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The Seemingly Abnormal Self-Portraits: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Three of Maugham's Novels

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Abstract: The characters in William Somerset Maugham's novels seem to be deviant, but their behaviors are driven by various motivations. The complexity of their characters is attributed to many reasons and can be explained through psychoanalysis. Herbert in *The Kite* embodies the phenomenon of "inferiority and overcompensation," Lisa in *Lisa of Lambeth* reflects the phenomenon of "self-defense mechanism," and Kitty in *The Painted Veil* represents the phenomenon of "archetype," based on the theories of psychoanalysis. The three novels serve as Maugham's seemingly abnormal self-portraits, reflecting his complex and contradictory views of human nature. These perspectives influenced his personal life and sparked varied opinions among readers. Nevertheless, there are valuable psychological lessons that modern readers can learn from Maugham's novels.

Keywords: William Somerset Maugham; Psychoanalysis; *The Kite*; *Lisa of Lambeth*; *The Painted Veil*

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1. Introduction

Novels by William Somerset Maugham are well-known for their intriguing plots and vivid protagonists. Maugham published twenty long novels and six short novel collections in his lifetime, which is astonishing. It is difficult to think of another major modern writer whose fiction has achieved such enormous exposure in the movies [1]. However, Maugham once described himself as "only a second-rate" writer [2]. His high reputation contrasts with his low self-esteem. The characters in Maugham's novels can be seen as reflections of himself through psychoanalysis. Although they may seem unusual, there is a rational explanation for this phenomenon.

2. Inferiority and overcompensation in *The Kite*

As the title of the short novel suggests, the main character Herbert's strange behaviors revolve around a kite, implying a hidden comparison of importance between the kite and Betty. Herbert's choices can be divided into

three stages. In the first stage, Herbert was nonchalant about the kite, just as he said: "Betty says it's a kid's game anyway and I ought to be ashamed of myself, flying a kite at my age" [3]. Meanwhile, he cherished Betty, even at the cost of quarreling with his mother. Nevertheless, as time went by, things changed unknowingly. In the second stage, Herbert showed interest in the kite, but he did not show it to Betty. Catching sight of his parents, who were flying kites, despite his silence, he was secretly concerned about it. He started going to the same place to watch kites on weekends and fixed his eyes on the kite. In the third stage, having been dissuaded by Betty from flying the kite, he "threw her onto the bed and went out" [3] (page 181). Even worse, he threatened to kill Betty when he found out that she wanted to destroy the kite. Even when the magistrate decreed that Herbert would be imprisoned if he refused to fulfill his duties, Herbert insisted that he would rather be imprisoned.

Maugham himself views *The Kite* as "an odd story" [3]. The oddity of the story lies in the complicated and even contradictory actions of Herbert. On one hand, those who read the story deemed Herbert as an eccentric fellow because he left his wife Betty and refused to give her alimony simply because she smashed his kite. On the other hand, the narrator portrays Herbert's actions as "perfectly reasonable, quite intelligent, and decent" [3]. It is preposterous that the kite eventually outweighed Betty. It is even more ridiculous that Betty was punished by Herbert for no reason except for ruining a kite. The change in Herbert's attitude toward Betty was so dramatic that it seemed nearly absurd.

As pointed out by Adler, feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and insecurity determine the goal of an individual's existence [4]. It was the sense of inferiority that drove Herbert to act unduly, and his action was geared to the prefix "over" in the term "overcompensation." Why did Herbert feel inferior? Through a glimpse of the text, readers may find it strange because Herbert was brought up in an affluent family and was the only son who received care and love from his parents. The only divergence he had was to marry Betty, in which he took the upper hand and acted at his own will. He seemed to have enjoyed everything that a young man of his age could have.

Nevertheless, Herbert's sense of inferiority is not groundless. What made Herbert feel inferior and inadequate was nothing but the loss of a sense of self-control and power. Herbert's mother, Mrs. Sunbury, was very controlling. She was stringent with Herbert in his childhood and puberty. He was cut off from all recreational activities like playing with friends. Besides, he seldom experienced freedom and was only allowed to play kites with his parents on weekends. The kite, which seemed to be a tool for entertainment, was essentially a psychological consolation for Herbert, and the connotation of the sole consolation is revealed at the end of the novel:

"It may be that in some queer way, he identifies himself with the kite flying so free and so high above him, and it's as it were an escape from the monotony of life. It may be that in some dim, confused way it represents an ideal of freedom and adventure" [3].

Betty plays a two-fold psychological role in Herbert's world. It is interesting to note that the two halves of the role are opposite. One half is psychological compensation, whereas the other half is psychological anti-compensation. Initially, Betty relieved Herbert from a situation where he seldom had people to communicate with. Knowing that they had got engaged, Mrs. Sunbury screamed: "You fool" [3], but her disapproval did not make Herbert waver in his determination to marry Betty. That was the only choice Herbert made, defecting from his mother's will, and instilling the power of decision-making into himself. Unfortunately, Betty's appearance did not fundamentally change Herbert's situation. Even Herbert's going out for supper was described as "an unfortunate thing" [3]. Subconsciously, he was desirous of regaining the kite:

"You'll never be able to fly it by yourselves," he said.

"We can try."

"I suppose you wouldn't like me to help you just at first?" he asked uncertainly.

"Mightn't be a bad idea," said Mrs. Sunbury.

It was late when he got home, much later than he thought, and Betty was vexed.[3]

At the same time, Betty's desire for controlling Herbert emerged. "Betty Bevan looked very much as Mrs. Sunbury must have looked at her age" [3]. The similarity between Betty and Herbert's mother is uncanny. It signifies Betty's role as an aggressor and a threat to Herbert's compensation. Herbert's revenge against Betty is driven by the mechanism of overcompensation because the deprivation of the kite ignites his inferiority again. For Herbert, the result of overcompensation is not satisfaction, but a loss of reason, which can still be attributed to his incessant sense of inadequacy.

In reality, Maugham himself also suffered from inferiority and overcompensation. In Adler's early theories, the sense of inferiority is associated with the defects of the body, which causes difficulties, including disdain from others, thus triggering self-abasement [5]. Such a description is in line with the case of Maugham. Maugham once confided that the first thing that people should know about him was the influence of stutter on his life and writing. He was once bullied by his schoolmates due to his stutter, and the experiences were imprinted in his memory. Just as he once said, "I have never forgotten the roar of laughter that abashed me when in my preparatory school I read out the phrase 'unstable as water' as though unstable rhymed with Dunstable" [6].

A sense of inferiority is the prime stimulation for an individual to get rid of inferiority. Overcompensation refers to the undue efforts to overcome defects [5]. Maugham exerted excessive efforts to overcome his inferiority, which resulted in overcompensation. In 1954, the well-known Garrick Club celebrated Maugham's eightieth birthday, and the celebration was a glory enjoyed merely by three other preeminent British writers, namely Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. It is strikingly unusual that in his advanced years, Maugham confided to his nephew that he could not recall a single moment of happiness in his life [7]. Granted, he reaped various laurels and considerable fortune through writing, but it was achieved by overcompensating his sense of inferiority. In fact, he never felt that he had attained his compensation.

3. Self-defense mechanism in *Liza of Lambeth*

Different from an array of other novels featuring commendable female characters, *Liza of Lambeth* witnesses the tragedy of Liza, its main character. Liza is lamentable and seems to fall into a somewhat strange degeneration. Liza seems to have everything enviable, including a glamorous appearance, a gentle personality, self-reliance, and various admirers. Nevertheless, her behavior is puzzling. She becomes the mistress of a married man called Jim eventually experiences a miscarriage, and ends up with a miserable death.

Liza's tragedy can be ascribed to her relationship with Jim, which is composed of three stages, and every stage has its bewildering point. The first stage is shortly after her encounter with Jim. The bewildering point in this stage is that Liza chooses Jim to be her boyfriend. Jim is not a suitable spouse for her in three ways. Firstly, in terms of values, Jim has married and should not betray his wife and children. Secondly, in terms of age, Jim, whose eldest daughter is of the same age as Liza, is too old to be the husband of Liza. Lastly, from the perspective of virtues, Liza is industrious and beautiful, whereas Jim is neither rich nor handsome. The second stage is the first half period of her relationship with Jim. In this stage, the bewildering point is Liza's attitude towards other people. At that time, an unmarried youngster named Tom expresses his liking for Liza, but Liza refuses him. However, she shows immense concern for Tom's attitude towards her and is frustrated for "*you ain't spoke ter me since*" [8]. Both

her attitude towards Tom and her attitude towards Jim's family are self-contradictory. On the one hand, she fears them and is afraid of meeting Jim's wife in the streets. On the other hand, she befriends Jim's family, taking the initiative to accost Polly, Jim's eldest daughter. The third stage is the second half period of her relationship with Jim. At this stage, she still has the opportunity to leave Jim. Although he beats her, and she is overwhelmed with sorrow, as described in "could think of nothing to say, and a sob burst from her" [8], she does not think of making a change. Instead, she maintains the relationship with Jim.

As seemingly odd as Liza's behavior is, it can be explained by the theory of ego-defense mechanism in psychoanalysis. The defense mechanism serves to alleviate psychological agony resulting from a sense of guilt or external factors like punishments inflicted by the outside world [9]. In Liza's case, her relationship with Jim is immoral and brings stress and reproach from others.

If Liza feels guilty for her behavior and is scared of the punishments from society, why does she choose to establish such a deleterious relationship with Jim? The answer lies in her low self-esteem. Notwithstanding her apparent advantages, Liza is deeply absorbed in self-pity and lacks warmth from her family. By instinct, children show attachment to "a particular figure, usually the mother, and develop a strong liking to be in her company" [10]. In Liza's case, no one in her family loved her. Her father died, and her mother, Mrs. Kemp, maltreated her and sometimes beat her. Mrs. Kemp claimed that she worked herself to provide for Liza, as described in "worked myself to the bone ter keep'er in luxury" [8], but the truth is that Liza earns money for her mother to spend on gambling and drinking wine.

The psychologist Satir proposes that people with low self-esteem have strong senses of anxiety and uncertainty, and seldom perceive themselves positively without recourse to others' recognition [11]. As she crosses the street, Liza "arched her back and lifted her head, and walked down the street, swaying her body from side to side, and swaggering along as though the whole place belonged to her" [8]. Liza is attracted to Jim not because of him being able to compensate for what she is lacking or because their relationship defends her self-egoism, but because Liza's self-defense mechanism is broken by Jim.

"Of course she wasn't going to the theatre with him, but she didn't mind talking to him; she rather enjoyed being asked to do a thing and refusing, and she would have liked another opportunity of doing so" [8]. Everyone except her mother befriended, adored, or admired her, and this compensated for her unhappiness in her family. That is the only source of her self-esteem and confidence, which she cannot feel in her heart. Likewise, to defend her ego, she denies the fact that Jim has beaten her, "Me? I ain't got no black eye!" [8]. Unfortunately, although the defense mechanism can serve as a temporary protection, it cannot resolve psychological trauma. Liza's low self-esteem has never changed, nor does she attain genuine love from others. Liza enters a condition of fixation, repeating her old lifestyle and refusing to make timely changes lest her self-esteem will be hurt. Hence Liza's destruction is inevitable.

Maugham named the protagonist in *Liza of Lambeth* with the same name as his daughter, which shows that he attached significance to the novel. Why did Maugham regard the novel as a significant one? A possible reason may be that the phenomenon of ego-defense mechanism also happened to Maugham himself. Like Liza, he had low self-worth. His nephew Robin Maugham deemed him as the most preeminent contemporary but possibly the most miserable writer. Despite his talent and success, he failed to gain happiness, even temporarily [7].

Similar to Liza's case, the prime cause of low self-esteem in Maugham is also the lack of love. It is undeniable that "there are few blows to the human spirit so great as the loss of someone near and dear" [10]. Maugham's parents died before he was ten, and his uncle, a childless vicar who had little knowledge about children, was given custody of Maugham. He was taken from France to England and placed in an utterly foreign environment. The bleak and forlorn childhood heavily impacted his character and writing. In his masterpiece,

Of Human Bondage, an autobiographical novel, the main character Philip has similar experiences to those of Maugham in his early years. They are both orphans, brought up by their uncles, and have had a full taste of disappointment and disillusionment in life.

As Maugham confided: "He had had so little love when he was small that later it embarrassed him to be loved (…) He did not know what to say when someone paid him a compliment, and a manifestation of affection made him feel a fool" [12] (page 261). Due to the lack of the company of his father in his childhood and puberty, coupled with the estrangement between him and his uncle, Maugham was sort of an example in his life. After Maugham's marriage, "fearful rows" frequently occurred between Maugham and his wife Syrie, and their daughter considered him "a forbidding father" [13]. Though he had good intentions, he was uncertain about interpersonal relationships.

4. Archetype in *The Painted Veil*

As Hastings argues, the portrait of Kitty Fane is one of Maugham's finest fictional achievements [13]. Kitty is unique in a way that she is a complex character who develops along with the storyline. Kitty is multi-faceted and unpredictable, and her actions often contradict her desires. The first contradiction is that she is vainglorious, but she marries Walter, who is indifferent to fame and fortune. The second contradiction is that she does not love Walter, but she follows him to Meitian-fu, the perilous place plagued by cholera. The third contradiction is that she feels apologetic for Walter and has realized that Charlie is "vain, cowardly and self-seeking" [14], but when she meets Charlie again after Walter's death, she still shows her affection to Charlie.

Readers who are judgmental or assertive would hope that Kitty will be "a much less divided person, much more of a functioning unit, in which every feeling and action has its admitted relation to every other feeling and action" [15]. However, the novel would be immensely different without Kitty's internal struggles. The watersheds of Kitty's fate are her marriage with Walter, her adultery with Charlie, the journey to Meitian-fu, and Walter's death. Had it not been for Kitty's marriage with Walter, or had it not been for her adultery with Charlie, she would not have been confronted with the same dilemma of going to Meitian-fu as the punishment for her fault. Without the journey to Meitian-fu, Walter would not have died. Her guilt for Walter is mixed with her love for Charlie.

According to Carl Roger's theory of the archetype, a person's character encompasses two opposite parts, the persona and the shadow. The persona refers to the inherent tendency to behave appropriately in public, while the shadow indicates the hidden, suppressed, and unconscious part that the person feels ashamed or embarrassed of [5]. The more one associates oneself with an excellent persona, the darker their shadow becomes. The disharmony and conflict between the two will bring many psychological problems and obstacles, which account for Kitty's conduct.

Kitty's decision to marry Walter results from a combination of her persona and her shadow. For Kitty, the persona drives her to behave like an obedient daughter. Her mother expects her to get married, so Kitty fulfills her mother's wish. The shadow driving her is her vainglory. That is why she can never find a young man with a satisfactory income and social status. Since Walter is a scientist, she thinks that he will be an ideal man to meet her vainglory.

People subconsciously use their parents as references when searching for a spouse, but they sometimes end up falling into the same old trap. Kitty's mother, out of vainglory, disdains Kitty's father for his inability. The same thing happens to Kitty. After Kitty's marriage with Walter, the persona propels her to behave like a loyal wife. She is disappointed because she cannot enjoy the social status she used to have in her parents' home or satisfy her vainglory. Her lover, Charlie, on the contrary, boasts a high social status and a promising future. He

is an Assistant Colonial Secretary and is about to succeed the Colonial Secretary who is to retire soon. When the affair between Kitty and Charlie has been known by Walter, she anticipates that Charlie will divorce his wife and marry her. After the death of Walter, Kitty meets Charlie again, and her conduct is as follows:

"She was shaking and sobbing, struggling to get away from him, but the pressure of his arms was strangely comforting. She had so longed to feel them round her once more, just once, and all her body trembled. She felt dreadfully weak. It seemed as though her bones were melting, and the sorrow she felt for Walter shifted into pity for herself" [14].

The persona urges Kitty to behave like a pure woman or at least someone ready to mend her ways. Nevertheless, she still has other demands for Charlie. As Freud maintains, the physical demands on the psyche are the ultimate causes of all activities, but they are conservative in nature [9]. Granted, Kitty has to accept the fact that in terms of Charlie, her desire for money and social status is disillusioned. Her shadow spurs her to approach Charlie.

As is contended by Carl R. Rogers, the phenomenon of the archetype exists in everyone [5]. In reality, the phenomenon of the archetype also happened to Maugham himself. Publicly, he was "communicative and informative about his profession" [16]. He was knowledgeable, insightful and eloquent when talking about literature. He once published a book called *A Writer's Notebook*, which expresses his discerning views on writing. He also published another book named *Ten Novels and Their Authors*, which describes ten illustrious novels worthy of reading. On the outside, he was professional and dedicated as a writer. However, in private, he was involved with his male secretary Gerald, both a drunkard and a gambler. He was mean to his wife Syrie, even gloating over her death because he was free from the obligation of providing alimony. He was harsh to his brother, claiming that his brother was the most detestable person he had seen, and even his brother's death did not pacify his abhor. In addition, he did not conceal his resentment even in front of Robin, his nephew [7]. Indeed, he was nonchalant or even cruel to his family.

Unlike the former two psychoanalytic phenomena which are closely intertwined with specific experiences that have left indelible negative imprints in people's minds, the phenomenon of archetype cannot find its root in particular factors. Instead, the existence of the archetype can be supported by a self-evident truth that no man is impeccable. Even those people whose works are immortal fail to elude certain desires. Whether the contribution of an expert in a certain field like Maugham outweighs and can compensate for his faults in life remains debatable. Still, it is worth noting that various facets of Maugham's personality, like those of Kitty, are interdependent. Provided that some demerits are removed, some merits will also be changed. For instance, Maugham's cynical tendency is intertwined with his sharp insight.

5. Conclusion

More often than not, a literary masterpiece more or less serves as a self-portrait of the author. Maugham's novels are no exception. Through *The Kite*, it can be perceived that Herbert and Maugham himself are both haunted by a sense of inferiority. Being eager to escape from it, they pursue a sense of power and control in their inappropriate ways and incur overcompensation. *Liza of Lambeth* implies that both Liza and Maugham himself suffer from the lack of egoism caused by the absence of intimate relationships. They strive to defend their egoism, but they do not regain it because they never address the problem from its roots namely a healthy intimacy with another person. Through *The Painted Veil*, both Kitty and Maugham himself conceal their shadows and reveal their personae. Ineluctably, their shadows are exposed and trigger negative influences on them.

Meanwhile, Maugham's novels are more than just self-portraits because they epitomize the universal psyches transcending time and space. According to Ben Jonson, "Shakespeare does not belong to a single era, but every era. Even though Maugham cannot be compared with Shakespeare, he captures cleverly the

everlasting motif of human nature" [17]. Firstly, Maugham's novels are to some extent the portraits of a group of writers. From the perspective of Ernest Hemingway, for a writer, the best "training" for writing in his or her early years is an unhappy childhood [18]. Similar to Maugham, copious writers germinate a strong motivation for writing driven by a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem. For those novelists, the characters created by them can be better understood from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Secondly, Maugham's novels are to some extent the portraits of untold ordinary people. Bearing the message of *The Kite* in mind, the readers will get to have a profound understanding of inferiority. Having learned the lesson in *Liza of Lambeth*, the readers will reflect on themselves and focus on self-esteem issues. Some readers might find that they are trapped in blind love through *The Painted Veil*. As is maintained by some psychologists, "psychoanalysis can be transmitted to today's younger generation in order to arouse and develop their sustained interest" [19]. Therefore, the quintessence of Maugham and his novels is not only literary but also psychological.

Disclosure statement

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