

A Study of the Influence of Pirate Spirit on British Marine Literature from *Captain Singleton*

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Abstract: *Captain Singleton* is a famous work published by British novelist Daniel Defoe in 1720. To some extent, it records the British pirate culture in realistic literary works for the first time. Therefore, *Captain Singleton* deeply reflects the important role of pirate spirit in the British marine literature in that historical background. At the same time, under the influence of this novel, pirate spirit gradually gets its real boom in Britain, and has a profound impact on the thought and theme of the subsequent marine literary works.

In this paper, the analysis of pirate spirit will combine with the historical background of the formation and prosperity of British pirates in the 18th century, in order to study the causes and connotation of pirate spirit, as well as the influence of this ideology from historical, spiritual and cultural views.

Keywords: *Captain Singleton*; Defoe; Pirate spirit; British marine literature

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1. Defoe and *Captain Singleton*

Daniel Defoe is a representative writer of British realistic novels in the 18th century, and he is known as “father of novel in Britain and Europe”. Compared with previous literary works, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, *Captain Singleton*, *Captain Jack* and other novels have made new breakthroughs in both artistic form and subject thought in the field of literary creation. Defoe is the pioneer of British realistic novels, and his works have played an important role in the development of novels in Britain and even in Europe.

Captain Singleton is the second masterpiece of great influence created by Defoe after *Robinson Crusoe*. This novel is based on the story of a real character “Avery” in British marine history, mainly records the stories of the sailing adventures and the development of wastelands by the protagonist, and tells the experience of his journey and exploration in Africa and India. The protagonist, Singleton, became the captain of a pirate ship after several hardships. He led his crew to sail in the ocean, killed indigenous people and the crew of other ships, looted and sold the black slaves. However, after becoming rich, Singleton felt uneasy and guilty about what he had done, so he finally quit his sailing career and confessed his behaviors.

Captain Singleton reflects the life situation, moral concepts and spiritual ideals of the British colonial peri-

od, and this book immediately becomes a popular book after its publication. At the same time, in the 18th century, with the rise of the great British Empire, its establishment of maritime hegemony, development of foreign trade and colonial expansion, British capitalism grew rapidly and accumulated a lot of wealth in this period^[1]. A kind of “pirate spirit” gradually formed in this nation’s minds, and *Captain Singleton* brought this spirit from the ruling class into the public characters. Therefore, this book shows the important role of British pirate spirit in the development of its marine history, and brings a great influence to British marine literature.

2. The Formation and Prosperity of British Pirates

As early as in the ancient Greek literature, *Homer’s Epics*, there has been the description of pirates^[2]. In Homer’s time, the ancient Greeks regarded pirates as adventurers and warriors, and believed that pirates needed to be respected because of their bravery and wealth. The pirate spirit embodied in *Homer’s Epics* is one of the spiritual characteristics of the ancient Greek heroes.

From the end of the 8th century to the 11th century, Britain suffered at least 300 years of invasion by the pirates “Vikings” in northern Europe^[3]. At that time, Britain had not yet become a powerful empire and could not resist the wanton robbery from the Vikings. Significant historical events will certainly affect the ideology of the

people. The invasion of the Vikings brought the pirate culture into Britain and changed the British people's original attitude of awe and fear of the sea.

As an island country, the fate of the British people and their country is inseparable from the sea. The sea has brought them survival resources, while it has also brought danger to them. At the same time, if Britain wants to develop its economic and business capabilities, maritime trade is a major problem that must be overcome, and the maritime plunder from pirates has greatly restricted the development of Britain. Therefore, this brutal invasion from the Vikings aroused the British inner enthusiasm for adventure, inspired their national ambition and desire for expansion and colonization, and they finally found a way for Britain to pursue commercial interests.

The development and prosperity of pirate spirit in Britain originated from the beginning of new marine routes and the emergence of Privateer's License in the 16th century. With the consent of the government, the British conducted large-scale pirate activities and set up many non-governmental organizations. People sailed to seek "secret treasures" with the "gold dream", they established overseas colonies and developed marine trade. During the reign of Elizabeth I, the Queen herself was even called "Queen of pirates"^[3]. Thus "pirate" was no longer a robber who gains personal benefits by killing and robbing in people's stereotype, but a hero who breaks the moral and legal restrictions.

The pursuit of freedom, the courage of adventure and the idea of rebellion all made the pirate spirit deeply engraved in the blood of the British people and became a part of the British spirit, which laid the ideological and cultural foundation for the further colonial expansion of this nation. The development of pirate spirit promoted the prosperity of British marine literature invisibly. Literature, as a carrier of cultural expression, records the historical changes and the evolution of minds in a certain period and region. Under the background of this age, the literary works of British writers were inevitably connected with marine culture.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is the first meaningful British marine novel, and *Captain Singleton* even directly takes pirate as its protagonist, which becomes the most outstanding embodiment of the spirit of pirates. "We inquired still more, and particularly the way to the Gold Coast ... therefore, if he would venture to go; and as for himself, we told him we would live and die together -- there should not a man of us stir from him. (Chapter 1)". The pirates willingly tied their fate with that of their cap-

tain and ready to take risks.

3. The Ideological Core of British Pirate Literature

3.1 From Historical View -- Colonial Expansion

Literary works are the recorders of history, reflecting the social environment and people's ideology in an era. At the same time, literary works will also affect people's mind and the societal trends in this era because of their distinctive indoctrination and communicability.

The pirate spirit in *Captain Singleton* represents the colonialism thoughts of the British people. In the 18th century, Britain entered the period of capitalist society and set off an upsurge of overseas trade and exploration. As a typical character of "overseas entrepreneur" in that era, Singleton's marine adventure experience is very similar to the British expansion of overseas colonization^[4]. The protagonist bravely and firmly takes risks with his dream and desire, wants to go out of his motherland to explore the world, to conquer the world and to obtain fame and riches, and even finally fantasies about ruling the world.

In terms of the attitude towards indigenous people, the pirates in *Captain Singleton* regarded them as "ignorant", "greedy", "cruel" fools or barbarians. After arriving in Africa, Singleton and his exchanged gold with the indigenous people for food and daily necessities. This transaction seemed to be fair, but in the view of the indigenous people, Singleton was just using worthless things to forcibly exchange for their survival materials. Defoe certainly understood that, but in his novel, this kind of transaction was described as the result of the stupidity of the indigenous people, and Singleton cleverly used this to cheat and rob them.

In terms of the attitude towards land, although Africa was described as a desolate and barren place with poor environment, it was attributed to the incompetence and the backward civilization of the indigenous people. Singleton successfully crossed the interior land of Africa, captured black people and harvested valuable treasures along the way. As a result, overseas land has changed from "desolate" to "undeveloped" in their mind. The British had reason to search riches in this undeveloped land and had the obligation to build civilization there, because the land "is more suitable for the British than that barbaric nation".

Singleton believed these barbarians and this desolate land were in urgent need of the salvation of European civilization. He even denied the development ability of the indigenous people, and thought that gave this land to them was just a waste of resources. Besides, Singleton and his companions came to this savage place after all kinds of hardships with the sacred mission of salvation.

They needed to “educate” the people with civilization and “explore” the land with science and technology, and after that, they could reasonably buy and sell the indigenous people and occupy the land.

Of course, there are some kinds of racial discrimination in Defoe’s novel from a modern perspective, but at that time this racial ideology was generally recognized by the British public. In the novel, Singleton was not an evil character, and on the contrary, he was regarded as a brave adventurer, an intelligent communicator, and a typical hero who conquered overseas. Defoe’s commendatory description of the piracy of Singleton and his companions reflects the colonialist idea that “piracy is the overseas trade by the bravest man”, which was firmly believed by British capitalism in the 18th century^[13].

The idea of colonialism in *Captain Singleton* influenced many later British marine literary works in terms of the attitude towards history. *Treasure Island*, created by Stevenson in the 19th century, praised the spirit of exploration that the British people should have since their childhood. In addition, Charles Dickens also praised British maritime hegemony in his works. From different perspectives, the writers highly praised the spirit of pirates and the enthusiasm of adventure, and fell into the dream of overseas colonization through the description of pirates.

3.2 From Spiritual View -- Spirit of Social Contract

Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, Captain Singleton did not act alone, but in groups. Besides, he did not build his own empire in a fixed place, but travelled around the world, dealt with people, groups and leaders from different colonial countries. As a result, *Captain Singleton* highlights the collective strength and teamwork among pirates, as well as the conflict and integration between different groups, different nationalities and different cultures.

In the early 17th century, the idea of western modern social contract prevailed in Western Europe. Social contract means the consensus agreement of all members of a society on the basic norms of the social action, usually includes the feature of assumption or imagination. In *Captain Singleton*, the spirit of British early social contract is embodied in two aspects: one is the division of labor and the cooperation within the pirate team while sailing, and the other is their distribution system after obtaining the treasure.

The successful voyage depends on the professional roles played by each member on that ship. The members of a ship formed their own small social groups in the vast ocean, obeying the rules of this community and carrying out their own tasks. It is described in *Captain Singleton*: “I told them, that if we were all upon one bottom, we should all apply ourselves heartily to the work. (Chapter 4)”. In

the pirate group, loyalty and diligence are the indispensable characteristics of each member, and the harmonious operation of the whole team is the common premise to protect the development of both individual and group interests. However, this kind of harmony can’t be separated from the restriction of contract. “Individual interests subordinate to collective interests” and “Mechanism of minority subordinate to majority” consciousnesses are the high embodiment of the spirit of social contract in Western Europe.

After the joint cooperation to obtain the treasure, the pirates voluntarily accepted the “distribution system according to work” within the group. This ideology was a kind of advanced and progressive thought in the early capitalist society, and it also confirms the influence of Social Contract Theory on the British literature at that time. When within the team: “We might then set our negroes all to work for us, and receive equally the fruit of their labor and our own, and being all exactly alike sharers, there could be no just cause of quarrel or disgust among us. (Chapter 4)”, the pirate group uses the contract to stipulate the distribution of individual interests, so as to avoid internal conflicts.

The spirit of social contract embodied in *Captain Singleton* was influenced by the social trend of thought at that time, and it also spread rapidly among the public through literary abilities of communication and influence. The spirit of contract is very important in overseas trade. In the 18th century, when it was hard to record people’s promises and deeds by means of science and technology, overseas trade and colonial treaties relied on the contract on a piece of paper signed by both parties. Thus, a trustworthy cooperator had to regard the agreement as an important norm and attach importance to the contract with the other side. The spirit of social contract in Western Europe also further helped Britain achieve great success in overseas trade^[4].

The spread of this spirit is also represented by the pirate groups in the literary works, which further affects the British marine literature in the spiritual aspect. In William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, a British marine literary work in the 20th century, boys form a small society. At the beginning, they comply with their social contract, perform their duties, and peacefully distribute the labor income. When the evil side of human nature is exposed and the social contract is broken, people will face the disaster of the whole society and civilization.

3.3 From Cultural View -- Superiority of Civilization

To a certain extent, the invasion of colonialism is the destruction and remodeling of one civilization to

another, which is based on the colonists' own sense of superiority. In the 18th century, the British had a strong desire to conquer the world, they highly praised the spirit of pirate, encouraged colonization, and had confidence in their national identity after having the status of maritime hegemony. The British gradually grew up a strong sense of civilization superiority in the desolate overseas land. This kind of sense is also reflected in *Captain Singleton*.

"Four or five of them (negroes) fell down as if they had been shot; several others fell on their knees, and lifted up their hands to us; whether to worship us, or pray us not to kill them. (Chapter 1)". In this novel, the African people succumb to the authority of Singleton in order to survive. They have a kind of "worship" and "beg for mercy" emotion to the British industrial civilization. Singleton once generates such an emotion: it's really gratifying that he was not born in such a crowd and will not be so stupid and barbaric. In his mind, Singleton distinguishes his own nation from the black race, criticizes the civilization of this poor group with a superior attitude, and shows his pride as a British man.

In *Captain Singleton*, the indigenous people are described as a stupid and weak race that need to be educated, changed and supported by British civilization. They worship and regard Singleton as their leaders, get food and escape from the beast with the help of him, thus they obey the orders of Singleton obediently, and yearn for the help of civilization. The colonies also welcome the arrival of British civilization, because only the British people can use the lands rationally and find and develop their value, which will not be wasted by the ignorant people. This is more deeply depicted in Defoe's another novel *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the protagonist believes that only British civilization is the premise of order and harmony in the world.

Defoe also implicitly devalues the colonists of other countries, which is based on the fighting events between Britain and other countries in colonies^[5]. After being bullied on a Portuguese pirate ship, Singleton scornfully describes them as "demon", taunts the barbaric and cowardly characters of Portuguese. Here the British spirit of brave and discrimination against cowards expresses incisively and vividly through his words. The images of France and Holland are also defaced in this novel, and the features of these unscrupulous colonists are compared with the virtues of "modest, polite and well educated" of the British. This contrast is actually because the British hate the powerful navigational abilities of other countries, and thinks that they have blocked the process of British hegemony. And this kind of behavior of vilifying other countries and praising one's own shows the

faithful faith of Britain in its powerful empire status. Britain believes that she is the best choice to conquer and rule the world, which reflects the superiority of civilization of the British people.

The sense of civilization superiority presented in *Captain Singleton* further influences many marine literary works. Under the trend of rationalism, the works of the 18th century advocated the noble status of the British identity and vigorously promoted their "gentleman's etiquette". However, *Gulliver's Travels*, a marine novel, was published three years later. From another perspective, it ironically attacks the idea of saving barbarism from rational civilization, and criticizes the British people's long-standing sense of civilization superiority. For Gulliver, his overseas journey becomes a process of self-denial and cultural frustration. In the 19th century, George Gordon Byron's lyric poetry *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* takes a young man as the protagonist, who is disappointed in British politics and society. This poetry tells the process of leaving the motherland and sailing overseas to find real cultural identity and spiritual sustenance.

4. Conclusions

Looking back on such early pirate literary works with strong personal emotion as *Captain Singleton* is very helpful to analyze the historical, spiritual and cultural theme of British marine literature, and to study the colonial ideas and hegemonic desire in British characteristics. The pursuits of freedom, resistance and adventure in the pirate spirit also affects young people to find their own dream today. The colonialist thought, the spirit of social contract and the superiority of civilization embodied in the pirate spirit educate today's people to unite and cooperate, pay attention to the contract spirit, respect different cultures, and maintain a sense of awe for the land and people.

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