

# On the Value and Modern Significance of "Sorrow Writing" in Sagan's Novels

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## Abstract

**Francoise Sagan (1935-2004) is a phenomenal French writer in the 20th century. She is from a middle class family. What she is most familiar with, as well as what she does best at, is middle-class' romance, psychology and emotions. Because of her famous work Bonjour Tristesse, "sorrow" becomes synonymous with Sagan's works. This article will analyze the "sorrow writing" from the perspective of the development of French literature and the background, in order to reveal that the source of "Sagan-style sorrow" comes from the post-war confusion and distress, and the "melancholy" tradition of French literature. This article also reveals the literary value and aesthetic value of Sagan's "sorrow writing" through text analysis, including the development of narrative structure and time awareness, the construction of a highly personalized literary picture and the formation of a light and moderate aesthetic charm. Finally, this article discusses the connection and heterogeneity of "sorrow writing" and modern civilization, explores the interlacing of classical cultural spirit and contemporary industrial civilization in Sagan's novels, and discusses the ideological enlightenment of "sorrow writing".**

## Keywords

**Sagan, sorrow writing, modern value.**

## 1. The Origin of "Sorrow Writing"

### 1.1. Confusion and Distress after the War

The appearance of "Sagan-style sorrow" is not an accidental event with personal characteristics. It is firstly a sorrow of a specific era, but also a sorrow of the group.

In the 1950s, the entire western world faced a major social transformation. This was a very special historical end of ideology. On the one hand, World War II just ended, and the post-war collective environment plunged young people into a general spiritual loss and fall.

On the other hand, it has profoundly hit the education and social reality of the internal and external contradictions of this group of young people. In the 1950s, the development of capitalist society was in the middle of a swing. It developed rapidly in the fields of economy, science and technology, and a variety of thoughts emerged in large numbers. However, the conservative cultural concept of schooling made the middle school students in this period still accept the western "classical culture" from ancient Greece to the late 19th century before modernism. The mainstream of social morality is also frugal and diligent advocated by Puritanism and Protestant ethics. This kind of contradiction made young people found that the knowledge they learned did not match the actual society. Therefore, they inevitably felt confused. It led these young people to lack beliefs and ideals, and be indifferent to politics.

### 1.2. The Continuation of the "Melancholy" Tradition of French Literature

The "sorrow writing" of French literature was not first created by Sagan, but a tradition of "melancholy". Since the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, a large number of images of "sorrow" have appeared in French literature, and a "melancholy" mood

has also emerged. Melancholy, as a literary source and an aesthetic category, has long been known in French literature. These images are all infected with the "Century Disease" Group of people. It can be said that the "sorrow" written by Sagan, whether it is "sorrow emotion" or "sorrowful character image", is a continuation and branch of the "melancholy tradition" in French literature, which is essentially a "melancholy". In the context of Sagan's novels, it can be viewed in equal measure.

Therefore, "Sagan-type sorrow" was a deformed value caused by the contradiction between capitalist culture and economic reality at the time, and the "sorrow writing" in Sagan's works was a depiction of the symptoms of general confusion after the war, which was also derived from the French literary tradition. The continuation of "melancholy" and the projection of his personal life experience.

## 2. The Value of "Sorrow Writing"

### 2.1. Constructing a Literary Picture of "Sorrow Writing"

Sagan's "sorrow writing" established a highly personalized literary picture, which should be reflected in Sagan's narrative, including her personalized narrative style, circular narrative structure, in the narrative process. The prominent concept of time and the sense of death extended by the concept of time.

First of all, in Sagan's works, there is usually a very similar narrative structure. At the beginning of the story, the protagonists will lead a peaceful life step by step, do things according to certain inertial thinking, and maintain the happiness of secular standards. However, the restless nature and the desire for happiness and eroticism prompt them to walk out of the current mediocrity and break this temporary balance. At this time, the protagonists will find a more incompatible with real life, experience extreme anxiety and panic, and face the choice of returning or fleeing. In *Aimez-vous Brahms*, this choice is particularly evident. The protagonist is a 39-year-old middle-aged divorced woman, Paule. She has a lover called Roger who has been together for six years. He is a person who often changes new partners, and Paule longs for spiritual and physical stability. But Roger's behaviors obviously does not correspond to her desire. This created an "imbalance" in the plot. At this time, a new character appeared. A young and energetic trainee lawyer, Simon. In the relationship with the young, the heroine felt the stability and happiness she longed for, but in the end, she chose to return to her past lover.

In addition to deliberately arranging the imbalance in the plot, it also exhibits a circular narrative structure that is very close to the view of cyclic time of Borges. For example, in *A Certain Smile*, it cuts in the order of spring, summer and autumn, and connects the whole story through Dominique's three meaningful smiles, completing a circular narrative structure of repeated actions, and then expressing the emptiness and circulation of life, no matter love or life is nothingness, only the loneliness is true.

Secondly, time consciousness is the primary thread that runs through Sagan's entire creation. In Sagan's works, it is revealed that the time passes by mercilessly, and the importance of the moment is beautiful. The moment of happiness, the existing feelings, and fleeting love are the ultimate objects she describes. In the vortex of time, people can only passively die with the passage of time. Only when they feel the passage of time can they better understand the meaning of death. For the life of an individual, the end of time marks the end of life, and time is connected with death. The limited and accidental life is the intersection of Sagan's time consciousness and death consciousness. This kind of time consciousness reflects Sagan's sorrow and timely pleasure, unrestrained, unregulated, and persistent attitude.

Therefore, when constructing her own "sorrow writing" literary picture, Sagan has a high degree of recognition in self-expression and personalized narrative. The personalized narrative

structure, the understanding of time, and the concern for death all constitute the literary picture belonging to Françoise Sagan.

## 2.2. Forming a Light and Moderate Aesthetic Charm

The overall style of Sagan's novels is "light". The writings are refined and elegant. At the same time, they are so full of flowing music and poetry. The characters are fairly fixed and have the characteristics of typification and simplification. They are experts at tracing a profound and timeless psychological world. The romantic story of adventure and the classic writing style blends together, which makes the work have multiple appeals and long aesthetic charm. This classic style is no longer a complete absorption of the characteristics of classicist literature, but is reflected in some details. In addition to the pursuit of elegance in writing, this inheritance is more concentrated in absorbing the motif and tragic consciousness of ancient Greek and Roman literature. For example, motifs of "incest" and "abandoned women" in the ancient Greek literature appeared in *Those without Shadows*. The seemingly happy middle-aged couple Fanny and Alain actually have different ideas. In Alain's fifties, falls in love with his nephew's lover, the actress Beatrice, because of the vision of those around him, he had to suppress his inner emotions all day long and drink wine to relieve his worries. Fanny became a "Medea-style" spiritual abandonment, so she was unhappy and extremely depressed in spirit. At this time, in order to be famous, Beatrice empathized with the producer, which caused Edward, Alain's nephew, to fall into the pain of losing love, so he came to Alain's house to seek comfort, but drunk and slept with Fanny. The motifs of "incest" and "abandoned woman" are linked in series. At the same time, *Bonjour Tristesse* also has a similar motif. For instance, Cécile's concern about Anne stealing her father Raymond is actually a repetition of the ancient Greek "Oedipus" tragedy. At the same time, typed and singular characters are also an obvious characteristic of inheriting the classicism style. This is mainly reflected in the fact that the protagonists are middle-class men and women familiar with Sagan, so there are certain limitations in the diversification of characters.

## 3. The Modern Significance of "Sorrow Writing"

### 3.1. Identification of Female Status

As a female writer, Sagan, under the tone of "sorrow writing", uses writing as a feminine voice and recognizes the dominant position of women. When looking at the relationship between the sexes, Sagan returned to the origin to explore the natural differences between the sexes, presenting woman's unique psychological experiences, and writing these extremely small but extremely rich experiences vividly. In the 1950s, the French woman's movement flourished. As a female writer, Sagan instinctively paid great attention to the survival situation of women. She wrote a variety of female characters. These female figures are all holders of "Sagan-style sorrow". It can be seen that Sagan takes woman's fate as a separate theme. These figures are adolescent women, middle school students, college students. After the World War II, the characteristics of young people's freedom, rebellion, and free willfulness. They pursue absolute freedom and refuse to fulfill their obligations from society and family. There are also mature middle-aged women, such as Fanny in *Those without Shadows* and Anne in *Bonjour Tristesse*. What they embodied more is a contradiction between self-consciousness and traditional bourgeois thought. However, no matter which group of women, Sagan has paid deep attention and scrutiny from their standpoints, emphasizing woman's personal right to freedom and happiness. The hedonistic principle of the younger generation conflict with traditional values, and the outcome often ends with the defeat of traditional values. For these female characters, Sagan has never revealed the pros and cons of a value in her works or commented on the behavior of his characters. She does not express the emotional needs of modern women who desire to be loved and choose to love from a social, economic, and moral perspective, but

expresses the internal desire of modern women to despise existing moral norms and pursue personal happiness from the perspective of personal feelings.

Beauvoir once put forward a point of view in *The Second Sex* that marriage is the only means of integration in society for women.

The significance of Sagan's novel is that she deliberately destroys this traditional narrative model that was originally characterized by patriarchal marriage. These novels changed the image of women as the weaker side of the relationship between the sexes, emphasizing the rights of women as subjects to obtain freedom and happiness. This reveals a deeper cultural psychological structure.

For example, Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse* always dominates in the relationship, and Dominique in *A Certain Smile* is analogous. In the relationship, they are strong, active, and never willing to become a vassal of men. Perhaps this is not entirely in line with the actual situation of the 1950s. But for young female readers, such characters are instructive. Because of the indirect output of this value, this emotion will be converted to enlightenment education in gender politics.

### 3.2. Reflections on the Spirit of Classical Culture and Modern Civilization

Sagan's novels are influenced by Existentialism obviously, at the same time, it is worth noting that her works also show traces of being influenced by the spirit of classical culture. As mentioned earlier, Sagan absorbed the tragic consciousness of ancient Greek literature in her aesthetic pursuit, and her creation was also deeply influenced by classical cultural education. For example, Sagan often mentions classical music in his novels and essays. Music has a fluidity, and Sagan's novels often mention music when describing the psychological activities of characters, such as Brahms, Schumann, etc. These details can reflect her musical preferences and the influence of classical culture on her. Therefore, the characters she portrays often reflect a classic cultural spirit. This classical cultural spirit is expressed in the traditional bourgeois reason, temperance, and adherence to moral standards. In *Bonjour Tristesse*, Cécile, the girl who lost her mother in childhood, leaves the boarding school and lives with her father Raymond. Raymond is a free prodigal person, which seems to have laid the tone of life for a pair of swinging father and daughter. But it seems paradoxical that Raymond is about to marry Cécile mother's old friend Anne, which makes the intoxicated life of self-satisfaction into a state of unbalance. In such a story, everyone is an autonomous individual, and Anne is undoubtedly an image with a classical spirit. She is elegant and temperate, and her life is full of norms. Anne's arrival made Cécile feel terrified because her disordered life is ending. And Cécile is a person with a more destructive modernity characteristic, a person who lives under the guidance of existentialism. Raymond is a kind of symbolic meaning. He is an individual who is surrounded by dual spiritual strength. He is like a rag doll pulled by the classical cultural spirit and modern industrial civilization. In Raymond, a sharp contradiction can be seen. This contradiction also coincides with the characteristics of the era of the 1950s.

It is worth noting that Sagan's later work *Aimez-vous Brahms* seems to form a kind of intertextuality with *Bonjour Tristesse*. This is a story of an unfaithful woman, but it makes people feel tangled and beautiful. However, in fact, it is actually a reconstruction of *Bonjour Tristesse* with a change of perspective. Paule is similar with Raymond. Roger and Cécile are the epitome of modern living conditions, and Simon is classical, which is between consumer culture and classical culture. And by reading Sagan's essays, I can see that Sagan herself admires Brahms very much. Brahms is a classic classical musician full of sense of order and self-restraint, and Simon, as the carrier of the "Brahms spirit", is bound to bear the same loss in the era of vigorous capitalism.

Sagan's life situation may not be an active life in the broad sense, but the words and deeds of those characters will truly touch the reader's heart with a longing, a long-lost romance, desire and longing. When a strict social rule restricts people, people will not truly show their emotions,

but will choose to hide the true temperament under the mask. When we try to use rationality to measure the gains and losses of behavior, it seems to be normative, but that norm prevents people from using their own behavior to experience the true meaning of life itself. In this sense, Sagan's "battered generations" of sloppy bodies are the generations that really touch their inner needs and feelings. Their spirit is free and pure, their behavior is full and full of tension. The freedom and joy they have harvested is something that the traditional bourgeoisie has never felt before.

In addition, Sagan's "sorrow writing" is essentially a prediction and response to the form of human desire in postmodern society, and it is also a microcosm of the state of human existence in the contemporary era of materialistic consumerism. The reason for the middle-class bourgeois love is more worthwhile for us to explore deeply, because the middle-class Bourgeois is actually the group most likely to fall into emptiness.

Faced with the alienation of the material life of the consumer society, the rebel figures that Sagan wrote strives to pursue a new humanistic spirit. However, due to the time consciousness of Sagan's connection with the death, the meaning of survival fell into nothingness, so the middle class she described did not pursue spiritual conversion and redemption. They utilize their actual behavior to express their thoughts and meanings of life freely.

#### 4. Conclusion

Sagan's "sorrow writing" is not only a reflection of the combination of modern civilization and the spirit of classical culture. While writing modern characters, setting up the confrontation between the spirit of classical culture and modern industrial civilization, using a kind of "sorrow writing" shows the lack of spiritual and lonely survival, trying to awaken people to think about two transmuted civilizations. Therefore, to a certain extent, Sagan has some things in common with the awakening writers of the seventeenth century. Our society needs a modern dimension of guidance, the entanglement and struggle between the two civilization forms in Sagan's novels, Happens to give a new way of thinking about human beings who pursue freedom.

Through her writing, she showed the genuine emotions common to a generation, a kind of sorrow with irrelevant and absent. There are both disagreements with the world and powerlessness that cannot reconstruct a new world, and this confusion requires us to think about it.

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