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ABSTRACT

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* is zombie novel written in post-apocalyptic style, which presents three days life experience of the hero Mark Spitz after a doomsday disaster. After the zombie plague destroyed modern civilization, a group of survivors including Mark himself are trying to clean up the chaos and rebuilding their homeland. In the post disaster life, survivors need to face several difficulties including the lack of production means, the irrecoverable social disorder, as well as the invasion of psychological trauma. In light of post-apocalypse writing style analysis, this paper attempts to analyze the image of "zombie plague" and its underlying metaphor, the state of the post-apocalyptic world along with the material and spiritual dilemma for survivors want to rebuild their lives, and finally discusses the hope for survivors to overcome their predicaments. As an excellent modern novel, *Zone One* has brought readers several enlightenments in social reconstruction, psychological trauma recovering, as well as human civilization transmission aspects.

Keywords: post-apocalypse; zombie; plague; colson whitehead.

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Zombie Plague and Post Disaster Reconstruction under the Post-Apocalypse Novel *Zone One*

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ABSTRACT

Colson Whitehead's Zone One is zombie novel written in post-apocalyptic style, which presents three days life experience of the hero Mark Spitz after a doomsday disaster. After the zombie plague destroyed modern civilization, a group of survivors including Mark himself are trying to clean up the chaos and rebuilding their homeland. In the post disaster life, survivors need to face several difficulties including the lack of production means, the irrecoverable social disorder, as well as the invasion of psychological trauma. In light of post-apocalypse writing style analysis, this paper attempts to analyze the image of "zombie plague" and its underlying metaphor, the state of the post-apocalyptic world along with the material and spiritual dilemma for survivors want to rebuild their lives, and finally discusses the hope for survivors to overcome their predicaments. As an excellent modern novel, Zone One has brought readers several enlightenments in social reconstruction, psychological trauma recovering, as well as human civilization transmission aspects.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The American writer Colson Whitehead's makes a detailed description of three days life after the plague disaster in his work *Zone One*, in which he mainly focuses on the process of the protagonist and other survivors of the zombie plague trying to rebuild their homes and their future life. The theme of this story belongs to the post-apocalypse novel, which gives a detailed description in the

destroyed world and the survivor's hard effort in rebuilding their homeland. Previous researchers mainly focused on the narrative techniques of the novel, while this paper focuses on the stylistic analysis of its' "post-apocalypse" theme, mainly analyzing the metaphor of "zombie" element used by Whitehead in his work, the mass culture in "zombie" image, as well as the author's views of doomsday reconstruction. Finally, the paper analyzes how the survivors could get out of the physical and spiritual predicament, how to face the damage, rebuild their homes, and keep inheriting human civilization.

The concept "post-apocalypse" refers to the time and space after apocalypse happened; it is exactly derived from the concept "apocalypse". The *Apocalypse* is the last book of the *New Testament*, contains prophetic descriptions of the scene to the Last Judgment's Day. According to *Apocalypse*, human beings' crimes are so unforgivable that God will eventually bring the Last Judgment to the earth. The ugly world will be totally destroyed by catastrophes, and only a few faithful Christians can get their eternal life.

And the post-apocalyptic fantasy is actually the secularized product of religious *Apocalypse* fantasy in the contemporary context. According to the definition of Professor Claire Curtis, "Post-apocalypse is a subgenre of science fiction. Compared with apocalypse novels which emphasize the scene when disasters happen, post-apocalypse novels mainly set in the doomsday world after the catastrophe, focusing on the scenes after the catastrophe and the thoughts and actions of the survivors, such as how survivors struggle in the ruined world, how they try to save the fragmented civilization, and what new ethics are people adopted after disaster."(Curtis, 9)

In the post apocalyptic world, social civilization no longer existed, and the survivors are in face of several difficulties such as food shortage, labor division confusion and psychological trauma. The background setting of *Zone One* is undoubtedly in line with the typical characteristics of post-apocalyptic novels in contemporary America. In the extremely cruel living environment after zombie catastrophe, this novel shows its' core themes of post disaster social reconstruction and psychological trauma overcome.

II. ZOMBIE PLAGUE: THE CAUSE OF WORLD DESTRUCTION IN ZONE ONE

In the novel *Zone One*, the cause of doomsday disaster is the outbreak of zombie plague. Under the great influence of this 21st century popular fictional virus of public imagination, most human beings were killed or mutated. Only a small number of survivors, including the hero Mark Spitz, are lucky enough to escape from the zombie infection. Zombies, the fictional biochemical disaster which is extremely popular in the 21st century's mass culture, especially among the American people. As a kind of literal image, it not only meets the public need for the pleasure of spiritual terrorist stimulation, but also undertakes the function of cultural metaphor. The religious legends, ethics and ecological hypothesis involved in zombie stories not only include the proposition about human nature which has been eternally discussed in literal aspects, but also have distinct characteristics of the times.

The concept of "zombies" represents a despairing and frightening image in most people's mind. Just as anthropologist Elizabeth Bird once analyzed, the image of "vampire" in popular culture carries a romantic attraction to most readers, while "zombie" conveys a rather disturbing feeling. Zombie's life had already come to its' end, this fictional trait is implicitly consistent with the modern public sentiments, for many people feel that the vitality of this world is also dying out. In brief, zombies represent a depressing image. The prevalence of zombie culture in the United States has an inseparable relationship with the deterioration of the earth's environment, the irresponsible scientific experiments and the moral

decay driven by interests. In the 21st century, human society is facing more and more biochemical crises, social and economic turbulence and escalating terrorist attacks. These potential threats to the stability of life have greatly shaken people's sense of security. "Zombie" image is exactly the concentrated reflection of this public anxiety. In addition, this kind of disaster has become more imaginable with the development of modern biotechnology, thus its' terrorist image in the literal description is extremely real to contemporary readers.

In life and death struggle with zombies, characters are exposed in an almost desperate environment, thus their nature is quite easy to show up. People's moral concepts will gradually fade and disintegrate with the increasing crisis of the situation; the main contradiction will therefore shift to the interest conflicts between survivors. Those who still survived will tend to snatch for living resources and power. As a result, the internal contradictions in human groups will become more acute. Just as Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis school had said, the selfish "Id" will be exposed step by step under the crisis environment. At this time, compared with the zombie's threatening, the interests' conflicts between survivors are even more horrible. Therefore, contemporary zombie themed works often show the creator's reflection on human nature and the condemnation of human's greedy desire. From this perspective, zombie themed works are also metaphorical for "human nature".

In addition, in many zombie works, the common way of zombie virus transmission is "gnawing". By infecting other people around, the plague scale will expand step by step. To some extent, this infective mode is corresponding to the way plague and virus spread in real life. The confrontation between human beings and zombies and in the novel is essentially indicated the contradiction between human beings and viruses in reality. Therefore, the "zombie" image can be said to originate from people's exaggerated imagination of the epidemic disaster in real life. Besides, it also carries the hypothesis and thinking of its' writer for the real disasters' prevention.

III. THE POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD STATE IN ZONE ONE

At the beginning of the novel *Zone One*, author Whitehead using the protagonist Mark's perspective shows to readers a scene in which the doomsday survivors try to complete their post-disaster reconstruction task and clean up the safe area in New York. In that chaotic world of ruins, many things have lost their original value: Such things as sculptures, entertainment facilities and some luxury accessories, which were once popular with the public, have become worthless. The former mode of division in production and some conventional lifestyles has now become meaningless. "This was the fourth day of rain, Friday afternoon, and a conditioned part of him submitted to end-of-the-week lassitude, even if Fridays had lost their meaning." (Whitehead, 10) The former social order has already disintegrated. After Armageddon, it is obviously impossible for things to return to the old ways. This "collapse" situation is actually the biggest characteristic of post Apocalypse style. In the world after the end, many things that people used to take for granted and regarded indispensable had become less important. The whole living environment around the survivors became lifeless, and there are only relics left by the former civilization. The whole world has turned upside down after the great calamity: Some places once in a high status now become the most dangerous area; while some "civilian gathering zone", once being regarded poor and shabby places, now become the major strategic command post.

The ten sweeper units were crowded into a dumpling joint on Baxter Street, the restaurant the Lieutenant staked out for his briefings. All the Cos had annexed Chinatown turf for briefings and strategy sessions, spreading out from Wonton Main at Broadway and Canal according to their disparate appetites. General Summers, for example, claimed an elegant and cavernous dim sum palace on Bowery, rescuing it from the enlisted men's amusements. For months, the establishment had been used as a drag-racing track, the dim sum carts caroming across the linoleum. Friday nights became quite bleak when Summers put a stop to the competitions, until the

marines relocated their arena to the roller rink. (Whitehead, 13)

In this post disaster world, many of the original "rules" no longer exist; many common zones have given their latest emergency uses. The deep meaning behind these changes is that lots of human achievements now have been lost their original significance and value. In other words, all the civilization achievements and social systems that people have accumulated in the long historical development can be eliminated in a very short time and become meaningless under the intervention of powerful disaster forces. These "remnants and ruins of civilization" always appear very expressive in the world environment which has already been destroyed. Their dilapidation and irreparability reflected the fragility of human civilization in the face of catastrophes. These absurd and decadent descriptions of the post-disaster environment can also bring a strong sense of helplessness and powerlessness to readers; arouse their anxiety about future life. Through the post-apocalypse fictional scene, readers can vividly imagine the dangerous situation of human beings in the future; thereby reflect on those potential problems that may threaten the survival of mankind.

Modern post-apocalypse novel can also be regarded as a literature reflection of contemporary life. The doomsday imagination in current writers' works is rooted in the modern social reality with frequent crises, reflecting the real sense of anxiety for survival. Wars, natural disasters, ethnic conflicts, terrorist attacks and other current issues make modern people subconsciously feel that the so called "doomsday" may not be out of the reach. These worries are reflected in a fictional way in the latter-day post-apocalypse novels, its popularity in mass culture shows a public anxiety emotion towards future life.

Through the imaginative description of the end of the world, post-apocalypse novels reflect the writer's anxiety about the ultimate fate of mankind. It undertakes the important mission of reflecting on history, criticizing reality, as well as finding future salvation methods. This literary

intention shows obviously clear in novel *Zone One*: Whitehead does not give much description of the bloody scene in the zombie disaster, instead he writes in full detail about the reconstruction work after the disaster, which mainly focuses on the thoughts and actions of the plague survivors, especially of the hero Mark. What is Mark thinking about when cleaning the safe zone, how he gets along with his colleagues and superiors, and how he looks upon the world's future hope---the newborn triplets are the real focus of the narrate. It is exactly these contents of the novel that express author's deep thinking about how could survivors gradually work through the devastating disaster and rebuild a new human society.

IV. THE PLIGHT OF DOOMSDAY SURVIVORS IN ZONE ONE

In the novel *Zone One*, it's not so easy for survivors to start a new life. They need to face the dual dilemma in both material and spiritual aspects. From the material level, after being attacked by zombies, the division of labor in human society has almost completely collapsed. As a result, commodities and living resources cannot be produced and distributed in the old ways. Food and clothing are in serious shortages. In New York, the most precious and popular food after the disaster is corn. In order to protect these foods, the corn field guards show great vigilance to all the suspicious ones who came close to the fields, afraid that they may snatch away these survival materials :

They pushed up like weeds. "Back away from the fucking corn, dude." The two guards pointed their weapons at his head, at two of the five recommended skel dropping points. ...The crops were important. The crops separated today's iteration of humanity from last year's. He waved the rifles away and gaped. (Whitehead, 20)

This kind of situation is obviously unimaginable before the zombie disaster. The guards' rude and preventive attitude obviously shows the difficulty of survival in the post disaster world. Not only the food, but also the clothes are in serious shortages. "Socks. Yes, socks. The prospect of a nice new

three-pack of athletic socks never failed to hearten Mark Spitz." (Whitehead, 13) Obviously, even in the once thrived Manhattan, it's not easy for survivors to get enough clean clothes. Basic material needs are hard to be guaranteed in time due to the shortage of material resources and manpower, which is indeed an urgent issue for the survivors who are working hard every day to rebuild their homes.

Not only the material living conditions become difficult after the plague, the spiritual challenges survivors have to face are also extremely severe. The psychological trauma caused by zombie attacks and the destruction of their homes affects the mental state of almost every survivor in this novel. Everyone is more or less exposed to persistent negative emotions, feeling numb, afraid, vulnerable and lonely, along with the feeling that their lives are divided into two distinct states before and after the disaster. Traumatic memories continue to invade their minds, causing them to experience the intense pain of life fragmentation, relatives leaving and the world's great changes in the struggle of memory and forgetting. Just as the scholar Swinney once commented, "*Zone One's* elements of literary fiction present as long, dry passages that appear to not move the plot forward." (Swinney, 29) This chaotic and incoherent narrative mode is exactly the writing techniques that Whitehead uses to indicate the survivors' psychological trauma. Readers can always see the protagonist Mark talking to his colleagues during the daily cleaning work, with his inner mind actually absented in recalling the fragmentary memories before zombie disaster. This absence of mind, as he admitted in his own mental monologue "Touching these artifacts nauseated him now, in the latest manifestation of his PASD." (Whitehead, 20) is a manifestation of his personal psychological trauma.

On the cognitive level, this kind of personal trauma often tears down a person's defense mechanism, making the injured lose the ability to respond to the external world at any time, thus becoming numb as well as losing emotional sustenance to the real world. "You never heard Mark Spitz say 'When this is all over 'Once things

get back to normal' or other sentiments of that brand, because he refused them. ...This is what he had learned: If you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them." (Whitehead, 5)

In the sentence above, Mark still seems to be very active devoting into the post disaster construction work, but his inner feelings have already become rigid and numb, for he has lost his positive future expectations. He just literally "survived" day by day, while not caring if any good or bright things will happen in the future. His life is now only a continuation of the time "quantity", already lost the "quality" it should have. In other words, he no longer has spiritual motivation to actively recreate a new life, but becomes a spiritual "zombie". This kind of mental state without inner vitality can be very dangerous. Once people fall into inner numbness and depression for a long time, he is likely to lose the life direction and become empty inside. The inner emptiness will eventually lead to a subconscious self-abandonment, as well as given up to the future.

At the same time, psychological trauma also has a certain social nature. When the society or the whole collective encounters a historical disaster, each individual's pain will finally evolve into collective trauma. Collective trauma will bring a kind of destruction to the public relationship. In other words, collective trauma is the embodiment of individual trauma at the social level. Although it is less powerful than individual trauma, it has imperceptibly broken the ties between people and destroyed people's collective identity. Sociologist Kai Erikson points out that "collective trauma damages the bond that connects people and the society. The damage works slowly, even unconsciously, into the consciousness of those who suffer from the disaster." (Erikson, 185)

With the broken of social relationships, people gradually realize that the collective is no longer acts as an effective source of public support, their deep emotional connection to the social group gradually disappeared. The concept of "self" and "others" continues to be alive, although something inside may be changed forever by the damage. But the concept of "us" no longer exists in survivor's

mind as important as it used to be any more. This collapse of the sense of collective spirit and destiny symbiosis will eventually make people lose the fundamental power of unity and cooperation, which in turn causes the national collapse, social collapse and even the basic partnership collapse. In the long run, the lack of collective consciousness will further disintegrate the human collective that has already been hit by the plague.

V. THE RECONSTRUCTION HOPE OF THE POST-APOCALYPTIC WORLD IN ZONE ONE

Faced with such a devastating blow of the zombie plague, all survivors are urgently in need of rebuilding a new social order, in order to continue new production along with reviving their morale and social spirit. To achieve these goals, they have to start from both material aspects and spiritual aspects: On the one hand, they should try to gather as many human and material resources as possible; On the other hand, they need to overcome their psychological trauma so as to regain the inner strength of living a positive life.

At the beginning of the civilization reconstruction, the social structure is undoubtedly simple and flat. The mode of resource supply is extremely incomplete, thus the division of responsibilities in social production is blurred. In terms of this "simplified" social operation, it is undoubtedly a quick and efficient choice for all survivors to gather together and form a provisional autonomous committee. The provisional autonomous committee can organize its every member to gather up all their existing means of production, as well as the labor force to maximize the value of all available resources, so as to ensure that they can maintain the operation of the temporary mini sized society after the disaster as smoothly as possible each day. Under the arrangement of the provisional autonomous committee, the survivors are divided into several teams to carry out the basic work of scavenging waste, clearing obstacles, repairing machinery and providing medical assistance. Due to this proper arrangement, the post disaster society gradually has its' certain division of labor order once again. And the division of proper laboring order is

exactly the beginning of making a social community full of vitality.

And in terms of psychological trauma, psychology generally believes that "exposing the trauma" is the first step to cure it. Therefore, the protagonist of trauma must face up to the consequences of terrible disaster rather than avoid to admit it's happening. When the protagonist starts to take action and thinks about how to deal with future difficulties, he actually has a stronger spiritual motivation to open up a new life, as well as a much more positive "living desire". The strong desire for a better life and the great driving force of survival is the important factors that urge Mark and other survivors to move forward. It can be seen that in order to get out of the spiritual dilemma, traumatized must accept the fact that the occurrence of unfortunate events has already caused irreversible consequences to their lives, afterwards reorganize their mental states and find ways to adjust their lifestyle in order to connect with the new outlook on reality.

Jon Allen proposed his psychological point of view in *Coping With Trauma*, that "It is the subjective experience of objective events that lead to psychological trauma...The more you believe that you are in danger, the more serious your trauma will be....From a psychological point of view, the baseline of trauma is the overwhelming emotion and complete helplessness." (Allen, 32) From this perspective, whether the disaster sufferer can repair the harm of trauma in time also depends on whether he can find new emotional sustenance and survival hope as soon as possible. In the novel *Zone One*, the image "child" is the survivor's future hope of their broken world. "The American Phoenix has its own child celebrities, the Tromanhauser Triplets, who were born to the final member of a band of survivors ... The triplets embody the promise of reproductive futurism—that growth is inevitable." (Sorenson, 40) It is the presence of these children that gives plague survivors hope for the continuation of life in the future. The new born make the "old one" believed that they have the responsibility and obligation to rebuild a good living environment for children, to make sure these children and their descendants can live a much more secure life in

the future. They want these children to continue human civilization, keep inheriting their culture and treasure from generation to generation. By this time, most survivors have the common goal of uniting and striving together to protect the newborn, thus gradually radiate the enthusiasm and vitality of starting to build the city.

Contemporary American post-apocalypse novels tend to adopt the plot mode of "from the doomsday to the rebirth". At the end of the story, writers always indicate that there are some future hopes for the remaining human groups to gain new vitality. This plot pattern can be regarded as a reproduction of Christ's "from crucifixion to resurrection" experience in the Bible. The plot setting of the novel *Zone One* is just in line with this. Despite of all the difficulties, the people who survived after disaster still try their best to gather together, support each other, and hold on the responsibility of inheriting mankind civilization. At the end of the novel, even Mark, who has been constantly trapped into numbness and cynicism emotion because of psychological trauma, finally realizes "You have to learn how to swim sometime." (Whitehead, 73) So in the end he chose to "open the door" and walk out to face the fragmentary post-disaster world, to give his own hearty help for the remaining human civilization to get reborn.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the post-apocalyptic novel *Zone One*, zombie plague survivors represented by protagonists Mark Spitz are striving to achieve the rebirth of human civilization through the daily post-disaster construction work and the overcome of psychological trauma. After suffering from the zombie attack, they have been hammered on both material and spiritual aspects. The former social labor division is fragmented and difficult to maintain, meanwhile most people's spirit has become numb and passive. Many of them even lose the motivation of moving to a new life. This negative mental state of escaping will gradually deprive the positive motivation power of the whole human nation to continue developing and multiply, furthermore leads to the danger of human race extinction. Therefore, the remaining

human beings in the novel need to accept the irreversible consequences of the zombie plague, face up all kinds of difficulties at present, and strive to invest in new jobs to establish new emotional ties with the surrounding new collective. So as to obtain new hope of life and help human civilizations continue to inherit. This typical plot setting of "reconstruction after destruction" carries the author's hypothetical thinking about the crack of doom and social reconstruction, and is a literary means to reflect on the living method of contemporary society as well as human beings' future fate. Through the novel, readers can reflect, criticize, explore and preview the future, thus get some enlightenment through thinking, finally find out a more reasonable and intelligent attitude towards life.

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