

Viciousness: The Image of Snake in *Bay of Souls*

GAO Wenyu^{[a],*}; ZHANG Tianjiao^[b]

^[a]Jiangsu Vocational College of Business, Nantong, China.

^[b]School of Foreign Studies, Nantong University, Nantong, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The use of animal images is an important aspect of Stone's writing art in *Bay of Souls* because he takes it as a carrier to depict different kinds of people in contemporary American society. Stone has revealed his worry about Lara by using the image of snake. Although Lara is put in the negative position by Stone, Stone did not give up the hope on her. Lara, a poor fellow, suffers from the loss of soul and plays a role of Muppets. Lara does not know why she struggles or for whom she struggles. The seemingly glamorous identity can not cover the fact that she is still a humble person hijacked and taken advantage of.

Key words: Robert stone; *Bay of Souls*; Animal images; Metaphor; Reality

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INTRODUVTION

Robert Stone (1937-2015), whose literary works have profound meaning and faithfully reflect the historical background and the social culture, is an important representative of American neorealist fiction after World War II. Each of his works has its distinguishing feature yet all the works echo each other, therefore, he is considered by some critics to be one of the "America's most eloquent chronicler of the impending apocalypse" (Kaplan, 1998). But according to others, "Robert Stone is an even edgier

and more uncompromising writer" ("*Lighting Up the Dark*" B07, 2010). For half a century, he has never stopped writing and is unswervingly loyal to his style, regardless of the evaluation from the outside world. James Finn believes "Robert Stone is a highly ambitious author whose reach sometimes exceeds his grasp" (Finn, 1993). It is with this kind of perseverance and the keen insight of American society that Stone emerges slowly and is familiar to the public. In the end he remains the center of the circle of American neorealist writers.

The alienation of people tends to go to two extremes: one degenerates into the weak with the sense of homelessness, and the other evolves to the strong seemingly glamorous but cruel. In fact the heroine Lara in *Bay of Souls* is such the typical representative with the so-called power. The politics professor Lara has the identity of a complex background, which increases mystery and danger to her beauty. She is related to the political communities and military groups of the third world. In another word, she is a political spy. She is born in Trinity Island in the Caribbean Bay but educated in Europe. Due to the influence of the indigenous religion in Haiti, she believes that her soul is grasped in a witch's hands. In order to retrieve her soul, Lara invites Michael to go to Trinity with her to participate in the religious ceremonies for the commemoration of her brother. Every time the appearance of snake in *Bay of Souls* has brought a major push to the progress of the novel. The image of the snake in the story has shown two main features: "instigator" and "doombringer". The "instigator" plays the role of the media in the misery of Michael, while the "doombringer" directly leads to his inevitable tragedy. In this part, more attention will be paid to the analysis of the image of the snake in the novel, focusing on the interpretation of the snake and its characteristics. Combined with the analysis of prototype in western myth, the study has revealed the negative image of "snake" to display the tension of the story.

1. SNAKE AS INSTIGATOR

One typical example is comes from Lara herself. More accurately, it is the story about the Garden of Eden that is inextricably linked with snake and betrayal. In *Bay of Souls*, Lara is the replica of Eve and the witch Marinette is the copy of snake. “When she was a girl the island was a paradise without a snake park, if one was a certain kind of person” (Stone, 2004). Of course the island is coincident with the Garden of Eden in the Bible. Lara has lost her precious soul there because of the influence of the witchcraft, just as Eve eats the forbidden fruit and has been eventually expelled from the Garden of Eden. The two words “Snake” and “betrayal” will make readers automatically think of such western biblical allusions. “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden” (*Bible*, Gen. 3.1)? Of course, the result is that the ancestors of mankind have to suffer the ever greatest misfortune: being expelled from the Garden of Eden and tied with the evil that can not be washed away during their lifetime.

In the text Lara fell down during the dancing at the ceremony party. “After falling she had no idea of time; she had fallen into the darkness of the world’s first beginning where the only light came from the glowing snake” (Stone, 2004). Later “she saw Marinette in the snake-light” (Ibid). It is the snake that makes the female “fall into the darkness”, which has already happened in the *Bible*. When God asked Eve whether she had done anything wrong, the woman said “the serpent beguiled me, and I did eat” (*Bible*, Gen. 3.13). The serpent confuses Eve and Adam by its lies, and has Adam and Eve irretrievably commit the heinous crimes: betrayal. Needless to say, it is the culprit who has the human ancestors expelled from the Garden of Eden and undoubtedly all the misfortune comes from the lure of the snake. That is the reason why John Milton, the British bourgeois revolutionary poet in the 17th century, uses this material to create *Paradise Lost*, in which the serpent is the symbol of the Devil Satan.

Lara has a dream of American style to be superior and upper-scale. Dating from the British colonial period, American Dream has been a good faith in the United States: believing that through hard work and unremitting struggle, one will be able to have a better life in the USA. In the 19th century, the Americans became wealthy through their own hard work, courage, creativity and determination, rather than relied on a particular social class or the assistance of others. Usually American Dream is the symbol of economic success or an entrepreneurial spirit, which is also the reason why many European immigrants went to the United States with the American Dream. However, with the passing of time, more and more people today have criticized American Dream because it has too much emphasis on the material wealth which is

used to measure victory and happiness. The result is that the current Americans seem more utilitarian. The fact can never be denied that Commercialism and Mammonism have eroded the spiritual values and the cultural fabrics of a society have been degenerated. Everyone is unscrupulous in order to get success and does not hesitate to trample on the law or even betray the conscience. “Neither friends nor rivals are everlasting, but only profits”, the famous comment from Winston Churchill has also been carried forward to the extreme. In the classic literature of the 20th century, American dream is broken in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, in which the author reveals the spirit fallen because of the money, status and pleasure, as well as the distortions and disillusionment of the American Dream’s nature.

From the overview of *Bay of Souls*, Stone also actually holds a negative attitude on the so-called success of Lara, even if “it announced that Marie-Claire Purcell had been appointed the island republic of St.Trinity’s ambassador to France. There was a small picture of Lara” (Stone, 2004). Seizing the crown by virtue of dishonesty and crooked means can not be taken as a model, let alone be the foundation of either personal or national survival. Once upon a time, the young Lara is also a simple and pure girl. But after nurtured in such a large vat for several years, Lara has expertise in various kinds of betrayal now. “Identity or selfhood is not something natural, essential, or innate, but rather is something that is socially constructed” (Klages, 2009). The game of pornography, smuggling and prying for information will be continued by Lara and be kept all roll well.

First of all, Lara and her ex-husband, the French leftist intellectual with the naturalization of Cuba, were once the trivial assistants of the Socialist Group. However, both go toward the opposing camp later and serve for the interests of the United States and the West, which are Lara’s betrayal to her own country. Secondly, while working in the intelligence agencies, she is engaged in some secret deal. Lara and the local villain named Roger Hyde want to have three boxes of “goods” carried away before the U.S. military force marches into the island and stations there. Unfortunately, the aircraft with the goods crashes on the reef on the coast. Taking advantage of her work, she does the drug smuggling in order to line her own pocket, which is Lara’s betrayal to her own career. Finally, Michael dives to the bottom of the sea for the salvage of the “goods”, like the tool used by Lara. Lara also likes to dive but when it reaches a critical juncture, she excuses that she just used to enjoy the coral at the sea bottom while leaving Michael alone in the water with little camaraderie. Before Michael went to the country, he has heard about the news that the island is in the civil strife. It is self-evident that choosing this time to rush there is ill-advised. However, he does not mention this to Lara, waiting for her dissuasion. To his disappointment, Lara has remained silent and kept mum about it. She must have had another purpose when

she asks Michael to attend the memorial ceremony of voodoo, which is Lara's betrayal to her lover. Lara once tells Michael that her inner life and soul have been lost. From the details of her soul's losing, we can come to the conclusion that all her betrayals originate from her self-betrayal, the initial one. In the end of the novel, Lara is full of vanity and illusion: "She rode on in the direction she had been heading. He could not imagine what could lie that way for her" (Stone, 2004).

Apart from Lara's betrayal, the novel abounds with different betrayals. Michael's betrayal to his family has ended up with his wife's and child's leaving. The Chief Executive on the island, Colonel Junot's betrayal to McKie is also an example. In his opinion, it is not terrible to offend one of his reporters, because his newly-found girlfriend is more powerful energy. "I mean, not with paper, not the State Department, but my ass is flung out. I mean, my friend—my friend, my lover" (Ibid). Perhaps the unfortunate reporter should have already known the real purpose of her lover. Stone wants to tell the readers by her swear that ruthless betrayal is precisely one of the manifestations of alienation of the present Americans.

Stone, however, chooses female as the negative image, not because of his attitude of machismo nor discrimination against women, but rather due to his personal experiences and many vicissitudes in the early years. "According to Stone, narrative is useful in life. It permits us to have experiences free of charge" (Lawrence, 1996). It is undeniable that Robert Stone is indeed an ill-fated American writer in the neorealist fiction circle. His neorealist writing style seems negative and bitter, which is inextricably linked to his early traumatic experiences. His father ran away from home when Robert Stone was young, but misfortunes never came singly because his mother was diagnosed with intermittent schizophrenia and lost her job as a primary school teacher. Both the mother and the son lived on the welfare, laboring on the edge of subsistence, so that Stone had to spend his childhood in the orphanage due to his family financial difficulties.

The early years of the suffocating life have left Stone an incomplete home and a bruised heart, which makes it difficult for him to get out of the shadow in the later decades. In Stone's works, especially in his later works, he is adept at representing the conflicts between individuals and the declining contemporary western society. Stone's childhood experiences have influenced his literary creation significantly, so that he is interested in the characters of being not-belonging, insane, irresponsible and hypocritical. The manic performance of Stone's mother when she suffered the psychotic episode had left young Stone the only impression of fear. This kind of fear is reflected in the image-building of female protagonists in many of his works. One example is Lara in *Bay of Souls*. In the novel Michael has not only showed his wishful love but also a trace of elusive fear which is hidden in the

heart, so implicit that it is difficult to be obscured. Its very nature is nothing more than the emotions experienced by Stone in his childhood when the love is intertwined with the fear. In order to reflect this feeling, Stone has selected "snake" as the representative image to be associated with females. Readers can not totally put an equal sign between females and the evil side. In fact, "often the women in Stone novels seem wounded, desiring something only drugs or alcohol can satiate" (Frederickson, 1996).

2. SNAKE AS DOOMBRINGER

The first time the snake appears in *Bay of Souls* is on the body of a bar waitress named Megan. When Michael is buying alcohol, he has a close inspection of her and is attracted by her mysterious atmosphere. "He also saw that where her hair was swept to the side at the back of her collar, what appears to be the forked tongue of a tattooed snake rose either side of the bone at the nape of her neck. A serpent, ascending her spine" (Stone, 2004). Stone hints that Megan who is shuttling between men has such the temptation as the snake. But to the men, it is very difficult to keep themselves sober from succumbing to this temptation. Since Michael easily loses himself in front of a strange bar waitress, what will the reaction be when he faces the glamorous Lara? The answer can be got naturally that Stone has already paved the way for Michael's falling.

Snake does not appear very frequently in the Greek mythology but almost every time it appears, a female will follow, which is a very interesting phenomenon. The history of snake seems to begin with the story about Perseus. The hero Perseus was determined to run the risk of cutting down the ugly head of the banshee called Medusa and handed it over to the king. Medusa was the daughter of Phorcys and Athena "deprived her of her charms and changed her beautiful curls into hissing snakes" (Barney, 2008). Perseus carefully cut off the head of the Banshee. When he passed the Libyan Desert, a little bit of blood dripped from the head of Medusa and fell to the ground, changing into various kinds of colored snakes. From then on, all the places of the world have been under the danger of snakes. This legend about the snake fully embodies the simple philosophy of the ancient Greeks and it has also showed the awareness and understanding of the snake by the ancient Greeks. The snake is doomed to be evil. The legend that the snake changes from a woman's blood is the concrete manifestation of the value orientation of the ancient Greeks and the "feminization of snake" or "the comparison between a woman and a snake" keeps appearing in Greek mythology.

Generally speaking, snake is a kind of reptile with no foot and its appearance has caused the sense of abomination. It is the symbol of sinister and cruelty, manifestation of terror and ugliness, representative of

evil and incarnation of hostile forces. Moreover, the tip of its tongue is forked, greatly different from the orthodox creature. The two tongues symbolize being gossipy and good at gabbing. It has been a long history since the snake was linked with the forces of evil. People around the world are almost full of fear of snakes until the very day. In the Egyptian mythology, evil enemies in the ancient time will be pronounced as “snake”. In the Greek myth, Heracles met Hera’s persecution after birth. She sent two serpents to eat the baby in the cradle. But Heracles was so strong and powerful that he strangled the snakes with his hands, which really astonished the adults.

From the beginning of human’s history, snake is always the totem of the many landlocked nations. At the same time, females are the dominant force in the development of the matriarchal society. Thus the combination of the two is regarded as the ancestors and has been paid homage to for a long period. This is the reason why in mythology, a lot of Goddesses have their bodies covered with the image of a snake. However, when it comes to the man-centered society later, women are often considered to be the source of the scourge, therefore the comment that “a woman is a serpent” appears. Since the snake is the cold-blooded animal and is not equipped with vocal cords of making sound, it has left people a deep impression of evil. The women with beautiful appearance but internal insidiousness and viciousness are known as the “beauty snakes”.

To Stone, however, women who have lasting bonds with a snake will not have a good end eventually. “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him” (*Bible*, Ecc. 10.8). Ultimately, the serpent “ascending her spine” controls people’s thinking and devours human’s souls. Such description appears at the end of the novel: Michael “was looking for Megan, that barmaid. He asked the old man behind the bar about her. ‘She been sick.’ the old man said” (Stone, 2004). With a handful words, Stone points out the truth that anyone under the control of the evil will be destroyed by the evil. Just as the description in the Bible: “and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him” (*Bible*, Rev. 12.9). In the end, snake—the symbol of the evil is bound to destroyed, as the barmaid gets a drug OD in the city and is stricken by Encephalitis. “And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years” (*Bible*, Rev. 20.2). At the end of the novel, Lara seems to have recovered her soul. Actually she is still caged in the dark world that has imprisoned her for many years. From the tragic depictions of two “female snakes”, the idea that Stone wants to convey emerges gradually, as the Bible says, “but I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (*Bible*, 2Co. 11.3).

All the words related to the snake in *Bay of Souls* have created an eerie imagery. On the airplane for drug smuggling, the pilot saw that “out over the ocean, the first devil came with a change in the color of darkness” (Stone, 2004). With a closer look, “a towering black cloud rose above the island, snake-shaped” (Ibid). Because of the bad luck brought by the snake, “when the engine began to cough, his instrument lights flickered. When they settled down, he saw the manifold gauge flat and dark” (Ibid). The pilot can not help but to worry about the bad situation, he speaks both to the plane and to himself: “beautiful machine, what troubles thee? The devil” (Ibid). But with the efforts to control the aircraft, the pilot “felt the machine dying in his arms” (Ibid). In the end, “then silence, and out of the silence fall the crash” (Ibid). Confronting the snake rising from the sea, the pilot can not control anything or himself. When trapped in a high altitude, he feels “he was another random object, aloft and stripped of power, afloat in silence as in the old dream of flying. The bad one” (Ibid). To be frank, there is nothing on the calm sea that has any effect on flight, but the plane accidentally loses control and crashes. Only fatalism can explain—the curse of the snake is the message of death. As the Bible says: “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward” (*Bible*, Gen. 49.17). Eventually the body and soul of the pilot are imprisoned quietly in the seabed forever.

In the novel, the descriptions of the snake column in the Temple also show the malice of the snake. “At its centre, running from the earth floor to the thatched roof, was a wind-twisted snakelike pole called the *poto mitan*, representing the serpent of wisdom, *Dambala*, whose sinuous form connected earth and heaven” (Stone, 2004). Joseph Campbell, the famous scientist of American mythology has done a lot of researches, showing that some people have the tradition to worship snake with the feelings of fear from ancient time. In the last few decades, the study of Ancient Near Eastern shows that in the cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria or Palestinian areas, the image of snake is connected to the gods, demons, spells and incantations. Among them, some spells are especially used in preventing the snake bites or healing the wound. Since the ancient times, the legend of snake has been circulating among the civil. According to the legends, snake is to convey the symbol of death so that the characteristics of snake is the same as the devil’s. People’s worship of the serpent god stems from fear of the powerful devil, demonstrating the surrender of the state in order to achieve its asylum. However, “ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell” (*Bible*, Mat. 23.33)?

Stone is firmly convinced that the road from the cult eventually leads to complete collapse and he also implies the relationship among people in the real world: If someone is a liar and is used to alienating others, or

misleading and confusing others, this person will be likened to a snake. If the snake does appear in the shape of human, it certainly can be ingenious to stimulate people's greedy desire which leads them to the crimes. In this way, ordinary people will be tempted to listen to a lie and take it as the truth. The one choosing to take the right road will get the glory in the future while those who do not will fall definitely. One who has seemingly chosen the wide door but stepped into the contrary direction will be led astray. Like the warning from the Bible: "they hatch cockatrice's eggs, and weave the spider's web: He that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper" (*Bible*, Isa. 59.5). Choosing the wrong route, one will ultimately fall into the hell of burning flames. "Fires burned before the ascending serpent" (Stone, 2004). All the believers of the heresy have the "four fires burned around the *poto mitan*, which enclosed the celestial serpent, Dambala" (Ibid). And the evil sorcerer Baron Samedi is ready to display his dark forces, "out of the darkness, around the *poto mitan* where the spirit of Dambala held power" (Ibid). As everyone sees, the loss of the soul has made them generally lose the control of themselves. Therefore, what people need to do is to regain the hope and get rid of the confusion by the snake. Recorded in John 15, Jesus Christ is the "true vine", and his disciples are "branches". However, non-truths are the "venom" in Deuteronomy Chapter 32, which is spread by Satan. It is snake's job to drive a wedge between people, lead to their separation, and spread the lies that distort the facts as well.

CONCLUSION

The animals in *Bay of Souls* can not be defined as the living beings in nature, nor can they be simply evaluated by the common sense of human. In fact Stone has given religious interpretations to those animal images so that deer, snake and fish have their own unique significance and because the characteristics of these animals are based on the Bible and western mythology. It has become a common belief to people that deer is the synonym of beauty, while the prototype of deer is the symbol of

weak victim. Snake gives readers a sense of fear and this feeling derives from the fact that people are afraid of being bitten. The analysis of snake can make people comprehend that the real cause of fear is the rootlessness when they are expelled from the fairyland because of the betrayal. Fish appears to swim freely in the water. However, the prototype of fish is just an empty shell, with neither mind nor soul. Stone has used the generic images with special features to reflect the real life and the inner world of human beings. The religious teaching, historical significance, value judgment and national feelings are included in the fiction as well. The significance of the images in the novel *Bay of Souls* lies in the reinterpretation of them. Being acquainted with the culture, customs and stories in the Bible and western mythology, fitting the sight of the interpreter and the sight of the protagonists in the text together, I have gained a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the religious implications in the Bible and western mythology.

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