

Strickland's Self-redemption in "The Moon and Sixpence" under the Hierarchy of Needs Theory

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Abstract: "The Moon and Sixpence" is one of the most important novels of Maugham, laying the foundation of his early reputation. This novel is a representative work reflecting the spiritual world of Western dreamers in the 20th century. It mainly explores the contradiction and interaction between life and art, and deeply reflects the social condition of Western capitalist countries, where people have abundant material but are spiritually barren in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this paper, the methods of textual analysis, generalization, and summarization are employed to discuss the psychological view of Strickland on his way to self-redemption under the Hierarchy of Needs Theory. It is his gratification of the "deficiency needs" and the emergence of the highest needs—self-actualization that makes him escape from reality and decide to pursue art. After analyzing his motivation, this paper explores the internal and external obstacles on his way to self-redemption through analyzing his psychology and the background at that time. Finally, it is found that his self-redemption is achieved by returning to nature and resorting to art, which can bring a guidance for the confused later generation on spiritual redemption. Also, through the process of analysis on Strickland under the Hierarchy of Needs Theory, the practical value of Maslow's theory can be further confirmed, and the understanding of the character of Strickland can be broadened from another perspective.

Keywords: Hierarchy of Needs Theory; Strickland; Self-redemption

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1. Strickland's psychological view

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, there are five basic needs of human beings, including physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization, which can be described in the shape of a pyramid, with the largest and lowest needs, physiological needs, at the bottom and the needs for self-actualization at the top. Only when the lower four layers of the pyramid, often called "deficiency needs" or "d-needs", have been satisfied can the highest needs, self-actualization, emerge. Thus, Strickland's early psychological view is that his "d-needs" have been gratified before his middle age, while the highest needs are still not satisfied. This situation laid the foundation for his self-redemption in the future.

1.1. Strickland's gratification in the "deficiency needs"

The general principle in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is that the needs will move to a higher level after gratification of the

lower needs. Thus, the appearance of Strickland's needs for self-actualization itself implies that the other four lower needs have already been satisfied.

The lowest needs, as well as the fundamental ones, are physiological needs. In "The Moon and Sixpence", before he fled to Paris, Strickland was a stockbroker, living the same stable life as the average middle-class family in society at that time. They would not only eat and drink to gratify their physiological needs but also hold a banquet for their guests. Hence, it can be found that Strickland's living condition was far beyond satisfaction.

The second set of needs is safety needs, which means that people need to live in a safe and stable environment ^[1]. Strickland lived in a harmonious family with his capable wife and two lovely children who loved him. Also, his family had a stable social circle with their relatives and workmates. Thus, they could gratify his safety needs.

If physiological needs and safety needs are well satisfied, the needs for love, affection, and belongingness emerge. In "The Moon and Sixpence", Strickland had an enviable family, a gentle and capable wife. No matter whether Strickland was satisfied with his marriage or not, it was a normal and even happy marriage in the eyes of all. Thus, his family must have given Strickland a kind of love and belongingness up to the average. Furthermore, as a member of his class, a stockbroker, Strickland did a good job at work, could take part in the social activities, and was praised as a respectable man. Hence, it can be found that he was totally familiar with the social principles of his class and could adapt to them. In other words, he could integrate successfully into his own class. In this case, his need for belongingness was completely gratified.

The last set of "d-needs" is esteem needs. Human beings need a kind of respect and admiration from others, or, in other words, a need for a stable self-respect and self-esteem as a symbol of being recognized by society. Strickland was thought to be a dependable man by the people around him, which meant that he was appreciated and recognized by others as the gratification of his esteem need. And when he left London to pursue his dream, he was indifferent to the confusion of the people around him. At the same time, when his early painting was not recognized, he never lost heart and just smiled. These kinds of behavior reflect a strong confidence in his heart. His confidence was derived from a firm recognition of himself, not of others, which shows that his esteem needs are satisfied.

1.2. Strickland's deficiency in the highest needs

When the four lower needs have been satisfied, Strickland's highest needs for self-actualization emerge. Self-actualization refers to the desire for self-development and self-fulfillment ^[2], that is, a tendency for a person's potential to be realized. Each person will have his or her own way to realize self-actualization. For Strickland, his self-actualization was built on the basis of creating a masterpiece that could touch the recesses of people and satisfy his own contentment.

Although the needs for self-actualization are different from other needs and can only be reached by a few people, once these needs emerge, they will be the strongest ones among the five sets of needs in the Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Strickland compared painting to the last straw he grasped before drowning in the water. The extreme lack of self-actualization drove him to abandon his wife and children and lead a beggar-like life. Thus, what led to his desperate desire for self-actualization is worth exploring.

In "The Moon and Sixpence", Strickland lived in the industrialized age. At that time, the living conditions of people were greatly improved with the rapid development of material civilization. The enormously exaggerated material pursuit, however, resulted in people's unconscious ignorance of spiritual needs. People were mind-numbing and followed the herd instead of thinking. Under this situation, in "The Moon and Sixpence", the narrator found two strange things. One thing was that Mrs. Strickland, who cared so much about the environment, would decorate her house in the same way as the other five hundred houses in London, and always moved with the times. Also, her life was like a copy of thousands of other wives' lives in London, which was a source of pride for her. The other thing was that everyone would make themselves go to some meaningless parties where no one really enjoyed those kinds of social activities.

In the industrialized society, the pursuit of money, delicacy, and articles of luxury seemed to be common and reasonable for people. Such a social status unavoidably caused Strickland's deficiency in the highest needs. When people's

spiritual pursuits can't be satisfied by society anymore, some of them choose to keep themselves away from society, which is Strickland's motivation for self-redemption.

2. Causes for impeding Strickland's gratification in the highest needs

Although Strickland had determined to achieve his self-actualization, there were inevitably many obstacles on his way. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, self-actualists are rare in real life because society has not created appropriate conditions for self-actualization, and the social environment restricts people's creativity. Thus, most people cannot reach the set of self-actualization. So did Strickland. The causes should be analyzed from two aspects. One is concerning Strickland's inner world, and the other is from the environment he lived in.

2.1. Bondage of worldly life

Maslow acknowledged that human motivation is rarely realized in behavior without connection to the environment and other people. Therefore, environmental factors must have prevented Strickland from satisfying his highest needs. In this case, the term "good society" is formally proposed, which aims to offer its members the greatest possibility of becoming sound, self-actualizing human beings. Healthy people who grow up in a good society are more likely to achieve self-actualization, but it will be difficult.

Unfortunately, the society Strickland lived in was hardly a good one. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Britain, the degree of people's focus on their living conditions or the environment they lived in grew higher with the development of material civilization. Thus, they had little knowledge of living a simple life and paid less attention to spiritual pursuits. Besides, the physical enjoyment obsessed them so much that all modern people tended to live in the same pattern. It was the bondage of worldly life that led to an unfavorable society for one's self-actualization.

In "The Moon and Sixpence", however, Strickland was a person who was incompatible with others or the whole society. He had the "innocent eye" of each self-actualist to distinguish the truth from the numerous and complicated phenomena more easily than most people. With this eye, he was more likely to perceive reality as it is, rather than being locked into other people's wishes or beliefs. That is to say, he could distinguish the true value of life from the bondage of worldly life and stay awake rather than following the herd. Thus, he always tried to get rid of the bondage of worldly life.

As a stockbroker in the middle class who possessed capital, Strickland lived a life that everyone admired. Yet, one day, he suddenly left his wife and kids in Paris to pursue his dream of painting resolutely. This action was considered insane in other people's eyes. But for Strickland, this move meant that he could finally pursue his ideal life without any scruples. In general, each society has its own social norms and customs, which are generally followed by the general public. When someone does something different, he or she will become the target of criticism. Thus, it can be imagined that in a society that advocated material comforts, Strickland, a rule breaker, would be doubted and isolated, living on the margins of society.

This kind of society was clearly not what Strickland longed for. However, no one can live in isolation. In an unfavorable society without anyone's support or help, his journey to pursue his lifestyle was more difficult. Thus, the bondage of society had hindered him from achieving his goals.

2.2. Contradiction between the ideal and the reality

In our daily life, the contradiction between the ideal and the reality can be found easily. Many people have a variety of bizarre or beautiful dreams in their childhood. But when they grow up, they will find that the cruel reality will shatter all dreams with no mercy. In this case, some people choose to accept the fact and adapt to the pace of reality, while some people choose to stay immersed in their dreams until death.

This kind of contradiction has puzzled lots of people throughout the ages. Indeed, it seems easy to understand when it is applied to the Hierarchy of Needs Theory. The reality is absolutely the "deficiency needs", and the spirit is the need

for self-actualization. On one hand, people cannot pursue the needs for self-actualization while the “deficiency needs” haven’t been satisfied. On the other hand, even though the “deficiency needs” have been satisfied at the beginning, they will also be consumed during a long-period pursuit of self-actualization. Then the “reversal in the hierarchy” will emerge. When people reevaluate their “deficiency needs” and the needs for self-actualization, most of them will choose the former, because they can’t bear the pain of the lack of “deficiency needs”, which is also one of the reasons why only a few people can achieve self-actualization.

In “The Moon and Sixpence”, the contradiction between the ideal and reality is embodied in Strickland. After reading this novel, it is known that in Strickland’s childhood, he tended to be a painter, but his father thought that it was not easy to make money as a painter and told him to do business. He knew the dream of painting couldn’t fill the stomach or couldn’t satisfy the “deficiency needs”.

In fact, the decision of his father had triggered Strickland’s pursuit of self-actualization. Because only by experiencing the meaningless and materialistic life in modern society as a regular stockbroker could he realize how urgently he longed for spiritual pursuit. His aspiration of being a painter finally exploded and burst out like a latent volcano, which was in a similar way to the establishment of a belief. Reality is the basis of belief, and only by going through the cruelty of reality can belief be strengthened. The contradiction between the ideal and reality made him more eager to realize his dream.

However, Strickland’s journey to realize the ideal was not smooth. No dream can be realized without the foundation of reality, and no need for self-actualization can be satisfied without the prior gratification of “deficiency needs”^[3]. After Strickland left his home, he often suffered from economic urgency. When the narrator first met him in Paris, he lived in a sketchy hotel, wore a dirty shirt, and didn’t even have enough food to eat^[4]. So, his physiological and safety needs can’t be satisfied. What’s worse, even after he got seriously ill after a long, beggar-like life, no one noticed or cared for him. In other words, he received no warmth, respect, or admission from others. Thus, his needs for love and belongingness and esteem couldn’t be gratified. Under this situation, he was greatly tortured by his “deficiency needs”, or by the reality.

Without the gratification of “deficiency needs”, his dream was too ideal to realize. The reality had urged him to leave for the ideal, but when he left it, he had realized that no one could live without the support of reality. Thus, it could be imagined that the contradiction between the ideal and the reality had tortured him on his whole way to self-actualization.

3. Strickland’s approach to self-redemption

Neither the unfavorable environment nor the limitation of basic needs can prevent Strickland from pursuing self-actualization. Maslow believed that the infinite possibilities, plasticity, and flexibility of human beings can make them change their present situation and achieve self-actualization. Just as he referred, healthy people have the ability to be detached from their surroundings. That is to say, they live by internal laws instead of external pressures. Therefore, despite the unfavorable environment Strickland lived in and the dissatisfaction of “deficiency needs”, Strickland had found his own way to realize his self-actualization by returning to nature and resorting to art, which can be called “self-redemption”.

3.1. By returning to nature

In modern society, individualism and hedonism prevail among people with the growth in living standards and the increase in social temptations. Thus, when a “weirdo” who pursued spiritual redemption appeared, no one would understand him. The pressure and discrimination from the external environment made the “weirdo” sick. However, the “weirdo”—Strickland had found his own way to get rid of the unfavorable environment—by returning to nature, Tahiti. The natural beauty of Tahiti attracted Strickland as soon as he arrived there. Without the disturbance from others and surrounded by the natural beauty, Strickland finally realized his spiritual redemption through doing a great mural.

When Strickland found that the society in which he lived was unhelpful for the gratification of his highest needs and hindered him from it, he left to seek a new place where people could be kind to him and offer him a kind of tolerance for his actions. That is one of the ways to achieve self-redemption. For Strickland, Tahiti or nature is his ideal place, and his

way to get rid of the external pressure can also be said as returning to an ideal place. In real life, some people may have their own spiritual pursuits, but when the environment is unfavorable, their spiritual pursuits will be hard to satisfy. Under this situation, finding a place or a certain group of people where they can give them a sense of belonging will help them create an ideal place in their mind. Then, this place can provide people with the power to follow their creed and face the incomprehension of others. Finally, they can live by internal laws instead of external pressures.

3.2. By resorting to art

In Schopenhauer's opinion, the will replaces reason as the most important element, and the power of will is also too strong to resist. Strickland tried to cast off his "deficiency needs", but he failed. However, when he came to Tahiti, although his "deficiency needs" still won't be completely satisfied, he achieved his self-actualization by painting a mural that could express his inner feelings.

Considering Strickland's escape from London, his struggle in Paris, and his tragic but great death in Tahiti, it can be found that the main thing that runs through his life is the pursuit of art. For art, where his passion lay, he could bear all the pains. His will had conquered all the external obstacles by resorting to art. Thus, for Strickland, art was the only path to his spiritual redemption. Painting, as his favorite thing, could free him from the inner pains and struggles.

Thus, through Strickland, people can find a new way to conquer the internal obstacle, by resorting to the things they love. For the things they love, people can build up a strong will and reach the level of "functional autonomy of higher needs" to realize their self-actualization and finally finish their self-redemption.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of the Hierarchy of Needs Theory, this paper makes a detailed analysis of the psychological view of Strickland in the novel and brings forward several opinions on spiritual redemption for future generations, at the same time, so that people will know more about the importance of gratifying their needs and have some feasible ways to achieve inner peace.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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