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**Review Article**

# The Hunger and Thirst in Wolfe's *April, Late April*

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**Abstract:** The works by Thomas Wolfe are full of unrestrained feelings and great momentum. The author's subjective feeling is strong. He employs the techniques of suggestion and symbolism to affect his readers. In the story *April, Late April*, the hero ceaselessly praises his lover, using appetite, dishes and fruit to express his strong passion, while the heroine is enthusiastically involved in it. The author uses gorgeous language to depict every act and move and every twinkle and smile of the heroine. Every part of "her" body is connected with all the beautiful things in the world. It forms a striking contrast with those indifferent things in the eyes of the hero.

**Keywords:** Thomas Wolfe, Hunger and Thirst, Dishes, Background, Love

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## 1. Introduction

Thomas Wolfe's life is one of the colorful legends in modern American literature. Within his short lifetime, Wolfe wrote four lengthy novels, plus many short stories, dramatic works and novellas. He is known for mixing highly original, poetic, rhapsodic, and impressionistic prose with autobiographical writing. His books, written and published from the 1920s to the 1940s, vividly reflect on American culture and the mores of that period, albeit filtered through Wolfe's sensitive, sophisticated and hyper-analytical perspective. [1]

Man is hovering on the death line at birth. The reason why he can live is because he is born with an ability—to eat. The reason why he chooses to live on is because he has not lost the sense of hunger and thirst. [2] Thomas Wolfe's short story *April, Late April* is such a work. In the story the author expresses his notion of creative writing and sarcasm on the society through the use of sounds, colors, smells, shapes and touches. One will surely have a sense of hunger and thirst when love thirst plus appetite. And looking upon one's lover as dishes and fruit is special in love stories at all times and in all countries. [3] From this story we read a love story that is refreshing, a love story that is deep and moving, a love story that can be seen by eyes, can be touched by hands, and can be smelled by nose. From this story we read that sounds, colors,

smells, shapes and touches are compared to the view of love and lover's beauty. From this story we also read the strong material and spiritual desires of people of the time and the pursuit of their desires.

## 2. Wonderful and Fresh Combination: Food and Drink Plus Men and Women

There is a unique phenomenon in the world history of literature: in our first poem collection *The Book of Songs*, the first one is a love poem. It reads: "Fair, fair," cry the ospreys. On the island in the river, Lovely is this noble lady, Fit the bride for our Lord. While in the Western literature, the first epic *Iliad* tells about the Trojan War caused by the love affair between Prince Paris and Helen. This unique phenomenon shows that love plays an important role in the history of world civilization and in the history of human development. Where there are human beings, there will be love. Where there is love, there will be literary works of love. Love is one of the basic contents of human life. It is one of the original motives to promote the development of society.

The basic need for human survival is what the Chinese understanding of Dietary men and women. It is also what the Western people's idea of "Eat, drink, and multiply". Thus it can be seen that eating and drinking are as important as love.

They are indispensable. However, no writer has ever combined food and drink, multiplying, and men and women properly and artistically. No writer has ever put them into one, no writer has ever made them perfect in sound, color, flavor, taste and shape. But in short story *April, Late April* by Thomas Wolfe, we read the perfect combination of the three. It arouses the aesthetic perception of reading interest.

Love stories at home and abroad are as many as stars, and each has its own characteristic. Some compare their lovers to moons, some to flowers, some to fairies and some to sweethearts. But moons, flowers, fairies and sweethearts are abstract concepts. You can appreciate them, but you cannot eat and drink them. Thomas Wolfe does not follow the mode of traditional love stories. He originally and creatively makes them vivid and concrete as rich dishes, excellent in color, smell and taste, combining men and women, eating and drinking and multiplying visually, vividly and figuratively, gleaming with mouth-watering and thinking perfection. For example:

She was as fresh as morning, as crisp as celery, as delicate and tender as a plum, her rare and tender succulence was so irresistible he felt he could devour her in his flesh forever. And then, when he had embraced her to his will, she would rise and set briskly about the preparation of a meal for him. [4]

The lover is “celery, plum and succulent”—fruit and vegetables. She is “fresh, crisp and tender”. Who will refuse them when he is hungry in the morning? And then, “she would rise and set briskly about the preparation of a meal for him.” What he sees and what she does is composed of food materials.

Tentatively, he would take her arm and pull it gently like a wing. “Shall it be a wing,” he would say, a little hoarsely, “a tender wing done nicely with a little parsley and a butter sauce? Or shall it be the sweet meat of a haunch done to a juicy turn?” She accepts it “with a merry face”. Then he releases his desire of hunger and thirst further: “Or shall it be the lean meat of the rib?” “Or the ripe melons that go ding-dong in April?” he cried, “or shall it be a delicate morsel now of woman’s fingers?” he said with a rising jubilation in his heart, “a trifle of delicate knuckles tinged with paprika!” he cried and thrust them in his mouth. “Or belly, or back, or side, or throat—or her damned delicate apple-cheeks!”....

When the sweetheart is changed into cooking materials, he wants to put in some condiments and make them into delicious food. This is the sign of desire: “a tender wing done nicely with a little parsley and a butter sauce”, “the sweet meat of a haunch done to a juicy turn?” and “a trifle of delicate knuckles tinged with paprika”. Here, in the work, the body of a person is dismembered and cooked into a table of delicious food. This kind of experience is so strong and so refreshing. And it increases the freshness of aesthetic readers.

In theory, Thomas Wolfe’s comparison of lovers and passion is not his original creation. We Chinese also have this kind of idioms. One example, Mencius<sup>①</sup> said: “Eating and

amativeness are our natures”. Another example is “feast to the eyes.” Food and passion are the two elements of human existence. They are also the main source of artistic creation of literature, music, dance, painting, etc. But because of the restriction of the Chinese traditional ideas as “it is improper for men and women to touch each other’s hand in passing objects”, “One should enjoy, but not indulge in lewdness”, in the Chinese literary works, we seldom read the unique comparison and fresh description as is described in Thomas Wolfe’s works so as to add some color, aroma and taste to literature. This is the difference between Chinese and Western cultures. Wolfe wrote the “feeling” under specific circumstances—so fine, so novel, so attractive and mouthwatering—it provides some enlightenment and reference for Chinese literature.

### 3. The Ceaseless Hunger and Thirst: Fine Food Plus Beauty

Wolfe once said, “In New York, people’s desires are never disillusioned. Everyone feels that things will be to his heart’s content, and his hunger and thirst will be satisfied.”[5] The author is trying to indicate the strong and ceaseless hunger and thirst of the Americans of the time. Reflected in this story, it is the hunger and thirst for food and passion. This refers to the activities of people with rich emotions, not the behavior of their lower instincts. In his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Friedrich Engels said that “it is self-evident that the beautiful posture, close contacts, harmonious interests and so on once caused contacts between men and women.”[6] What Engels said is things that happened in ancient times, but for the relationship between men and women of any time reflected in this story, it has some regularity of universal meaning. Let’s see an example in the story *April, Late April*.

There is no spectacle on earth more appealing than that of a woman in the act of cooking dinner for someone she loves. Thus the sight of his mistress as, delicately flushed, she bent with the earnest devotion of religious ceremony above the food she was cooking for him was enough to drive him mad with love and hunger. [4]

Another example,

From time to time he would go to the door of the kitchen where she stood above the stove, and for a moment he would draw into his lungs the maddening fragrance of the food. Then he would fling about the room again, until he could control himself no longer. The sight of her tender face, earnestly bent and focused in its work of love, her sure and subtle movements, and her full lovely figure—together with the maddening fragrance glorious food, evoked an emotion of tenderness and hunger in him which was unutterable. [4]

How charming and pure and fresh this description is! The author stresses again and again the “love and hunger.” This is

famous Confucian after Confucius himself.

① Mencius (372–289 BC) was a Chinese philosopher who was arguably the most

the natural expression of his heart. It is based on the beauty of appearance and on the beauty of food. And it brings out the ceaseless hunger and thirst. Everything of the woman, such as her figure, her limbs and her smiles, every action of the woman, and her skillful movements; in a word, everything of her, gives rise to his hunger and thirst. All the vegetables, all the tastes, give rise to his hunger for food. This woman, also crazy about love, is simple, clean and sincere, which is like the monosodium glutamate that is put in food, which makes the family of the two and the boring world of the two colorful, emitting strong fragrance, and full of happy tones.

Therefore, the beautiful description of this story comes from the combination of fine food and fine beauty, comes from the appetite and passion. As the two basic keys of human desire, appetite and passion largely govern human behaviors. Because of this, the two elements received special concern from the theoretical circles, passion is especially so. In Sigmund Freud's theory of instinctual structure, passion is in the most basic and essential position. It is the primary motivation of all human behavior. [7] For the whole Western spiritual world, Freud's influence is great. His theory of psychological analysis shocks the various aspects of the humanities with great force. The word "passion" appeared frequently in different theories from the time of Freud. More and more writers closely tie up emotional expression with the personal desire, regarding them as an indivisible unity. But Thomas Wolfe does it in a different way. He introduces the other human desire—appetite—into the description of passion. Desire is a big part of what makes us human. It is a releasing form of human instinct, and makes up the most inherent and basic requirement of human behavior. Through more or less satisfaction from desire, man as the subject holds the object and setting, and obtains the identical between the object and setting. [8] The two desires are interacting and exchanging. And they obtain special effects of intertextuality. The sense of hunger and thirst of human beings comes from two aspects: the desire for food, and the desire for passion. Although they are different in the way of approach, they are similar psychologically. Wolfe combines the desire for food and the desire for passion, and catches their coherence in the psychological sense. This oddly combination makes us read in Wolfe's story less carnal appetites in the description of passion but with more smell of the food. Thus, the aesthetic pleasure it brings in reading is also different from other stories, radiating with philosophical light and unique literary style.

#### 4. Behind the Beauty: Exposure Plus Sarcasm

Comparing with other well-known love stories in the world, in this love story *April, Late April*, the figurative use of language is unique, it also has full-bodied artistic atmosphere and it is of strong social significance, profound, touching and out of the ordinary. The most important thing is that author hides the social significance deeply in the story and plot. He uses the techniques of suggestion and symbolism to express

his exposure and sarcasm on the society. To tell precisely about the exposure and sarcasm, it is necessary that we came back to the background of the author.

In the Western world where a person's family background is of importance, Wolfe was not a man of noble birth. If he had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he would not have formed his unique aesthetic view and distinctive writing style. His father was a stonecutter, while his mother owned a boardinghouse in a small town, North Carolina, where Wolfe grew up. [9] Probably because of his poor family, he was always feeling hungry when he was young. The sense of hunger and thirst went throughout his life. That's why some critics hold that his works are autobiographical. The characters of the prototype in his works are his family members. Others hold that he was full of youthful passion, but limited himself to his native soil and his personal life. [5] Most people could read in this story *April, Late April* his desire and feelings toward love. It has an autobiographical trace. This is the personal background of Thomas Wolfe. Then, how about the environment and society?

Thomas Wolfe was one of the members of the Lost Generation. [10] This generation experienced the crash of the Western traditional civilization after World War One. They could not find the spiritual value of their own. They could only feel free in the realm of art. For this generation, there was no authority at all. The requirement of the elder generation was equal to chains. The previous achievements were regarded as filth. They had a radical view toward the tradition. [11] Just for this reason, they created a modern art and various artistic patterns. *April, Late April* is one of the examples of anti-traditional love story. In this story, the author does not describe in detail the macro social environment, mentioning only several things outside the family life:

The shout of a child, the smell of old worn planks in the sun, weaving colors and points of light upon pavements, the smell of the markets, of flowers, and vegetables—was given intensity, structure, and the form of joy because of her [4]; The hoof and the wheel went by upon the street, as they had done forever [4]; The high, immortal sound of time, numerous and everlasting, brooded forever in the upper air above the fabulous walls and towers of the city. [4]

This is suggestion and symbolism. Again the figurative language is used: lights, colors, tastes, and shapes. Reflecting the comparison of his lover, it's not difficult to find out his love and hate and why he has the sense of the ceaseless hunger and thirst. In Wolfe's opinion, the society he was living in was like a pool of stagnant water, awfully dull. People living in such a society would become numb gradually. People living in such a society would lose their real selves gradually. As one of the representatives of the Lost Generation, Wolfe's intention of opposing the society is strong. But the way he uses to oppose the society is not hysterical but a way of releasing the original desire. This original desire includes not only passion but appetite as well. The strong and ceaseless sense of hunger and thirst caused by the two original desires are Wolfe's weapons against the dull society. The sense of hunger and

thirst in essence is the sense of discontent with life and the psychological state of unwilling to keep quiet. At the same time, the skills of suggestion and symbolism influence greatly the readers and the author's subjective experience resonates with those who read it.

## 5. Conclusion

The works by Thomas Wolfe are full of unrestrained feelings and great momentum. The author's subjective feeling is strong. He employs the techniques of suggestion and symbolism to affect his readers. He even conveys to readers through the use of sounds, colors, smells, shapes and touches. From some of his works, we could read that Wolfe tries to combine Walt Whitman's spontaneous expression of his original ideas with James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness to form his own special style. [12] Some of these features are also reflected in the story *April, Late April*. The hero ceaselessly praises his lover, using the language of appetite, dishes and fruit to express his strong passion. This can not only be seen as his own feeling for love with autobiographical traces it accords with artistic style. He is successful. From this short story, we could read that the hero is full of passion. When he sees or thinks of something, his flow of thoughts leaps. He ceaselessly praises his lover, using appetite, dishes and fruit to express his strong passion. This offers readers a vivid and typical figure in literature.

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