been considered to be excluded from the traditional animal but has been added to the list of articles or objects as food. Even the ancients used fish as a currency, namely the units of measurement during the exchange affairs. For the other, the perennial living in cold water has made the fish lonely, cool and cold-blooded. Fish is cold, turning a blind eye to the sufferings of others. Even in the face of humanity, it can bite without hesitation.

## 1. FISH AND SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS IN THE POST-COLONIAL SOCIETY

In *Bay of Souls*, there are hundreds of words relevant to fish. When Norman invited Lara to have lunch, they saw “it supported a large tank full of illuminated tropical fish and for years had offered a busy, pretentious array of precooked ‘cuisine’ that arrived at the kitchen frozen in plastic bags inside cardboard boxes, like low-grade trail mix” (Stone, 2004). Stone, however, is simply dismissive of those tropical fish that are used for enjoyment since the beautiful and bright appearance is purely an illusion. “Busy” and “pretentious” are just used to conceal the essential characteristics of “low-grade”. In fact, the Americans described by Stone are so seemingly superior and “illuminated”, but after being stripped the coat, they show the same pale souls, perhaps in some way far worse than the inferior nation they deemed. Fish does not think about their living state and do not make progress, let alone having any faith. Just like some Americans who have the tendency to lack some kind of ultimate guiding spirit, even the technological advancement and economic prosperity can hardly conceal the desolation of the spiritual world. In the story, when Michael was asked by Liz “What is the worst problem?” He answered: “That I have no soul” (Ibid.), while “untended souls awaited visitation, salvation, home” (Ibid.). In ancient mythology, it is self-evident that fish is in the low status. The Pisces in the Greek mythology is the incarnation of Aphrodite and Eros in water. In order to escape from the son of earth goddess Gaia, Titans’ attack, Aphrodite changed into the fish hiding in Nile (some say Euphrates). She had her feet tied together with her son in case of being separated and dives into the river with fish shape. The other myth is about the Capricorn: In order to save the Temple fairy from the Beast’s attack in Black Forest, Faun Paine was forced to jump into the lake at the end of Saint River where even the Gods were afraid to set foot in because the water was cursed. Anyone who steps into the river would become fish and will never come back. However, Paine proceeded without hesitation and stepped into that lake and stood in the center, holding the fairy high in the hands. Unfortunately, he could not return to the land afterwards, because his lower body had changed into a fishtail. Obviously the description of fish in the myth is with contempt, because it is believed that fish is totally the uncivilized creature, without faith or spiritual sustenance. Turning from god to fish is the spiritual relegation which is undoubtedly disdained. One detail in the Bible has shown the significant differences that have differed fish from the other animals from another aspect— the great flood and Noah’s Ark story. In Chapter 7 of the Genesis, God has washed the dirty earth: “And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed

from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark” (*Bible*, 2002). Great flood destroyed the world except for the fish which met no impact. The whole process is enough to show that fish and other animals have a huge distinction. Either myth or the real history has revealed the fish are out-and-out lower organisms since ancient times. Regardless of their various shapes or different sizes, fish can never hide the fact that they, with the empty mind, are lack of the spirit.

Except for *Bay of Souls*, Stone has observed this and had an analysis on the point of view a long time ago in *Fuzzy Aquarius* in his short story collection *Bear and his daughters* in 1997. He has the man corresponded to the fish to explain the real survival status of the current Americans, thus reveals the social chaos and disorder because of people’s lacking of faith. The main scene of the story taking place is in an aquarium where naturally he will not miss the depiction of fish. What greeted Alison’s eyes was this scene: She stood before the team of the swimming salmon for a moment, seeing some fish without eyes. The eye sockets were empty, probably being rinsed clean. But the blind fish could still swim with other fish, remain in line and even turn with the others. Anyway, they always followed the other fish swimming around. Generally speaking, the common psychological description in the novels can be divided into two categories: the spiritual and the one belonging to the material. *Fuzzy Aquarius* is undoubtedly the former because it is the major feature of the novel to make good use of dreams, hallucinations and other psychological portrayal. This description by Stone in the text may seem strange, but its very nature is the true reflection of the contemporary American social reality. Stone argues, “if we make explicit the interpersonal origin and reference immanent in bad faith ... we shall find ourselves running afoul of general account of consciousness as empty, egoless, and transparent to itself” (Eshleman, 2008). The metaphor of blindness refers that the general publics do not know exactly what they want in this world, nor know what kind of people they should become in the near future, so blindly repeating the same rhythm of life day by day. Although physical eyes are sound, the pair of eyes of spirituality deep inside has been closed, and eventually the owners are reduced to “a mindless fool and an easygoing puppet” (Yang, 2004). So in the author’s view, drifting through the life of mediocrity seems like the ugly blind fish dying in this small fish tank. Michael is the person who has “turned his back on the inspirations of the chapel” (Stone, 2004) and believes nothing at all. Unlike the traditional society, the modern society is not so clear, methodical and makes the overall sense. Therefore the novel has showed that the modern society has brought many troubles and oppressions, with the writing of the meaningless of the whole world, the sense of helplessness, anxiety and fear. As Michael’s attitude to his life: “Vain now. No one watched over us. Or rather we watched over

each other. That was providence, what a relief” (Ibid.).

Although with the overall stability, the contemporary American society simmers with potential dangers. Problems in various aspects of contemporary American public are hidden behind. “Stone reaches outward to explore the dangers of the world and inward to plumb the depths of late-century American anxieties” (Paul, 1999). Living in the humanist renaissance era, neorealists in U.S. must reflect on the social issues, examine the morality and concern about the presence of people in contemporary American society. The United States described by Stone is in the period of social transformation. The highly-developed capitalist urbanization has set off a huge change in the field of value, politics and culture. The traditional society is falling apart due to the process of modernization and the traditional values of the people meet the overall challenge. According to the Christian view, the sin of human is prominent in two aspects: the Fallen of the spirituality and the depravity of the moral. All come to the evil things. With the rapid economic development, people are gradually affluent in the material sphere, while their spiritual realm gradually desert. Many Americans are seemingly religious believers, but in the strict sense they are not. The pious are no more than the conformists, knowing nothing about the religion. Michael told Lara “We don’t presume on God. Now we see Him, now we don’t. Mostly we don’t” (Stone, Ibid.). When Michael and Kristin saw their son Paul “genuflected and crossed himself” (Ibid.), they “blundered into eye contact, exchanged a bleak unseeing glance and sat down” (Ibid.). In the eyes of the philosopher Kierkegaard, these people are just in the stage of following the religious rules and ritual rites. Stone gives the merciless criticism on this deformed society by means of fish image in these two novels.

Stone once told an interviewer, “I discovered that my way of seeing the world was always going to be religious--not intellectual or political--viewing everything as a mystic process” (Kaplan, 1998). He was once an atheist but now “he is hounding God in person, blaming him for history” (Leonard, 1998). Actually, Stone has become more and more interested in the religious stories of the other writers like Wolff and find them “fundamentally religious nature”(Stone, 2004). When he was writing another novel called *Damascus Gate*, Stone told his reader that “Jerusalem was intensely charged with the interaction of God and man” (Anonymous, 1999). He insists that in order to change the status quo fundamentally, only the humanist moral concern from the Christian salvation can be relied on. According to the traditional Christian canon, human beings are superior to the rest lives on the earth because they are created by God, according to his own image. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (*Bible*, 2002). Human is visibly the mixture of clay plus God’s breath. Near the

end of his life, when God withdraws that breath, human will only be restored to the dust. It is just because of the presence of the breath that the human being can be the only species to have the spiritual communication with God, and spirituality has determined the possibility of redemption. The Central American island in the novel is the epitome of the modern people’s living environment, the symbol of humanity’s bleak ending and desolation of the human’s spirit world. These social situations highlight the “modern” confusion and emptiness of life. Mankind has abandoned traditional religious beliefs, begins to lose the original spirit and is caught up in the constant conflicts, struggling themselves with the environment and the fate. The actual situation of the United States today is just the case: with the rise in economy, the national faith falls apart. Stone says in the novel that the western culture is worthless because it has been decadent, dying and we have to backtrack. The nation, with little interest to the spiritual pillar may have a rapid development with great potential, but certainly such the development can not be long-term or steady. The nation can not grasp its own development direction soundly because the heart of the nation is full of impetuous and dazed force, which leads to the booming of economy and military while the ideology is always shifting in the low state. Stone is an outspoken writer and what is hidden behind is his deep concern and sincere love to the human being. From his novels, readers can also understand that to expose social problems is not the purpose of the neorealist fiction, but the primary means of moral concern. The ultimate purpose of moral concern from the neorealist fiction is to rebuild the moral consciousness of contemporary American society and pay attention to the presence of the individual.

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## 2. FISH AND CLASS CONFRONTATION IN THE POST-COLONIAL ERA

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Stone has taken advantage of the plot of fish’s eating people with eight pages’ description in *Bay of Souls*. For the cargo salvage, Michael dived to find the wreckage of the crashed aircraft. At first, he saw a large number of fish accompanying him, “to share the dive” (Stone, 2004). Then he saw “A cloud of angels — and on the edge of vision the trembling barracudas, waiting to pick off stragglers” (Ibid.). Fish are indifferent because when they see the food, they do not hesitate to swallow it. They simply neither think about the source, nor care about killing their own kind. When Michael got close to the aircraft and explored inside the cabin, he suddenly stunned by the phenomenon that the remains of the pilot was “obscured by the swarms of fish of every shape and species that teemed in it” (Ibid.), “and of course the fish were there in uncountable numbers to eat them” (Ibid.). The nature of the fish is clear: in the face of death, they are completely indifferent but leisurely enjoying the

carrion. In Michael's life, perhaps it is the first time that he has been aware of the fish's brutality, "swatting at shadows, feeling himself buried alive, half unconscious with fear" (Ibid.). Perhaps it is because the fish lives in water while the human lives on land that results in the huge gap between them. No matter what reason it is, the fish in the western myth has always been seen as the notorious sea monster and the man-eater, just like Cetus in Greek mythology, the sea monster created by the gods, whose name means "whale" in Latin. "The Ethiopian queen believed that her daughter Andromeda was more beautiful than the Sea God's daughters. The marine fairies got very angry and asked Poseidon to flood the entire Kingdom" (Schwab, 1996). They announced that only by feeding Andromeda to Cetus could the kingdom be saved. So the king had to tie his daughter to the rock, waiting for the monster emerging from the sea. However, Zeus's son Perseus saw her and fell in love with the girl. In order to rescue Andromeda, he turned Cetus into stone by Medusa's head and killed it. So many stories were circulating among the medieval sailors that they had encountered the terrible giant fish on the voyage en route. All the stories were expanded around the ruthless fish which was just its very nature.

As we can see, Michael is somewhat naive. Though "the swarming fish made him shudder with loathing" (Stone, 2004). He was still trying to evade reality and tried to make self-suggestion: "Easy, easy, he said, speaking to the fish, to the pilot, his pal and fellow aquanaut" (Ibid.). Nevertheless, no matter how hard he tried, it was difficult to escape from this horror haze. "The dreadful sights of water and the men that fishes gnawed upon" (Ibid.). Through such terrible description of fish's hunting, Stone tries his best to convey the point of view: the pilot's being eaten by fish in the novel, is no more than the copy of cannibalism in the real world. The apathy showed by the fish in the novel can be paralleled with the apathy by the contemporary Americans, to the presence of the other people and the other values. Such a large group of the American people has been under the influence of the distorted American values for a long time, unconsciously playing the role of accomplice and seeking power by riding the back of the tiger, but only finding the road of development gets narrower. By using the fish image, Stone laments for the Americans: "Fishermen and emigrants, smugglers and divers, pilots and contrabandists and policemen, all might find their way to Guinee one day, at the bottom of the trench at the bottom of the world" (Ibid.). The picture of fish's eating people cruelly has left to the reader the permanent loneliness and helplessness. At the end of the novel, Michael was still difficult to step out of those horrible memories "under the gray bones of a mackerel sky" (Ibid.).

"Bay of souls" is the name of a place of the fictional island in the Caribbean, which will not be strange to readers because everything happens there reminds

them of today's world. In some sense, *Bay of Souls* is a political novel because "the several globe-spanning successors charged with political and personal urgency and culminating in his Conradian horror-story-quest tale *Bay of Souls*" (Anonymous, 2010). Nowadays in many international affairs, we can easily see how the United States suppresses other countries especially the developing countries in the political and economic regions, and how the United States ruthlessly interfered with them. In his novel, Stone has depicted the antagonistic relationship between the United States and the Third World countries. "Whether his scene be Central America or New Orleans, Vietnam or Los Angeles, Stone makes of violence an elemental part of life" (Epstein, 2008). Published in 1982, *A Flag for Sunrise* is Stone's third novel, and is also the first novel in which he studies under the unique environment of the Central America. The main content of the novel is about what happened to the former CIA agent Frank Hawley Will in a fictional Central American country named Kent. When he encountered with the nuns Justin and found that she was involved in the local anti-government activities, he urged her to leave there. But Justin refused to return home, and finally was killed. According to Stone's words, the Americans come to the Central American countries with different purposes, or for missionary, or for investment of the tourism resources development, or to escape the frustration of living in the United States. "But they only brought troubles to the natives who completely do not need them" (Liu & Wang, 2002). However, the U.S. government has not abandoned the infiltration and invasion to other countries, and at the same time shaped the United States into the headquarters of the ultra-right forces, so that the foreign policy of the United States can be completely controlled by the right-wing hawks who have the final say. In the remote institutions like Fort Salines, "out here the milk of patriotism never ran thin" (Stone, 2004), military intelligence agencies tended to go to a place like this for the fresh blood. Without exception, all of that has shown the U.S. top hierarchy's contempt and indifference to the interests and lives of the people in other countries. "Stone's philosophical bent, vividly gritty style, and edgy wit are evident in his portrayals of some of American life's darker aspects" (*The Columbia Encyclopedia*). From the analysis above, people can not help but are reminded of the giant fish Leviathan as the symbol of evil both in the Old Testament and in the Old Testament Apocrypha chapter six. The word meaning of Leviathan is "crack", which is often described as the one with hard scales, sharp teeth, fire-spitting mouth and nose, and belly with spikes. For Christian, Leviathan becomes synonymous with the devil and is dubbed the "jealous", one of the seven sins.

In *Bay of Souls*, the word "indifference" has run through the whole novel and there is hardly description about the joys, happiness or laughter. On the other hand, Stone deliberately melts cold into the way people

treating the others, which are also used to answer for the “soul’s losing”. Kristin, Michael’s wife, “did not always trouble to enliven her voice when addressing strangers and people she disliked. She had a way of sounding very bleak indeed” (Stone, 2004). To the husband, “her voice was distant and, he thought, chill. It made him think of the woods. Or of the light shining at the bottom of the freezing stream” (Ibid.). When a man is in the face of family betrayal and cheating, he is often destined to play the role of being moral judged, because the male is viewed as the dominant side while the female is more inclined to be the innocent. Most men, however, are more reluctant to speak out their pain and pressure, but often bury it in the heart because of their social roles. During that time, men need more understanding and caring. But in the face of such cold marital status, no wonder Michael will use his love and marriage to take the risk. “Everything seemed lost, traded for something rich and bright, a deeper darkness, alien light, dangerously insubstantial” (Ibid.). Similarly, Michael’s colleague Norman is not any good, “He spread his arms and with a cold, false smile enacted a parody of *gemütlichkeit*” (Ibid.). Others such as the servant in the hotel, “his answer was in native Spanish. A cold greeting, something *para servirle*” (Ibid.). And Pilot speaks in the way of “some kind of grim complicity, taking no comfort and expecting none in return” (Ibid.). The whole world in Stone’s novel is cold, chilling and colorless, with no love or compassion between person and person. “A psalm for fools in the snow. Really expecting nothing but cold and death in the shadow of those wings” (Ibid.). Even the sequence of books put on the shelf also reveals: “A New York gang novel called *The Cool World*, these beside Winston Churchill’s *History of the English Speaking Peoples* and devotional pap like *The Glories of Mary*” (Ibid.). The putting together of the above two kind of books has shown the nature of the current social indifference indirectly. Stone sets his mind to find back the warmth and care of human, to shorten the distance between people. When the disease called indifference spreads, he tries his best to protect the most beautiful and most fragile soul through his novel.

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## CONCLUSION

Stone has always been stuck to the art guidelines of his own and developed his distinctive realistic style in fiction writing. As a neorealist fiction, *Bay of Souls*, fully demonstrating Stone’s style, is a unique novel in

contemporary American literature. Stone does well in depicting various things by using Animal and it makes his style distinguished from other novelists. In order to portray the characters, Stone displays their psychological activities and renders their emotions, which not only combines reality and fantasy cleverly, but also create a unique artistic charm. The distinctive style in his novels is one of the reasons why he has become an important contemporary American writer of neorealism. Stone has exhibited his concern about the current Americans by using the fish as he shows his deep love to the general public. With the increasing of wealth today, a large number of Americans gradually lose the target of living and abandon the road of self-reliance while choosing the road of depravity. To save these dazed and indifferent Americans, Stone resorts to the power of religion and hopes that the love and goodness long-buried in their minds could be reactivated.

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