

Spiritual Dilemma and Ecological Regression: An Analysis of Jake's Spiritual Vacuum

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Hemingway's masterpiece *The Sun Also Rises* depicts some American expatriates living in Europe after the First World War. In despair, the dissolute group of American men and women hanker after excitement by feasting and flirting their days away. Jake, the protagonist of this novel, also leads a riotous life every day. With spiritual ecology theory, this paper is to interpret Jake Barnes' spiritual vacuum and explore Jake's efforts to reconstruct his spiritual balance and harmony. This thesis consists of two parts. Part one reveals Jake's spiritual vacuum including loss of self-confidence, traditional values, and decadence in life. Facing emptiness, Jake tries to drink excessively to numb himself. The second part explores his ecological regression by fulfilling the harmony between himself and nature, himself and his inner heart.

Keywords: *The Sun Also Rises*, spiritual vacuum, ecological regression, Jake

Based on the historical period from 1924 to 1925, *The Sun Also Rises* centers on the life of the Lost Generation, the group of American youth haunted by a sense of betrayal and emptiness brought about by the destructiveness of the war. Full of youthful idealism, these individuals seek the meaning of life, drink excessively, and have love affairs.

Lu Shuyuan, in *Ecological Literature and Art*, summarizes the mental symptoms of modern people into five aspects including spiritual vacuum, incompetence of behavior, alienation of existence, homogenization of life, and materialization of mind based on studies by some western scholars (Lu, 2000, pp. 152-158). As the representative of Lost Generation, Jake in *The Sun Also Rises* drifts from Paris to a bullfight in Spain. What he experiences illustrates his spiritual vacuum and manifests how he struggles to fill his vacuum.

1. Embodiment of Jake's Spiritual Vacuum

1.1 Loss of Self-Confidence

Lu Shuyuan points out that "people in modern society lose self-confidence and the traditional value of culture. People's lives lose their meaning, and life is generally boring and desperate" (Lu, 2000, p. 152). Thus, there are three salient points about the spiritual vacuum. The first is that people lose confidence. Secondly, the loss of traditional values is manifested in the spiritual vacuum. The final point is the emptiness and decadence of life.

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The spiritual vacuum is reflected in the main character, Jake. Jake loses his self-confidence. He becomes impotent due to the war, even though Hemingway doesn't narrate it directly because of the Iceberg Principle. It is reflected in some details. When Jake meets Georgette and flirts with her, this whore touches him with one hand, but Jake puts her hand away. When she asks if he is sick, Jake nodded. "I got hurt in the war." (Hemingway, 1996, p. 22). From the dialogues and behaviors, Jake's illness is manifested clearly. Besides, when Jake and Brett kiss each other, Brett asks Jake not to touch her. When she says, "isn't there anything we can do about it?" Jake replies, "there's not a damn thing we could do" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 31). Due to the corporal injury, he loses his confidence. At night, he often cries in secret. "I lay awake thinking and my mind jumping around. Then I couldn't keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. All of a sudden I started to cry" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 35). When Jake persuades Brett to live with him several times, he is refused. And this further destroys his confidence. Thus, instead of pursuing Brett with courage, Jake becomes a friend of those men who have a relationship with Brett. When Brett dates Mike, Jake gets along well with him. When Brett plans to leave with Romero and asks Jake to help her, he agrees without a word of objection. When Brett leaves Romero and stays at a hotel alone, Jake comes to help her without complaints. "Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sigh the wire with love" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 216).

As one embodiment of a spiritual vacuum, Jake's loss of confidence is highlighted in the novel. Mainly due to his sexual impotence, Jake has no nerve to profess his feelings for Brett. While getting along with Brett and her dates, Jake gets less confident and always sobs alone at night.

1.2 Loss of Traditional Values

The second focus of the spiritual vacuum is the loss of traditional values. The loss of traditional values is manifested in two aspects, including the failure of the American dream and the breakdown of morality. The American dream is an essential part of American traditional values for Americans. It is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success as well as upward social mobility for the family and children achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. The American Dream is rooted in the *Declaration of Independence*, which proclaims that all men were created with the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Therefore, Jake took part in the first world war with the ideal. However, what he saw and suffered was quite different from what he thought. During the war, he witnesses killing, death, and cruelty. War brings him physical and spiritual trauma instead of honor and reputation. Thus, his American dream is disillusioned and such disillusionment is reflected in his attitude toward war. When Georgette talks about war with Jake, they "agreed that it was, in reality, a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 22). In chapter ten, when Cohn advises to bet on something else or bet on bull-fights, Jake says "it would be like betting on the war and you don't need any economic interest" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 94).

In addition to the failure of the American dream, Jake's loss of traditional values can be explored in his breakdown of morality, that is, his hypocrisy towards his friends. Jake meets Georgette and doesn't want to make friends with her sincerely. On the contrary, he treats her with contempt. He just picks her up because he

holds the idea that it will be nice to eat with someone. It has been a long time since he has dined with a poule and he can't remember "how dull it could be" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 22). However, when Jake's friends call him and ask him to bring Georgette, Jake introduces Georgette as his fiancée. Then they decide to go to a dancing club. At that club, Jake leaves with Brett without caring for Georgette. Besides, Jake's attitude toward Cohn is an obvious illustration of his loss of morality. Jake mocks Cohn for he has been reading W. H. Hudson and *The Purple Land* and he deems "that sounds like an innocent occupation" and "for a man to take it at thirty-four as a guide-book to what life holds is about as safe as it would be for a man of the same age to enter Wall Street direct from a French convent, equipped with a complete set of the more practical Alger books" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 16). After knowing the relationship between Brett and Cohn, Jake is unforgivingly jealous of him as he has stated "I certainly did hate him. I do not think I ever really hated him until he had that little spell of superiority at lunch—that and when he went through all that barbering" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 95). Later, when Cohn decided to go to San Sebastian to wait for Brett, Jake cursed him as the lying bastard. At the end of the novel, when Cohn is defeated by Romero and decides to go back to Paris, Jake mutters, "true love would conquer all" with a trace of sarcasm (Hemingway, 1996, p. 180).

1.3 Drink Excessively to Fill the Vacuum

Victor E Frankl (1963) points out that things will flow to fill the vacuum if the vacuum appears. People maybe try to enrich life with pleasure or sexual intercourse or seek power. It may also be filled with anger and hatred, which could lead people to spend a lot of time trying to destroy what they think hurts them. There are various ways to fill the spiritual vacuum to free the self from the emptiness of life, including drug abuse and violent crime. In *The Sun Also Rises*, they drink to excess to numb themselves.

In terms of bibulosity, from chapter two to chapter nineteen, different kinds of wine or alcohol have been mentioned in each chapter. The main characters indulge in excessive drinking to various degrees, and every character in it has drunk alcohol.

Jake is a typical tippler in it. When getting along with others, he almost treats everyone with different kinds of alcoholic beverages. When Jake first meets Georgette in chapter three, he treats her with Pernod. After drinking Pernod, they go to another place and have another bottle of wine. Later, they go to a dancing club with their friends, "he walked down the street and had a beer at the bar at the next Bal. The beer was not good and I had a worse cognac to take the taste out of my mouth" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 25). In the dancing club, Mrs. Braddocks brings up a stranger and introduces him as Robert Prentiss, Jake then asks him to have a drink and makes him have another. After having drunk a lot, he "was a little drunk. Not drunk in any positive sense but just enough to be careless" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 26). In chapter four, when Brett is quite drunk and comes to his apartment, Jake gets her brandy and soda.

During his working hours, he asks Robert to have a drink. They go downstairs to the bar and have whisky and soda. Both of them think a bar is a good place because there is a lot of liquor.

During his leisure time, he also has a drink. When Jake waits for Brett in the Hotel Crillon and she doesn't turn up, Jake goes down to the bar and has a Jack Rose with the barman. When Jake and Bill go to Burguete, Jake goes back to the hotel to get a couple of bottles of wine to take with them. When they go fishing, he also takes bottles of wine. He thought "a bottle of wine was good company" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 210).

Facing the decadence and emptiness of life, Jake chooses to numb himself by drinking. Being a salient feature of the spiritual vacuum, hard drinking, however, intensifies the sterility of his existence.

2 Regression of Jake's Spiritual Ecology

While if one wants to get balanced in spiritual ecology, "he needs to fulfill harmony between himself and social circumstances as well as between himself and cultural circumstances" (Lu, 2000, p. 148) Thus, the regression of spiritual ecology can be achieved through the way that man and nature, man and man, and man and society.

2.1 Harmony between Jake and Nature

The twentieth century begins with a global breakdown. Numerous wars and fights take place in the whole world and have a bearing on American youth. Millions of soldiers die everywhere. Although Jake survives after the First World War, his mental and physical health are destroyed. In physical health, he becomes sexually impotent due to the war. In mental health, he lost self-confidence and American Dream and often cries in secret at night. In life, he is a journalist who has no relatives around him. In the conversation between Bill and Jake, Bill says to him, "You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 109).

The story takes place mainly in Paris and Spain. The tone of the Paris scene is somber. The characters of the novel do nothing all day and indulge in eating, drinking, and playing. In Spain, Hemingway spares no effort to describe nature and the actions of the characters embracing nature. Jack and Bill have a peaceful, beautiful fishing trip. Here, at last, they can take a break from the frustration that runs through the book. The aimless, cynical decadence seemed to have vanished. Here, they drink, but not as heavily as they do in Paris. They just fish, swim, relax, and enjoy nature. "The sunlight came through the leaves in light patches on the grass. The trees were big and the foliage was thick, but it was not gloomy. There was no undergrowth, only the smooth grass, very green and fresh" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 110). The author uses many adjectives to describe the beauty of nature, showing Jake's love for nature. As Bao Jiaren comments, "for Brett and Mike, wherever there are hotels and cafes, it is the same everywhere. Cohn, for his part, yearns for South Africa and ignored reality; In Jack's eyes, nature is the remedy for his suffering" (2002, p. 74). In the countryside where the scenery is beautiful and the air is fresh, he is surrounded by the beauty of the natural environment, which brought him a sense of order, vitality, and purity. Being close to nature helps to eliminate his despair and enrich his spiritual world.

2.2 Harmony between Jake and His Inner World

Jake gradually emerges from the spiritual dilemma by establishing a harmonious relationship with his inner world in Spain. The establishment of a harmonious relationship with his inner world has gone through two stages. The first stage is at Burguete, and the second stage is at Pamplona. In fishing, Jake and Bill treat each other like brothers without hypocrisy and satire. They respect each other with sincerity. From then on, Jake begins to make peace with himself, as he stated, "we stayed five days and had good fishing" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 117).

The second stage is about the bullfight at Pamplona. Jake admires bullfighters and bullfighting and goes to see it every year. He believes "nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bullfighters" (Hemingway,

1996, p. 17) And he likes reading the newspaper about bullfights. He has two bullfight papers and he plans to "read it all the way through, including the Petite Correspondence and the Cornigrams" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 35). In the eyes of Jake, bullfighting becomes a "microcosm of the good world" with "sensible rules, bravery, and a higher purpose" with a paradigmatic hero (Wagner-Martin, 1987, p. 9). And the matador symbolizes the courage and nobility of old-world values through a "controlled yet violent administering of death" (Baker, 1972, p. 245). In Pamplona, he further gains confidence and strength as he deems "under the wine I lost the disgusted feeling and was happy. It seemed they were all such nice people" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 135).

It is in Spain that he gained comfort from the books. In Paris, there is little mention of his reading, and in Spain, there are numerous depictions of Jake's reading. In chapter twelve, he reads a wonderful story while waiting for Bill. In chapter fourteen, he mentions that he is reading a book by Turgeneff. At that time, he is very drunk but he thinks "If I kept on reading that feeling would pass" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 136). In Lu Shuyuan's view, the use of art for the treatment of diseases has almost become a fashion and art can indeed play a healthy role in people's bodies and minds, especially in the treatment of mental illness. In essence, art is not just a way of life and attitude of life but is the spirit that life depends on (Lu, 2000, p. 364). For Jake, reading is a process of self-consolation, self-help, and self-realization.

In Spain, Jake no longer indulges in pessimism and despair. Fishing makes him forget his impotence, bullfighting makes him once again close to death and understand death, and reading makes him gain strength. In Spain, he struggles to rebuild his spiritual pillar.

Through fulfilling the harmony between Jake and nature, Jake and his inner heart, he gets balanced in spirit, which is also reflected in the ending. For one thing, when the fiesta is finished, Jake decides to go to San Sebastian alone because it will be quiet there and he can read and swim at his will. For another, at the end of the novel, when Brett says, "we could have had such a damned good time together", "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (Hemingway, 1996, p. 222). Jake just replies lightly in a totally different state of mind from when the novel starts.

Conclusion

Spiritual ecology theory is applied to probe into the spiritual imbalance of Jake, the protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises*. As for spiritual ecology imbalance, there are five symptoms including spiritual vacuum, incompetence of behavior, alienation of existence, homogenization of life, and materialization of mind which are summarized by Lu Shuyuan.

Jake's spiritual vacuum is the focus which is reflected in his loss of self-confidence and traditional values. Then the emptiness and decadence of his life are depicted and he drinks to excess to numb himself, which becomes a negative way to fill his spiritual vacuum.

However, how to reconstruct spiritual balance and harmony? In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake tries to establish a harmonious relationship with nature and his inner heart by returning to nature and art like fishing and reading.

The characters have been regarded as the typical "Lost Generation" who indulge in excessive drinking without aim from previous research. Through Jake's spiritual regression, however, it can be seen that Jake not only represents the Lost Generation but shows a constant pursuit of truth and spiritual pillars which give him hope. Hemingway infuses his own experience into his protagonist, Jake Barnes. Using the theory of spiritual

ecology, this paper can be regarded as one way to interpret the mental development of both Hemingway and the protagonist. Besides, in this age of materialism, spiritual ecology matters a lot to human beings. The harmony between the spiritual ecological environment and the inner world of mankind comes a long way in men's mental health.

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