

On the Symbolic Meaning of “White” in American Literature and Culture

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Keywords: American, literature and culture, “white”, symbolic meaning

Abstract: American culture is different from Chinese culture. The United States advocates elite governance and takes “white” culture as the leading role. From the point of view of the American people, “white” is not only a physiological feature, but also plays an important role in their literature and culture. During the development of the United States for more than 200 years, “white” has been given a unique and profound symbolic significance. The American people believe that it symbolizes nobility, purity and racial superiority, and is treated with worship and respect. It represents values and social status to in America. Therefore, “white” is of vital symbolic significance in American literature and culture. Based on this, this paper explores the symbolic meaning of “white” in American literature and culture.

1. Introduction

The United States is dominated by “white” culture, which is a kind of cultural posture formed in the process of historical development. “White” is not only the representative of a culture, but also the symbol of power and status. No one or anything can shake its supreme significance among the American people. However, with the development of society and the enhancement of globalization trend, diversified cultural concepts are also constantly integrated into American culture, achieving a good development. In recent years, “white” in American culture has also gradually undergone some changes. We have to admit that “white” culture has been the source of contradictions in the development of the United States for more than 200 years, so it is also the inevitable trend of social globalization that the symbolic significance of “white” has changed. In this paper, the traditional and modern symbolic meaning of “white” in American literature and culture is expounded and compared to analyze the change of American mainstream culture.

2. Symbolic Significance of “White” in American Ttraditional Culture

Based on the development history of the United States for more than 200 years, it can be found that the American people’s worship of “white” culture and the concept of “non-white” exclusion were not so strong at the beginning. This kind of cultural concept is gradually rooted in people’s hearts after a long-term development process. Many American scholars have also carried out a series of researches. The most classic review books are *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* and *White Over Black*. In America, the phenomenon of white people’s discrimination is serious. People have a strong worship of “white”, but some misunderstandings and biases against “non-white” ethnic groups.

In these two works, *White Over Black* mainly describes stories that happened when the protagonist immigrated from Britain to the United States as well as the reason why the American people highly respected “white” culture. This is mainly because in the social background at that time, the living environment of the American people was poor. They not only had to solve the problem of food and clothing and endure hunger and cold for a long time, but also had no conditions and funds to cure when they were ill. In this background, they also had to prevent the invasion of Indians. At that time, the United States was in a bad environment of internal and external troubles. During this period, “white” and Christianity became the survival belief and symbol, as well as the powerful savior among American people. In such a long historical development process, the American people have gradually formed a sense of great worship and

respect for “white” culture. Through this description in *White Over Black*, we can find that the cultural consciousness with white race as the core began to form at this moment with inevitable reasons.

Then, with the acceleration and change of American development history, the continuous expansion of colonies and the gradual rise of slavery, the reverence for “white” and the cultural consciousness of white race were formed deeply. The United States stepped out of this harsh environment of internal and external troubles and realized unification at the end of the 18th century, bringing great changes to people’s lives. It was an important turning point in American history, to which “white” has made a great contribution. Therefore, people’s worship and belief for “white” became more and more serious. In this period, “white” is not only the group embodiment of American modern culture and values, but also the intangible cultural heritage of American nation. Its symbolic significance in American traditional culture has reached a commanding height.

Through this series of historical development process, it can be found that “white” is a great consolation and belief for the American people and an unshakable cultural consciousness, which compensates the psychological defects of white workers and alleviates the disputes in the United States at that time. “White” culture is an invisible force to promote the prosperity and psychological satisfaction of American people’s life, and enhance the progress of American people and American culture. However, if we take a comprehensive and dialectical view to analyze it, “white” culture has a dual nature for the development of American Society. On the one hand, the excessive respect and worship for it cause the United States to ignore the initial germination of cultural blending environment at that time, and refuse to integrate any other culture represented by other colors into the United States. On the other hand, it, with its strong symbolic significance and influence, expands the influence of the United States on the world, pushes the United States to the forefront of the world, and promotes the development of globalization of the United States. These two properties form the contradiction of the development of American culture.

3. Symbolic Significance of “White” in American Traditional Literature

Because “white” represents the supreme status and symbol in the American people’s mind, so for the development of American traditional literature, it is widely used. In literature, it is used as a symbol for some noble and pure things. “White” has a special status and meaning in American literature, which symbolizes nobility and elegance. In 1993, the United States published a book *Racial Probles of White Woman*. This was the first application of “white” culture to American literature. In this book, a series of literary descriptions of “white” are made, and the following viewpoints were basically expounded: “White” in the United States not only represents the superiority and structural value of race, but also represents an evaluation perspective. The white people stand on the commanding height to examine themselves, others and the society. “White” plays an important role in literature, and also occupies the supreme position in American culture and American development. This is the initial embodiment of typical American unconscious cultural form.

Later, it was found that not only in the United States, but also in the whole North American society, “white” represents a high value, a high privilege and honor in the political and economic management of the country. It is not constrained by any law. Morally, the American people regard it as the supreme symbol of power, which is a kind of right mark difficult to control. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and American Literary Imagination*, there is a deeper literary description of “white” culture. This book simply and directly puts forward the inferior influence of “white” racial culture, and expounds the concepts of racial rank, racial vulnerability and racial exclusion derived from “white” racial cultural consciousness, as well as the important influence of these concepts on the overall development of the United States. It analyzes the conflict between “white” and American literature and cultural concepts from a more comprehensive, objective and dialectical perspective and thinking. In this book, the author emphasizes that “white” should not always be regarded as the commanding height of power, but should be given authority and status in different historical periods of the United States. If it is always regarded as the commanding height, there will

be devaluation and exclusion of other cultures. This phenomenon is not conducive to the formation of the cultural blending environment of the United States. To a certain extent, it will hinder the development of American culture. But from the perspective of white people, they still think that “white”, as the adhesive of white society, promotes the stability and unity of American society, and brings great economic superiority and psychological satisfaction to white people.

In *Magnora*, the author compares the North American Indians to wolves. This is because the historical plot has deeply influenced the American people. The American people believe that “white” is justice and black is evil. In American literature, the beautification of white people and the malice of black people have existed for a long time. Because of the deep-rooted influence of this cultural consciousness, the American people generally believe that white people are just, kind and intelligent in literary works, while black people are abnormal, slow and incapable. This kind of thinking consciousness is with no reason. The American people think that is the nature of other people of color other than “white”.

Until the 20th century, there was a book *Witness of Native Americans*, in which “white” was given a new meaning. In this book, “white” stands for the great white shark, symbolizing that the white Europeans settled in the United States. American scholars have reexamined and reanalyzed whether they need to catch the great white whale. “White” in this book also symbolizes the things that are difficult to catch and hide, not just the symbol of purity and nobility. “White” may not be the pure color of human soul, but the fierce great white shark. This book subverts and criticizes the concept and symbolic meaning of “white” in the United States, and is the first literary work to deny its noble symbolic meaning. After the publication of this book, more and more literary works analyzing and examining the symbolic meaning of “white” appeared in the United States, which gradually reduced the supremacy of “white” in the hearts of the American people.

4. Symbolic Significance of “White” in American Modern Culture

After entering the 20th century, the symbolic meaning of “white” in modern American culture has changed. In the 20th century, the United States was in a rapid economic and political development. In this era, the mainstream culture based on “white” still exists. The vast majority still respect and worship “white” culture, believing that “white” is entering the mainstream society and the key of upper class, playing a greater privilege and occupying a higher position in the United States. However, from the perspective of a bystander, on the one hand, the United States regards multi-ethnic and multi-cultural integration as its founding ideology, emphasizing the equality of all people and rejecting racial discrimination. On the other hand, it still regards “white” as the supreme power and the protective umbrella of entering the upper class, which is contrary to the founding ideology of the United States and not loyal to the original essence of American development. The worship of “white” culture and rejection of “non-white” culture are the main reasons for the formation of social contradictions in the United States.

After the 1950s, the awareness of cultural diversity has gradually risen. Although respect and worship for “white” culture still exist, great changes have taken place in the understanding of “white” culture. More and more American people have realized that the cultural consciousness dominated by “white” culture has affected the development of the country and also has an impact on their own interests. Therefore, the supreme social status and symbolic significance of “white” has gradually become blurred. It no longer exists as the only color in the United States. People are increasingly accepting the symbolic significance of other colors, and the exclusion of other colors has basically disappeared.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, although in the long history of development, “white” has always been a symbol of important significance in American literature and culture, occupying an important social position and representing major social rights. With the development of society and the acceleration of globalization, its symbolic significance in American literature and culture has also changed.

Through the research of related scholars, the symbolic meaning of “white” in American traditional literature and culture and modern culture has been compared. The evolution of mainstream values in American society is being explored and analyzed. The study of this subject produces an important impact on the development of the United States and the world, and should be further studied as a key topic.

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