Bidirectional Disenchantment: The Deconstruction of Ideal and Reality in The Moon and Sixpence

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Abstract:

W. Somerset Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence centers on Charles Strickland, a painter who resolutely abandons his mundane life, endures numerous hardships, and defies social conventions—all in pursuit of his artistic ideal. By depicting the varied choices made by different characters amid the conflict between ideal and reality, as well as the distinct fates that follow, the novel subtly reveals a core issue: excessive glorification of either side will trap people in a state of cognitive confusion. This paper argues that only through the bidirectional disenchantment of both ideal and reality, and by deconstructing their seemingly contradictory opposition, can individuals break free from cognitive limitations, balance ideal and reality independently, and ultimately make more rational life choices. The concept of "bidirectional disenchantment," as proposed in this paper, serves to highlight the inherent imperfections in both our ideals and our reality. By deconstructing the perceived conflict between them, it suggests a new perspective: when we cease to view ideals as infallible myths and reality as an unbreakable shackle, we discover that their respective flaws can be complementary. This understanding reveals that the tension between them is not only manageable but resolvable.

Keywords: Disenchantment, Deconstructing, Ideal, Reality, Balance, Rational.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Introduction of Disenchantment

The theory of "disenchantment" originates from German sociologist Max Weber. In his work Science as a Vocation, Weber discusses the disenchantment of the world as the central process of modern social rationalization. Once scientific rationality displaces traditional mysticism and transcendent beliefs, the world, which was formerly imbued with sanctity and a sense of fate, is liberated from the influence of divine beings and ultimate meaning, transforming it into an object that can be rationally analyzed and

controlled. This is what Weber called "the disenchantment of the world" [1].

In literary research, "disenchantment" refers to the process by which authors, through texts, break readers' romanticized and absolutized imaginations of specific values, identities, or ideals, dispel their "sublimity" and "perfection," and further reveal the complex essence and truth of things. Different from the "macroscopic rational process" in sociology, literary disenchantment focuses more on the "collision between individual cognition and textual reality": it does not deny the value itself, but refuses to shape it into a "black-and-white" symbol. By depicting characters' dilemmas, the costs of ideals, or cracks in reality, it enables readers to break away from "beautiful illusions" and confront the complexity of human nature and the world.

1.2 Introduction of Deconstruction

"Deconstruction" is a core theory proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, as he clearly stated in Writing and Difference. Deconstruction is not about "destroying the text"; instead, it breaks the pursuit of "a single fixed meaning" in traditional criticism. Examining the language, narrative, and symbols of a text reveals the hidden contradictions, gaps, and uncertainty of meaning within the text [2].

Traditional literary criticism often assumes that a text has "a core connotation endowed by the author" or "a single correct interpretation." From the perspective of deconstruction, however, language possesses the characteristic of "différance" — the meaning of a word needs to be defined through its differences from other symbols, and is generated with delays depending on the context and the reader's perception. Therefore, there is no ultimate interpretation of a text. For example, regarding common binary depictions such as "justice" and "violence," "sublimity" and "mediocrity," deconstruction does not take their absoluteness for granted. Instead, it explores the contradictory descriptions within them, breaks the black-and-white perception, and demonstrates the multiplicity of meaning.

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

The Moon and Sixpence has long been regarded as a classic text exploring the "confrontation between ideal (the moon) and reality (the sixpence)." The narrative of the protagonist Strickland abandoning the secular world to pursue art not only triggers in-depth inquiries into "the cost of pursuing ideals" and "the significance of mundane stability," but also leads numerous scholars to focus on the contradiction between the two. However, existing studies mostly emphasize the opposing struggle between ideals and reality, and rarely adopt a "disenchantment" perspec-

tive to deconstruct the idealized perception of these two values.

From the perspective of academic research, Hermione Lee, a renowned biographer of Maugham, discussed the relationship between Maugham's personal experience (such as his own conflicts between literary ideals and secular life) and the novel's themes in her work W. Somerset Maugham: A Life, but did not deeply explore the cognitive misunderstandings behind the ideal-reality opposition [3]. Another scholar, Zhao Yiheng, pointed out in Principles and Deduction of Semiotics that in the study of binary opposition themes (such as ideal and reality) in literary works, traditional analytical methods often overemphasize the "opposition" of the two sides and ignore their "interdependence" in the construction of textual symbolic meaning [4]. This academic tendency is also reflected in the research of The Moon and Sixpence: most studies focus on Strickland's "rebellion against reality" and "devotion to ideals," but fail to dig into how reality subtly supports his ideal pursuit (such as the initial material foundation provided by his stockbroker career) and how ideal pursuit affects his perception of reality.

This study proposes a "bidirectional disenchantment" perspective, with three core purposes: First, to deconstruct the cognitive framework of "the rigid opposition between ideals and reality" existing in academic research. Second, to reveal W. Somerset Maugham's writing intention regarding the complex nature of ideals and reality (i.e., neither is perfect, and both need to be viewed rationally). Third, to provide contemporary readers with practical guidance, helping them avoid idealized misunderstandings when they choose their ideals and compromise with reality. It replaces the illusory expectation of "perfect choices" with the rational understanding that life is about "balancing choices and trade-offs."

2 Disenchanting the Sublimity of Ideal

The concept of ideal is based on people's inner interests and autonomous will, choosing what people themselves really like. Instead of external utilitarian motivation, the core of the ideal is the acceptance and passion in themselves. From Erich Fromm's humanistic thought. In his work The Sane Society, Fromm pointed out that a healthy ideal should be "the free expression of human creativity," and doing what one loves is essentially an individual's realization of self-worth through activities they are passionate about, preventing ideals from becoming dependent on external norms [5].

Society usually endows the ideals symbolized by the moon with a "sublime aura." Seemingly, this gives people a so-called spiritual sustenance and a direction for

their efforts, making them attach sufficient importance to and cherish their ideals. However, it actually widens the distance between individuals and their ideals. The reason is that when people look up to their ideals, they will subconsciously start to feel that these ideals are out of reach; eventually, they will gradually accept this notion, which in turn hinders their actions and restricts their thinking. This observation accurately captures a real-world phenomenon—quite often, when we place our ideals on too high a pedestal, they end up becoming like the "moon" that we can see but never reach. In essence, this kind of "sublimation" is actually adding a filter of "inaccessibility" to our ideals. In this way, disenchanting the sublimity of the ideal is really essential.

2.1 The Concept of Sublimity

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word sublimity as "the quality of being extremely good, beautiful, or enjoyable" [6]. In the aesthetic system of Kant's Critique of Judgment, sublimity is not an attribute of the object itself, but a special aesthetic experience generated when human beings face formless, infinite things or those with absolute power (such as violent nature and the vast universe) [7]. Humans inherently possess an aversion to entities or phenomena that are overly perfect. If they imagine their ideal is sublime, automatically, a sense of fear is generated unconsciously. Therefore, the more people adore the ideal, the greater the difference between the ideal and reality. In this way, people will be trapped in puzzles, hesitation, and self-doubt. The ideal has already lost its original meaning.

2.2 The Process of Pursuing the Ideal is Not Sublime

The novel discloses that the pursuit of ideals is not as sublime as it seems. On the contrary, it is frequently beset with moral dilemmas and material degeneracy. By "disenchantment," consciously to escape from the dilemma, people can understand that the process of pursuing an idea is not sublime. Strickland is a good example of disenchantment.

Strickland was never shackled by the glow of his ideals from start to finish. He didn't wait for every condition to be perfect before he began, nor did he force himself to chase perfection along the way. Once a stockbroker, he had what the world would call an ideal job and a happy family. Yet he suddenly shattered that peace, abandoned his wife, left for Paris, and threw himself into pursuing his dream of painting.

Moral nobility never held Strickland back. Stroeve, who admired Strickland's work and was eager to help him, spent a great deal of effort convincing his wife to let the ailing Strickland stay at their home. But once Blanche started caring for Strickland, he set his sights on her—and before long, he took over both her and the house as if it were his right. In the end, Blanche died, broken by Strickland's cold indifference. However, none of this absurdity stirred a single regret in him; he still mocked Stroeve for being naive and dismissed Blanche's feelings as worthless.

Therefore, W. Somerset Maugham wrote: "His callousness was inhuman, and in my indignation, I was not inclined to mince my words" [8]. This portrayal of Strickland's moral indifference reflects a potential risk in the relationship between individual ideals and social morality: in the process of pursuing personal ideals, some people may prioritize their own goals over the feelings and rights of others, leading to moral deviations.

2.3 Ideal Itself is Not Sublime Neither

In secular society, professions like life-saving physicians, innovative painters, and knowledge-disseminating teachers are widely revered. Cloaked in prestige, these occupations have become ideals for many. Yet few recognize that an ideal should be rooted in genuine passion for the work itself, not in a vague perception of the profession's status. Strickland transcended such misconceptions: he clearly understood that his true pursuit was the act of painting, not the fame of being a renowned painter.

Early in his pursuit of this goal, Strickland conversed with W. Somerset Maugham. Maugham mistakenly believed Strickland's goal was to be a famous painter and challenged him on this point. Strickland, however, knew his sole drive was to paint, and his response reflected this singular conviction. For example, when Maugham noted his age, saying, "But you're forty," Strickland dismissed age as an obstacle, replying, "That's what made me think it was high time to begin." When Maugham questioned his basic painting skills, Strickland showed no awkwardness about his inexperience, answering, "Not yet. But I shall. That's why I've come over here. I couldn't get what I wanted in London. Perhaps I can here." Time and again, Maugham sought to dissuade Strickland from his "painting dream" by invoking harsh realities, but Strickland remained resolute. This was because he was never attracted to the glamour of being a painter; instead, he was obsessed with painting itself.

It was this devotion that led him to declare, "I tell you I've got to paint. I can't help myself. When a man falls into the water, it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown" [8]. He had found the ideal that truly captivated him—an allure so compelling it was irresistible, and one that outshone any secular glam-

our.

3 Disenchanting the Stability of Reality

In society, more people choose to grasp reality rather than pursue their ideals, opting instead for more secure fame, wealth, power, and status. In modern society, material wealth is often associated with social status, respect, and self-actualization [9]. Consequently, people tend to pursue material possessions to meet their needs at different levels. As society continues to evolve, people's mindsets are constantly influenced, leading them to keep striving for material abundance.

In understanding why people generally place great emphasis on material conditions, Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a reasonable explanation. Maslow argued that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, beginning with physiological and safety needs, which must be satisfied before individuals can pursue higher-level goals such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Within this framework, material conditions not only encompass the direct satisfaction of basic physiological requirements, such as food and shelter, but also include the sense of security derived from income, property, and social protection. This sense of security helps alleviate individuals' anxieties about the future and allows life to acquire a degree of predictability and stability [10].

3.1 The Risks in Reality

Among those who pursue material things, they tend to see material possessions as tangible and long for the sense of stability that comes with material abundance, rather than the anxiety of gain and loss brought by ideals. Yet in reality, material things are not stable either—they carry countless risks. A single mistake can make people lose everything. If people free themselves from the illusion of stability and stop clinging to material pursuits, they gain the rational ability to balance ideals and reality [1].

Take Mrs. Strickland in The Moon and Sixpence as an example. She was deeply obsessed with worldly comfort and security. Together with Strickland, she maintained a family that seemed warm, peaceful, and happy. Mrs. Strickland took pride in this life and devoted herself entirely to it. However, one day, Strickland suddenly left for Paris, abandoning his family to pursue his ideal of painting. As Mrs. Strickland said, "I remember before we were married, he used to potter about with a paint-box. But you never saw such daubs. We used to chaff him. He had absolutely no gift for anything like that" [8]. Who could have thought that a hobby her husband had casually mentioned in daily life would become the reason for the family's breakdown?

Thus, clinging to the stability of reality is meaningless. People can never know where, in the ordinary course of life, the fuse of future disaster is hidden. The "stability" of material reality is often temporary; in the long run, it is full of uncertainties brought by changes in personal relationships, social environment, or external circumstances—this view is also consistent with Schumpeter's "creative destruction" theory, which points out that social and economic structures are constantly iterated, and the original stable state (such as material wealth and occupational status) will inevitably be broken by new changes [11].

3.2 There is No Ending in Pursuing Reality

The essence of pursuing reality fulfillment lies in a desire for material possessions. In social life, as people's values are constantly shaped, they begin to pursue material goods and keep craving more. However, material desires are endless, and this unceasing pursuit breeds a sense of inadequacy. It traps people in the illusory prosperity of materialism, making them increasingly greedy and indifferent, while also depriving them of the ability to truly experience happiness [5].

For example, in The Moon and Sixpence, Alec Carmichael seized the opportunity that arose after Abraham's resignation. He later developed into a distinguished physician and even received a knighthood, thus amassing wealth, fame, and social status in the secular world. By then, however, he had become immersed in the pursuit of material realities and trapped in the conventions of secular society. As a result, he arrogantly dismissed Abraham's choice as foolish, claiming that Abraham lacked character. As stated in the text: "The fact is, I suppose, that it's not enough to have brains. The thing that counts is character. Abraham hadn't got character" [8].

What Carmichael failed to recognize, though, was Abraham's resolve and determination—and the genuine happiness Abraham had found. He was also unaware of what Abraham told Maugham: "Never, not for a minute. I earn just enough to live upon, and I'm satisfied. I ask nothing more than to remain as I am till I die. I've had a wonderful life" [8].

Therefore, disenchantment with reality is crucial. The material world of reality is neither unbreakable nor able to bring sufficient happiness. Instead, people are often trapped by desires for it—even minor upsets can trigger its collapse, precisely because excessive glory and expectations attached to the material world leave people vulnerable to it. Moreover, while material abundance may bring social fulfillment, it cannot fill the spiritual void, leaving people swayed by their own thoughts and struggling to communicate effectively with the outside world.

4 Conclusion

Neither ideals nor reality is absolutely "perfect": the former is not sublimely perfect, while the latter has the limitation of being trivial and ordinary. Thus, there is no need to give up one completely.

However, when making important choices, people often fall into the wrong idea of "having to pick one or the other." They feel hesitant and anxious, which makes it hard for them to make a decision. The root reason is that they put too much of a "glow" on either ideals or reality—either treating ideals as something sacred, or seeing reality as absolute. This makes them view the two as opposing sides that conflict with each other, moving away from their real goals.

The "bidirectional disenchantment" put forward in this paper aims to point out the imperfection of both, so as to deconstruct their contradiction. When people realize that ideals are not a "myth" and reality is not a "shackle," they will find that the flaws of the two can make up for each other, and their contradiction is not impossible to resolve.

After getting rid of the "either-or" way of thinking, people can, based on their own actual situation, choose the part of ideals that fits their abilities and accept the part of reality that can support them. In the end, they will make a choice that better matches their own needs and helps with their long-term development. This is not only the meaning of "bidirectional disenchantment" but also a more sensible and practical attitude when facing life's choices.

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