

# Self-identity's Construction Process in *The Moon and Sixpence* from Lacan's Theory of the Mirror

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## Abstract

In literature, the conflict between individual ideals and reality and the complexity of human nature are frequently discussed themes. Thus, in *The Moon and Sixpence*, the themes of life and humanity echo the core ideas of modernist literature. In the story, Strickland ditches his wife and children and travels to the South Pacific island of Tahiti to pursue his artistic dreams. Despite his poverty and illness, he did not care, regretting that he had not started making art sooner. Through Strickland's artistic pursuits, the novel presents the contradictions between genius, personality, material civilization, modern marriage and family life, and a profound exploration of the meaning of life and the value of art. However, an in-depth study of the work reveals that the author spends much space elaborating on three significant female characters in Strickland's life. This elaborate layout is not random but cleverly combined with French psychologist Jacques Lacan's Theory of the Mirror, aiming to reflect his deep understanding and subtle changes in self-identity at different stages of life through the shaping and evolution of these female roles. Based on this observation, this study aims to explore the gradual maturity and deepening of Strickland's self-identity view in his life journey from the perspective of the women around him. Through a detailed analysis of the complex relationship between these female characters and Strickland, the author hopes to reveal the dynamic changes in his inner world and his continuous pursuit of art and understanding of life. At the same time, this study also provides a new perspective for readers to re-examine and understand this classic work's profound connotation and humanistic value.

## Keywords

Lacan's Theory of the Mirror; *The Moon and Sixpence*; Self-identity.

## 1. Introduction

*The Moon and Sixpence* features many images of three women, Mrs. Strickland, Blanche, and Ata, who are integral to these protagonists' lives. They are like a prism, reflecting the pursuit and desire of Strickland in different periods. Mrs. Strickland both the pursuit of their own fame and wealth at the same time, branches dare to love to dare hate but also selfish cold, love tower pure kind but lack of self-consciousness, this is in different degrees reflects the Strickland in different periods, the image of these women became his self-cognition, deep desire and struggle mirror, makes him in constant reflection and struggle, gradually find their own way and direction, more let the reader in the taste of the story at the same time, the human self-identity, love and freedom have more rich thinking and comprehension.

## 2. Initial Stage: A Vague Self-identity

In the vast universe of art and literature, the characters' self-identity is often gradually constructed and perfected through their relationship and interaction with the others. Lacan proposed the mirror stage, "We know that the image in the mirror is reversed, and we may see

in this at least a metaphorical representation of the structural reversal we have demonstrated in the ego as the individual's psychical reality" [1]. Lacan believes that the image in the mirror and the image of the self are subversive; that is to say, the eyes of the others may not be correct, but many people are still very concerned about the views of the others. Through interactions and interactions with the others, characters look at themselves in front of an invisible mirror, see themselves, and then outline and shape the outline of self-identity. In the vast field of literature, the self-identity of the characters is not an isolated island but deeply rooted in the close connection with the others. This kind of identification may be a dreamy pursuit of the ideal self and gradually clear their own direction in the exploration and struggle, or perhaps it is a deep and honest acceptance of the real self, even in the face of imperfections and flaws, with a peaceful mind. With its unique visual language and narrative skills, artworks present this process in the eyes of the audience or readers, giving us a glimpse of the magnificent inner world of the characters and the complex aspects of self-identity. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Strickland is just an obscure stockbroker, and the author describes in the third person as "there was in him anything out of the ordinary" [2], and he is even more impressed by his wife. In the author's writing, Mrs. Strickland is portrayed as a typical middle-class wealthy lady, which tells she was "rather tall and plump", "She was not pretty, but her face was very pleasing" [2], this reflects the author's good impression of her. Through more than ten years with his wife, Strickland gradually realized that he had more extraordinary dreams and pursuits deep in his heart. He also realized that he and his wife were not fellow travelers. The author skillfully describes Mrs. Strickland's vanity and persistent pursuit of social status from the foil of Strickland's dissatisfaction and alienation from his wife's side. In the process, Mrs. Strickland became the first "Other" in Strickland's eyes and was also a mirror image of his true thoughts. "In essence Words, self is but one else" [3]. Through the delicate description of Mrs. Strickland, the author skillfully expresses the true thoughts of Strickland. His wife is like a mirror, reflecting his inner desire and struggle. At the same time, while interacting with his wife, Strickland constantly builds and reshapes his own consciousness. His wife's incomprehension and even block, but let him more firm determination and determination to take the road of art and faith. This process not only shows the complexity of the character's self-identity but also deeply reveals the unique charm of the artworks in shaping the characters and showing human nature. The alienation of personality is first reflected in the alienation of the human heart and essence, and Strickland's inner desire for artistic perfection fully demonstrates his alienation of personality. Strickland gave up his original family to pursue his dream; this dedication to the ideal makes him appear alienated and out of place in the real world. Lacan illustrates the nature of the self with the mirror stage theory of alienation; he points out that babies in 6-18 months, the first time in front of the mirror, and this sense of unity and unity can only come from the external illusory mirror, cannot produce from the inner perception of the baby [4]. Such identity determines that the self can only be the product of alienation, and its being the conferred unity and self-sufficiency are an illusion. Therefore, the author shows Strickland's alienation by describing his rupture with society. In addition, through the dual functions of vision and narrative, the author also allows us to go deep into the character's inner world and feel the tortuous course of the protagonists' self-identity and the trajectory of their spiritual growth. The moon in the title represents the lofty ideal, the artistic dream pursued by the hero Strickland, and sixpence represents reality, symbolizing the secular life and material pursuit. This opposition reflects the conflict between ideal and reality and echoes the opposition between self and the others in the Theory of the Mirror. In this theory, individuals build self-identity through interaction with the others. At the same time, Strickland pursues the ideal self represented by a moon by abandoning the real life represented by sixpence.

The theory of the Mirror also emphasizes the process of individual building and confirming self-identity through interaction with society. Mrs. Strickland's various behaviors after her

husband's departure also reflect her continuous growth process from dependence to independence, which is also a mirror image. Human life is composed of two aspects: the body and the mind. The body is the material carrier of life, and psychology is the spiritual carrier of life<sup>[5]</sup>. When Mrs. Strickland faced her husband's sudden leave, she no doubt suffered a tremendous psychological shock, with unspeakable grief. However, she was not swallowed up by the grief but quickly picked up her mood and showed a calm and rational attitude. Keeping calm in difficulties and actively seeking solutions shows her perseverance and independence in the face of significant family changes. Mrs. Strickland proved with her actions that she could face life's challenges on her own strength even in the most difficult times. Mrs. Strickland's tenacity and independence were also profoundly reflected in her determination to assume the family responsibility. She properly arranged the child's daily life and paid close attention to their study to ensure they could continue growing and progressing in such a dilemma. In order to make a living, Mrs. Strickland has shown extraordinary courage and determination. She taught herself the skills, supported her family with her own hands, and even used her social resources and compassion for her "infidelity" to develop her career. This spirit of unremitting self-improvement and courage helped her go through the difficulties and find a new direction in life. Although Mrs. Strickland had already adapted to her current environment, the end of her husband's life meant that she would live independently with her children, which was a difficult challenge for her and almost resumed. "Once an individual enters the new cultural environment, it is difficult for him to return to the original natural state, but this contradiction is always accompanied by the growth and life of the individual" <sup>[6]</sup>. Mrs. Strickland could not return to her original state of life; her husband's departure would be a thorn in her heart, but life's difficulties did not defeat her; she always maintained a valuable dignity and dignity. Therefore, she does not want to show herself in front of people but chooses to face every moment of life with a solid and optimistic attitude. Her tenacity and dignity not only help her stand tall in the difficulties but also let her shine on the road of life.

### 3. Change Stage: True Self-identity

Individuals' self-identity is gradually shaped and made clear in the complex interactions and relationships with the others. Strickland, a former stockbroker, after long struggling in the shackles of marriage, finally plucked up the courage to break free and go to a foreign country to pursue the distant but burning his inner dream of painting. This decision marked a complete change in his life trajectory and prompted a dramatic change in his psychological world. This change is first reflected in his extreme dedication and almost obsessive love for art. "The mirror stage, which refers to the infant's early experience of fascination with its own image in a mirror, relates how the child responds with jubilation and pleasure to seeing a reflection of its own image" <sup>[7]</sup>. In the Theory of the Mirror, babies are obsessed with self-image because they feel happy seeing their own image. After identifying his favorite career and goal, Strickland also decided to throw everything away and devote himself to art, which reflects his obsession with art. Even though he knew there was endless poverty and unknown challenges ahead, he also set foot on this art road full of thorns. His behavior was so incompatible with the moral framework of society at that time and even somewhat unconventional. His artistic creation became the only way for him to communicate with the world, and this way further deepened his alienation. His attitude towards women shows this contempt for traditional morality more vividly. In Strickland's eyes, women seem to be just the tools in his artistic creation rather than individuals with independent thoughts and emotions. His relationship with Blanche is the best example; initially, he sees her as a suitable model rather than a cherished companion. When Blanche could not meet his artistic needs, he abandoned it without mercy, eventually leading to her tragic ending. This contempt for traditional morality and the extreme pursuit of personal desire show his psychological ruthlessness. However, the psychological changes in Strickland

are not limited there. On the road of pursuing art, he is also constantly exploring and confirming his identity, from an ordinary securities broker to a passionate artist, he has experienced a dramatic change of identity. In this process, his self-identity is closely linked to his artistic pursuit, and he expresses his inner feelings and rebellion against reality through his paintings. When the author describes Blanche, he uses the before and after comparison.

At first sight, in “my” opinion, Blanche is “pleasant and simple, always happy, but she remained always rather silent” [2], which is a solid contrast to her giving up her family and eloping with Strickland. “In the 19th-century European society, the status of women was considered to be generally lower than that of men, so the individual identity of women was hidden under the power of the husband, which to some extent strengthened the sense of male hegemony in the family and the absolute ownership of his wife” [8]. However, Blanche was brave in breaking the social shackles, to some extent, the same as Strickland’s choice at that time. In the face of love, Blanche shows a firm determination, fully reflecting her brave pursuit of true love. After falling in love with Strickland, she seemed to have become another person; once gentle and obedient, she was replaced by determination and determination. Her heart is now only the persistent pursuit of true love, even if it means abandoning everything, including the once seemingly happy family life. This different transformation is shocking and thoughtful about the true meaning of love and life. “In fact, the self is a kind of imagination, which anticipates the image of its own autonomy, so as to simultaneously deviate from the difference between the unity of the imagination and the actual dependence” [9]. In fact, the self is a kind of imagination that tries to eliminate the shackles of fantasy and reality by anticipating the image of its own ideal. Strickland fled his original bound marriage and was full of longing and expectation for his future life. “The reference to the mirror captures this ambiguity by emphasizing that the ego is built upon an image of one’s own body as it would be perceived from another’s point of view” [7]. Through the description of Blanche, the author reflects Strickland’s mental state at that time from the perspective of “an Other”, he urgently needed to find someone who could support and encourage him unconditionally, but deep down, he was still in a mystery exploration. He just wanted to find a suitable model to complete his painting, so he abandoned her mercilessly when Blanche could not meet his needs. This series of behavioral and psychological changes shows Strickland’s ultimate pursuit of art and reveals his complex exploration of self-identity and interpersonal relationships.

Others play a vital role in the awakening of human self-consciousness. Blanche’s fanatical pursuit of Strickland reflects precisely one side of the Theory of the Mirror. Her love for Strickland was, in fact, a search for self-identity. Blanche shaped herself through a relationship with Strickland, which became integral to her self-identity. Scholars have pointed out that an individual cannot acquire a stable perception of himself as he has to anticipate his own image from the mirror, that is to say, from the gaze of the Others. However, Strickland’s indifference and eventual abandonment of her severely impinges on her self-identity, and she knows that her image has irrevocably changed in the eyes of the others, ultimately leading to her tragedy. As Fukuhara said, “the identity of the self is always determined by the other, and the self is constructed in the relationship with the other” [10]. Human self-identity always needs to be realized through the recognition of the others. Blanche’s love for Strickland partly stems from his admiration for his identity as an artist, which makes her see an idealized self-projection in Strickland. She realized her pursuit and yearning for art and beauty through her relationship with Strickland.

#### **4. Mature Stage: a Clear Sense of Self-identity**

In Lacan’s Theory of the Mirror, the construction of individual self-image is a complex and subtle process, which starts from the initial identification of the mirror image, which is not only

the mapping of the external image but also the awakening and shaping of inner self-consciousness. "In the context of Lacan's thinking, the idea of a mirror stage no longer has anything to do with a real stage or phase in the Freudian sense, nor with a real mirror" [11]. The Theory of the Mirror proposed by Lacan is not the same as the theory proposed by Freud in concept. Lacan's Theory of the Mirror is not related to the actual mirror but a view that reflects the image of oneself through the views of the others; Maugham reflects Strickland's psychological changes by describing the women around him. Strickland is going to Tahiti, which means a way of life by escaping from the shackles of reality and returning to the embrace of nature. Compared with the materialistic European society with supreme money then, Tahiti was like an unpolluted pure land, providing Strickland with an unfettered and free-flying art world. On this isolated island, Strickland seems to have found his own "moon", which is only his art paradise. This pursuit of the ideal self coincides with the concept of self-confirmation through the eyes of the others in Lacan's Theory of the Mirror. On the island of Tahiti, however, Strickland finally got rid of the worldly shackles and bravely pursued his inner artistic dream. Strickland met his second wife, Ata, who showed a very different character trait than the first two women, showing that Strickland was in a change of mind state. With her meticulous care and affectionate companionship, Ata fits perfectly with Strickland's innermost fantasies about an ideal wife. Zizek once pointed out that "in order to achieve self-identity, the subject must identify with himself with imaginary others, and he must alienate himself" [12]. This identity is reflected in the alienation of personality, and Ata meets Strickland's requirements for his wife, so he gradually changes from refusal to accept the girl to starting a family with her. Not only does she take care of her husband's daily life in her daily life, but more importantly, she never interferes with his personal preferences and artistic pursuits. She could care for her children independently, allowing Strickland to concentrate on his beloved painting career. Strickland's experience on Tahiti climaxes his artistic pursuits and embodies the profound changes in his inner realm. Through the influence of Ata, "an Other", Strickland has strengthened his belief in pursuing artistic ideals and successfully constructed his own ideal self. This process again confirms the importance of "the Other" in constructing individual self-identity in Lacan's mirror identity theory. Strickland once heartily praised Ata, "She cooks my food and looks after her babies, she does what I tell her, she gives me what I want from a woman" [2]. The words reveal Ata's dedication and dedication in her married life and highlight her model image as Maugham's ideal wife.

To some extent, this also reflects the "narcissism" proposed by Lacan, that is, "the mirror attachment to the perfect ideal image of oneself, and the form of love entrusted by the baby to the illusion of its autonomy" [13]. The concept of narcissism expounded by Lacan refers to another image that the individual loves but reflects his heart's genuine desire. After two emotional setbacks, Strickland's most pressing desire was to support him unconditionally, allowing him to devote himself to writing without worry, and the emergence of the love tower appropriately filled this vacancy. Maugham intends to emphasize the role of a peaceful haven and a partner with caring and unconditional support, which shows that Strickland's mood at this time has been entirely out of the shackles of reality. During his days with Strickland, Ata consistently supported his career and gave him the greatest freedom and space in his painting creation. Although her life on the island was simple, her existence brought endless warmth and serenity to Strickland. Even in the face of her husband's leprosy plight, Ata never flinched. She stayed firmly by Strickland's side, spending the last days of her life with her loving care and selfless company, which echoes the concept of exploring and confirming self through interaction with the others, and Strickland confirming and realizing his ideal self through his relationship with Ata, at the moment when Strickland's mind has reached full maturity.

The self is not present alone but is revealed through the connection and interaction with the others. Ata's deep love and admiration for Strickland is a vivid example of her unremitting

pursuit of self-identity and subjectivity as it is pointed out that “the so-called subjective self of mankind is formed in the symbolic concept and is a self-subject shaped by others” [14]. Human self-identity is an imagination generated by the influence of the social environment and other factors, and she sees her relationship with Strickland as a precious bond through which she can define and shape herself. In Ata’s eyes, Strickland is the love of her life and an integral part of her self-identity. Hence, “to wish for the desire of the others implies to wish to be recognized as a free entity and equally so, to wish to be free means to desire to be acknowledged by the other” [15]. Ata wanted her husband’s approval, and she found a sense of belonging and value in the relationship, an experience that was invaluable to her. Strickland’s acceptance and value of her has made her experience an unprecedented recognition of her self-worth. This recognition is like a powerful force, supporting her to move forward and bravely pursue their own happiness on the road of love. Moreover, Ata’s admiration for Strickland gave her an idealized self-image in the depths of her heart. This image shows her desire for a better life and her most sincere desire. By worshiping Strickland, she found a mirror reflecting her deep dreams and hopes. This worship has become the source of power for her to constantly move forward and constantly surpass herself.

## 5. Conclusion

In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the author depicts the three crucial female characters in Strickland’s life, which not only trades the characters and their fates but also makes profound use of the Theory of the Mirror to subtly reflect the protagonists’ profound perception and inner changes at different stages of life. The theory of the Mirror has been endowed with new life here. It is not only a psychological concept but also a bridge between the individual and the self and between the individual and the others. Through the interaction and collision with these three female characters, Strickland constantly seeks for and confirms his own identity and value in the others. These women, like mirrors, reflect his deep desire, fear, pursuit, and struggle. In the process, Strickland set up an imaginative stage for himself. At this stage, he constantly plays different roles, talking and exchanging words with various images of self-imagination. These images are his exploration and cognition of self and his understanding and perception of the world. They accurately portray his heart and his projection and imagination of the outside world. However, this unremitting pursuit of self-identity makes human beings bear heavy shackles. We constantly look for our own shadow in others, trying to confirm our own value through the recognition and affirmation of others. However, human beings in this process will often lose themselves in a predicament of being unable to extricate themselves. Humans constantly wander and struggle between imagination and reality, trying to find their natural position and role. *The Moon and Sixpence* shows us the hardship and complexity of this self-identity through the story of Strickland and the three female characters. It tells us that true self-identity is not achieved overnight but requires us to find our own answers in continuous exploration and practice gradually. In this process, we must bravely face inner fear and unease and firmly pursue our dreams.

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