



Psychoanalysis of the Protagonist Strickland in the Moon and Sixpence

Shengyu Tian

Tiangong University, Tianjin, China

Email: arisswift@163.com

How to cite this paper: Tian, S.Y. (2021) Psychoanalysis of the Protagonist Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 8: e7571. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1107571>

Received: May 23, 2021

Accepted: June 14, 2021

Published: June 17, 2021

Copyright © 2021 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the character image of protagonist Strickland, which is done through three dimensions id ego and superego respectively. According to the author of this paper, Strickland's id is craved for artistic creation, ego is the state that Strickland tried to reconcile with the current situation, and superego can be recognized as the state that Strickland was in the Tahiti Island. But the image of Strickland is not completely perfect, for example, he is greedy, lazy, and cruel. This also shows the complexity of human nature. Finally, the author of this paper summarized the intertwined relationship between three personalities.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Psychoanalysis, The Moon and Sixpence, Strickland's image

1. Introduction

The prototype of the protagonist Strickland was based on the painter Paul Gauguin, the French impressionist [1]. Strickland once leads an enviable life, a decent job—stockbroker, everyone thought he had a happy life and ever after. But things changed when Strickland left home, ran away from his wife and families and moved to Paris in order to chase his dream of painting. In Paris, he was barely alive because he was too poor to support himself and he often got sick and hungry. But all these he did he did not care. A friend of Strickland persuade his wife to take care of Strickland, and this wife of Strickland's wife admired Strickland gradually as days grew, and this admiration is accordance with Strickland's

sexual desires and eventually, the wife betrayed her husband and Strickland betrayed her wife, lastly Strickland abandoned another woman—the wife of Strickland’s friend and the wife committed suicide. Strickland’s attitude towards his friend and friend’s wife was not grateful and even a little scornful. Finally, Strickland ended up on an island called Tahiti and married a local woman and there he created many masterpieces including the painting he drew on his own house, and during that time on the island he was blinded. When he passed away, according to his will, the local woman torched his masterpiece on the wall and the painting was burned down to ashes.

The Moon and Sixpence was never a mainstream literary work in the history of English literature, but it is still worth digging into its values and enlightenment. The book used first person narration. The theme of it is to show the complexity of human nature and reveal struggles in which a choice has to be made between reality and ideality. Clearly, the protagonist Strickland chose ideality. “The moon” and “sixpence” has symbolic meanings: the moon in the title represents the ideality which is a dream but unattainable and untouchable; and sixpence is the smallest money unit in that time of England and the sixpence represents the reality which is comfortable seems to us but intolerable for Strickland.

Thematically, Gu [2] dealt with the theme of *The Moon And Sixpence*, and Li [3] and Hou [4] studied human nature in the eyes of Maugham [5], and Huang [6] mainly studies the spiritual values and struggles of the protagonist Strickland, these research successfully analyzed the theme of *the Moon And Sixpence* from different angles. Some scholars compared different Chinese translation versions of *The Moon and Sixpence*, for example, in Cheng [7], and also there are many other researches concerned with the study of the translation, Yu [1], Ji [8], and they all gave their different opinions about the different versions. Of course, we can also research it critically from the perspective of feminism, for example, Ding [9], and Strickland’s attitude towards women is prejudiced and unfair. Here the author of this paper mainly talks about the theme: spiritual pursuit and seeking.

2. An Introduction to Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory

In this chapter, the author of this paper will present the theory and the author of this paper tries to express the Freudian psychoanalytical theory by presenting the history and development. Personality theory comes from the dimension of Freudian psychoanalytical theory. Freud’s psychoanalytical theory establishes the first systematic personality theory in the history of psychology, including personality structure and personality development.

2.1. The History of Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory

This paper aims to study psychoanalysis of the protagonist Strickland in *The Moon and sixpence*. The author will present that the paper will involve by pre-

senting the history and the development of Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory.

2.1.1. The Origin of Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory

Sigmund Freud is the first researcher of psychoanalysis to discover the unconscious and defines the terms and concepts of unconscious communication. Almost all psychoanalysis is rooted in his original notions and concepts. Freud began to study the nervous system as a junior at the University of Vienna, and continued to his works after graduation. He has published research on hysteria and neurosis since 1890. Freud wrote the book *The Study of Hysteria* with Breuer in 1895, which the publication of this book laid the theoretical foundation for the Freudian psychoanalytical theory. Although at that time the medical world didn't take his research seriously enough, he soon moved from the neurology to the field of the psychiatry, and coined the term "psychoanalysis" in 1896. And psychoanalysis in the early stage mainly refers to the clinical treatment such as "talking cure" [10]. In 1919, the establishment of the International Society of Psychoanalysis has marked the final formation of the School of Psychoanalysis.

2.1.2. The Development of Freudian Psychoanalytical Theory

Since the 1890s, Freud was famous for the interpretation of dreams. And the traditional dream interpretation theory of Freud has been applied to literary works to analyze the character structure and interpret the textual features as a symbol of the writer's psychological struggles. The Interpretation is an important stage in the development of the human mind and enriches our experience of literary reading, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* uses the Dream Analysis concept suggesting that Hamlet has strong feelings toward his mother. In 1905, Freud was awarded an honorary doctorate. This marked the international recognition of psychoanalytical theory. And Freudian psychoanalytical theory is including unconsciousness theory, instinct theory, personality theory, anxiety theory, psychological defense mechanism. And Freudian psychoanalytical theory had a profound impact on literature and writers throughout the Twentieth Century.

2.2. Personality Theory

The personality theory that this paper adopted gives people an explanation for human behavior. Freud believes that the mind is responsible for both conscious and unconscious that it makes on the basis of psychic drives. The personality theory can explain why humans feel anxious when human beings' moral standards struggle with human biological instincts. Freud generally published and publicized structure model drives the personality theory into three parts: Id, Ego and Superego. And human behavior is the balance of three parts.

2.2.1. The Definition of Id, Ego and Superego

The Id is the most primitive part of the personality structure since the human birth. "The id is containing our impulses, including thirst, anger, hunger, fear,

and the desires for the instant gratifications” [11]. The id is unsure of any form of reality or consequence. Freud believes that some people are in control of their id because it makes people do some behaviors that they want, not judging whether it is right or wrong. And the id only follows one principle which is the principle of pleasure. It means that human pursue their individual’s biological needs such as food, life of satisfaction and the avoidance of painfulness.

“Ego is the organized subdivision of the personality. It is the executive hand of the personality, controlling perception, learning, and reasoning [11]. The ego is generated from the real world after being born as an individual. From the principle of governing human nature, the reality principle has dominated the id. Furthermore, the ego is between id and superego, which can regulate and balance the impulse in both of them.

“Superego is the part of the personality that represents the conscience, the moral part of us. It consists of the conscience and the ego ideal, which refers to the ideal of perfection that the ego strives to emulate” [11]. The superego can be considered to be the conscience of the mind because it has the ability to distinguish between realities as well as what is right or wrong. Superego is the highest part of the personality structure in the control position, which is gradually formed by the individual’s upbringing in the social cultural and moral standards in life.

2.2.2. The Interrelationship among the Id, Ego and Superego

Id, ego and superego consist of the three levels of personality theory interweave with each other to form an organic team. According to Freud, each of them is responsible for specific aspects of the personality. Id reflects the biological instinct of the human being and acting like a primitive person according to the pleasure principle. Ego as like an executor of the personality to seeks to satisfy the instinctive impulse circumstances permit according to the principle of reality. Superego is like a moral person that represents the society of the person to pursue the perfection. Thus ensuring the normal circumstances, the id, ego and superego are in a state of coordination and balance. There will be psychological barriers endangering the development of the personality if the three levels are in disorders or damage. When the ego breaks a superego rule, the superego punishes the ego by making the person feel guilty. Id, ego and superego have a close relationship, as Freud describes “they are areas of color melting into on another as they are presented by modern artists” [11]. In short, Freud believes that people live in the sea of conflicts, that there are constant battles between Id, Ego and Superego [11]. All psychological activities of human can be reasonably explained from the connection between three parts. The id is permanent and the superego and the id are almost permanent opposites. The ego needs to be adjusted because of this reconcile and the contradiction between the id and the superego. When an individual experiences anxiety stress from the id, superego and the outside world, the ego helps to activate the psychological defense mechanism.

3. Psychoanalysis of the Protagonist Strickland

In this chapter, the author of this paper will analyze the characteristics of Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence* from the three dimensions, namely, the id analysis, ego analysis, and superego analysis. The author will give the manifestation, the cause and factors, and intertwined struggles of each part.

3.1. Id Analysis

The protagonist Strickland was a stockbroker, in the novel Maugham describes him as “I never for a moment discerned that there was in him anything out of the ordinary”, such an unordinary person startled the storyteller afterwards. We could see a little contempt and pity for Strickland from the way the storyteller describes him at the end of the novel, because Strickland’s life was whole a lot of mess, his body being suffered from illness, the environment being nasty and dirty, but he didn’t care. According to Freud, when someone is not satisfied with something, his or her demand are not met, then he or she will be compensated at another. So is Strickland. His demand for arts or painting is not satisfied, so he quit the job and pursued the long-craving dream of painter. Before that, he lived in rich and abundant life, back then his id could be the desire to eat, sleep and drink and But this was not what he wanted. Maybe the common values and parents’ aspiration made him a stockbroker, but his id in his heart demanded him to quit this boring job and follow the call of the heart.

Almost everyone living in this world inevitably will have to socialize with others because we live in a group although everyone is an individual. The environment Strickland was in made him sick and want to run away from it. As it mentioned before, back then Strickland’s desires were human primitive instincts but they changes as he ran to Paris to pursue his painting dream. Once his id was not the same, his satisfaction was met, he only cares about painting and art but pay no attention to other things, such as his own health, his living conditions, and what other people may think about him.

The author of this paper thinks that Strickland’s escaping was not a result of external force, but the result of internal driving force. His id was not satisfied with ego, the situation that he was in, and he could not find his social belongings or this material obsession can offset his desire of ego.

3.2. Ego Analysis

According to Freud, ego was a kind of reconciling state that between reality and ideal, it is the reconciliation between these id and superego. He cannot shake the shackles of marriage and family, he wants something more thrilling although he lives an abundant and happy life and has a beautiful wife and a decent job. Before the escaping, Strickland’s id or inner desire was not satisfied, for a long time he was hoping he could be engage in the profession or activities that he actually loves and cares about. But all this has been settled after he ran away from his house and his wife, just like his id suddenly awakes, the desire of painting sup-

pressed by the morality and suffocated by the ego at last accumulated to a certain point and burst out, it became the inner force of artistic creations. Before escaping, his ego was struggled and suffered, at last he cannot put up with it anymore; after the escaping, his inner desire was alleviated to some extent. So he would rather the agony of the illness, the deficiency of the food, the bad living environment, his satisfaction of desiring for the biological and physical needs was compensated by his satisfaction of desiring for the artistic needs. In his heart, he craves artistic creation.

Maybe someone would regard it as an escape from his responsibility for his child and his wife. This is, the author of the paper thinks that, the character that Maugham creates is a kind of paradox, who follows the call from the inner heart on the condition that violating the moral codes. Not alone in the past, even in the modern society, others find it difficult to understand someone like him, for he abandoned his superior living environment, his wife and children, and that is sometimes enviable status for an ordinary person to have. No wonder when the storyteller asked Strickland's wife if he could meet Strickland, his wife answered, did you really want to meet him for he is just an ordinary person with nothing special.

In that background of society changing so fast, people wonders and confuses, people felt depressed, desperate and pessimistic, Maugham explores the relationship between the western material civilization and the individual development, expressing the Maugham's doubts about the material civilization and his reflection about the complicated human nature. For us, to have superior and decent life like Strickland is enough, but for Strickland this is not what he really wants.

3.3. Superego Analysis

When Strickland was finally on an island of Tahiti in southern Pacific Ocean, he found the right place for him to continue his artistic creation. It was like he found his sanctuary place, as if he had been here before. His artistic desire was finally released and satisfied. Just like mentioned before, Strickland was hard to understand and so is painting maybe for us normal person with the less ability to appreciate, the author of the paper thinks, the storyteller's attitudes towards Strickland is both recognize and despise. The life on that island is primitive but suitable for Strickland to continue his artistic creation. Although Strickland came to a place which is isolated from the outside world to achieve his spiritual pilgrim, in Maugham's eyes, to abandon families and everything is very inhuman and cruel.

Yet there is a point that must be pointed out is that we must criticize Strickland's infidelity to his wife and indifference to lives. Whether for his wife or his "companion" in Tahiti Island, he regarded them as some instrument just to satisfy his own sexual needs. Strickland's indifference to life and his contempt for lifestyle are reflected in his personality, especially his ignorant attitude towards

women, which is totally not tolerant in our eyes. In fact, through the whole life of Strickland, he could never leave the company of the women whether from the wife him or the girl he met on the island.

4. Conclusions

We could draw a conclusion that before running away from home, he had not been able to find the real meaning and essence of arts, just like most of us ordinary people, is stuck with reality with the noble and beautiful dreams leaving behind, that ideal or dream is unreachable because we have reality to face up with and family to support, we are not able to pursue that ideal just like Strickland did.

The struggle between id and ego in Strickland has undergone a series of changes. After running away, id and ego in Strickland finally reached a point which is balanced. In fact, Strickland is wandering between ideal and reality, arts and life, hope and disappointment, but all this has been resolved during his life in that Tahiti Island. He gave up the life which he is scorned of but decent in others' eyes. According to the author of this paper's understanding, id for Strickland is what he craves for arts, ego is the reconciliation or compromise between his life and art aspirations such as the life before the escape, and superego is the kind of state which he attained on the island. And this feeling of the superego is even more intense when all the paintings and houses were burned under the demand of his, it all became so simple, beginning with nothing and ending with nothing.

On that remote pacific island, everything was primate, which could bring a wide range of source material for him, and no one is running such kind of relationship networks, no one is using masks and veils to cover the ugliness, everything seems so real and genuine in Strickland's eyes, and this sense of reality deeply touched the heart of Strickland. He suddenly understood and figured out what he really wanted and true meaning of life and arts. It looked like his spirit had been separated from his body, wandering around, and finally found his soul in this remote land.

In author of this paper's eyes, what Maugham tried to express is that despite Strickland searching for artistic pursuit is noble, Maugham also showed Strickland's cruelty coldness, and disrespect for woman, this complexity of humanity is displayed through the protagonist Strickland's characteristics, righteous as well as wicked, good as well as evil, and struggles between reality and ideality. The human nature is the novel's theme.

The limitation of this paper is we only look at the protagonist Strickland's image from the psychoanalysis mainly from three different views, that is, ego id and superego, and due to energy and time is limited and the knowledge level of author of this paper is limited, this is not a detailed and full investigation and research. Yet there are many factors and facets that be weighed throughout the novel but the author of this paper tries to give more thoughtful and deliberate

research and hopes to shed a dim light on the related research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Yu, D. (2016) A Comparative Analysis of Three Chinese Version of The Moon and Sixpence from the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity. MA Thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing.
- [2] Gu, H. (2004) Conflict Between Ideality And Reality—Review on The Theme of Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence. *Journal of Zhejiang Ocean University (Human Science)*, **21**, 38-41.
- [3] Li, Y.X. (2015) The Human Nature Research on Maugham's Moon and Sixpence. MA Thesis, Yili Normal University, Yili.
- [4] Hou, X.J. (2004) Defect and Saving—Maugham's Humanity Exploration. MA Thesis, Jilin University, Jilin.
- [5] Morgan, T. (1980) Maugham. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- [6] Huang, L. (2015) The Spiritual Seeking Of Strickland in The Moon And Sixpence. MA Thesis, Shandong Normal Univesity, Shandong.
- [7] Cheng, K.W., Deng, Q.F. and Deng, Y.H. (2020) "Harmonization and Difference": A Comparison of Two Chinese Version of The Moon And Sixpence from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology. *Translation Research and Teaching*, **1**, 106-111.
- [8] Ji, C.Y. (2018) A Comparative Study of Two Chinese Versions of the Moon and Sixpence from The Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory. MA Thesis, China University of Geoscience, Beijing.
- [9] Ding, X. (2004) A Psychoanalytical and Feministic Interpretation of Strickland's Escape in The Moon and Sixpence. MA Thesis, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou.
- [10] Zhu, G. (2003) Twenty Century Western Critical Theories. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai.
- [11] Sigmund, F. (1962) The Ego and the Id. Trans. W.W. Norton and Company, New York.