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AN INTERPRETATION OF THE HEROINE' IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS IN  
*THE PAINTED VEIL* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

*The Painted Veil*, conceived by Maugham as his most engaging novel, delves into the journey of the protagonist, Kitty, as she breaks free from confusion, desire, and spiritual emptiness to discover her true self and gain a fresh perspective on life.. This process fully embodies that individuals cannot live apart from society, and "society" exists as a community. The individual cannot be confined to the self-centered "social" and social sphere.

While previous academic research on *The Painted Veil* has focused on the concept of love and marriage, Ecocriticism, Post-colonialism and the analysis of the heroine's image, there are few studies from the spiritual perspective, which provides the possibility for this paper. This paper aims to address this gap by employing Freud psychoanalysis to conduct a deep psychological analysis from the "id", "ego" and "superego" of the hero and heroine, exploring the heroine's identity consciousness. By examining the connection between individuals living in society and society through the lens of identity, which involves the construction of self-identity and one's place in society.

Analyzing the identity consciousness of the heroine in *The Painted Veil* from the perspective of psychoanalysis will not only enrich the theoretical study of Maugham's novels, but also provide a new angle for readers to understand Maugham's works.

**Keyword:** *The Painted Veil*; Psychoanalysis; Freud; Identity Consciousness.

1. Introduction of the Author and the Work

*The Painted Veil* is the work of the English writer W. Somerset Maugham. He wrote at least four novels, more than 150 short stories, more than 30 plays, and many books of travel and autobiographies. *The Painted Veil* is a novel written by the renowned English writer W. Somerset Maugham. Maugham's literary career spanned across various genres, including 4 novels, 150 short stories, more than 30 plays, travelogues, and autobiographies. Although he claimed to be "the better of the first class", he was regarded by the literary world as one of the few best writers of the twentieth century in English fiction. His works were not well received by

academic critics, but they were widely read around the world and well received, because he wrote about “real life” and about his own life. He once said at a press conference, “Any reasonable, sensible writer should write about his own experience, because he has no more authority than his own experience.”

In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham explores a tragic and desolate story with infidelity as the central plot. The first half of the novel deals with Kitty's choices about her marriage. Kitty, the protagonist, is vain. She cheats in a loveless marriage, she ends up being cheated on by her lover, and her husband loses his life because of what she did. Kitty was born beautiful, since childhood by her mother Lady Gastine dote, looking forward to marrying into a rich and noble family. Despite her initial popularity in society, she fails to find a suitable partner by the age of twenty-five. Her sister Doris, average-looking and unremarkable, was engaged to the son of a baronet. Scolded and “forced” by her mother and unwilling to marry after her sister, Kitty hurriedly married Walter, a solitary, silent but loving bacteriologist, and followed him to Hong Kong. She was a vain woman, only on impulse married a man she did not love, which foreshadowed the affair after marriage.

The second part tells why Kitty has an affair, leading to the climax of the novel. In Hong Kong, her husband loved her, but he was rigid and did nothing but work. Her husband's character made her feel lonely, alone and lost. Hong Kong Deputy Chief Secretary Charles Townsend is a married man, he saw the beautiful Kitty, involuntarily gave birth to sexual desire, and wanted to have sex with her. Kitty's husband discovers their affair and wants her to go to Meitan, a cholera-infested city in mainland China, with the intention of killing her. Desperate for assistance, Kitty turns to Townsend, who refuses to divorce his wife but encourages her to join him in a life of secrecy.

In Meitan, Walter risked his life to save the wounded, beloved by everyone, but later unfortunately contracted cholera, and later died. During this time, Kitty volunteered in a French Catholic convent, saw how the nuns cared for orphans and treated highly infectious patients (many of whom died), and was moved by the love, selflessness and commitment to their faith shown by the nuns. *The Painted Veil* delves into themes of love, betrayal, personal growth, and redemption. It examines the consequences of vanity, infidelity, and the pursuit of superficial desires. Through her experiences in Meitan, Kitty learns valuable lessons about compassion, self-reflection and the importance of genuine connections. The novel offers a poignant exploration of human nature, societal expectations and the complexities of relationships.

## 2. An introduction to Freud's theory of personality

Freud's theory of personality structure can be divided into two stages: the bipartite personality structure in early period and the tripartite personality structure in later period. Freud published *The Ego and the Id* in 1923. He proposed the tripartite personality structure theory in this book. In the later period of Freud's personality structure theory, he believes that personality is a whole with three components: Id, Ego, and Superego.

First of all, the id is the most basic and primitive part of the personality structure. The id is made up of all innate instincts and is one of the most difficult parts of the personality to understand. It is also the most primitive part of the personality. Human instinctual sexual drive and repressed tendencies are included in the id. The id wants to release energy and relieve excitement and tension. From the perspective of meaning, Freud says:

It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality, what little we know of it we have learnt from our study of the dreamwork and of the construction of neurotic symptoms, and most of this is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We all approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations (Freud 1993:105)

It consists of hereditary instincts and desires, such as hunger and libido. It is a kind of unknown control force, through the direct release of psychological energy to obtain happy and satisfaction. From the perspective of principle, in the process of pursuing happiness and satisfaction, it doesn't have the concept of right and wrong. It doesn't consider moral constraints, just blindly to fulfill the first principle of life, that is the principle of pleasure. which is, pursuing happiness and avoiding pain. Freud believes that the baby's personality structure completely belongs to Id. In the process of pursuing desire, Id is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts,

but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. Therefore, the id is entirely unconscious.

Second, the ego is human beings' rational part. It exists between the id and the external world. A part of the id undergoes special development and produces special organizations when it comes into contact with reality. These organizations are the connections that everyone has to some psychological processes. It is known as the ego.

The ego comprises that organized part of the personality structure that includes defensive, perceptual, intellectual-cognitive, and executive functions. Conscious awareness resides in the ego, although not all of the operations of the ego are conscious. The ego separates what is real. It helps us to organize our thoughts and make sense of them and the world around us (Snowden 2006:105-107).

⑦The ego is gradually separated from the id and lies in the middle layer of the personality structure. The role of the ego is mainly to regulate the contradiction between id and superego. On the one hand, it regulates the id and on the other hand it is subject to the superego. The ego follows the principle of reality and meets the requirements of id in a reasonable way. At this time, the principle of reality temporarily discontinues the principle of happiness. Most of its psychological energy is consumed in the control and repression of the id. Freud believes that the ego is the executor of personality. The ego satisfies the id in a reasonable way and temporarily suspends the pleasure principle in a realistic way. The ego represents sense and prudence in the personality structure. Freud thought that the ego is the executor of personality.

Superego is the final component of personality structure theory. The superego, which is made up of ideal and conscience, stands in for the social moral code. The top of the personality is where the ego is separated from. It is the moral ego, which gradually develops as a person learns about social, cultural and moral norms in daily life. Snowden says

The Superego strives to act in a socially appropriate manner, whereas the id just wants instant self-gratification. The Superego controls our sense of right and wrong and guilt. It helps us fit into society by getting us to act in socially acceptable ways (Snowden 2006:106-107).

In the personality structure, the superego is in charge and is controlled by the principle of morality. The moral component of the personality structure includes the superego. The highest level of the psychological structure is the superego, which is a moral self. Social norms, ethics, and values help people assimilate it. It acts as the internal censor, make moral judgement in light of social pressures. The form of the superego is the result of socialization. Superego follows the ethical principle and it has three functions. The first function is to restrain the impulsiveness of the id. The second is to monitor the ego. The third is the pursuit of perfection. The superego operates in the form of moral hearts, maintaining the individual's sense of morality and avoiding taboos. It is the embodiment of all moral restrictions and the impetus behind all honorable deeds in human life.

The totality of a person's personality is made up of their id, ego, and superego and they are distinct but intertwined. According to the distinction, id refers to a biological instinct that is influenced by genetics. Personal experience and social circumstances, or chance and current events, are what shape the self the most. The ego and superego are extensions of the Id in their interaction. Ego simultaneously functions as the primary system of personality structure, controlling and regulating human motivation and conduct. The superego and the id are nearly opposite to the ego, which is permanently opposed. The ego needs to regulate between them in order to coordinate the struggle between the id and superego. According to Freud, the personality structure is a dynamic energy system rather than a static energy system and it will continue to develop after it has formed. He believes that no matter the growth of an individual or the development of the human beings, the ego has been gradually conquered the id.

In the history of psychology, Freud was the first psychologist to carry out a thorough and in-depth investigation of personality. His research exposed the truth of human nature and peered into people's inner lives, which was more profound than earlier psychological understandings of people's inner lives. His hypothesis

paved the way for the advancement of human psychology and encouraged the study of western personality psychology. The first comprehensive theory of personality ever developed was his "tripartite personality structure" idea. According to his hypothesis, the id, ego and superego are typically in a state of relative equilibrium; however, once the balance is lost, the personality structure will be out of balance, which will result in the development of an unsound personality.

### **3. An analysis of heroine's identity consciousness from the Perspective of Psychoanalysis**

In this part, I will analyze the heroine's lack of identity consciousness through the theory of id personality, and then analyze the emergence of the heroine's identity consciousness through the theory of ego personality. Finally, heroine's consciousness of identity is analyzed through the theory of superego personality.

#### **3.1 The lack of sense of identity consciousness**

In the 1920s, societal constraints confined women from middle-class families like Kitty's to subordinate roles as mere extensions of men within the family structure. Living in a limited social sphere centered on communication and entertainment, Kitty, despite being part of the broader society, remained oblivious to the true essence of life. Her motivations were driven by a desire to escape her mother's criticism and keep pace with her sister's marital achievements. Opting for Walter, a man with wealth and influence, Kitty, conditioned by her mother, prioritized materialistic aspirations over self-awareness and the significance of individuality. Oblivious to the deeper meaning of marriage, Kitty's focus was solely on superficial material comforts to gratify her desires and address immediate concerns, reflecting her inherent self-centeredness. Despite her initial intent to marry for wealth, Kitty lacked a profound understanding of both marriage and her own personal purpose.

The id is a personality that exists from birth. According to Freud, the id is the most important component of the personality. It follows the pleasure principle and strives to fulfill all desires, wishes and needs. According to Freud, the id simply follows the pleasure principle, which is completely unconscious and produced by human instincts such as wealth and sex. For Kitty's husband, Kitty never considered Walter's feelings, and she never cared about ethics. After marriage, Kitty was not satisfied with her married life, because she thought her husband was rigid and unemotional. So she decided to lie. Kitty was aware that Townsend had a family and that she had a husband, but she utterly disregarded morality, shunned all outsiders, and disregarded her responsibilities as a wife. She was simply concerned with her own wants and pleasures. At this time, Kitty is acting quite egotistically.

From all the above, we can see that Kitty makes choices based on her own interests. Based on the analysis of id's personality structure, we can conclude that Kitty is a selfish person, regardless of whether she marries Walter, who loves her "impulsively," in order to satisfy her material life, or cheats with Townsend, pursues her love, and obtains spiritual happiness. Kitty loses herself in the pursuit of self and the persistence of so-called love; she lacks a sense of self-identity and femininity.

#### **3.2 The emergence of identity consciousness**

Amid Walter's revelation of Kitty's betrayal, she proposes to Townsend, who callously rejects her. Faced with Walter's self-masochistic punishment, Kitty must choose between divorce and exile to Meitan. In this death-laden place, both Walter and Kitty discover their true selves. Touched by selfless nuns, Kitty volunteers to care for convent children, finding solace in their unwavering faith. This period becomes a transformative journey as she represses her own pain, redirecting focus from her affair with Tang Sheng. The fleeting joy derived from personal happiness contrasts with the enduring happiness found in selflessness. Meitan's universal spirit infects Kitty, leading to profound self-discovery and mental salvation. Walter's unfortunate cholera infection shifts Kitty's priorities from personal happiness to seeking his redemption. His dying words, filled with pleas and redemption, become the catalyst for Kitty's anticipation of forgiveness, marking the culmination of their complex journey.

The ego is the rational, logical and waking part of our mind. The ego follows the principle of reality and meets the requirements of id in a reasonable way. The id personality structure can regulate the instinctual desire

of the id and to allow these desire to be released in some nondestructive way. What's more, id can meditate between the instinctual (esp. sexual) desire of the id and the demands of social pressures issued by the superego. Kitty's ego triumphed over her selfishness, and she offered to assist the convent. She began to realize that she should realize her own self-worth and social value. She no longer cared about whether working here would increase her death risk; she sincerely hoped to bring help and warmth to the children here. When she realized how much the children and the convent women liked her, she was happy from the bottom of her heart. It demonstrates Kitty's developing sense of self.

Identity, crucially involving self-awareness and empathy for others, contrasts with Kitty's initial self-centeredness. Townsend's true nature prompts her shift from egocentrism to concern for others. Meitan, a cholera-infested village, becomes the transformative backdrop. The serene natural scenery draws Kitty's attention, sparking her shift from self-absorption to awareness of the social environment. In this remote setting, Kitty witnesses the fragility of life, leading to a realization of life's importance and contemplation of its meaning. This profound experience in Meitan marks the germination of Kitty's identity consciousness. Her evolving focus from self to others signifies a trans-formative journey spurred by the harsh realities of the social environment. In the face of life's fragility, Kitty's heart is both shaken and awed, underscoring the profound impact of external circumstances on her evolving sense of self.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?"

"What? Death."

"Yes. It makes everything else seem so horribly trivial. He doesn't look human. When you look at him you can hardly persuade yourself that he's ever been alive. It's hard to think that not so very many years ago he was just a little boy tearing down the hill and flying a kite." (Maugham : 1992: 38)

From all the above, we can see that Kitty begins to recognize herself, others and the surrounding environment. Compared with life, Kitty realized that what she suffered was not worth mentioning; here, "she could not help sobbing." Kitty could not help feeling sorry for what she had done; in front of the more important life, she realized her original stupidity and ignorance and began to change. From the analysis of the personality structure of the self, we can conclude that Kitty no longer only focuses on her own desires and is sad about the inhumanity she loves, but opens her vision and begins to suppress the desire of the id, which is the manifestation of the germination of her identity consciousness.

### 3.3 The awakening of identity consciousness

The superego encapsulates internal moral principles, encompassing ego principles, conscience, and self-ideals. Adhering to these ideals brings pride, value, and a sense of accomplishment, while serving as a filter for forbidden desires, inducing guilt. In Meitan, Kitty awakens to her immorality and realizes her inadequacy as a wife, grappling with guilt over hurting Walter. Integrating into society, she contemplates life's meaning and seeks redemption. Kitty, previously inattentive to Walter, scrutinizes his every word and action, driven by a newfound desire to make amends. This transformative journey reflects the dynamic interplay of superego elements in shaping Kitty's evolving self-awareness and moral consciousness. In scrutinizing Walter, she strives for redemption, symbolizing a profound shift towards aligning with societal and personal ideals, marking a pivotal moment in her psychological development.

Kitty learned from Waddington that:

"I respect him. He has brains and character; and that, I may tell you, is a very unusual combination. I don't suppose you know what he is doing here, because I don't think he's very expansive with you. If any man single handed can put a stop to this frightful epidemic he's going to do it. " (Maugham : 1992: 38)

Waddington's high regard for Walter reshapes Kitty's perception of her husband, fostering understanding and appreciation. Facing the world, Kitty resists emotional stagnation and transcends self-solidification. The fusion of Chinese and Western culture in Waddington highlights a unique perspective shaped by Chinese influence, deviating from Western passion or typical calmness. Despite his unremarkable appearance,

Waddington plays a pivotal role in helping Kitty discover herself. Through insightful communication, he sees through Kitty's confusion and introduces her to work in a convent, a transformative experience. This friendship enriches Kitty's life in Meitan, contributing significantly to her maturation. The dynamic interplay between cultural influences and interpersonal connections illustrates Kitty's profound evolution, marking a turning point in her journey of self-discovery and personal growth.

Leaving Meitan after Walter's death, Kitty unexpectedly encounters her former lover Townsend. Despite Townsend's advances, Kitty, transformed by her superego's triumph over id desires, resolutely rejects his advances, adhering to newfound self-discipline and self-respect. This marks a significant shift from her past disregard for ethics and morals. With her pregnancy, Kitty contemplates a hopeful future, finding identity and responsibility in impending motherhood. The deaths of Walter and her mother bring clarity to Kitty's evolving identity. Liberated from the shackles of dependency on her husband's life, she fearlessly confronts the future, taking control of her destiny.

Amidst these changes, Kitty decides to return to England, where her father remains the only surviving family member. Despite her past indifference, Kitty, recognizing her duty as a daughter, sincerely apologizes to her father, acknowledging his importance beyond a means for fortune. This decision reflects Kitty's newfound maturity and a genuine commitment to familial responsibility, as she bravely faces the complexities of her past and strives for a more authentic connection with her father. In navigating these transformative experiences, Kitty gains a deeper understanding of her identity and embraces the courage to shape her own destiny.

From all the above, we can see that Kitty no longer lives in a muddled way in the future, but begins to have her own pursuit and planning, and finds her own social value. From the analysis of the personality structure of the self: Kitty at this time has really completed self-redemption, which is also an important embodiment of the awakening of the consciousness of identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the id, ego and superego of the heroine Kitty in *The Painted Veil*, Kitty bid farewell to the past confused, bound by desire, ego and spiritual emptiness, and found the true self, and had a new understanding of life. This process fully embodies that individuals cannot live apart from society, and "society" exists as a community. The individual cannot be confined to a self-centered "social" and social sphere. Kitty finally got out of the limitation, found her own social position and social value, reflected on herself, and had a better plan for her future life. Kitty pursues the pleasures of id, love, and in the end gets nothing but pain. She can realize her own mistakes, follow the social ethics and morality, then finally move towards the superego, which is the realization of self-identity.

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