

# The Contradiction between “Soul” and “Body” in André Gide’s *Pastoral Symphony*\*

XU Chang

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China; Sorbonne University, Paris, France

André Gide is one of the most important writers in the history of French literature in the 20th century. His works are highly distinctive: on the one hand, there is strong coherence and beautiful language between his works, which gives them a strong musicality. On the other hand, his works delve deeper into the struggle between the “soul” and the “body” under the oppression of “religious concepts”, which is most evident in one of his representative works: *Pastoral Symphony*. This article will analyze and explore the contradiction between “soul” and “body” reflected in the work of “Pastoral Symphony” from three aspects: “modernity”, “aesthetics”, and “characters’ prototypes”.

*Keywords:* André Gide, *Pastoral Symphony*, “soul”, “body”, contradiction

## Gide’s Modernity

In the literary world of France and even the world, a large number of scholars have discussed and defined the modernity in literature, but most scholars are unable to conduct a complete appraisal of the “modern literature”. But currently, there have been some unified assertions in the academic community. The so-called “modernity” refers to questioning the traditional spirit, manifested as a trend that goes against the mainstream of the times. It is a quality that is “rooted in the soil of the spirit of the times and transcends it with rebellion and questioning” (ZHU & JING, 2005, p. 310). In the field of literature, confrontation and rebellion against the times are often one of the symbols for identifying the modernity of works. Generally speaking, a writer with a modernist mindset often uses this as the core of their work to showcase their distinct personality and style.

In contrast, Gide’s modernity is not simply a counter mainstream, but rather a new expression of the current living conditions of people and their initial significance in the long river of history (ZHU & JING, 2005, p. 310). The modernity presented in Gide’s works coincides with the view of another 19th century French poet who had his own unique views on the issue of “literary modernity”: Charles Baudelaire: “The key is to extract the poetic meaning that may be contained in history from form and eternity from temporality” (Gide, 2002, p. 468). Each of Gide’s works strives to embody both the poetic essence of reality and the fleeting eternity. He can always keenly detect strange concertos beyond the symphony of his heart and era, and then present them in a new aesthetic form to the audience. Gide once said, “There is nothing that surprises me more than the anxiety of modernity. People feel that this anxiety overwhelms all of Cocteau’s thoughts and decision-making power... The only important

---

\* **Acknowledgements:** This essay is supported by the China Scholarship Council Program (ID: 202408440417).

XU Chang, majored in French language and literature, Ph.D. candidate, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies; joint training doctoral student of the Sorbonne University.

thing for me is that modernity cannot be eliminated with a universality. I do not seek the era that exists in my time, the era that I want to achieve beyond myself” (Gide, 2002, p. 468). On the one hand, Gide recognizes the modernity of literature, and on the other hand, he is not limited to the general sense of modernity. What he hopes to do is to present readers with a different literary modernity in his eyes through his works.

### **Gide’s Aesthetic Principles**

Gide embodies the “Narcissus complex” in his works, which is also an important entry point for us to explore his aesthetic views. Narcissus has a handsome appearance and he is therefore welcomed by many goddesses. But Narcissus himself had a high heart and was not moved by the admiration of many goddesses. Until one day, he came to the river and discovered his reflection in the water. Narcissus fell in love with his reflection at first sight, and from then on, he came to the river every day to gaze at his reflection in the water. He was infatuated with his own reflection, unable to extricate himself and ultimately died by the river. The goddess of love, Aphrodite, felt deep sympathy for Narcissus, so she transformed him into a narcissus growing by the river, fulfilling Narcissus’ wish to always look down at his reflection in the water.

We know that Gide himself has a deep “Narcissus” complex, which is closely related to his childhood experiences. Gide’s father was relatively open-minded, giving him opportunities for natural and free physical and mental development, while his mother was a relatively traditional and conservative person. She adheres to traditional ethics and customs, and always defends morality and norms. Faced with parents with completely opposite personality traits, the seeds of conflict have taken root and sprouted in Gide’s heart since childhood. If his father gave him the motivation and desired to release his nature, then his mother became one of the reasons why he adhered to moral standards. After reaching adulthood, Gide married his cousin Madeleine. This woman replaced his mother’s position in Gide’s heart and to some extent, continued to put him in a dilemma between adhering to morality and unleashing nature. Spanish philosopher Unamuno once said: “Life is a contradiction” (Unamuno, 1987, p. 14). The contradiction of life or existence stimulates contradictory emotions, and the release of emotions is not only a natural instinct for writers, but also a compensation for the soul. Freud once said, “All literary works, like dreams, are the makeup of desire. They are a form of compensation” (Zhu, 1987, p. 192). Gide seeks a way out of contradictions and liberation for himself. This rebellious existence prompts him to question tradition, but he cannot profane morality. He can only transform this impulsion of “body” and pain into the release and liberation of the “spirit”.

### **Prototype Characters in *Pastoral Symphony***

According to Gide, *Pastoral Symphony* is a “critique of a form of self-deception”. From Gide’s life, it can be seen that at the time of writing this work, he was experiencing a serious emotional crisis with his wife, Madeleine. The trigger of the crisis was his own forbidden love with young Mark. On the one hand, Gide was nurtured by his mother from a young age and adhered to traditional moral norms; On the other hand, his true emotions and expressions yearn to break through layers of constraints and release them. At this moment, he is in a contradiction between the “soul” and the “body”. Faced with the traditional dignity, Gide’s silent accusations and his rebellious behavior became his weakest struggle.

Below is an analysis and interpretation of the main characters appearing in the work.

### **The Blind Girl**

The interpretation of the blind girl in the work can be carried out from the following two aspects: firstly, although she is only an adopted daughter, she still has an inappropriate relationship with her adopted father, which is not tolerated by the secular world from a moral perspective. The secular world has put on a pair of “moral” and “ethical” shackles between heterosexuals. At the same time, as a gay author, it is not even possible for Gide to like someone who is different from their own gender as ordinary people do. In the eyes of most people, homosexuality violates the laws of nature, so Gide’s homosexual identity has also greatly suppressed his inner self, which directly leads to the tragedy and fruitlessness of his relationship with his lover, Mark. Secondly, due to eye diseases, the blind girl is unable to see their loved ones, so her feelings towards her adoptive father also symbolize a kind of unremarkable and uncivilized love. The feelings between the blind girl and “priest” in a state of blindness are therefore not bound by traditional moral norms and secular restrictions. Even if this harm violates morality and unintentionally harms others, this love still exists. Finally, at the moment when the blind girl regains her sight, it means that her love has returned to the secular world, thus losing the protection of her previous state of blindness. She will face directly the criticism and judgement from secular and secular morality. This actually implies Gide’s love with Mark in real life and the situation with which the author himself needs to be faced.

### **The Priest**

Generally speaking, as members of churches and churches, priests bear the responsibility of promoting secular ethics on the one hand, and on the other hand, they must set an example to uphold the dignity and authority of traditional ethics. However, in Gide’s *Pastoral Symphony* it is such a seemingly traditional and orthodox person who has done something that is not accepted by secular ethics, which is to fall in love with his adopted daughter. His behavior clearly violates religious doctrines. Obviously, the author’s portrayal of the role of “priest” in the novel has a ulterior motive: as a “messenger of God”, the priest, who stands between “God” and “Man”, wanders and struggles between emotions and doctrine. In order to satisfy his desires in his heart, he constantly seeks secular excuses for his forbidden love for the blind girl. The priest even felt that his emotions were unbearable for the church and the secular world, but he still chose to persist in these emotions and not be moved by the pressure of the secular world. His choice also burdened this emotion with heavy shackles from beginning to end. This setting in this novel once again reminds readers of the relationship between Gide and his lover, Mark, in reality. On the one hand, Gide was afraid of traditional moral and secular perspectives, so he desperately wanted to justify himself and longed to gain recognition and respect from traditional ethics through his marriage to his cousin Madeleine; On the other hand, he doesn’t want to do anything that goes against his true feelings, so he chooses to continue liking Mark and tries to maintain this relationship. Gide’s actions in reality precisely correspond to the priest’s approach in the novel. The two men have achieved a perfect unity to a certain extent. The contradiction between “soul” and “body” is intertwined between the author and the priest, and the moral torture and the true emotions within struggle with each other, constantly tearing apart the author’s heart.

### **The Eldest Son**

Gide perfectly spreads his true image across various characters in the novel, and the character “eldest son” is no exception. In the novel, the eldest son always goes his own way, constantly challenging his father’s authority until the final conversion, and his rebellious personality is also displayed to the extreme. This also coincides with

the author’s rebellious personality traits in real life. In the novel, as father and son, the “pastor” and “eldest son” both fall in love with a blind girl. This feeling seems to come from instinct. Both father and son know that falling in love with a “blind girl” will mean immorality and violate mainstream social values, but the two still choose to maintain this relationship, rather than regulating their own thoughts and clearing this abnormal idea in a timely manner. From this perspective, the contradiction between their “soul” and “body”, as well as the “rebelliousness” that emerges from their hearts, are so inherent that society cannot reverse or assimilate them. However, the “eldest son” did not choose to become a “hypocrite” and use a series of lies to justify this “forbidden love”. On the contrary, he chose to face up to this relationship, which ultimately made the “blind girl” accept his admiration and affection. Even if in the end, the “blind girl” passed away, their emotions reached a harmony and achieve eternity. Although their relationship still ended in tragedy, the “eldest son” resolved the contradiction between “soul” and “body”.

The plot arrangement of the father and son falling in love with the “blind girl” at the same time also reflects to some extent the author in real life. Despite being of the same gender, Gide fell in love with Mark without hesitation. This emotion is more rebellious compared to the father son’s feelings towards the “blind girl” in the novel, and to some extent, it goes against the mainstream of society and moral values, reflecting a deeper contradiction between the “soul” and the “body”.

### **The Wife**

The wife is also an essential character in the novel. The priest’s efforts to find excuses are not only to justify his forbidden love for the “blind girl”, but also to gain the trust of his wife and achieve the goal of self-deception. While striving to highlight the unethical relationship between the “priest”, “eldest son”, and “blind girl”, Gide wanted to find a landmark that could represent traditional values and ethical morality, and the character “wife” became the author’s choice. While reading the works, we will find that the “wife” in the novel happens to correspond to Gide’s real-life wife: Madeleine. The “wife” in the novel and Madeleine in reality are both symbols of morality. The existence of both invisibly suppresses the true desires and nature of the protagonist and the author themselves in the novel. From his wife Madeleine, Gide received more spiritual comfort than physical satisfaction. The author struggles in contradiction between the emptiness after satisfying her body desires and the spiritual comfort provided by her wife. On the one hand, the carnal desire engulfed him, making him unable to extricate himself; On the other hand, the moral values implied by his wife made him feel unbearable. This also shaped the unique contradiction between “body” and “soul” of André Gide.

### **Conclusion**

The *Pastoral Symphony* ends ultimately with the death of its core character, the “Blind Girl”, which is also a tragedy in the usual sense. Although death is seen by most as a negative setting and a symbol of tragedy, with a cruel and dark nature, it is precisely this setting of “death” that liberates the “sadistic love” in the novel, and at the same time, it also liberates the love between Gide and the boy Mark in real life. If this “forbidden love” is destined to be unrecognized by secular and traditional morality, then let it exist in another way, that is, to release the “soul” and free it from the constraints and shackles of the “body”, thereby completely resolving the contradiction between the author’s own “soul” and “body”.

### References

- Gide, et al. (2002). *Tentation de la modernité*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 朱光潜. (1987). *变态心理学*, 朱光潜全集卷II. 合肥: 安徽教育出版社.
- 朱静, 景春雨. (2005). *纪德研究*. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.