



Return to Nature and Gain Self-consciousness--- An Analysis of Jack London's Consciousness of Spiritual Ecology in *The Valley of the Moon*

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Abstract: With the deterioration of the global ecological environment, the thinking on ecological issues involving in Jack London's novels has attracted more and more attention of the world. This paper attempts to interpret the profound spiritual ecological consciousness in Jack London's *The Valley of the Moon* from the perspective of ecocriticism through text analysis. A study of spiritual ecology should provide an approach to the spiritual crisis by analyzing the essence of the spiritual ecology. This paper starts with analyzing the disorder of spiritual ecology including isolation from nature and loss of self-awareness, and goes further to give an analysis on Jack London's proposal that human should return to nature and regain self-consciousness. Nature and human existence are closely related and human have to integrate and unite with nature instead of isolation in order to gain a healthy and sane life. The author hopes this paper can bring some enlightenment to readers.

Keywords: Jack London; ecological consciousness; spiritual ecology; *The Valley of the Moon*

I. Introduction

Ecological crisis not only resides in natural and social fields, but invades into the spiritual realm of human. Spiritual crisis or spiritual emergency is recognized by American Psychiatric Association as a distinct psychological disorder that involves a person's relationship with a transcendent being or force; it might be accompanied by assumptions related to the meaning or purpose of life. Apart from their spiritual beliefs, people feverishly worship materials which bring them psychological tortures, including anxiety and fickleness. Feelings of void, illusion, and loneliness soon would flood in by the time the inner mind is emptied. Therefore, it is crucial to clean the soul and regain the harmony of spiritual ecology. Spiritual ecology is the interrelationship between the subjects (mainly human beings) in terms of the spiritual level and their living environment. It has been brought forward by ecological scholar Lu Shuyuan, who has categorized ecology into spiritual ecology, social ecology, and nature ecology[1].

In his book, *The Thirty-year between "Spiritual Ecology" and Me*, he proposes spiritual attributes are the important ones of human beings. The main connotation of spirit includes people's emotional activities, thinking activities and will activities, which are embodied in people's value orientation, reflection ability, religious belief, and aesthetic preference. As a kind of life activity that creates, moves, changes and extends, the spirit has an internal energy conversion mechanism and interacts with its environment. It itself is an open system full of vigor and vitality, that is, an "ecosystem". The quality of life, the value of life, and personal well-being depend to a large extent on the well-functioning of this ecosystem. In addition to the "lithosphere", "hydrosphere", "atmosphere" and "biosphere", there is also a "spiritual circle" in the earth's ecosystem. Since the development of human beings, the spirit, as an autonomous and active life activity of human beings, has had a huge impact on the earth's ecosystem, and continues to exert a greater impact. In the industrial age, the human spirit has become an almost dominant factor in earth's ecosystems. In modern society, the ecological crisis of nature and the spiritual crisis of human society occur simultaneously. When the natural environment is polluted, the spirit is also polluted; when soil erosion, land



desertification, species decline, and resource depletion occur, the process of human materialization, human hollowing, and human vulgarization is also intensified; the loss of people's beliefs and ethics, the loss of morality and sympathy, and the loss of sense of history and mission are also increasing day by day. Spiritual ecology is a subject that studies the relationship between human beings as the main body of spiritual existence and their living environment (including natural environment, social environment, and cultural environment). On the one hand, it is related to the healthy growth of the spiritual subject, and on the other hand, it is related to the benign operation of the earth's ecosystem with the participation of this spiritual variable[2]. In a word, a study of spiritual ecology is to solve the spiritual crisis in the analysis of its roots and ways.

The Valley of the Moon (VM) describes the situation in which the protagonists Billy and Saxon fall into a double crisis in their lives and emotions during the Great Depression in the United States. Billy went from a capable, responsible, caring man to a brawling, alcoholic and aloof man who had little spiritual connection with Saxon. The hardships brought about by the labor dispute, Billy's changes, a life without love, and a deep fear in her heart made Saxon almost mentally chaotic and broken. In order to save her marriage and love, Saxon began to think, and she felt that Oakland was not a suitable place to live, and it was not suitable for the growth of their children, because there was no love here. And then she decided to persuade Billy to leave this place and find their own life again. Billy followed Saxon's advice. In order to find an oasis in the desert of their souls, the couple packed their bags and embarked on a journey to find an ideal home together. Finally, they found the Valley of the Moon in California and made their love and marriage ultimately saved.

Jack London depicts the natural beauty of the Valley of the Moon. It is picturesque, beautiful and full of life: the afterglow of the sunset, the farmland gleaming like gold, the ancient and incomplete crater-like summits, the rosy sunset, the fragrance of the laurels, the wild vines, the creeks, and the wild pigeons etc. Together, they form a fascinating picture of all things interacting with each other. It is peaceful and full of free air here. People are spiritually rich and interdependent with plants, animals, and land. They live in harmony and live a simple and prosperous life. All of this not only allowed Billy and Saxon to stay away from the strife and sick souls in the civilized city and return to a place where nature is rich and abundant, but also allowed them to recover their spirits and completely liberate their bodies and minds. This is the home that Billy and Saxon have always dreamed of. Through the wonderful depiction of the natural beauty of the Valley of the Moon, Jack London's novel conveys an important ecological thought: natural beauty has the healing effect of restoring vitality, saving spirit, and purifying souls; man is a part of nature and inseparable from nature.

The natural beauty of the Valley of the Moon nurtures the beauty of human nature. The people who live there are kind and warm-hearted. Billy and Saxon met the Hales when they first arrived at the Valley of the Moon. The Hales advocate natural life, and use their own diligence and wisdom to create and enjoy this simple and comfortable life. Billy, Saxon and the Hales sincerely helped each other, and got along very well. This interaction shows a natural tendency that is healthy, positive and full of genuine caring. Billy and Saxon not only gradually forgot the blows and pains they had suffered in the city life, but also learned a lot of agricultural knowledge and strengthened their confidence and courage in their new life.

In *VM*, natural beauty and human beauty blend with each other. Human beings live in harmony with nature, and everything thrives as it is. People, in particular, have a natural and healthy state of mind. There is no fighting and squeezing between human beings, and they are friendly to each other. The Valley of the Moon seems to be a balanced, stable and well-functioning ecosystem, and everything full of spirituality reflects Jack London's spiritual ecological awareness. Jack London hopes to save the endangered nature and the alienated spirits through such a way of returning to nature, so as to maintain the balanced operation of the ecological whole and realize the long-term safety of human beings. Everything depicted in *VM* is based on Jack London's ecological ideal, which may not be realized in real life, but as a writer, Jack London has achieved the transcendence of reality in his works.

Disorder of Spiritual Ecology

Land is not only the habitat of human beings, but also the mother of human existence. Jack London's love and attachment to the land is not only due to his own character and knowledge, but also to the influence and nurture of his family. His stepfather, John London, lived on a small plot of land and ran a potato farm. However, in reality, in order to obtain their own temporary interests, people do not hesitate to plunder the land recklessly. When developers find that the plundered and trampled land no longer has the possibility of adding value, they turn their attention to other regions and start a new round of plundering. Since Jack London has had a very deep affection for the land since he was a child, he is very disgusted with the behavior of human beings trampling on the land. Therefore, London's great deal of writing on land is fraught with ecological implication. That is to say, London has discovered much spiritual value of land apart from the regular economic benefits of soil.

The protagonists in *VM* set off for their imagined pastoral life in search of a piece of land, an idealized "moon-valley", which not only contains fertile soil but also with luxuriant forests, limpid brooks, varied wild animals etc., as uttered by Saxon. Therefore, Jack London has deemed land as a holistic ecological community which consists of the core part of *VM*. However, alienation from land has given rise to human spiritual crisis.

1.1 Isolation from Nature

Since human beings have moved away from nature in the process of industrialization and urbanization, a great number of Americans have left their home in rural and countryside and then turned to pursue a kind of modern life. Nevertheless, most of them without money have turned into the slaves of machinery. In *VM*, Saxon works as an ironer in a big whitewashed room that painted with heat and that was thickly humid with the steam that sizzled from the damp cloth under the irons of the many ironers. In addition, Saxon lives with her brother's family in a shabby house which sits along with slums. "It was a small room, not disorderly, because of lack of furnishings to disorder it. The plaster, discolored by the steam of many wash-days, was crisscrossed with cracks from the big earthquake of the previous spring. The floor was ridged, wide-cracked, and uneven, and in front of the stove, it was worn through and repaired with a five-gallon oil can hammer flat and double. A sink, a dirty roller-towel, several chairs, and a wooden table completed the picture." [3].

The rapid growth of industry has caused severe ecological crisis which reminds Americans of the Westward Movement for their worrying about the loss of the initial national spirit in building a "Garden of Eden". The nostalgic mood of wild-land complex has emerged in American consciousness in the early 20th century.

Correspondingly, Jack London revealed it, which could be embodied in the protagonists' return to nature and search for land. However, London went deeper from this superficial phenomenon and pointed out the nation-scale deterioration of land after the Westward Movement. With the neglected aftermath of the Westward Movement, the whole nation has self-indulged in her great success of economic prosperity in the process of industrialization. With the deterioration of ecological and environmental problems, land destruction has become a particularly prominent problem of that time.

Human beings have alienated from nature and their negligence of natural land have caused amazing damage to land. For example, the Roberts saw the scene of deserted farmland owned by an old farmer. "There was too much land too little farmed. Everything was slipshod. House, barn and outbuildings were fast falling into ruin. The front yard was weed-grown" [3]. Here, barren farmland reveals the maltreatment by human beings and their alienation from nature.

Besides, it could be found more examples of the maltreatment towards land and nature from Saxon's conversations with Mr. Gunston. "We live in a wicked age," Hastings countered, smiling grimly, "This wholesale land-skinning is the national crime of the United States today" [3]. Young Americans inherited abundant land from their ancestors yet leased it to the Portuguese and then went to live in urban areas. In no more than five years, the Portuguese dried up the land. Immediately after, Americans released it to another Portuguese for three years, and gave one-quarter of the former return. In the end, no third Portuguese appeared to rent it anymore as there wasn't anything left. There is no doubt that both American and Portuguese have accumulated a great deal of fortune from the land, nevertheless, they have turned it into barren soil. That is the way how the land has been ruined. The similar damage to nature also happens in forests. In some valleys, "The trees have been cut and sold for firewood" [3]. In conclusion, living away from nature and the deterioration of land has made human beings completely cut off the spiritual tie with nature.

1.2 Loss of Self-awareness

In the *VM*, both Billy and Bert suffer from spiritual crisis, therefore, they escape from their family responsibility and feverishly dive into life-and-death strikes till one is heavily injured and the other dead. To be more specific, with the progress of the strike, the family's economic situation has become more and more difficult: not only the quality of the food has declined, but also the monthly payment and rent have become a problem. Last year, Billy worked diligently; but this year he has no work to do. Billy went out early and returned late every day, often with injuries. He also stopped being candid with Saxon and began to drink heavily, then he also became less talkative, and his words became increasingly pessimistic and hopeless. The once loving couple is estranged, because of the hard life and conflicts between labor and capital torment. He gradually became brutal, and in order to make ends meet, he took part in a fistfight and then returned home bruised. In the process of recovering from injury, Billy regretted his previous behaviors under Saxon's careful care, but he was able to forget all his regrets when he walked out of their home. And more importantly, the alienation from herself and her ancestral beliefs made Saxon lose self-consciousness. After getting married to Billy, Saxon obeys her husband's male chauvinism and even quits her previous job and becomes a housewife. Moreover, due to her deep love and respect for Billy, Saxon gives up all attempts of self-independence and totally relies on her husband. However, when a series of sudden disasters occur to her, such as the abortion of her first baby, the death of a friend in a strike, the jailing of her husband, the cut-off of family income, etc., Saxon could hardly bear all this on her own, therefore, her body breaks down. After recovering step by step, Saxon finds her mind could not get rid of the trauma from those disasters. Her mind is characterized by symptoms similar to the mental disorder. Saxon stays insomnia at night, meanwhile, her head feels numb and heavy at the daytime. In addition, she does housework yet could not recall of anything that she has done, and she feels so strange in mind although she is healthy in body.

Consequently, the self-awareness of Saxon is exhausted by mental disorder which psychologically beats her down to desperation and insane. In a word, Jack London well illustrates the unbalanced spiritual ecology of men and women in *VM*. The protagonists find a way to reconstruct their spirits by returning to nature.

Reconstruction of Spiritual Ecology

Spiritual ecology of human beings has witnessed an age of crumbling to collapse. The root of this imbalance is the swell of anthropocentrism. Jack London puts forward ways to restore human spirit through returning to nature.

2.1 Return to Nature

In *VM*, Jack London considers Gunston as a great model of environmental protection who brings his family to a valley and lives a lifestyle of “the unity of men and heaven”. Not only does he form a deep understanding of the close relationship of man and nature, Gunston also puts his theory into practice. He puts his time and energy in the conservation of soil. For that he treats his one thousand acres of trees like a doctor, Gunston forbids any felling of his trees without his permission, even if he planted hundreds of thousands of trees. Gunston even does some experiments with pasture grasses. Besides, he is will to buy exhausted ranch to help restore the soil.

Human engagement with nature helps to restore the relationship between man and nature in spirit. Saxon is purified in the soul by gorgeous Carmel Bay which “caught her breath and gazed at the amazing peacock-blue of a breaker, with golden sunlight, over-falling in a mile-long sweep and thundering into the white ruin of foam on a crescent beach of sand scarcely less white”[3]. Gradually, she could not help but let herself melt in the marvelous feeling by connecting her heart with “the surf and gaze at the sea-horizon of the deepest peacock-blue and piled with cloud-masses, at the curve of the beach south to the jagged point of rocks, and at the rugged blue mountains seen across soft low hills, landward, up Carmel Valley”[3]. After this, the whole flesh and soul are purified through her engagement with nature, and the evil thoughts and negative moods vanished as if a miracle emerged.

In the process of crossing the river, the Roberts are impressed by one environmental friendly practice that workers are planting willows along the river bank, “...they began to encounter dredges at work, biting out mouthfuls of the sandy river bottom and heaping it on top of the huge levels. Great mats of willow brush, hundreds of yards in length, were laid on top of the river slope of the levees and held in place by steel cables and thousands of cubes of cement. The willows soon sprouted, Hastings told them, and by the time the mats were rotted away the sand was held in place by the roots of the trees”[3]. This environmental friendly measure demonstrates a kind of understanding and concern on nature, which Jack London in favor of.

2.2 Regain of Self-consciousness

On their returning from city to nature, and also in the pursuit of a pastoral life, Billy and Saxon, the protagonists, experienced “the Unity of Heaven and Men” in flesh and soul for several times. Immersed in wonderful nature, the Roberts find their deeply buried self-hood starting to emerge. They saw different kinds of people with distinct faith and lifestyles. What immigrants such as the Chinese and the Japanese bear in mind is that “living is money”, and so do the Portuguese. These immigrants overemphasize on work that they squeeze out every minute and every bit of energy for money. This discovery brought an opportunity for the protagonists to know themselves step by step.

Now the Roberts already recognized that their ideal life should never follow the trail of the immigrants. The Chinese, the Japanese and the Portuguese, who all spend all their lives working and have no time to experience life. What lifestyle they need is to enjoy the beauty of life. Therefore, without returning to nature and the nourishment of landscape along their traveling, the protagonists may not find themselves at all. They may not figure out who they are, where they come from and what kind of life they really pursue for. The Roberts find themselves could enjoy happiness and satisfaction in the idyllic life than that of city as Saxon claimed, “if only they did not go back to the city where the beautiful things of the spirit perished and the beast bared its fangs”[3].

Saxon’s mental disorder is already cured in nature because she regains her self-consciousness and grows into an independent woman. She builds her own vegetable garden and gains economic independence; she reads sedulously and spends more time in appreciating nature to replenish her life; she gets on merrily with neighbors and Carmel friends in equal and democratic spirit from group activities and mutual progress.

Furthermore, Saxon and Billy rediscovered each other, “she found in Billy highly a certain health and rightness, a certain essential integrity, which she prized more than all book learning and bank accounts”[3]. Meanwhile, Billy is moved by finding that his wife should possess far more beauty and scores of merits than ever. As good as their pastoral growth friends, the protagonists rediscovered themselves and achieved spiritual growth in nature.

If people are no longer close to nature, they will suffer from dangers in soul. Such as the vanishment of beliefs and the barren spiritual land as Jack London depicted in *VM*. People who lose themselves in the endless pursuit of endless desires will step onto the spiritual ecology wasteland. This hidden but sharp conflict will break the stability of human’s inner spiritual ecology. To arouse the concern for nature and to balance inner spiritual ecology, Jack London brought forward this pastoral approach to achieve spiritual restoration.

Conclusion:

The ecological awareness in Jack London’s work is an inevitable product of the times. He lived in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, agricultural civilization had been replaced by industrial civilization, natural ecology had been destroyed, and class contradictions had intensified. Machinery promoted the development of productive forces and brought material wealth and great differentiation between the rich and the poor. Human society was superstitious

about mechanical civilization and blindly optimistic about scientific rationality. While human beings continued to conquer nature and obtained material satisfaction, they were also faced with the problem of ecological imbalance: natural resources were over-grabbed, human beings were fascinated by greed, the working class was increasingly impoverished, and so on. In a society where industrialization and materialism prevailed, the good nature of human beings was challenged, and people became indifferent and alienated. Jack London was keenly aware of these ecological problems, and integrated his hidden worries and ideals, as well as his ideas to solve this problem, into the novel.

The author believes that human spirit and nature are actually closely linked, and only by truly integrating into nature can we heal the deteriorating spiritual and ecological conditions of human beings and achieve a healthy and happy life. In the contemporary society with frequent global ecological problems and unbalanced human mental states, the ecological philosophy contained in Jack London's novels not only provide the public with new ideas for a feasible way to solve spiritual crisis, but also inspire people to find their true self and abandon the growing desire so as to return to and embrace nature with a simple lifestyle and attitude.

The society has witnessed our astonishing progress since the 21st century, but at the same time, the problem of the deterioration of the ecological environment has become increasingly prominent, which has seriously threatened the survival and development of human beings. Faced with such a severe living environment, human beings have to introspect themselves and issues related to survival and development. From views of this paper, Jack London's novels demonstrate that people should live in harmony with nature, interpersonal relationships should be friendly and harmonious, and the individual spirit should be full of spiritual and ecological concepts. It is of great enlightening significance for awakening the ecological awareness of modern people, cultivating ecological ethics, and realizing harmonious coexistence between man and nature, man and society as well as man and himself.

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