

On the Construction of the Subjective Consciousness of the Protagonists in Maugham's Novels

—Taking *the Moon and Sixpence* and *the Razor's Edge* for Example

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ABSTRACT

Literature is actually the study of man, and man's self-awareness has always played an important role in literary creation. Therefore, literary works often involves the construction of subjective consciousness, and the distinguished writer Maugham is no exception, whose classic trilogy all focuses on the self-pursuit and spiritual quest. Looking back, most of previous researches concentrate on the character or ideological theme of Maugham's novels. They have laid down a good foundation, but there is some insufficiency leaving space for further exploration. Although the free spirit of protagonist has been touched somehow, it has yet to be risen to the subjectivity problem of human and the construction of subjective consciousness. Under this background, this paper aims to explore the process and reasons of awakening and construction of the subject consciousness from the protagonists' growth experience in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge*, hoping to provide some reference for a better understanding of Maugham's humanistic concern and the construction of self-identity in real life.

Keywords: construction of subjective consciousness, *The Moon and Sixpence*; *The Razor's Edge*, W. S. Maugham

1. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, subjectivity has been a longstanding topic often talked about brilliantly by people, among which the subjective consciousness always commands people's attention. Numerous literary works reflect distinctive thought of this subject, one fine example of which is *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge* by British writer Maugham. With no doubt, there is a difference between the two protagonists' life paths, more specifically, one pursuing an artistic ideal while the other exploring the meaning of life. But one thing is for certain—the two share something in common during their growth process, that is, from unconscious obedience to independent consciousness. The transformation period of the heroes can be regarded as a process of awakening and construction of subjective consciousness, which may produce an effect on our own grow-up and life choice. However, previous research mainly focused on the subject construction of one protagonist in Maugham's single novel or discussed it

from some theoretical perspectives like post-colonialism and gender studies. On the whole, there is still a lack of analysis on the construction of subjective consciousness Maugham depicting through the protagonists' own growth stages along with the wide volume of two novels. The following part will elaborate the transformation course of the protagonists' subject consciousness in these two works, from several aspects including the concept of subject consciousness, three stages of the protagonists' growth and the reasons for the protagonists' achieving subjectivity.

2. INTRODUCTION TO SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Subjective consciousness is one of the connotations of subjectivity, involving people's recognition of their own principal status, affirmation of their own subject ability and value, the consciousness of changing both the objective and subjective world with initiative^[1].

Subjective consciousness possesses a rich meaning,

majorly consisting of autonomy consciousness and free will. Autonomy consciousness, the first section mentioned earlier, can be divided into two minor parts-world dimension and life dimension. The former means that people realize they assume a dominant position and can take an active role in the relationship with the objective world. And the latter refers to people's conception that they are individuals with independent personality who can master their own destiny. Free will, the second composition, is the highest ideal of the subject, which includes the free state of consciousness and the consciousness of seeking freedom. Its ultimate goal is to accomplish freedom and liberation of the subject by overcoming the opposition between subject and object. With the emergence of the main body awareness in long-term human practice, subject consciousness comes into being, then going through a lengthy process of development. In general, subjective consciousness contains three elements-subject autonomy, subject existence and practical consciousness. More specifically, based on the premise of understanding their social environment and social relations, people carry out social practice purposefully and systematically, and further recognize their own status, values and responsibilities in the practice of changing the world, so as to make the subject consciousness mature and sublimate simultaneously^[2].

If a comprehensive view is taken, it is clear to find that many foreign literary works take the exploration of human destiny as their theme value, which inevitably relates to the thinking over subjective consciousness. In many cases, the subjective consciousness concerned is mostly shown as humanism in social evolution, heroism in conquering and transforming nature, or tragic consciousness in man's self-existence and survival dilemma^[3]. While in Maugham's depiction, the subjective consciousness becomes more complex. There is not only a deep concern for people's realistic situation and living state, but also the heroism and romantic feelings of breaking through secular obstacles and searching self bravely. Besides, there also exists humanistic spirit to value the inner world and explore the true meaning of life. For example, Fu Xiaofei's master thesis *A Research of Maugham's novels from Life Aesthetics Perspective* digs out relevant characteristics contained in Maugham's novels from the perspective of life aesthetics. Ye Chenxi's master thesis *The Road to Liberty: On Maugham's Exploration of Unshackling the Human Bondage* analyzes the spiritual crisis and soul searching embodied in Maugham's novels from the perspective of psychology. However, most studies tend to lay emphasis on characters, humanity, a certain philosophical thought or aesthetic concept. There still lacks a comprehensive research of the protagonists' life course from both the growth perspective and the subjective consciousness theory.

3. THE IGNORANCE AND SUPPRESSION OF SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The construction of human subject can be divided into three levels roughly-perceived self, cognitive self and conscience self^[4]. Perceived self is a relatively initial stage, during which people's behavior is influenced by the power balance of self-perceived external motivation and internal motivation^[5]. In the primary phase, the two protagonists in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge* mainly show innocent and obedient traits. That is to say, in the relationship between subject and object, they tend to be more subject to the objective environment, which can be classified as a typical situation of more external stimulation than internal one in self-perception. They either hold back real desires to play a perfect role both in family and society, or drift with the tide and lead a life no different from ordinary people. In one word, their subject consciousness is still in a slumbering or repressed state.

Strickland, the main character of *The Moon and Sixpence*, first appears as a stockbroker with a decent job, a respectable social position and a satisfying family. However, behind the enviable life, he often feels empty and confused in his innermost heart, not as self-sufficient as we think at all. When following his sociable wife to attend various parties, he seems awkward, dull and inconspicuous, leaving the impression that there is no need to waste any time on him. Such an unnatural state is the very result of his efforts to conceal true desires and integrate into society.

Larry, the hero of *The Razor's Edge*, has similar experiences. Before joining World War I, Larry lives a life like other American boys. He likes to dance and go to parties, has a beautiful young fiancée, and has a vision for the future including returning to work after the war. Such a life state, as it were, follows the standard mode in which Americans manage their life at that time. That means an individual should not only satisfy their own need for pleasure, but also contribute to the country's development and prosperity through personal efforts, thereby living up to the expectations of their peer groups and the whole community.

Generally speaking, in the initial stage, Strickland and Larry lead as ordinary lives as others, that is, seeing themselves as members of society to a considerable extent rather than forming a clear understanding of their real needs and inner thoughts. This is just the manifestation that the moral value judgment of superego occupies a dominant position. Therefore, this period can be called the protagonists' immature stage. Undoubtedly, they are ignorant for the time being, but they also has the possibility of growth. Still, this potential needs to be inspired by the internal motive or external opportunity, so that it can help them change into a soberer and mature self later in life.

4. THE AROUSAL AND RECONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Cognitive self is the second stage of subject construction, which can be described as breaking through the mist, untangling the complex relationship between oneself and family, society or other things, and reestablishing one's identity. In this stage, stimulated by external conditions or activated by the inner self, the protagonists start to grasp the consequences of their life pursuit genuinely and deeply. As a result, they decide to break the stable status quo of life and embark on the road of seeking an distinctive ideal and the true meaning of life. During this process, their subjective consciousness switches from loss to awakening, getting rebuilt gradually.

Having had enough of his monotonous work and life all day long, Strickland finally cannot compromise with it anymore. After a year's early arrangement, he determines to leave for Paris, where he thinks will benefit to his pursuit of an artistic dream rooted in his youth. It can be said that the sudden decision causes a wave of comment like throwing a pebble on the calm water, leaving everyone think that he had run away with his mistress, or that he just went insane. No matter how strongly other people disapproves, mocks or even curses, Strickland never gives in to the tough dilemma brought by the deprivation of social position he formerly enjoyed. Despite suffering both physically and mentally, he adheres to his original intention, always sticking to the painting career he has been yearning for. For Strickland at this moment, it's not intolerable to starve, wander or be treated coldly by others. He would be quite satisfied as long as he can follow his heart, pick up the brush to do some painting and strive to getting closer to his supreme dream.

In similar vein, Larry, the hero of *The Razor's Edge*, also goes through a process featuring the revival of subjective consciousness. After witnessing a comrade of his sacrificing the life to save him in one mission, Larry is extremely shocked so that he cannot help but wonder what the meaning of life is. This issue throws Larry into great confusion for quite a long time, making a profound impact on his life choice in the years to come. In order to get an answer, Larry heads toward the road of loafing in search for the meaning of life instead of going back to work or returning to university like everyone else after the war. During this period, Larry undergoes a variety of trials and pays the price also, the most iconic of which is the breakup with his fiancée Isabel. Isabel demands that Larry should give up his loafing and go back to the United States with her, or else she would put an end to their romantic relationship. In the face of the threat from his beloved girlfriend, Larry determines to stick to himself rather than be shaken by others, however painful it may be at this moment. That is the very embodiment of Larry's individual subjective consciousness against external

pressure, and Larry's victory in this struggle certainly makes the breakthrough of his subjective consciousness development. Over the next ten years, Larry travels respectively to Spain, Italy, India and other countries, searching for the true meaning of life and the road to salvation all along.

In the second stage, motivated by the internal and external environment, Strickland and Larry both acquire deeper understanding of real pursuit and desire in their heart, thus put into practice what they have figured out by roaming and wandering. We can gather from the changes that these two protagonists have set foot on a brand-new lifestyle strikingly different from others. It is the conscious self that adjusts itself and the environment to act as the executor of one's personality. Taking everything into consideration, this stage can be called the transition stage of the protagonists, during which the subjective consciousness has been roused from the primary state of ignorance and begun an important process of reconstruction. It is a remarkable leap undoubtedly, yet there is still a more complete and perfect self for the protagonists to reach through the prolonged accumulation of experience or the push of an opportunity event.

5. THE RETURN AND COMPLETION OF SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The conscience self is the final goal and destination of the subject construction. That means after recognizing one's own existence, one can confirm this kind of existence with action, which helps to understand the meaning of life and existing value, and complete self-fulfillment ultimately. In the later stage, the protagonists have acquired some accumulation after roaming or wandering for a long period. At this point, they finally find a habitat where their drifting mind can get rest and lean close to, allowing them to lift their soul upward. During the transcendence from non-self to self, the subjective consciousness ends up making its return successfully.

After traveling to Paris and Marseilles, Strickland finally comes to Tahiti, an attractive island in the South Pacific. It is here that he married Ata, a kind and simple aboriginal girl, leading a plain and natural life he had always craved. It is also here that he finds the Garden of Eden where his artistic dream and unique soul can be put in the right place, which is absolutely a great showcase for exerting his tremendous talents and creating extraordinary works. In this course, his tortured body has been comforted, meanwhile, his suffering soul has been purified. With an unprecedented relief, he finally accomplishes the pursuit for the extreme beauty of art and the arduous search for self.

In the wandering process lasting for a whole decade, Larry is able to find an answer and get back into himself,

just as Strickland does. After discovering the fact that Western spiritual comfort is not enough to clear up the doubts wrapping around him tightly, Larry turns his attention to the mysterious oriental philosophy. Under the influence of Hindu thought, the inspiration of Indian practitioners, and perhaps most important of all, the guidance of a saint, Larry finally gains an insight into the truth of life in an instant. From then on, he seeks out the way leading to well-being and achieves inward peace. Even further, he completes self-redemption and helps the world by leading a return to life and saving others when needed.

In the last stage, the two protagonists both fulfill their ambitions and pursuits through internal accumulation and external environment encouragement for a considerable time. They finally complete the exploration for the true meaning of life and the return of self-subject consciousness, which is exactly a result of the dual function of ego's internal drive and self's constant adjustment.

6. THE REASONS FOR THE PROTAGONISTS' SUCCESSFUL SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION

The two protagonists, created in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge*, have undergone a series of difficulties and tests in their life journey. The reason why the protagonists can accomplish the subject construction in the end, could be roughly attributed to three aspects—the characters themselves, the writer's intention and the readers' expectation.

In terms of the characters themselves, Strickland and Larry both have something special distinguishing them from the average man, which provides a strong motivation for them to pursue ideal and seek themselves. Considering the status alone, Strickland could be classified as the upper class beyond doubt. But in practical communication, he looks dull and clumsy, as if he does not belong to this elevated social circle at all. Perhaps at that time, his desire to break through the existing circumstances has been hidden beneath his calm appearance. As soon as such eagerness spears out of the ground, it will grow at an amazing speed. And in the end, it will take root in his heart like a towering tree, prompting him to go further and further in his pursuit of self. Similar to Strickland, Larry also shows some personality traits that are different from those of his peer group. Apart from his love for reading books and staying alone, he has his own thought though not speak a lot, bearing an air of solitude and melancholy. This distinctive characteristic enables him to think quietly, to reflect on himself deeply, to explore his inner world further, which contributes to the result that he will not be easily moved by outward objects, and will firmly cling to his choice all the time.

From the aspect of the author, the subjective construction of the two protagonists is related to Maugham's own life experience and the era environment he stands at. The painful childhood experience, oppressive family atmosphere and unhappy marriage has brought great trauma to Maugham, making up his introverted and sensitive temperament. On the other hand, it impels him naturally to pay more attention to the exploration of the mental world and the pursuit of freedom, which indicates the direction for the growth and transformation of the protagonists in his novels. In addition, living in a specific time of the two world wars makes Maugham acutely aware of the spiritual crisis and growing unrest in society caused by war violence. This perception prompts him to ponder on the meaning of life and the value of self-existence, furthermore, seek the way of salvation for the modern world, which runs through many of his works.

From the perspective of readers, the final completion of the protagonists' subject construction also meets the needs of readers' horizon of expectation to some degree. While reading a novel with twists and turns in the plot, readers' mood usually fluctuates along with the characters' fate. From the bottom of their heart, they often hold out hope that the protagonist can transform into a better self after suffering a lot and paying the price for growth. The setting of a happy ending, in other words, the protagonists' realization of their life ideal and the successful subject construction coincides with the reader's aesthetic expectation precisely. It enables readers to enter an ideal state beyond both themselves and reality, thus obtaining pleasant emotional feelings and favorable reading experience. What's more, readers can also get enlightenment, instruction and inspiration from the protagonists' growth process and life destination. All of these will help them to figure out the right direction of life, search out the answer to life, and seek for the spiritual freedom.

On the whole, the protagonists' own character, the projection of the author's self-consciousness and the consideration of reader's expectation horizon are closely intertwined, working together to make the two protagonists' subject construction come true.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper mainly takes the character construction and human nature exploration in Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge* as the foothold, and digs out the subjectivity problem expressed in the works with the help of growth vision. Through the discussion about the process and reasons of the two protagonists' subject construction, this thesis shows Maugham's humanistic care and spiritual pursuit, and reveals the characteristic and significance of Maugham's concern about the characters' soul and writing with the soul.

In a word, the complex social environment and the imperative crisis of self-identity serve as the key elements to bring to life the protagonists' subjective consciousness in these two novels. The persistent pursuit of dream or meaning has become an important driving force to support the protagonists to move forward, propelling them to grow up gradually on the way of wandering, find their true self and attain the real free spirit eventually. Throughout their life course, the two protagonists start from the immature state of naivety and ignorance, then undergo a major shift among trials and tribulations, and finally reach a complete and mature self. The growing process of the protagonists vividly mirrors the progressive recovery of their subjective consciousness, which is saturated with Maugham's attention and thought about the living state of human being. From a practical point of view, the above has enlightening value and reference significance for us to know ourselves, develop ourselves, explore the meaning of life and achieve a peaceful mind.

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