

On Mrs. Sommers' Self-construction from the Perspective of Theory of Mirror Stages

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Received: November 12, 2023 Accepted: December 3, 2023 Published: December 6, 2023

doi:10.5296/jsel.v11i1.21511 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsel.v11i1.21511>

Abstract

The short story *A Pair of Silk Stockings* depicted the protagonist Mrs. Somers' process of finding her ideal self through a fifteen dollar consumption, reflecting the difficult situation of American women wandering between housewives and their ideal self in the 19th century. Mrs. Sommers' self-exploration and alienation in the process of consumption, and her identity construction is quite in accordance with the three stages of one's establishment in Jacques Lacan's Theory of Mirror Stages.

Keywords: Theory of Mirror Stages, one's self, identity construction

Kate Chopin(1850-1904), an American writer as famous as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, brought her *A Pair of Silk Stockings* in her late life. Mrs. Sommers, the heroine, spent all her time in seeing to the family and taking care of the children, serving as a model of Family Angle praised in the 19th century. However, one day she found herself the unexpected possessor of fifteen dollars, to her a very large amount of money. Yet contrary to her careful speculation and calculation to buy something for the kids, she indulged herself in the consumption for herself, meeting her substantial as well as psychological need which in turn accomplished the construction of her self. Unstrangely, her thinking and feeling in her pre-shopping, during shopping and post-shopping coincided with Theory of Mirror Stage by Lacan, a French psychoanalysis who held that a baby's self-construction could be divided into three stages: pre-mirror stage between 0 to 6 months where the baby could not distinguish itself from the world nor to unify itself with the world; while-mirror stage between 6 and 18 months where the baby can have self-recognition to acknowledge the difference between itself and the image in the mirror despite its poor body coordination;

post-mirror stage where one can have a comprehensive understanding of oneself based on the acquisition of the difference between one self and the image in the mirror. (2001. p78)

1. Pre-mirror Stage: Absence of Self

Lacan believes that infants, at birth, can only passively receive information from the external world without a complete self-awareness or a potential to recognize themselves and their image in the mirror. It is in a chaotic state of overall understanding of oneself and the outside world. At this point, the baby only gains fragmented body experience, “The inherent emptiness requires the constant enrichment and confirmation of one self by the others” (2003). In the work, Mrs. Sommers lacks in the pre mirror stage, and the construction of self-awareness and self-image is dominated by the interference of the “other” in a patriarchal society, where the subject’s family role, social status, and other factors determined the establishment of their identity. The female protagonist follows the social norms and moral standards of female behavior in order to gain social recognition. However, Mrs. Sommers is unable to form a holistic understanding of herself, her family, and even the external world. due to the name missing and confusion of self.

Firstly, the name of the female protagonist is missing. As a person, name is not only a way of addressing oneself by others, but also an essential social symbol. In the late 19th century, women were still constrained and oppressed by patriarchy. After marriage, the female protagonist’s original name was stripped under the patriarchal convention, losing the pre-marital identity and her real name never appeared in the work and referred to as “Mrs. Somers” or “she” and “her”. However, the term “Mrs. Sommers” substantially existed in dependence on her husband, Mr. Sommers. In addition, at that time, women had not yet gained economic independence, and maintained a subordinate to men in both social and economic terms. In fact, Mrs. Sommers is just a representative of thousands of housewives of American women at that time, and the absence of the female protagonist’s name symbol also implies a lack of female identity.

Secondly, the protagonist’s self-awareness is chaotic. To become a socially recognized “true woman” (2004), one must be of piety, chastity, obedience, and warmth and so on. The social environment and historical background have shaped the image of a virtuous wife and mother for women, and guided them to actively identify, which is actually “confining women to the circle of wives and mothers, and are not allowing them to have any self-awareness and personal pursuit” (2004). Following such social norms, Mrs. Sommers regards it as her responsibility to take care of her family, but she doesn’t know what kind of life she really wants. Years of marriage have shaped her into a virtuous wife and mother. The female protagonist was forced to accept this impoverished marriage, which also represents her recognition of the authority of patriarchy. Getting a “huge sum” of fifteen dollars, she well considered the financial constraints of her family, planned in detail how to use this money to buy clothes for her children, without any attention to herself at all. Suffering the constraints of the social environment habitually for too long a time, Mrs. Sommers lacked self-awareness that has been suppressed by patriarchal society for too long, and she only passively accepts the role of a housewife given to her by society and family, mistakenly treating oneself

assimilated by society as the true self, living towards the role of perfect wife and perfect mother. Generally, Mrs. Sommers was in a state of confusion and chaos about her self.

2. Mid-mirror Stage: Exploration of Self

Infants at 6 to 18 months in the mirror stage are able to recognize their image in the mirror and recognize themselves as a complete and unified subject. Lacan believes that the function of the mirror stage is to “establish a relationship between the body and its reality” (2001.p102), or as people say, to establish a relationship between the inner and outer worlds. At this point, although the baby cannot coordinate its limbs, it readily identifies with the complete and unified image in the mirror. Due to the fact that mirror image is only an illusion obtained by infants through psychological expectations, and the fragmented physical experience of the subject itself has not yet been overcome, this identification is just an imaginative misidentification. In addition, Lacan divides others into the Other and the other. For Mrs. Sommers, the Other symbolizes order and is the patriarchy; the other does not refer to others, but rather to the projection of oneself, which is the ideal image in the mirror. When others appear as the Other or the other, they are just temporarily occupying the position of the other or the Other. In the process of consumption, the salesmen and waiters serve as the others. Mrs. Sommers has seen the image of her ideal self through the mirror of the other for many times and actively identified with it, so as to build a unified self-identity. Therefore, the female protagonist acknowledges that the process of mirroring is a process of self-misidentification and continuous alienation from unconscious self.

Firstly, what the female protagonist actively identifies with is a mirror image of a valued customer. Mrs. Sommers is a typical virtuous wife and mother, and her family members' daily necessities of food and clothing have already constrained her both physically and mentally. However, a pair of silky stockings in the mall awakened her inner desire and brought her stronger and stronger desire for consumption. She attempted to use consumption as a temporary measure to escape the difficult life after marriage. When the salesperson asked her to check the texture of the stockings, Mrs. Sommers saw her ideal self-image in the mirror through the other: the mirror presented a noble customer inspecting a diamond crown, rather than a housewife dressed in ordinary clothes and carrying a worn out shopping bag. At this time, she actively identified with the mirror image, gradually giving way to the illusion of a noble customer instead of a virtuous wife and mother. She did not experience any ideological struggle, but let this “wooden impulse” (2010) lead her and then patronized shoe stores, glove counters, and so on. Before getting married, the female protagonist had a privileged family background, and in this sense, the image of a distinguished customer in the mirror is a microcosm of her premarital image. However, due to the fact that the mirror image ultimately exists in nothingness, the imaginative identification of the female protagonist with the mirror image is actually a misunderstanding, indicating the ultimate failure of desire. In addition, Mrs. Sommers' consumption process also reflects the conflict between women's “self value” (2007) and their roles as wives and mothers, which was a common problem faced by American women in the 19th century.

Then, Mrs. Sommers took the initiative to identify with the image of a book lover in the mirror. After meeting her basic material needs, Mrs. Sommers continued to search for her next object of desire: expensive magazines. During the shopping process, Mrs. Sommers saw in the mirror the image of a book lover who couldn't let go of her books on weekdays, as if she were a book lover, immersed in the joy and satisfaction brought by reading. She substituted herself into this role, viewing her relationship with the outside world from the perspective of a mirror, and closely fitting this illusory identity between her actions and actions. When Mrs. Sommers walked on the street, she was more concerned with her own image, sometimes "holding the train" (2001.p167), as if showing off her dignified image to others. Although there are differences between the subject and the mirror, the subject still regards the mirror as her true self-image, constructs her self-identity from this perspective, and further transforms their image through consumption, in order to align with her ideal self. In fact, the ideal self is just a fictional and perfect image of Mrs. Sommers, and this sense of imagined completeness is actually a kind of completeness and unity that are not tangible or accessible. Therefore, the self-construction of the subject actually develops in the direction of fiction. When Mrs. Sommers sees the image in the mirror as her true self, she cannot find the true object of desire. The real self and the ideal self in the mirror image are always in a discrete relationship, which is also an important reason for the alienation of the subject.

Finally, Mrs. Sommers took the initiative to identify with the image of a royal princess in the mirror. After consuming in the store, although already hungry, the female protagonist did not go home to eat some biscuits as usual to meet her hunger, but instead walked into a luxurious restaurant she had never been to before. At this time, her focus is not on the physiological needs to solve the problem of hunger, but on the aesthetic needs. After entering the restaurant, Mrs. Sommers was completely immersed in the quiet and elegant atmosphere inside. In addition, her choices of blue oysters, desserts, wine, and black coffee also reflect the taste of the wealthy, rather than the dietary habits of poor housewives. After dinner, Mrs. Sommers left a coin as a tip for the restaurant waiter, who respectfully bowed to her. Against the backdrop of an elegant environment, she saw the image of a royal princess through the waiter's mirror. However, the external material enjoyment did not sustain Mrs. Sommers' long suppressed body and mind, and her desire for consumption drove her into the theater. The theater is a symbol of noble places and an entertainment venue for gentlemen and ladies in the upper class. The female protagonist immerses herself in it, "fully experiencing the joy of self-establishment by consumption" (2010), as if she is also a member of the upper class. The consumption of fifteen dollars brought the protagonist a moment of spiritual and material enjoyment. However, the image in the mirror is ultimately an illusion, disconnected from reality, and the ideal image of the protagonist cannot be achieved. Therefore, the end of the theater performance was the moment when Mrs. Sommers' fantasies went shattered.

3. Post-mirror: Construction of Self

Lacan believes that after 18 months, infants enter the post mirror stage and are able to recognize that the image in the mirror is actually their own image. They can also recognize

the difference between themselves and the other, and have a fresh understanding of themselves and the external world. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sommers plans to take a tram home and return to her family. The gaze from the other on the tram makes her realize her true identity. Mrs. Sommers finally reaches a reconciliation between her practical self and her ideal self, completing her identity construction.

Firstly, the protagonist recognized her own self. Mrs. Sommers fulfilled her brief and selfish freedom through consumption, in stark contrast to her original dutiful mother image, which also indicates that the female protagonist is heavily oppressed by patriarchal society in real life. After the performance, when Mrs. Sommers was once again brought back to real life, all material and spiritual enjoyment came to an abrupt end like a dream. Due to the solid political and economic foundation of patriarchy, as an ordinary housewife, Mrs. Sommers cannot shake the foundation of patriarchy or break free from the constraints of traditional social concepts on women. After a day of indulgent consumption, imagine that when she reminisces about her status as a housewife and the financial situation of her struggling family, the embarrassing reality will once again tightly surround her. The female protagonist realizes her true identity in real life and reexamines herself, which also symbolizes the return of Mrs. Sommers' self identity.

Secondly, Mrs. Sommers reconstructed her own self. The other is the medium for the construction of the subject's identity, playing a role in the self-construction process of the subject. Through the gaze of a man across from the tram, Mrs. Sommers gradually recognized her true identity. Under the influence of the other, the female protagonist returns to her reflection on the real world, which also signifies that the female protagonist has freed herself from the constraints of illusions in the mirror and moved from the dominance of the other to the construction of the subject's self. After experiencing this consumption process, although Mrs. Sommers was unable to become her ideal self in reality, she ultimately achieved a balance between herself and her ideal self through self-confirmation. The fact that the female protagonist reconciles with her impulsive consumption is actually reconciliation with herself and social reality. In the end, Mrs. Sommers completed her exploration of self-worth and identity construction.

Kate Chopin's short story *A Pair of Silk Stockings* depicts a hardworking housewife who is attracted by a pair of stockings and then goes on a shopping spree. Under the stimulation of the smooth touch of stockings, Mrs. Sommers' suppressed thoughts were released and presented in the form of consumption. During the shopping process, the female protagonist is influenced by the other and repeatedly identifies with the ideal self-image in the mirror. In fact, this repeated identification is a self-misunderstanding, which also indicates that the female protagonist will inevitably move towards alienation. In a patriarchal society, Mrs. Somers, who was at the bottom of society, struggled to navigate the dilemma between her personal ideals and life reality, which indirectly reflected the influence of social norms on American women in the late 19th century. The image of angel at home imprisons the thoughts and behaviors of countless women. When society internalizes this image as a standard for exemplary women and instructs them to constantly approach this goal, it also creates countless suppressed and bound "Mrs. Sommers". Therefore, when Mrs. Sommers was

driven by desire, it was not difficult to understand the material and spiritual enjoyment she pursued, as well as her ostentatious behavior. Only by breaking the shackles of patriarchy, breaking free from dependent status, and achieving gender equality in economic, social, and other aspects, can women, as independent entities in society, realize their own values within reach.

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