

# *An Analysis of Spiritual Alienation in the Eye of the Storm*

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**Abstract:** *The Eye of the Storm* is a novel by Australian writer Patrick White delves into the dehumanization and alienation embedded in human nature evoked by money-supremacy in modern society, and reflects the spiritual dilemma of contemporary gentrified class who are plagued by objectification and fetishism of monetary relations. With recourse to certain theories in modern psychology and sociology, this paper scrutinizes the representation, essence and intricacy of spiritual alienation in this story, in order to provide inspiration for cultivating correct ethic value in such a postmodern context. This paper is grounded in analytical basis as the permeation of alienation, morbid need hierarchy in precedence, a lopsided dichotomy between instrumental and value rationality that results in loss of integrity and judgment, and the conflict between different aspects of self where the uncivilized desire reigns. All the elaboration is conducive to cast reflection on the anti-manipulation of money-worship of the spiritual world in a post-modern context, facilitating the contemplation on the process of deconstruction of a distorted identity controlled by exterior material relations, and a reconstruction of self-extricated from alienation.

## 1. A Brief Introduction of the Plot, Alienation and Dehumanization

*The Eye of the Storm*, is a masterpiece which is regarded as one of the most thought-provoking novel written by Patrick Victor Martindale White, Australia's first Nobel Prize laureate for literature. Since its publication, this book has aroused tremendous repercussion and great shocking both in the literature community and society for its bare revelation of the concrete demonstration of dehumanization, alienation between modern people, commodity fetishism and commodification of any kind of mental or spiritual connections, such as love, brotherhood, filial piety and so on.

This novel is written with and spurs further contemplation of existentialism, delves into some existential literary themes such as "alienation", "loneliness", and "absurdity" in human life. In his novels, alienation is a normal state of human existence, solitude is a kind of insistence on not integrating with the world, and absurdity is a struggle against a meaningless world and a nihilistic life. "Alienation" was first used to refer to man's insanity and spiritual death[1]. Later it signifies "estrangement of man's being from his essence", i.e., man should not become what he has become, but what he should become[2]. In Western modernist literature, there is a consistent consensus to define: human beings, under the action of alien forces, lose their innate self-attributes and subordinate themselves to the material and society without inner essence.

The protagonist, Elizabeth Hunter, who is more than eighty years old, grapples death in her

decaying and solitary home in Sydney. Around her deathbed, we need to stand her two profit-driven children, three nurses with diverse personalities, a clownish housekeeper, and a conscientious but cowardly lawyer form a hypocritical and uncaring family. With Elizabeth, all of those bystanders performed a blatantly preposterous comedy tinged with love and hatred, cooperation and competition. Elizabeth, who once was a beautiful but debauched lady in her younger days, tended to eagerly seize and grasp everything, but what she had done often inflicted harm on her family and friends. When she becomes senile, the impending death triggered her to retrospect and recognize that, if a person is always being manipulated by exterior power, the meaning of life will not be sought anywhere. In a half-dreaming and half-awake state, she came to an epiphany; she attained a unity of self and the world in the eye of the storm. The sublimation of Lady Hunt's personality with the death of her body and the revival of her soul convey the author's wish that there is still hope after the despair of being dehumanized by negative powers[3].

Meanwhile, the definition of "dehumanization" is also of great significance to assist us to have a deeper comprehension for alienation, which shares synonymous meaning and close relation to it. It is people's perception and attitudes towards the humanity of self or others, in short, it is people's negative perception of human nature, which can be divided into two dimensions of "objectification" and "animalization" of humankind. Haslam proposes the Dual Model of Dehumanization[4]. According to this model, dehumanization consists of dehumanization of uniqueness and dehumanization of universality. When human uniqueness is denied, the individual is regarded as lacking in morality, self-control and education, indistinguishable from an animal, which is also called "animalistic dehumanization"; however, when human universality is negated, the individual is regarded as lacking in cognitive flexibility, enthusiasm, and initiative, and can be understood as a mechanical, indifferent, and passive human being. This kind of person is regarded as a machine, an object, and therefore this kind is also called "objectifying dehumanization". In this novel, "alienation" of the characters can be glimpsed from both aspects of dehumanization roughly.

The striking portrayal of dehumanization and human interaction alienation can be interpreted through several ways:

First, Mrs. Hunter's two children's rivalry and deceitfulness as they compete for the inheritance, which mirrors the alienation in filial and sibling bonds. Dorothy and Basil, actually love their mother at heart, but their real purpose is to greedily and selfishly divide their mother's property and assets, and their conflicting and antagonizing hearts keep them in the storm.

Second, Mrs. Hunter's young life of intoxication and dissolution. She married her husband Henry only for the sake of property. The link binding them is not attachment, instead, the private interests hidden behind the family. She rejects of rationality, wallowing in temporal leisure, becoming a slave in fetishism and a victim in conjugal alienation.

All of above-mentioned embodies the pervasive spiritual crisis and lack of emotion, human relationships have become islands of indifference.

## 2. Related Theoretical Illustration

Alienation is a common narrative theme used by postmodernist writers as a way of highlighting the reverse conversion power of human beings owing to morality, rationality, and some "otherness" forces. There are several theories which can give inspiringly profound explications to this pervasive phenomenon in terms of deeper, ulterior psychological reasons and value orientation. Pertinent academic illustration could be traced back to Marxism, which gives a penetration that the alienation originates from the contemporary development of alienated labor in industrialized society. Alienated labor converts autonomous labor into an involuntary means of maintaining basic sustenance, and the products of labor become an alien matter to the worker [5]. In the living process, the subject

relegates its own essential power on the object in practice, but the object's might can in turn exceed the subject's power, which unexpectedly enslaves, controls, and even opposes the subject itself [6]. People use each other to maximize profit, and the essence of the human being can be restored only after repelling the alien power of the object. As is depicted in this story, Lady Hunt's drastic pursuit for worldly leisure, eventually brought about the tenuous children's care and affection, excessive monetary desire inflicted on herself from the people around her, which seems a derivative irony finally curses on her own.

Additionally, Fromm's Humanistic Ethics can also help us to get a further insight to this phenomenon in terms of reasons, means and process. From the perspective of social psychology, he uses the "personality theory" and "socialization" to fully discuss the distortion and comprehensive alienation of human nature in modern industrial society, in both the micro and macro aspects[7]97. He argues that alienation has existed since ancient times, and it is only in modern capitalist society that it has developed to an unprecedented extent and permeated all spheres of society[7]105. In his view, the "existential ambivalence" of capitalist society is the bane of human alienation. The so-called "existential ambiguity" refers to the fact that in modern Western society, "human existence is often in an inevitable imbalance"[7]112, i.e. an unequilibrium between the affluence of material wealth and the exacerbation of relationship with nature, fellows and their own selves. The alienation of human nature is rooted in psychological alienation, being one of the most common psychological phenomena in modern capitalist society.

Fromm's view of the alienation of human nature holds that, the pursuit of economic development after the 19th century has suppressed man's true emotions and needs, making him feel lonely, restless, and mechanized, alienating him from his own creations, from others, and even from himself, and plunging man and society into a disordered state of abnormal pathologies. Alienation is estimated as a reflection of the condition of human existence under the conditions of advanced industrial society, and his viewpoint emphasizes it as an experience, a feeling, which reveals a subjective feeling of the mass in alienation under the conditions of affluence [8]. This is not only confined in the realm of the working class, instead, it is a prevalent one applicable to all. Firstly, in the field of social relations, the alienation of human nature is manifested in the estrangement of human beings from themselves and their fellows. People regard others as commodities, and the interpersonal interaction presupposes a value judgment of others. On the one hand, from the relationship between the subject and object, "alienation" and "objectification" are the subject's possession of the reality of the object, and the subject's alienation has a close connection as a close knit in the objectification process; on the other hand, from the human nature, objectification is the process of the human being acting on the exterior of the sensibility through purposeful and conscious activities, and finally confirms the power of human[2]123. The process of objectification is the objectification of human essence, while alienation is the loss of human essence. In *The Eye of the Storm*, both Mrs. Hunt as a young woman and Dorothy and Basil disgraced themselves as objectified embodiment of money, boundless desire and fetishism.

To be brief, in the spiritual and psychological facet, this contention implies that the essence of man (in which is defined as "self-recognition" by Fromm) determines the real needs of man. If the latter deviates from the former, it will lead to mental alienation of modern human.

Last but not least, part of Freud's psychological analysis, concept of "rationality" proposed by German scholar Max Weber as well as Maslow's need hierarchy theory can also be applied to help us probe into the alienation from spiritual aspect, which will be further exemplified altogether in the next section.

To sum up, this novel can be interpreted in the following logic of four dimension as follows: the loss of initial reason and the alienation of value rationality, the reverse control and enactment of human behavior and product according to Fromm, transformation and distortion of the individual's

demands in psychological perception (which can be interpreted by Maslow's theory of need hierarchy), as well as the psychoanalysis perspective by Freud of psyche in three stages as id, ego and superego.

### 3. Analysis of Human Alienation in Spiritual Dimension

After the Second World War, the rapid development of modern technology and the global capital circulation through the establishment of capitalism engendered unprecedented subversion of traditional morality and way of existence. While, on the one hand, human society has been progressing towards a modernized society, at the same time, human beings in the trend of modernism and postmodernism turns to be disoriented, numb and self-centered, suffering from a strong sense of individual fragmentation and being manipulated by the dehumanizing and alienating power of the "otherness" outside themselves. Typical examples are consumerism and commodity fetishism.

#### 3.1 Pervasive Permeation of Alienation by Froom

The reverse control and enactment of human behavior and product, i.e. manipulation, is the core theme implicated throughout the whole story. In accordance with relevant illustration of "alienation" proposed by Fromm, alienation, to a great extent, also involves a noticeably flagrant ethical degeneration in fetishistic societies. Since modern man lives in "existence ambivalence" referring to the division of man's real life world, they can't live a corresponding sound life along with the progress of the material reality. They are greatly disturbed by forces outside world and cannot obtain mental pleasure and spiritual tranquility, unable to achieve sound development. Material world has been the dominator with irresistible potency from human, which can maneuver them to perform in compliance with a criterion by exterior world, reversely make people be trapped in extreme mental tension and restlessness, even the unsound personality splitting and psychopathology, consciously or unconsciously falling into the alienation of human nature.

In the book of *The Eye of the Storm*, interpersonal relationships that should be based on harmonious traditional moral sentiments have become the source of human's spiritual crisis of nihilism and isolation: couples who should have shared weal or woe become strangers who ignore each other's true feeling (as is shown in the inhospitality, lack of mutual understanding and despicable exploitation in the marriage of Mrs. Hunt, Dorothy and Basil), and siblings who should have shared affectionate affinity have become foes who cudgel one's brain to wrest substantial legacy from the other (As portrayed in merciless struggle and ludicrous sex relationship between Dorothy and Basil after they met each other). Under the conditions of a society where money is utmost important, the ethical and moral order is subordinate to it, being completely distorted and alienated. People's heart is been deprived of kind ethics, being dehumanized. Ethics is no longer a sign that differentiates human beings from ignorance and barbarism to civilization, but an alienated evil tool that accelerates abnormal and dehumanized human nature.

#### 3.2 Deep Dissection of Psyche between Ego and Id

The dissection of her deeper psyche stages can be inspired by modern psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the id follows the "happiness principle", regardless of any value judgement, but only to do whatever it takes to meet its needs. The ego is the self that faces reality, which develops through acquired learning and contact with the environment [9]. It is the regulator and negotiator of the id and the external environment, following the principle of reality, it both satisfies the needs of the self and prevents violations of social or moral norms. As is depicted in this novel, Mrs. Hunter was vain,

lust and selfish. She made full use of her advantageous resource—beauty to gain a great amount of wealth. In order to pursue her happiness avariciously, her id made her struggle to control all her wealth. Her quest for money and sex is like a starving person's strong instinctive desire for food. That is her “id”. She uses her beauty and intelligence, which is her “ego”. However, her debauchery is more in the form of spiritual possession than physical possession.

She knew her every jewel clearly. Although she has married a wealthy and compliant husband, she loathed the common farm life, and she was not satisfied with all that she had gained through marriage and that she “would have given anything to open a box containing the sum of total of expectancy”[3]102 . And even if she fell ill—stroke, she could not move by herself, she would often count and check her jewels, although she was half blind. Australian renowned critic James Macaulay said: “The characters in White’s novel showed the image of modern people, these modern people depended on nothing, they no longer believed in God, no longer believe in traditional Values, they were not clear about the relationship between themselves and the world, therefore, they pursued ego fanatically.” [10]. She was not interested in possessions for the sake of possessions, but could not resist beautiful and often expensive objects. The limitless possession became her life aim and made her a categorically selfish egotist. This sealed the theory of Freud that ID is the nature, with its abeyance as the principle of happiness[11]. The same logic can be simultaneously applied to Dorothy and Basil.

However, when confronting death, she fell into a long dream. As is Freud explained, life can be interpreted through dream, which is the road to unconsciousness[12]. It is through unconsciousness and psychological activities that reflect the conflict between human being’s instinct and logos. Mrs. Hunter’s experiences in her whole life were connected by her dream and free association. Whether she was awakened or asleep, all her life was like a dream. Mrs. Hunter recalled her life through dream. After she experienced “the storm eye”, she realized herself. She made self-discovery, self-negation, and self-realization. In this way, her realization of superego is a way to dissolve her alienation. All in all, the relationship between her and her children was abnormal. They had no family love but the struggle against each other for the sake of benefits. Fundamentally speaking, this was utmost egotism.

### 3.3 Prevalence of Instrumental Rationality against the Rational One

Thirdly, from the perspective of the alienation of value rationality, this part of argumentation is mainly composed of two parts: the negative conversion of value rationality and the alienation trend towards instrumental rationality. The concept of “rationality” is developed by German sociologist Max Weber. He categorized rationality into two dimensions: value (or substantive) rationality and instrumental counterpart. The latter one serves the former, constructing a mutually operative, influential structure[13]27. Value Rationality holds a pure belief as unconditionally inherent value of conditions and actions, emphasizing the purity of motives and the choice of the right means to achieve ends, regardless of outcome. Nevertheless, instrumental rationality is the antithesis of value rationality[13]33, which is the signification that most efficiently achieves ends through precise calculations of utilitarianism under the direction of tool-worship and productivism. When the implication, the way of realization or its end is alienated in people’s minds, it will dynamically convert to its opposite, instrumental rationality.

In this story, the distorted and aberrant transformation of human nature's alienated value rationality is exemplified. What the characters did is not out of being good or bad, right or erroneous, but out of considerations of being useful or vain. We can seek some suggestions from Mrs. Hunt’s marriage and her children’s nefarious accomplice. As for Lady Hunt, her marriage was maintained by the luxurious and expensive assets her husband gave, while she couldn’t reciprocate

her husband with the sincere love, warmth and solicitude. She only concerned her happiness and desire, selfish and cruel completely. She also substituted control for love in rearing her two children, and, consequently, both of her children grew up in lack of love. Worse still, she caused Dorothy's pathetic marriage to enhance the family's prestige. She let her daughter married a man who was as old as her husband. At the thought of her daughter's marriage with suffering and humiliation, she could not be more regretful for her merciless decision in her later life, nevertheless, which is admittedly, a hindsight. As for her two children, they think that everything can even be exchanged and measured for money; the embodiment of meaning shouldn't be measured by human's felicity or conscience, rather, whether can help them to attain what they want at last, and even they can repudiate filial love. The above-mentioned all demonstrate a negative conversion in their value rationality. In Mrs. Hunt's eyes, love has been capitalized, her focus of her value system had shifted from human himself to an objective, bland matter world, and such conventional and right value as faithfulness, modest, benevolence and developing care incumbent on a wife has been discarded, which is substituted by value system as object-oriented, fetishism and monetary utilitarianism, being alienated towards a more instrumental one. Her pitiful husband, Mr. Hunter, has lost his personality traits and has been reduced just as a wretched, manipulated tool to support his family, without any meaning or vitality.

It is fair to say that, such deplorable shift makes people turn to be hypocritical, estranged and passive, and the wrong turn of value rationality brought them inner contradiction and conflict. In a word, they are degenerated to slaves of material outside themselves, rather than a positive dominator of the human self, which has been long highlighted by mainstream scholars since the Renaissance.

### 3.4 Distortion in the Demand Priority

Viewing from a psychological lens, the transformation and distortion of the individual's demands are another contributing factor that cannot extenuate the sins of fetishism. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory put in 1943, it is believed that human needs are an organized whole with five levels: physiology need, safety need, love and belonging need, respect or esteem need, and self-actualization, which are arranged in order from low to high, forming a "pyramid" structure[14]. In this novel, both the protagonist and other characters demonstrate their need hierarchy as a spindle structure different from the normal pyramid shape, which is misaligned and dislocated. This finally contributed to their mental alienation. In this story, everyone's most basic physiological and safety needs are perverse and distorted, transformed with an excessive pursuit of interests as a predominant priority. Whether Mrs. Hunt or her two children, their primary safety demand as pursuit of financial interests deteriorated and impeded their need for belonging, love, and self-realization. They live in a seemingly luxurious, ostentatious but actually a cold, lonely, indifferent world without belonging. It is this that alienated normal existence and dehumanized them.

Under the overwhelming performance and guidance of core need, Dorothy did not fully accept marriage because of belonging and love, but only reveled in her husband's temperament, title and status. The younger brother Basil suffered repeated marital setbacks due to mutual disappreciation and nonchalance. It was only when Mrs. Hunt was dying that they colluded for the common good and did whatever to maximize their financial and material benefits. In terms of their deeper mental need, they are stagnant on physical and security level, which makes them couldn't move towards a higher level of more sublimed psychological one. What's worse, the incestuous relationship between the siblings is a failed attempt for them to fill the belonging and love, rather, a kind of distortion and depravity caught in maze of wandering and helpless seeking.

For Mrs. Hunt, her blinded strong yearning to live with fortune and meretricious material perverts her need, and in turn becomes the source of her alienation. This eventually leads to her death and a satiric, abnormal self-actualized individual in material enjoyment. As she lay dying, death helped her to sublimate herself and her soul.

#### 4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the alienation of the human spirit is ultimately the result of a world in which righteous values are heavily distorted. Under such background, the whole spectrum of the underlying morbid desires that are rampant in the gentrified class are reified through alienation and dehumanization of fine morals. Alienated interpersonal relationships eventually lead to the failure and loss of spiritual ideals, the increasingly detached and alienated relationships between people, and the estrangement and dislocation between people and society. Frankness and humanity have been replaced by the value rationality that permeates and manipulates in daily life, whose conventional essence featured by rationality congruence was shattered completely. This novel delineates the conflicts between “man and society, man and man, man and self” in modern and society, White's novels, though obscure and full of tragedy, ultimately express the author's positive life philosophy. Patrick works focus on the innermost world of ordinary characters, especially those in affluent bourgeoisie who are inextricably caught in the plight of building up a sound spirit. The whole story is outright a process of crucifixion of overcoming alienation and reconstruction of “self” in such a perverse society context. Through the delineating the profile of those chasing material satisfaction in the trend of modernization, it's undeniable for us to explore the spiritual world of mankind in modern society at a deep level. The survival status of the alienation in modern men, in essence, still plays a substantially revealing role to the existential dilemma of contemporary society.

Therefore, it's urgent to be rational enough and develop a sound personality so that we can maintain sober and imperturbable original mind when facing a myriad of materialistic desires. Alienation can't overwhelm the modern people who are equipped with fortitude, integrity and ideal in heart. Apart from acquiring necessary material needs for survival, we should transcend the narrow concept of personal needs, create universal social values and build sound personality, and only through this way can we break the barricade of inevitable alienation via the achievement of comprehensive development.

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