

Self-reconstruction Across the Triple Thresholds: A Liminal Study of The Moon and Sixpence from the Perspective of Deconstruction Theory

Zunrong Gao

School of English and International Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

Abstract. As one of Maugham's most representative novels, *The Moon and Sixpence* deeply explores grand themes such as survival and death, ideals and reality, genius and secularism. Due to its profound and universal practical significance, it has attracted countless readers since its publication. Specifically, the spiritual journey of the protagonist in the novel has always been a topic in academic field. This article mainly uses Derrida's deconstruction theory to examine the threshold elements and transitional process that appear in *The Moon and Sixpence* and analyze their important roles in the reconstruction of the protagonist's self-identity.

Keywords: The Moon and Sixpence; Liminality; Deconstruction; Spatial Narrative; Self-identity.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Significance of the Thesis

Throughout Maugham's creative writing experience, *The Moon and Sixpence* holds an irreplaceable significance in his career. Published in the aftermath of World War I, this novel provided solace to the vast majority of people in society who had suffered from the trauma of war. Its ultimate questioning of the meaning of life remains profound and thought-provoking to this day, and the academic exploration of the rich implications of this novel has never ceased.

This article comprehensively analyzes the construction of the protagonist's self-awareness through the changes in time and space in the novel, and examines the cultural factors that catalyze the reconstruction of the protagonist's identity. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore the often overlooked marginal texts in the novel. This study can also provide inspiration for modern people in the era of intensified identity politics and spiritual infighting.

1.2. The Main Argument of the Thesis

By focusing on the three dimensions of spatial symbolic and individual liminalities, this paper argues that traditional social moral discipline and identity reconstruction occur on multiple semantic boundaries. The spatial liminality of Paris and Tahiti Island, as natural or cultural conflicts, has undermined the influence of Eurocentric values on identity through geographical displacement. Through the binary deconstruction of the traditional symbolic combination of the moon and sixpence, the painting becomes a proof of self existence that transcends the liminality of life and death. The individual liminality reveals the protagonist's identity through the deconstruction of his wife Amy as a symbol of her connection with social expectations [1], the mirror reflection of the Stroeve couple [2] as others, and Ata as a symbol of primitive life relationships. Through interaction with others, especially the female ones [3], Strickland strips away all social relationship attributes and constructs subjectivity as an stateless person.

The reconstruction of Strickland's self-identity in Maugham's works is a practice of deconstruction unfolding across multiple thresholds. Therefore, this article attempts to explore that true identity reconstruction often does not occur at the core of order, but erupts on the boundaries of meaning, cracks in order, and ruins of binary opposition. Through this extreme image, Maugham not only

explores the possible boundaries of existence, but also reveals the fluidity process of self deconstruction and reconstruction.

1.3. Research Methods

The binary opposition phenomenon in the novel constitutes one of the main branches of current academic research, so it is necessary to use a deconstructivist perspective as a methodological framework. This article also utilizes the important concept of liminality in anthropology to focus on the transitional stage of individuals in social structures in the text. In recent years, the liminal theory has been further developed and applied in academic field. Researchers have extended it to various disciplinary fields for analyzing transition and boundary phenomena.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, attempting to challenge and subvert the seemingly stable binary oppositional combination in the novel, revealing and exposing the instability and fictionality of these oppositional groups, and seeking new possibilities in their cracks. Therefore, in *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*, two core concepts regarding thresholds need to be emphasized: Arnold van Gennep believes that transitional rites can be divided into three stages: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. At the liminal stage, individuals detach from their original identity, have not yet acquired a new identity, and are in a vague and uncertain state [4]. Victor Turner believed that the liminal stage is not only an intermediate state of transition, but also a reflection of social structure, and may even become a source of social change [4].

As mentioned above, this study attempts to incorporate an anthropological perspective into the analysis of the novel, selecting the original version of the novel published by Vintage [5] to conduct a comprehensive examination of the geographical, psychological, cultural, artistic, and other phenomena that appear in the book, in order to achieve new breakthroughs in the novel's interpretation.

2. Spatial Liminality: Boundary Dissolution and Identity Reconstruction of Geographical Locations

Spatial narrative in *The Moon and Sixpence* is not a static background, but rather a field where Strickland deconstructs social identity and reconstructs the original self. By migrating from the civilized cage of London to the pristine land of Tahiti, he achieved a complete dissolution of geographical dependence, making the periphery a new center, and ultimately achieving the ultimate reconstruction of spatial identity in the paradox of physical extinction and artistic immortality. This process is essentially a geographical revolution of deconstruction, it subverts the rigid binding of modernity to "place-identity" through the fluidity of space.

2.1. Metropolis: Discipline Space and Identity Deconstruction

London, as a core symbol of European civilization, is portrayed in the text as a precision operating training machine. The securities trading hall, middle-class residential area, and salon social circle in which Strickland lived constitute Foucault's heterotopia— a power network woven through professional division of labor, family ethics, and aesthetic tastes. The identity of a London stockbroker is not only a professional label, but also a social code imposed on space: the Victorian study symbolizes rational order, the piano and printed carpet in the living room promote cultural dignity, and the Sunday church service is a stage for moral performance. Strickland's departure is a violent deconstruction of spatial discipline. When he took off his suit and stepped into the slums of Paris, he not only abandoned his physical residence, but also tore apart the capitalist logic chain of residence and identity— where residence is not a shelter, but a cage for legitimizing social roles. The dirty attic in the slums has become a liminal space for identity deconstruction. This is neither the ordered world of London nor the pristine land of Tahiti, but rather the transitional zone of "anti structure" in Turner's theory. Strickland presents a typical threshold state here: materially reduced to a wanderer (sleeping on a haystack, eating carrion), but spiritually yet to establish the artist's

subjectivity. The description of the studio space is highly metaphorical: a closed room without windows isolates social gaze, paint stains cover the civilized and clean view, and a locked door declares an absolute rejection of interpersonal relationships. This kind of spatial isolation is not retreat, but an active choice to strip away sociality, when he uses a painting knife to scrape off the portrait on the canvas, what is simultaneously scraped off are the multiple identities imposed on him by the bourgeoisie, such as husband, father, and gentleman. The spatial practice of the Paris stage responds to the creed of deconstructionism: identity is a product of power space.

2.2. Tahiti: Identity Reconstruction and Central Dissolution of Primitive Space

The emergence of Tahiti subverted the traditional colonial narrative of civilization and barbarism geographical dualism. This island, regarded by Europeans as the end of the world, has become a new origin of decentralization in Strickland's deconstructive vision. Maugham deliberately compared two spatial perceptions: in the eyes of colonizers, the "uncivilized wilderness" was portrayed as pure as the first night of creation under the protagonist's pen. This reversal of spatial representation is exactly what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls "cultural hybridity": the dynamic, liminal state in which the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized interpenetrate and negotiate within a "Third Space," thereby dissolving pure origins and binary oppositions [7]. Strickland deconstructs the seemingly elegant urban life of London and Paris through primitive jungles, ultimately turning the geographical edges into spiritual centers.

The primitiveness of the island triggered physical liberation. Strickland sheds the physical shackles of civilized society: ragged clothes deconstruct the identity symbol function of clothing, nude painting practice breaks the moral code of nudity shame, while jungle hunting reconstructs the primitive relationship of hand, tool and nature. The most revolutionary aspect is the functional deconstruction of the thatched cottage space: this open structure without partitions dissolves the strict division of modernity between life and art. The tree stump serves as a chair, the land as a bed, and the rock wall as a canvas—when Ata cooks in the corner of the house, the rising smoke blends with the scent of oil paint, practicing Heidegger's philosophy of existence that dwelling is creating. Here, creation is no longer a ritual in the studio, but a breathing instinct of life.

The ultimate completion of spatial reconstruction, with the sacrifice of Strickland's death. The setting of retiring to the mountains and forests after suffering from leprosy gives the thatched cottage a dual symbol: it is both a coffin for the disappearance of the body and a womb for the eternal life of art. When his body was deteriorating and rotting in the corner of the wall due to his illness, the mural bloomed with the mythical vitality of creation on all four walls. The final burning of the mural deepened the spatial paradox of deconstructionism—Tahiti, as a reconstructed utopia, is essentially still a mobile liminality. As Derrida once said, the center never truly exists. Strickland's spatial identity is forever *différance* in deconstruction, and the moment when the ashes fly is precisely the eternal moment when his identity breaks free from the shackles of material space.

3. Symbolic Liminality: Deconstruction of Binary Opposition and Reconstruction of Artistic Symbols

In the symbolic system of *The Moon and Sixpence*, Strickland played the role of the spark that ignited the symbol system. He used art as a weapon to violently deconstruct the binary opposition between the noble ideal and the humble reality, transforming the painting into a transcendent symbol floating on the threshold of life and death. The core of this symbolic revolution lies in the fact that art is neither a lofty ideal (moon) nor a vulgar reality (sixpence), but a third force that tears apart binary logic—an absolute existence that refuses to be incorporated into any value system.

3.1. Binary Deconstruction in *The Moon and Sixpence*

The classic interpretation of "moon" and "sixpence" presupposes an eternal opposition between idealism and materialism. Maugham deconstructed this cognitive paradigm through Strickland. When

the narrator laments that he chased the moon but fell into the gutter, the protagonist's actual actions expose the hypocrisy of dualism: Strickland both despises the material order such as selling stocks or tearing up checks represented by “sixpence”; and mocks the spiritual illusions symbolized by “moon”, calling fame from artworks as “melodrama” [5]. His declaration to Parisian painters that his paintings are not for sale, they have nothing to do with money— completely severed the symbolic chain between art and commodity value.

The driving force behind his creation is not the pursuit of beauty, but rather what Derrida called an arch-writing instinct: “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” [5]. This impulse transcends moral good and evil (betraying one’s spouse and friends) and has nothing to do with fame and fortune (enduring hunger and cold), becoming a pre-linguistic, physical driving force. In the perspective of deconstruction theory, it is precisely the explosive point that subverts logocentrism—when reason cannot explain why one gives up the comfortable life of a securities manager to endure poverty and illness, artistic instinct declares the bankruptcy of rational discourse.

Strickland thus constructed a new symbolic order. In Tahiti’s ultimate creation, murals are neither imitations of nature nor praises of divinity, but rather existential writings that directly transform physical pain into color explosions. As the leprosy virus gnawed on his nerves, his brushstrokes became even more brilliant—this paradoxical coexistence of body and spirit makes art an absolute reality that transcends binary values.

3.2. Paintings: The Liminality of Symbols and the Carrier of Identity

Strickland’s creative behavior itself is the best interpretation of deconstruction theory. The deconstruction of the creative process is reflected in the complete negation of the artistic production chain. He refused to exhibit, burned paintings, banned their sale, and even allowed cockroaches to gnaw on oil paintings. These actions constitute a direct attack on the capitalist art system: when Stroeve exclaimed, Strickland just splashed turpentine onto the canvas. At the moment when oil paint dissolves the image, it synchronously dissolves the exchange logic of masterpiece and value. Strickland guarded the unsellable nature of symbols through the practice of destroying paintings: they must exist as useless sacred objects.

The unfinished mural exists as the ultimate carrier of extension. The murals in Tahiti's thatched cottages are a perfect metaphor for the deconstructionist theory of “différance”: in terms of spatial *différance*, murals are inseparable from walls and refuse to be transplanted by museums, thus serving as a discipline against the art system; In terms of temporal variation, blindness caused by leprosy makes murals forever “unfinished”, meaning continuously sliding and refusing to be closed. In terms of interpretation, the narrator describes it as chaos at the beginning of creation, the doctor sees the fall of Eden, and Ata sees only a flood of colors. This uncertainty in the meaning of painting dissolves the interpretation behavior of authoritative individuals in the field of art. The mural thus becomes a floating signifier, pointing to the artist's self dissolving presence.

The liminal function of paintings highlights the subversion of the order of life and death by art. As a symbol of identity that transcends life and death, when Strickland’s body rots in the corner of the wall, the mural breathes like a living creature. This eerie symbiosis turns the thatched cottage into a threshold space between life and death: artists sacrifice their bodies eroded by viruses and cast their souls into paintings. The ultimate destruction of the mural deepens the liminality of symbols: ashes are both the end of material existence and the beginning of complete symbol freedom. As Derrida said, ashes are the purest traces of existence.

The primitive aesthetic principles upheld by Strickland are also a deconstruction of civilization hierarchy. European figure painting emphasizes perspective and anatomy (such as Stroeve’s academic art works), but Strickland tramples on the aesthetic dogma since the Renaissance with flat reddish blocks, distorted reproductive totems, and volcanic lava like brushstrokes. When the following colonizers exclaimed about his paintings, they were violently deconstructing the colonial

discourse of civilization and barbarism with symbols. The fact that Gauguin (Strickland's prototype) wrote art history in Tahiti confirms the revolutionary nature of primitivism: it forced European modern art to acknowledge that the edged symbol system had the power to subvert the center.

4. Individual Liminality: The Dissolution of Other Relationships and the Reconstruction of Self Subject

Strickland's path of self reconstruction, in a sense, was accomplished by stepping on the backs of others. From the living room in London to the thatched cottage in Tahiti, he systematically deconstructs the chains of subjectivity imposed by society through the betrayal of marriage, the trampling of friendship, and the nihilization of love. This process is not an existentialist pursuit of self, but a complete negation of the relationship with others—only by eliminating all the mirror images that define self can we climb out of the ruins of civilization and reveal our naked primitive self.

4.1. Amy: The Object of the Dissolution of Secular Identity

From a marital perspective, Amy Strickland is the most deceptive symbol trap in the novel. Her carefully managed middle-class life in London is actually a disciplinary device in Foucault's writing. In the living room decorations, embroidered curtains and silver tea sets form a set of symbols, imprisoning Strickland in the signifier chain of a respectable husband. When Amy showed the visitor "our dear stockbroker," it was actually a form of verbal violence against Strickland. Therefore, Strickland's escape was a break from his past identity, leaving behind both a farewell letter and a socially deceased body named Charles Strickland.

After Strickland's death, Amy's mourning had a hypocritical performance. Amy claimed that she would rather die than elope, exposing the essence of marriage as a social image cooperation. Her fear of eloping was not due to emotional trauma, but rather her fear of tarnishing the middle-class title with the label of "abandoned woman". This hypocrisy reached its peak after Strickland's death: she revered paintings of cockroaches gnawing on Parisian attic as genius treasures and mythologized traitors as cultural idols through curatorial memoirs. Maugham used a surgical knife like satire to uncover the truth: Society needs genius myths to whitewash its vulgarity, just as brothels need a statue of the Virgin Mary.

On the other hand, the deconstruction of marriage contracts presents an extreme form in Strickland's case. When Amy sent the detective to plead for his return, he firmly refused, stripping away the emotional connotation of the role of husband; refusing to pay child support and tearing up checks that symbolize patriarchal responsibility have reduced the role of father to an empty signifier. His behavior subverts the core creed of the traditional Christian family view, which is love is responsibility, declaring that self is the only law.

4.2. The Stroeve Couple: Liminal Character as a Mirror

Blanche and Dirk Stroeve formed a pair of mirror thresholds and were subjected to cruel treatment by Strickland. The tragedy of Blanche lies in her role as both a tool for Strickland to deconstruct love meanwhile a sacrifice. She initially took in the dying Strickland in the posture of a Virgin Mary, attempting to practice the ethical principle of Christianity's love your neighbor as yourself through nursing behavior. But when Strickland tore open her rigorous dress, the narrative of redemption collapsed instantly. Maugham reveals the truth of lust that he possessed her like picking up a palette, just to verify whether the body could ignite the flame of creation. Her poisoning was not a sacrifice, but a symbolic suicide - when she discovered that the self in Strickland's paintings was just a mass of pink flesh, she finally realized that she had never existed as a "human". The absent face on the canvas declares the bankruptcy of Lacan's theory of "othergaze": Strickland's eyes do not reflect the Other at all, and her death thus dissolves the myth of love, proving that love redemption is nothing but a symbolic fraud woven by patriarchy.

Dirk deconstructed the dual myth of art and morality through his ineffective dedication to Strickland. Dirk's academic painting skills are exquisite, he was able to draw the most realistic satin skirt pleats, but he only produces decorative painting products. The rare power that Strickland unleashed when painting the original color blocks declares the false association between genius and skill—the origin of art is the vitality of barbarism, not the technology of civilized discipline. When Dirk knelt down to worship the paintings he denounced as barbaric graffiti, the European art hierarchy collapsed with a loud bang.

Dirk's tolerance is the ultimate embodiment of Christian morality: saving love enemies, raising abandoned wives, and protecting paintings. But Strickland returned with the humiliation of taking his wife and mental abuse. This extreme inequality exposes the ineffectiveness of traditional morality in the narrative of genius - society confines the mediocre with morality while allowing geniuses to trample on norms. The ending of Dirk ultimately being stranded on the streets is enough to illustrate this point.

4.3. Tahitian Islanders and Ata: Rebirth of Unidentified Subjects in Primitive Relationships

Tahiti is not a utopia, but a primitive field for Strickland's ultimate deconstruction. The residents of the island and Ata represent an unprecedented paradigm of otherness— functional existence replacing emotional connection.

European colonizers viewed islanders as uncivilized others, but Strickland transformed them into tools to dissolve linguistic violence. The islanders call him The Painter, not his real name. This anonymous state realizes Derrida's response to logocentrism— when language cannot identify who you are, social identity loses its backbone of attachment. Strickland's refusal to learn Polynesian language is not arrogance, but an active embrace of aphasia. The logic of language barrier equals to civilization defect in colonial discourse has been reversed: stuttering gestures have become armor against symbolic violence. When he paints his body to signal to children, he practices Deleuze's advocacy of non discursive expression— there is more authentic communication beyond language.

As a key role in Strickland's reconstruction of the original subject, Ata's existence completely deconstructs the traditional emotional relationships in Western society. She provides food, cleans art supplies, and nourishes children, but never demands a declaration of love or marriage commitment. This relationship subverts the trinity of marriage, love and sex and practices the primitive exchange essence: survival cooperation is higher than emotional resonance.

The thatched cottage of Ata is a practical space for anti discipline: children crawl on the ground, yams grow in the corners of the wall, and life reproduction does not require hospitals or schools. Murals spread around the delivery room, with blood stains from childbirth and oil paint seeping into the soil together. She cleaned his ulcerated flesh and skin, as calm as wiping a palette. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, introduces the term "abjection", which denotes the psychological defense mechanism by which the subject experiences intense repulsion and expulsion toward filth, corpses, or horrific objects that threaten its clear boundaries, thereby establishing the "self" as a distinct identity [8]. This kind of space achieves the liberation of abjection—when bodily fluids, decay, and creative chaos blend together, the clean taboos and identity boundaries of civilized society completely collapse. Ata became Strickland's "eyes" after he went blind. During the leprosy quarantine period, she became a witness and guardian of the life and death threshold: on a physical level, she used herbs to slow down the decay of Strickland and maintain the minimum amount of life required for creation; On an artistic level, she protected the murals from colonial scrutiny, wielding a knife to expel French officials. At the symbolic level, she carries out the ultimate command of burning murals, ensuring that art escapes from all collections.

5. Conclusion

Strickland's journey of self reconstruction is a practice of deconstruction that occurs in multiple liminal spaces. Tahiti, as an ecological boundary of conflict, has dissolved old social identities. The

symbolic opposition between the moon and sixpence is revealed here as a fluid category, and achieves transcendent reconstruction in artistic creation. As the silent Other, Ata provides a decentralized ethical field, allowing Strickland to forge his ultimate, artistic subjectivity through detachment and isolation—a transcendent soul that finds its home in the stars and murals after escaping from all boundary markers. Maugham, through Strickland’s Tahitian years, not only wrote about the extreme possibilities of individual existence, but also revealed in the echoes of deconstruction that identity reconstruction often occurs on the boundaries of order and the ruins of meaning, and its essence is an eternal crossing towards the unknown.

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