

Transportation Imagery in W. Somerset Maugham's Works

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Abstract

Transportation, as a recurring literary image in Maugham's works, is not only the physical carrier for characters to achieve spatial movement, but also carries rich literary significance. This article takes Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, *The Painted Veil*, and *On a Chinese Screen* as the research objects, and analyzes the multiple roles of transportation in the narrative of the novels, social writing, and cultural exchanges. Transportation can facilitate the change of characters' spatial positions, cause their fates to change, and further drive the development of the story; at the social level, different transportation methods reflect the process of the alternation between old and new societies, and also reveal the differences between social identities and classes; at the level of cultural exchanges, transportation crosses geographical and cultural boundaries, providing practical conditions for the exchange and integration of different civilizations. Thus, it can be seen that transportation not only enriches the narrative layers of Maugham's works, but also provides a new research perspective for understanding his cross-cultural writing.

Keywords

Maugham, Transportation Imagery, Cultural Exchange.

1. Introduction

W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was a renowned British realist writer whose works consistently explored deep-seated social issues and examined the complexities of human nature to illustrate the interplay between society and the individual. Maugham was an avid traveler throughout his life, making numerous trips to Europe, East Asia, and China, among other places. These travel experiences continually influenced his literary work, causing the characters in his stories to frequently move between different settings, with elements of foreign cultures thus woven throughout his narratives.

Transportation, as the physical medium for people's movement, not only fulfills the practical function of connecting different spaces, but also plays an important role in literary narratives and cultural expressions. In recent years, academic research on Maugham and his works has mainly focused on travel writing, Orientalism, colonial discourse, spatial writing, and modernity, while the attention paid to the imagery of transportation has been relatively limited. Although these transportation means frequently appear in Maugham's works, they are mostly regarded as auxiliary elements in the travel process and are rarely examined as independent literary images with their own significance. Therefore, this article selects three of Maugham's works, *The Razor's Edge*, *The Painted Veil*, and *On a Chinese Screen*, as the research objects to explore the literary functions of transportation imagery in Maugham's works. This article holds that transportation in Maugham's works is not only the physical carrier of people's spatial movement, but also a literary image with narrative functions, social significance, and cultural exchanges, and has unique literary value in modern literature.

2. The Narrative Function of Transportation

In Maugham's works, the significance of transportation goes far beyond merely facilitating the spatial displacement of characters. When characters ride in different modes of transportation to enter new areas, it also means that they begin to come into contact with new social and cultural environments, and their original life experiences, values, and mental states undergo changes accordingly. The emergence of transportation is often accompanied by the transformation of narrative space, and new plots and character relationships thus unfold.

The transportation revolution brought about by the Industrial Revolution enabled people to traverse distances at an unprecedented speed. However, everything has two sides, the development of modern transportation has challenged the traditions of the existing social order, and beneath the advantages of speed and convenience lie the seeds of uncontrollable disaster. In *The Razor's Edge*, Sophie's life takes a dramatic turn due to a transportation-related incident. After marrying Bob, the couple lived modestly but shared a deep bond and had a child together—"I never saw two people so crazy about one another." The three of them were the picture of a happy family. However, sudden tragedy struck the family. One night, as they were driving back to Chicago in a small car, they were struck head-on by a large sedan driven by a drunk driver traveling at 80 miles an hour. In this traffic accident, Bob and their baby died instantly, while Sophie survived with a concussion and broken ribs. From then on, this model family was shattered. The high-speed car not only destroyed their family car—a physical accident—but also shattered her life, causing a mental breakdown that led herself be corrupted "she didn't care what became of her and flung herself into the horrible degradation of drink and promiscuous copulation to get even with life that had treated her so cruelly." Sophie suffered a mental breakdown after that. She numbed her pain with alcohol, drugs, and chaotic sexual relationships, only to ultimately be murdered and dumped naked into the sea. Through these plot points, Maugham reveals the devastating nature of modern transportation. Humans appear utterly insignificant in the face of modern machinery; the sheer power of modern transportation can effortlessly shatter people's peaceful lives, leaving indelible scars on their existence.

However, in Maugham's writings, transportation vehicles have dual characteristics. They can be the cause of breaking away from traditional life, but also a tool for achieving spiritual awakening in life. When the airplane was first invented, the inventors prioritized its economic value over human life: After inventing the airplane, the Wright brothers, seeking commercial gain, targeted the military as their primary market, making the United States the world's first major military power to field aircraft. In the first half of the 20th century, the extensive use of airplanes in the two World Wars made this high-speed spatial transportation medium a highly efficient killing tool[1]. In *The Razor's Edge*, 16-year-old Larry, driven by his love of flying, becomes a pilot during World War I with his uncle's help. However, during an aerial battle with enemy forces, his comrade Patsy crashes to his death while attempting to save him. The airplane—a flying machine representing the pinnacle of modern industry—should have been a symbol of humanity's conquest of the skies and pursuit of freedom, yet in war, it was reduced to an efficient machine for death. The extreme terror etched on Patsy's face in his final moments and the suddenness of his death left the young Larry with an irreparable psychological trauma. From then on, he often muttered, "The dead look so terribly dead when they're dead"[2]. The plane crash and the death of his comrades forced him to constantly ponder the meaning of evil and death throughout his life. After World War I ended, Larry refused to accept a stable job and planned to seek the meaning of life through traveling. Therefore, his fiancée Isabel canceled their engagement. He began to travel around various European countries. By working as a sailor on a ship traveling around the world, he eventually went to India to seek spiritual answers. Although *The Razor's Edge* truly focuses on Larry's spiritual exploration, his exploration is

inseparable from transportation. "Loaf" was the way he chose. "I've been loafing around, you know. I spent a year in Germany and some time in Spain and Italy. And I knocked about the East for a bit"[2]. Transportation occupied an important position in his loafing experience. He came to loaf across Europe by train to search for the answers to life, but after the exploration failed, he took a cruise for a wider movement, unlocking new experiences, and finally he reached India to find a glimmer of opportunity. Transportation helped the characters achieve the fluidity of physical experiences, that is, "the experience and mode of movement have an impact on the moving subject"[3]. Maugham used transportation to enable the characters to travel across regions, thereby advancing the narrative of the novel.

Just as it is pointed out in that "transportation is often an important part of the narrative space in novels, and is an intermediary for the imagination of tense spatiality." In Maugham's works, transportation not only plays the role of connecting the external geographical world with the characters' spiritual world, but also links different spaces together. As transportation moves, the geographical space in the novel constantly changes, and the characters' spiritual world is also expanded accordingly. Whether it is a car accident or an airplane crash that causes a sudden change in fate, or a voyage or a hike that opens up a new stage of life, these transportation methods break the continuity of the characters' original lives at key moments, causing new turns in the story's development and laying the foundation for the subsequent changes in the characters' fates.

3. The Social Functions of Transportation

"Transportation are among the most practical objects in human production and daily life, their intrinsic attributes and external forms are constantly evolving alongside historical development, cultural renewal, and technological progress"[4]. They document the process of technological development and reflect the trajectory of social change, while simultaneously serving as important repositories of historical memory. In *The Painted Veil*, the means of transportation are not merely physical mediums for facilitating the spatial movement of characters, they also reflect the development and changes of Chinese society in the early 20th century. Maugham uses various means of transportation such as ships, cars, sedan chairs, and rickshaws to present the historical picture of the alternation of the old and new eras in China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. The story setting of this book is in the early 20th century, when China was in an important stage of social transformation. As colonial forces continuously expanded into China, Western modern means of transportation gradually entered Chinese society. However, traditional transportations did not quickly exit the historical stage but coexisted with modern transportation for a relatively long period of time. Coastal cities like Hong Kong became important ports for Western colonization earlier, and their transportation systems also developed rapidly accordingly. During the time that Kitty and Walter lived in Hong Kong, the social environment they were exposed to already showed obvious modern characteristics. However, when they traveled from Hong Kong to Mei-ta-fu, the means of transportation along the way gradually completed the transition from modern to traditional.

At the beginning of the journey, just as in the work— "on the steamer that took them up the Western River"[5], the two completed the long-distance voyage by means of the steamship. It symbolized the speed and efficiency brought about by industrial civilization and also reflected the achievements of modern transportation development. As the journey continued to move deeper into the interior of China, modern transportation means gradually faded out of the movement space of the characters, while sedan chairs, small boats, and other traditional transportations once again became the main means of travel. This change in transportation also made the differences in modernization development among different regions of China more intuitively apparent at that time. "Mei-tan-fu? It's on a tributary of the Western River. We should

go up the Western River and then by chair”[5]. In the early 20th century, the inland areas of China had not undergone modern development. The roads were rough, the facilities were limited, and modern transportation was unable to function effectively. People could only rely on the sedan chairs or take small boats to travel along the river. The change in transportations reflects the changes in the spatial environment and also reveals the differences in the degree of modernization in different regions of China. Maugham did not directly describe the unbalanced development of Chinese society here. Instead, through the transformation of transportation methods, he created a sharp contrast between the modern colonial city and the traditional countryside, presenting to readers the historical reality of the interweaving of the old and new societies in China.

Changes in modes of transportation also reflect changes in social structure. The development of modern transportation has transformed the way people travel and has also redefined the social identities of different groups. As Marcy noted that there is a vast disparity in access to mobility between those at the two extremes of the social hierarchy[6]. In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham wrote, “She made her way through the crowded streets with their motor cars, rickshaws, and chairs, and the motley throng of Europeans and Chinese, to the offices of the P. & O. Company”[5]. This scene depicts a social landscape in modern China where old and new modes of transportation coexist. Different transportations correspond to different economic conditions and social statuses. That is, only the Chinese upper class and foreign colonizers owned automobiles, and passengers in rickshaws and palanquins were mostly from the upper class or the economically well-off middle class. While lower-class laborers could only serve as palanquin bearers or rickshaw pullers.

In Maugham’s works, the mode of transportation represented by walking reflects the living conditions of the lower social classes. In *On a Chinese Screen*, Maugham repeatedly described the Chinese people walking on the streets, who moved between markets, villages and docks, forming the most ordinary picture of life in Chinese society. In *The Painted Veil*, when Kitty rode in a sedan chair through the countryside, a large number of walking villagers gathered on both sides of the road, and the accompanying forced laborers also had to walk along. “The coolies with their loads straggled disorderly,; the soldiers of the escort shuffled along with a clumsy walk that covered five and twenty miles a day”[5]. Additionally, traditional transportations such as sedan chairs, rickshaws, and small boats, whose usage rights also reflect different levels of hierarchy. Although these types of transportation can meet people’s travel needs, they rely on human or animal power, embodying obvious social division of labor. People like Kitty and others from the upper class would ride in sedan chairs for their travels, but the task of moving was carried out by four sedan chair bearers. “They were borne in chairs, day after day”[5]. Within the same transportations, two social identities of “passengers” and “workers” were formed. The rickshaw puller ran on the city streets, the boatmen rowed boats across rivers, and the sedan chair bearers carried the sedan chairs up mountains and over hills. These laborers constituted an important part of the traditional transportation system, but they always served others’ movement. The “passengers” in traditional transportation were mostly from the upper-middle class, while the “workers” were lower class. In contrast, modern transportations like cars, trains, and ships are often associated with the upper class and Western colonizers. The development of machines made passengers no longer need human or animal power, saving effort while improving mobility efficiency. Therefore, transportation became a reflection of the hierarchical order of traditional society.

4. Transportation and the Interaction of Civilizations

In Maugham’s works, transportation not only serves the functions of facilitating the movement of characters and the establishment of social relationships, but also connects different cultural

spaces and becomes an important medium for the interaction of civilizations. Transportation is an extension of human capabilities. From traditional horse-drawn carriages and other animal-powered tools to modern means of transportation such as airplanes and cars, people use different devices to reach heights or speeds that human power cannot achieve. In traditional societies, geographical distance often limited the exchanges between different civilizations. In ancient times, exchanges between two countries often took several years. However, with the invention of modern means of transportation such as steamships, this limitation was broken. The time for cross-cultural transportation was shortened, and the distance was extended. The development of airplanes and trains “mechanized movement, rationalized time, and reduced space”^[7]. Therefore, the difficulty of communication between countries and regions was significantly reduced, and cross-cultural exchanges became increasingly frequent.

The significance of transportation goes beyond merely bringing people to unfamiliar places. More importantly, it creates realistic conditions for the encounter of different civilizations. In *The Razor's Edge*, Larry is able to leave the United States and Europe and travel to India to seek spiritual answers, which is based on the development of modern transportation. He “got a job as a deck hand on one of those pleasure-cruise ships that go around the world. It was going to the East and through the Panama Canal to New York.” Without the ability to cross the ocean with ships, such intercontinental travel could not have been achieved in a short period of time, and Larry would not have been able to reach India and truly come into contact with Eastern philosophy and Indian religious thoughts. Similarly, in *The Painted Veil*, it was precisely because of the convenience of modern transportation that Waddington, a Westerner, was able to come to China and come into contact with Zhuangzi's philosophical thoughts. He explained the Taoist thought as follows, “It is the Way and the Waygoer. It is the eternal road along which walk all beings, but no being made it, for itself is being. It is everything and nothing. From it all things spring, all things conform to it, and to it at last all things return. It is a square without angles, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form”^[5]. Transportation enabled Waddington to leave his original cultural environment and enter a new society. Taoist thought also changed his way of understanding the world, “allowing him to live calmly in the world with an open and detached attitude in the turbulent and death-ridden Mei-tan-fu”^[8]. Maugham did not merely describe transportation as a background element, instead, he used it to facilitate the characters' crossing of national boundaries and incorporate different civilizations into the same narrative space. Transportation not only achieved the transformation of geographical space but also created realistic conditions for the exchange between different cultures.

“The process of movement is also one of observation, communication and thinking, a process of constantly establishing new cognition”^[9]. Transportations have a certain degree of agency and, in the social network, they have a significant impact on the emotional changes and consciousness development of people. *The Painted Veil* has demonstrated the significance of transportations in the transformation of cultural space. The Hong Kong described at the beginning of the novel is a city with typical colonial characteristics, where Western lifestyles have coexisted with Chinese traditions for a long time, and Kitty has always lived in the social circle formed by the British colonizers. Later, she followed her husband to the inland of China, and as the transportation methods kept changing, the social environment along the way also changed. The continuous journey gradually made her move away from the familiar colonial culture and step by step enter the unfamiliar Chinese society. The transfer of spatial position not only changed the environment where Kitty was located, but also influenced the way she observed the outside world. When she first arrived in Mei-tan-fu, Kitty was still immersed in grief, “passing through the country with unseeing eyes”^[5], and as she came into contact with the traditional Chinese society in the local monastery, she began to rethink the relationship of life and responsibility. By the time of the return journey, Kitty was already able to “enjoy the idleness” and claimed that “it was pleasant after being cooped up in the city to see about her

the wide country”[5]. From this, it can be seen that the transportations not only brought about a simple change of location, but also enabled Kitty to change her way of observing the world in contact with Chinese civilization.

On a Chinese Screen, as a travelogue, chronicles Maugham’s experiences and observations while traveling throughout China. These experiences were also formed during the continuous movement. Different types of transportation such as ships, trains, and small boats took the author to new social environments, and his objects of observation also changed accordingly. He admired the high and powerful chants of the rivermen along the Yangtze River, looked at the tired and dusty camel caravans in Inner Mongolia, and observed the various aspects of life in opium dens. Due to the continuous changes in the travel routes, Maugham gradually broke through the observational limitations imposed by the fixed space and began to understand China in a more dynamic and fluid manner.

5. Conclusion

As an important recurring image in Maugham’s works, transportations are not merely a single physical carrier, but rather a literary image with rich literary functions. On one hand, transportations have a narrative function in literary works. The development of the storyline is inseparable from the transformation of space. In this context, vehicles are the prerequisite for the transformation, through which characters can enter the next journey of life and complete self-awareness and spiritual growth while moving in space, thereby promoting the development of the storyline. On the other hand, transportations are also witnesses of social changes. Different transportations correspond to different stages of social development. At the same time, the ownership and use of different vehicles are not completely equivalent, and the right to use different transportations also reflects the identity differences of different social classes. Finally, vehicles break the original geographical barriers and contribute to the interaction and communication between different civilizations, enabling Maugham to present the collision, exchange and reflection of Eastern and Western cultures through continuous travel writing. In today’s globalized world, the role of transportations is becoming increasingly important. The reflection on it in literary works can help to deepen the travel writing and cross-cultural research in the works, as well as highlights the practical significance of vehicles in the interaction of civilizations.

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