New Changes in the Traditional Image of the Saints in European Literature in the 20th Century

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Abstract. Because of the profound influence of religion, especially Christianity, on the development of European literature, the saint has always been an important figure in traditional literary works. European literature has gone through different stages of development, and the image and status of the saint in literature are constantly undergoing new changes. As European society entered the 20th century, a number of social and intellectual changes took place, which also led to many new changes in literature. This paper focuses on new changes resulting from the deconstruction and reconstruction of the image of the saints in 20th-century European literature. Thus, efficient approaches are needed to explore the definition of saints in traditional European literature, show new changes in the image of saints, and analyse the reasons for these changes. The results obtained in this research include the definition of the original concept of sainthood, the new changes in the image in the 20th century, and the reasons for the changes. These results suggest that the figure of the saint in 20th-century literature transcends the confines of traditional religious contexts and exists more as an absolutely sacred individual.

Keywords: Changes in characterization; saints; 20th-century European literature.

1. Introduction

Religion has always had a profound influence on the development of literature in Western Europe. As Christianity was the first religion to establish itself on a large scale in Europe, Christian literature occupied an important place in the initial stages of European literary development. From biblical to ecclesiastical to medieval literature, the saints have been the inevitable subjects of depiction. The basic concept and meaning of sainthood have been clarified in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, setting the general tone for the portrayal of the saints in subsequent literary works.

Ecclesiastical literature, whose source is the Bible, was a very important genre in literature. Since the birth of ecclesiastical literature, religious saints have become important literary figures, providing a variety of themes and subjects for literary creation. There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of the image of the saints in ecclesiastical literature.

The Middle Ages considered Christian Europe and, specifically, Christian Western Europe to be the centre of the civilised world, so medieval literature actually refers to medieval European literature. In "The Saint in Medieval Literature" by S. C. Aston, the biographies of saints are a rather universal subject in medieval literature, especially in non-Latin texts. Religious impulses were conducive to inspiring literary creation so that images of saints in medieval literature were often based on orthodox religious contexts [1]. Moreover, as literature has developed from the Middle Ages to the modern era, the definition of religion has undergone a series of changes in connotation and social status, and the image of the saints has also changed. Previous studies have provided important information on the transformation of the image of the saints. In the twentieth century, European society was faced with the transition from tradition to modernity and the emergence of various new trends, which led to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the meaning of religion by modernity, with different new influences on literary creation, the definition of saints was also deconstructed and broadened, acquiring a broad connotation of an absolute sacred individual. Nevertheless, there is limited research available that focuses specifically on the transformation of the definition and the image of saints in the twentieth century.

Although extensive research has been carried out on new changes in European literature in the 20th century, far too little attention has been paid to the transcendence of the saints over the scope of religion and the emergence of their new images in literature. This paper aims to contribute to this growing area of research by offering some insights into the new saints in 20th-century Western European literature. This paper is composed of four sections, including the definition of the original concept of saints, saints in traditional biblical, ecclesiastical, and medieval literature, the changing context of 20th-century European literary creation, and the specific image of saints in European literature in the 20th century.

2. Traditional Images of the Saints

2.1. The Original Definition and Image of the Saints

To explore the transformation of the image of the saints over time, it is first necessary to clarify the most original conceptual definition of the word saint itself. "Beloved of God, Called to Be Saints", the word saint in English is derived from the Latin word Sanctus, the Greek equivalent of ἅγιος, which means holy [2]. Sanctus was originally a proprietary term in the ancient Roman religion, but Christianity inherited the term and passed it on as a Christian term, which led to the use of the word saint in other religions or cultures as a translation of a similar term representing a person considered by the general public to be of special virtue and sanctity [3]. Saints in Hinduism, for example, are considered to be people of transcendent virtue and divinity. The Taoist school of Chinese culture believes that the ideal monarch can be called a saint. Saints, on the other hand, are defined in Western Christianity in an exclusively religious, circumscribed, and narrow sense. A Christian saint is a figure who is recognised as holy by the Church in Christianity.

Although the establishment of saints appears in Christianity, the understanding and recognition of saints are not consistent across churches, and some disagree altogether. At present, the institution of sainthood is found only in the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the Orthodox Church, and more, and almost all Protestant Christian denominations do not see the necessity to canonise people on earth, as it is not in accordance with the teaching of the Bible. Catholic and Orthodox saints, when approved, are granted official ecclesiastical recognition through the coronation process of the Catholic Church or the eulogy process of the Orthodox Church and are thus worshipped by the public. Protestantism, on the other hand, does not have any rituals for the canonisation of living people. Whichever denomination whose teachings deal with the concept of the Christian saint gives a clear and unmistakable definition of the saint and has its own criteria for defining the saint, and since these denominations all belong to Christianity, the criteria of these denominations do not differ much from each other. Generally speaking, the saints of the Christian religion are considered to have a direct connection with God and can lead others to God's way. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, saints are those who have died and are now in heaven with Christ; they lived holy lives on earth, had high moral virtues, and were canonised and venerated as saints by the Church after their death. To be a saint in the Catholic sense of the word is not a restricted status; a saint can be anyone who has lived on earth with the faith of following and drawing near to God, committed to perfecting his or her own virtues, dedicated to transforming the lower human nature in him or her into a higher divine nature through faith and works, approved by God, having received the love and grace of God, which is usually manifested in the form of earthly miracles, and therefore after death entering heaven to be with God. It is important to note that the concept of sainthood and the title of the saint are not identical: the concept of sainthood can be applied to any individual who meets the criteria for saints, while the title of a saint must be obtained through a series of rites of the Church. In summary, Christian saints generally have these qualities: they have a devout Christian faith, live strictly according to Christian doctrine, possess universal virtues, value spiritual sustenance over material life, have had unusual spiritual religious experiences, and are able to act as role models or protectors to give spiritual strength to their followers. Moreover, saints are more often considered to be able to communicate with God because of the divine grace they have received, and the faithful can ask the saints to pray to God for

humanity. From this perspective, saints often act as spiritual bridges in religion that are recognised by the Church as being able to communicate with God and bring grace to the wider community [4].

2.2. The archetypal image of the saints: in medieval literature

Because of the profound influence of religion, saints have always been a recurring figure in literary works. The earliest literary depiction of the saints is undoubtedly in the Bible. In the Old Testament, saint means a group of people who have an exclusively sacred purpose in the eyes of God, in this case, while other peoples worshipped pagan gods or idols created by man, the Jewish people were called by God to believe in the one true God, which set them apart from other peoples in the eyes of God as saints dedicated to the worship and service of God. In the New Testament, the word saint literally means "holy one". It portrays a group of believers who, through confession of sin and baptism, can transcend the secular world and commit themselves to the service of God [5]. The images of saints in the Bible are usually the highest reference standard for saints, that is, the closest to the divinity that man can achieve. These saints gain the power to overcome evil by believing in God and obeying God's commandments. Most importantly, the saints themselves are the reflection of God in the world, and the image of the saints is the projection of God's image in the world. The fifth book of the New Testament, "Acts of the Apostles," describes the activities of the apostles of Christ in Jerusalem and other areas after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ [6]. These apostles are the earliest images of saints. St. Peter and St. John, for example, preached to many people in Jerusalem, performed healings, cast out evil spirits, and raised the dead. At first, many Jews followed Christ and were baptised, but followers of Jesus began to be persecuted more and more by other Jews, such as St. Stephen, who was accused of blasphemy and stoned to death. Here is an important turning point in portraying the image of the saints, the saints start from a huge, general group to specific, named individual images, such as St. Peter and St. John. Literature has since begun to portray specific people as saints.

Later, the most typical embodiment of the image of saints in Christian literature is in ecclesiastical literature. Ecclesiastical literature is the orthodox literature prevailing in medieval Europe, and it is based on the Bible. Its genres include Bible stories, hagiography, prayers, hymns, religious dramas, and more. The main authors are church monks. Ecclesiastical literature advocated the virtues of Christians, asceticism, and afterlife ideas, mainly based on dreams, allegories, and symbols. At this time, ecclesiastical literature expanded and extended "Acts of the Apostles", recreating it as a literary genre devoted to the life and work of the apostles of Jesus. Written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, these ecclesiastical literary works mainly describe Jesus' twelve apostles as saints. The saints in these early works generally have divine powers and can perform real miracles, although these depictions are often supernatural, such as St. Andrew depicted in "Acts of Andrew", in addition to the usual miracles like the resurrection of the dead and the healing of the blind, he can calm ferocious beasts, calm storms, and defeat armies alone [7]. At the same time, these saints attached great importance to morality, and they also paid attention to the moral education of the local people in the process of travelling around to preach. Nevertheless, because ecclesiastical literature mainly reproduces the contents of the Bible, it is highly formulaic and conceptualised, its artistic value is low, and the images of saints portrayed are relatively single. Initially, they were martyrs who died during the conflict between Christianity and the official religion of Rome, then they were developed into religious activists who were mainly ascetic monks and ascetic monks, and the depiction of the saints was relatively thin. The saints are inspired by the Holy Spirit; on the one hand, they practice abstinence and asceticism in the world, and on the other hand, they go to various places to preach, serving God for life and possessing absolute divinity.

During the medieval period, the popularity of the stories of the saints increased greatly. The saints in medieval literature are examples of the ideal Christian, and they provide a reference for how to live according to the tenets of the Christian faith. In medieval literature, saints usually serve as patron saints of monasteries to guide Christians closer to God [8]. At this time, the images of saints are still depicted as having supernatural powers, and they can still bring various miracles to believers. Due to

the frequent wars in medieval Europe, the miracles and martyrdom of the saints became mostly related to war. For example, Roman soldiers were sent by Constantine the Great to put down a rebellion in Phrygia, a kingdom in what is now Turkey, and witnessed St. Nicholas saving three innocent men from execution. The soldiers appealed to the saint to save them, and St Nicholas appeared to Constantine the Great in a dream and persuaded him to spare the soldiers. In short, up to this stage of literary development, the God to whom the saint was linked was still the Christian God in the absolute sense, and the image of the saint in literature was still confined to the traditional definition of religion; it was also inseparable from the religious background and context, as well as from the so-called 'orthodox' status.

3. The Changing Image of the Saints in the 20th Century

3.1. Changes in Various Aspects of 20th-Century Europe

There is no doubt that from the end of the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century, the image of the saints has undergone various changes and reconstructions in different literary works, and the identity of the saints has gradually become more and more diverse. The portrayal of the saints has become less and less bound and restricted by religion, especially Christianity itself, and has become freer and freer in literary creation. As European society entered the twentieth century, the context and background of literary production experienced an unprecedented impact of modernity, with a growing shift away from the pursuit of the canon towards an interest in the unconscious. European literary works of this era reflect a greater irrationality, an increased sense of crisis and urgency, a questioning of the psychological stability of the individual personality of the nineteenth century, and a profound questioning of all philosophical or religious solutions to human problems [9]. Religion has also been deconstructed and reconstructed due to the high impact of modernity. Changes in the definition, concept, composition and social status of religion have changed the influence of religion on literature, and the images of saints have also surpassed the rules in traditional Christian literature, becoming more flexible and richer in literary works. At the same time that Christianity became more secular in the 20th century, state-promoted atheism brought persecution to many Orthodox and other Christians in communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Many Orthodox Christians came to Western Europe and America, resulting in a great increase in contact between Eastern and Western Christianity. The integration of ideas among different denominations and a series of reforms carried out by the Roman Catholic Church for modernisation has made the various canons of Christianity less strict. More and more believers with modern thoughts have put forward a new modern understanding of God and religion itself. War and industrialisation seem to devalue the individual. Global communication makes the world a smaller place. The dizzying pace of change requires writers to respond to this new world in a variety of ways. The rapid change of European society in the 20th century led European society into a new world that was different from the previous centuries. The transition from tradition to modernity in the world was accelerated at this time, and the change of thought was also reflected everywhere. Literary creation has ushered in wave after wave of ideological emancipation. Religion is no longer a lofty and untouchable sacred subject but has become more of a tool for writers to understand the outside world and explore their inner world. Furthermore, neo-positivism, developed in the late 1920s, asserts that only statements that are verifiable by direct observation or logical proof are meaningful. Religion, especially the unobservable and unprovable supernatural characteristics of saints' miracles, has become the main object of criticism by some philosophers. Existentialism believes that the starting point of philosophical thinking must be a personal experience and that religious and ethical requirements cannot satisfy the desire for personal identity; both theistic and atheistic existentialism tend to resist mainstream religious movements [10]. The birth and development of these modern philosophical trends have completely deconstructed religion to a certain extent, making religion lose its original sanctity, and philosophical trends will also affect literary creation, prompting writers to reflect on whether the only God exists in their works, even if it exists, then what is the definition and function of God? Is divinity

the supreme model that human nature always pursues? Can the absolute definition and connotation of God transcend religion and become an independent spiritual phenomenon? These new questions raised by modern European literature have prompted writers to re-explore themes related to divinity in another way. As a result, a group of "new saints" have emerged as independent holy individuals beyond the definition of primitive religions.

3.2. New Variations in the Image of the Saints in Literature: three types

The images of saints in the 20th century presented a new look in literary works. The biggest feature of the images of new saints is that they get rid of the religious background and context necessary for the creation of images of traditional saints. New saints are no longer even limited to individuals who meet the sacred standards of religious doctrines but are presented as purely divine individuals. Absolute divinity no longer refers to the virtues and divinity defined by Christianity but any idea that transcends the mundane world, pursuing ultimate liberation, tranquillity, and the idea of being close to the absolute spirit in any way. As a consequence, the image of saints has been greatly extended, and any image that embodies this kind of modern absolute divinity can be called a new saint. European literature in the 20th century paid more attention to the analysis of the characteristics of the inner spiritual world, which also led to the emergence of extremely personalised and transcendent images of new saints in a large number of literary works.

The images of these new saints can be roughly divided into three categories: the first category is the tragic characters who continue the traditional saint images and imitate the "martyrdom" of traditional saints, but the martyrdom is not purely religious, but a more secular and more profound one. The second category is images that absorb the individual heroism in Romanticism and have a more upbeat and agitated overall tone. What these images of saints pursue is not the ultimate goal of sanctification, and they pay more attention to the process of pursuing divinity, during which they are constantly improving themselves. The third category is the least traditional, the most modern figure of the new saint, some of whom even disdain traditional morality. They approach the absolute spirit by abandoning the world and tradition, so they are completely unsuitable for the common judgment standards of the world. The first type of image is typified by Alissa, the heroine of La Porte Étroite by André Gide. "A la question de savoir ce que l'âme peut préférer au bonheur, Alissa répond: la sainteté" [11]. Jerome, the hero, and Alissa, the heroine, made an implied promise of undying affection for each other during their childhood. However, in response to her mother's infidelity and strong religious impressions, Alissa developed a rejection of human love. Jerome is determined to become virtuous enough to be worthy of Alissa. However, Alissa eventually interprets "la porte étroite" (the narrow gate) as precluding any earthly happiness that she and Jerome could share in marriage. Her excessive faith in God and religious virtue not only cost her love but caused her to eventually become depressed and eventually die in Paris after a long illness [12]. This is almost a traditional martyrdom, abstaining, and asceticism for the sake of religion, renouncing all her earthly happiness in order to get closer to God and ascend to heaven. However, the intention of this image in literature is no longer, as in traditional Christian literature, to celebrate the asceticism and virtue of the saints and to exalt such a life to all believers but to question the necessity of religion through the tragic end of this beautiful image. Is the task of pursuing virtue and God and abandoning the earthly world a genuine calling of the Holy Spirit or a psychological illness imposed on mankind? When the illusory heaven conflicts with the practical life of the present, which should the saints choose? In traditional Christian literature, the answer is undoubtedly extremely certain, yet it is the emergence of the image of the new saints that offers a glimmer of possibility for other answers. There are many typical examples of the second type of image, which is laced with heroism and has been popular for centuries since the rise of Romantic literature. In the European literature of the 20th century, the particular social context made these figures more focused on self-reflection than on simply fulfilling their heroic mission and winning glory for themselves. For example, in the play "Man and Superman" written by George Bernard Shaw with the theme of Don Juan, the protagonist John Tanner is driven by vitality to improve his revolutionary ideas and strengthen his revolutionary beliefs constantly [13].

This drama embodies a strong sense of the process. People choose a definite road and are constantly pushed by various factors to improve themselves on the road. In the end, they become "superman" instead of sanctification. Such an image of "on the road" can be regarded as the image of new saints. What they have in common with traditional saints is that they are not born perfect, but they are approaching and finally reaching their divine goal through a specific process. Other similar images include Jean-Christophe in "Jean-Christophe" written by Romain Rolland. The protagonist has struggled all his life, from the awakening of his musical talent in childhood to his contempt and resistance to the aristocracy in his youth to his career pursuit and success in adulthood, and finally to the lofty state of spiritual tranquillity [14]. Therefore, the biggest feature of the second type of image of new saints is that they have a transformation process. Only through this process can saints truly complete their lives. The emergence of the third type of saint images is accompanied by the rise of modernist literary ideas such as Dadaism and surrealism literature. Surrealists believe that dreams are a way to understand the absolute self that is not affected by the outside world and are the most inspiring. As a category of the surreal and a symbol of the repressed world, the dream helps to synthesise the imaginary and the real into a 'surreal'. The main members of surrealist literature were originally differentiated from Dadaism, so they all had a tendency to oppose the alienation of traditional culture and capitalist society fiercely. The initial reason for the formation of surrealism was that writers were dissatisfied with the noisy resistance of Dada-style nihilism and wanted to use surreal pursuits to liberate human nature, thereby reforming society and life. Surrealism takes the promotion of unconsciousness and irrationality as a breakthrough in reforming life and society and puts absolute spiritual liberation and freedom of thought at the top of the value system, which has given birth to the third category of anti-traditional saints who seek to emancipate their minds and transcend worldly standards of judgment. Nadja by André Breton has greatly expanded the boundaries of the image of the third type of saint. The image of the new saint is not limited to the gender or identity of the saint at all, and even the elements that constitute the image of the saint are incomplete. The reader cannot know the complete fate of this character, and the character itself is not the narrator. The reader can only piece together a vaguely divine image of madness from the dreamlike fragments of another narrator. "Je suis l'âme errante" ("I am the wandering soul") [15]. When the narrator asks about Nadja's life experience, she answers like this. Nadja pursues absolute freedom of thought and soul from beginning to end. She asks to abandon all the norms and shackles imposed on herself by others, family, and society and even asks the narrator, as a lover, not to impose any thoughts and actions against her wishes on her. At the same time, Nadja also has a strange artistic taste. She releases her soul in art, especially painting, and communicates with the absolute spirit. However, the pursuit of absolute freedom also brought about Nadja's mental breakdown. Pursuing ultimate freedom and absolute spiritual beauty, even at the cost of self-destruction, completely transcends the secular world; this reflects a deconstructed, absurd divinity. The mind first climbs to the peak of absurdity and then sees the face of God suddenly revealed. The image of the third type of new saints is the most anti-traditional and also possesses the strongest divinity. Just like the saints in Christian literature can only embark on the road of sanctification after hearing the calling of the Holy Spirit, the formation of anti-traditional saints is also unintentional. Random and full of conditions, the individual must be full of divinity from birth, so the image of this saint is more like the apostle chosen by God, they roam in the world, and they seem out of place in the world because they are full of divinity.

The particular social circumstances of the twentieth century produced a rapid development of literary modernity, which can only be defined as a neutral term in itself, and it is impossible to evaluate simply whether its impact has been positive or negative. Just as modernity brought about not only some changes in the image of the saints in 20th-century European literature but also a profound, soul-touching deconstruction and reconstruction, these three categories of new saints are only typical, boilerplate broad classifications and may not really encompass all the fictional characters that can be included within the new saints' images. The definition of divinity can continue to be developed, and the image of the saint can continue to be updated with the changing times.

4. Conclusion

From the earliest biblical literature to the modern literature of the 20th century, the saint has continued to appear as an important literary figure in literature. This reflects the eternal human quest for a higher spirit: divinity. Human society has evolved and changed over thousands of years, yet the spiritual core of transcendence and the pursuit of divinity has been a constant value for all peoples. The very fact that the image of the saints has moved from a purely religious context to a fusion of historical and social factors and then out of the confines of religion to become a modern exploration of ideas is an indication that human society has moved from ancient to modern times and that human civilisation has been enriched by the constant search of thinkers. This paper has argued that social changes in Europe in the 20th century led to new changes in the image of the saints in European literature, and the study contributes to the understanding of the importance of the figure of the saint in European literature and the changing characterisation in modern literary production. The study has also shown that the development of the image of the saint in the twentieth century beyond the confines of religion towards the realm of pure thought suggests that modern social change in Europe has reconfigured the connotations of religion. Nevertheless, this study was limited by the absence of a profound and comprehensive study of the concept of sainthood in Roman Catholicism, the changing image of the saints in European literature between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, and a more detailed and insightful scholarly analysis of the social context of 20th century Europe. This would be a fruitful area for further work.

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