

Becky Sharp's Identity Pursuit in *Vanity Fair* From Lacan's Theory of Mirror Stage

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Abstract

William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the representatives of English critical realism in the 19th century. *Vanity Fair* has been generally regarded as his masterpiece, which reveals human nature and universal self-identity pursuit. Based on Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, this paper probes into the protagonist Becky Sharp's identity pursuit. First, the paper analyzes the awakening of Becky's sense of identity pursuit. Although this sense is bitty and fragmentary in this period, it accelerates Becky's steps for identity pursuit. Meanwhile, the appearance and state of this sense correspond to people's state of pre-mirror stage. Next, the paper explores Becky's identity pursuit. According to the mirror stage, the identity pursuit needs to be recognized by others, especially the mother. However, the early death of Becky's mother leads to its primordial lack, so that Becky has to turn to others for recognition. Finally, the paper discusses Becky's loss in her identity pursuit. Lacan points out that whether successfully distinguishes the specular image (Ideal "I") from ego (Real "I") or not is a key point of post-mirror stage. Living in the patriarchal society, Becky's humble origin, economic quandaries and the requirements of ideal female image in the Victorian age cause her to encounter obstacles. Therefore, it is no doubt that Becky's efforts for identity pursuing end in failure.

Key words: Vanity fair; Becky sharp; Theory of the mirror stage; Identity pursuit

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INTRODUCTION

William Makepeace Thackeray was one of the representatives of critical realism in the 19th century England. *Vanity Fair* is considered to be his masterpiece and marks the peak of his literary career. This novel was set in England during and after the Napoleonic Wars, and built the plots around the fates of Amelia Sedley and Rebecca (Becky) Sharp. Without a doubt, Thackeray managed to show a picture of the life of the ruling class of England.

Jacques Lacan was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who made prominent contributions to psychoanalysis and philosophy. The theory of mirror stage was the Lacan's first official contribution to psychoanalysis. Lacan points out that the mirror stage plays an important role in the form of people's personality. The mirror stage can be divided into three stages. They are pre-mirror stage, mirror stage and post-mirror stage.

This paper is based on Jacques Lacan's the theory of mirror stage, and it discusses the main female character Becky Sharp, as the subject of identity pursuit, from the gradual formation of the sense of pursuit identity to the construction of ideal "I", from the primordial lack of mother's image to the converting of the object projection of specular image, finally identity pursuit ends in failure and infantile regression in the form of self-exile.

1. THE AWAKENING OF THE SENSE OF IDENTITY

1.1 The Dissatisfactions With Current Status

Lacan holds that after a child was born, he will start to step on the road to find himself. At the pre-mirror stage, the individual could only passively accept the things from outside world. What he saw or thought is fragmentary and intermittent, so that he couldn't provide integrated process

mode. In order to get social and public identifications, the individual is always dissatisfied with his present state and looks forward to the next better status, especially the ambitious individuals.

In *Vanity Fair*, the protagonist Becky Sharp is an intelligent and ambitious young lady. She is described as a petite sandy haired girl with green eyes. Fluent in both French and English, Becky is also good at playing piano and singing. It could be said that Becky herself is very perfect. However, when she attends Miss Pinkerton's School, she finds that no one cares about her talents but takes notice of her family origin. However, she was born in a poor family with a scandalous father and an opera-girl mother. Compared with other girls, Becky is filled with envy and dissatisfaction at social injustice. She is aware of her realistic status, and gradually she concludes that her current status is a block for her development and she needs to change her current situation.

Leaving from Miss Pinkerton's school, Becky is invited to Amelia's house at Russell Square. There she attempts to entice Amelia's brother, Joseph, a fat and clumsy but rich civil-servant from the East India Company. However, her plan for hunting a husband only receives objections from Mrs. Sedley and warnings from Captain Osborne. They think that Joseph should not degrade himself to get married with a woman without a status. The letter from Joseph to Amelia indicates the failure of Becky's plan, and it also makes Becky further aware of the limitations of her current status.

Becky says farewell to Sedley's family and begins her position as a governess in Sir Pitt Crawley's family. She takes to life at Mr. Crawley's family just like a fish in water, and her personal talents have won the appreciations from all members of Crawley family. After his second wife death, Sir Pitt immediately proposes to her. Unfortunately, Sir Pitt's elder sister, Miss Crawley, breaks Becky's temporary satisfaction. She even discontinues economic support to Rawdon and cancels his right of inheritance. Becky's feeling of dissatisfactions on her humble birth and governess status escalates again.

After Miss Crawley dies, Becky returns to Queen's Crawley and starts to contact with Lady Jane, who comes from a notable family and is also Becky's sister-in-law. Different from the traditional ideal female Amelia and rich spinster Miss Crawley, Lady Jane not only possesses traditional virtues and great wealth, but also enjoys an honorable social position. Seeing Lady Jane's exalted social status, Becky's dissatisfactions on self identity reaches the highest point. In her view, all the unfair treatments she suffered are caused by her humble origin and extremely common social status.

1.2 Influences of Social Experience

In the process of the formation of self-awareness, the key concept is the mirror Stage. Lacan thinks that when an infant is between six months to eighteen months, if an

adult held it in front of a mirror, the infant will recognize itself through the reflection of the mirror. At this time, the infant will display a strange sense of elation and it will show its emotion through the expressions or actions. This stage is a process of self-identity and unification between the subject and ego.

Return to the *Vanity Fair*, to the protagonist Becky, the mirror stage which generates identity of subjectivity begins from her childhood, and matures during her experience in Miss Pinkerton's school. Becky's father Mr. Sharp is a totally defeated man. Becky shoulders all responsibilities which her father is supposed to take. Based on the Lacanian psychoanalysis, although the mother's image is absent, it has a greatly influence on the forming of subject. Becky could be considered as a spiritual orphan who even didn't know who her mother was. Therefore, she has kept looking for her mother's image in her deep unconsciousness. She has been questioning about herself with such philosophy propositions as who am I and where I come from. As a result of the experience of difficult childhood, in the face of semi-society, Becky has gradually realized her real status, while she also dreams of her ideal identity in the mirror.

As mentioned above, the mirror stage is not confined to people's babyhood. The lasting deficiency of pursuit makes the forming of subject gradually upgrade with the change of objective conditions. So when Becky leaves Miss Pinkerton's school, her new life is beginning. At this time, she just likes a baby who is given the birth and brought to a totally new world. The fact is that people with a lower status will only be pushed aside from upper crust. Becky is deeply conscious of her practical situation and self advantages, and then she puts things into action immediately. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, all these expressions are exactly the extension of baby's psychological states from the mirror stage. As a capable governess, Becky also tries to gain the favor of some relatives of this family. She knows the old Miss Crawley, her students' rich aunt, has absolute influence on the extended family with her money. To be a favorite of Miss Crawley, Becky puts all her resources to extremes. She even tempts Rawdon Crawley. Because she finds Rawdon is the inheritor of Miss Crawley's fortune. However, their marriage irritates Miss Crawley, and then he loses the right of succession. For Becky, her ideal identity pursuit fell through and the sense of "Ideal I" has become thicken again. So she needs to continually pursue her ideal identity and convert next "Ideal I".

After war broken out, Becky felt just like a fish in water and continued to pursuit the ideal I in the mirror. She circulates among various types of social situations, and deals with all sorts of military officers. When the Battle of Waterloo ended, Rawdon returns home laden with honors and was promoted to Colonel Rawdon. This couple uses Aunt George's influence to expand their

communicative circle in French high society. However, this materialistic life couldn't thoroughly satisfy Becky's pursuits. Deep down her heart, the missing ideal subject has still constantly summoned her, therefore, her identity pursuit enters into the third stage, which is obtaining the social status to compensate for her humble origin, not just gaining others' recognition or possessing individual wealth. Sir Pitt's death brings her hope to this young couple and it also gives a chance of a twist in Becky's fate. In order to contend for heritages, this young couple set out for the Queen's Crawley in the country. Becky wants to squeeze into the upper-class through Lady Jane's recommendation. So she does. She is granted an audience with the King under Lady Jane's help. Since then, Becky has been a sudden rise in social status. She becomes a delicate and charming star of the upper-class and circulates among the aristocrats at the party all day long. So far, Becky finally becomes the social butterfly of the upper-class and reaches her dazzling peak of life. It could be said the "Real I" has gotten instant gratification and gotten closer and closer to her "Ideal I".

2. THE PURSUIT OF IDEAL IDENTITY

According to the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, when a child experiences the mirror stage, its sense of the subject has greatly changed. This change is due to the reason of that the subject gains linguistic competence. Once it enters into linguistic sign system, the requirements of the subject has gradually developed from junior need to relatively senior demand, from relying on the concrete object to connect others. As a subject, Becky encounters a great many puzzles. First and foremost, Becky's mother died when she is a little girl who leads to the primordial lack of mother's image. However, the identity pursuit needs to be recognized by others, especially the mother, so Becky has to turn to others for recognition. In my opinion, Becky's life-long pursuit could be divided into three phases, and these three phases are also could be corresponded to the converting of her object-projection of the specular image.

2.1 Gaining Others' Recognition

Compared with peers, Becky has to face class discrimination and others' contempt. Amelia, as Becky's first specular image, has not matured. When they graduate and visit Amelia's family, Becky experiences a vastly different family environment compared with her own, and she decides to tempt Amelia's brother Joseph Sedley. Since then, what Becky needs to enter into the senior stage. Hunting Joseph is only a symbol and it is the first step for her to edge herself into the upper class and mould ideal ego, which is also the moment that Amelia has begun to become Becky's first specular image. The treatment of Amelia receives from school and her family background makes her become a symbol of others' appreciation, so

that Becky makes all her efforts to become a member of Sedley family and become an "Angle in the House" who possesses others' recognition and appreciation, like Amelia. Unfortunately, Becky's improper behaviors cause others' dissatisfaction. Becky experiences from gaining others' recognition to lose others' trusts. She is one very close to her specular image, and now their distance becomes so far. In addition, Becky has gradually found that what Amelia intends to pursue is only to be a good wife and a kind mother, however, such self-defeating lifestyle is stultifying that goes against what Becky exactly seeks for. Becky thinks that her specular image is not what she really wants. So she inevitably chooses to leave Sedley's family and begins to look for her new life.

2.2 Chasing Individual Wealth

Leaving Russell Square indicated the disappearance of Becky's first specular image. In order to satisfy her inner perfection and ideal ego, and also to achieve the projection of primordial lack of mother's image, Becky must search for the next specular image. When she reaches Sir Pitt's house, she comes to know the family structure, especially the structure of power. Serving as Miss Crawley's intimate maidservant, Becky has gradually come to know this wealthy old woman and she notices that Miss Crawley really likes her little nephew rather than the elder one. Undoubtedly, Rawdon is selected inheritor of vast fortunes, so Becky begins her second step to marry with this inheritor. Miss Crawley is absolutely not an "Angle in the House", but she wins others' respect due to her great wealth. The elopement with Rawdon causes Miss Crawley to cut off her financial supports to her nephew, but Becky believes that Miss Crawley will forgive them and leave her money to them. Although the pursuit of specular image temporally falls down and the ideal "I" becomes unreachable again, Becky never gives up, and she continues to pursue the next ideal "I" and convert to the next specular image.

2.3 Seeking Social Status

When Crawley couple elopes to Brighton, the Napoleonic Wars have been ramping up. The holiday is interrupted by orders and Rawdon is marched to Brussels. Becky has a happy time in Brussels. Of course, she doesn't forget her pursuit. She asks Rawdon to write letters to Miss Crawley and expresses their respects and greetings. However, Miss Crawley relents a little and she only wants to see her nephew. The more disappointing is Miss Crawley refuses to change her will and Rawdon loses his inheritance, so Becky's endeavors for helping her husband to win back Miss Crawley's heart and gain back her money fails. Since then, Becky's second specular image completely vanishes. Her real "I" and ideal "I" are separated again. After Sir Pitt's death, Rawdon's brother, new Sir Pitt, tells this young couple to come back and process mourning. In order to realize their targets, this young couple set out for

the Queen's Crawley. Through the communication with Sir Pitt's family, Becky gradually forms her third specular image—Lady Jane, who has already become the real holder of wealth. Becky wants to squeeze into the upper class under Lady Jane's recommendation. Fortunately, Becky's kindness and attention on Sir Pitt's family are destined to meet with an exceeding great reward. Through Lady Jane's recommendation, Becky is admitted into the Court and granted an audience with the King. Becky's excellent presentation before the King makes her become a social star, and her social status is promoted rapidly. However, at the summit of her success, on one hand, she gradually finds that the members of upper-class refuses her in the guise of accepting, and no one really cares about her. On the other hand, with the spread of the fame, Becky's previous romantic affairs are also dug out. She has to distance herself from her former self. What's more miserable, Becky's pecuniary relationship with Lord Steyne is discovered by her husband. Rawdon leaves his wife. Then Lord Steyne also finds her cheating and takes away his money. At this moment, Becky loses both husband and credibility. It could say that Becky's identity pursuit leaves far away again.

3. THE LOSS IN THE IDENTITY PURSUIT

According to Lacan, when a child experiences the mirror stage, he forms self integral feeling and begins to seek his self-identification. It is noted that the identification of self is the beginning of which is the name of the father. The name of the father is a metaphor and is not the real father in life but a kind of symbolization, a function of the society, a kind of social code and a series of systems of the family and the society. The recognition of the name of the father for child means that he obeys the social rules and accepts his social status. For Becky, she finds no satisfaction in her relationships with men and is unable to be a woman's friend. Becky's selfishness and determination have her scheming to achieve her targets without thinking about the moral or social consequences. In order to achieve what she wants, she sacrifices her family and reputation. However, the societal expectations imposed on women created a prison for a woman's identity so that she couldn't escape from the constraint of patriarchal society, nor drive away the spiritual emptiness. What's more serious is that she loses herself during her identity pursuit, she becomes more and more confused. Due to the above reasons, Becky would never realize her identity pursuit, finally she loses almost everything and infantile regression in the form of self-exile. For Becky, she has to leave the England and begins her Bohemian life—a vagabond life.

3.1 The Constraints of Patriarchal Society

Vanity Fair is one of the most classic critical realistic works which is rooted in social and historical reality

of Mid-Victorian age. In Victorian age, the political, economic and psychological development of society begins with patriarchy. Patriarchal social rules have a great influence on people's class consciousness. Stiff hierarchies restrain people's social status and economic condition. Sexual discrimination restricts female's individual development and lets them fall into the dilemma situation. Due to the controlling of patriarchal consciousness, the female is considered as a second-class citizen who has to dependent on other males socially and economically. In patriarchy society, an advantageous marriage is the surest way to high social status. However, Becky's humble origin causes her marriage plan repeatedly suffers setbacks. Deep in Becky's heart, she also wants to become an "Angle in the House", but the reality always forces her to go out of her family. She expects to become a little woman behind her husband. However, her husband is good-for-nothing. Becky once persuaded her husband to give up gambling and find a job. However, she gradually realizes that her husband could do nothing, and she doesn't give him up, but tries to help him to get a job by all means.

3.2 Spiritual Emptiness

All kinds of constraints in patriarchal society let Becky's identity pursuit extremely difficult, meanwhile Becky's inner world also suffers a series of attacks. Never having known financial and social security since she was a child, nearly everything she does is with the intention of securing a stable position for herself or her family. When she is a child, she has to help her father to deal with his debts. During Miss Pinkerton's school, Mr. Crisp falls love with Becky and writes a letter to her for propose. However, Miss Pinkerton concludes that Becky has tempted this young Oxford scholar and she wants to send Becky away. At Russell Square, Becky experiences her first mirror stage and forms her first specular image. She is eager to become an "Angel in the House" like Amelia, so she attempts to entice Joseph and tries to win all family members in favor. However, when her intention becomes more and more obvious, she finds that almost no one agrees with this marriage. Becky feels spiritual emptiness and has not the sense of belonging. The same situation also occurs in Sir Pitt's family. When Becky first comes to Sir Pitt's house, she almost wins everyone's welcome immediately. She finds out the family ties of Queen's Crawley, and tries her best to win other members' supports by all means. However, once Miss Crawley gets to know that her beloved nephew gets married with Becky, a daughter of a poor artist, she feels extremely angry with them and starts to curse Becky. To Becky, people always say they love her, but few of them will sincerely accept her. She always feels lonely and spiritual emptiness. Under Lady Jane's recommending, Becky gets a precious opportunity to be presented to King George IV at Court. Undoubtedly, this presentation greatly raises her social status, so that some of "the best" foreigners

and “the best English people” visit her. It seems that Becky achieves her goal of respectability. However, the sense of emptiness soon erodes herself. Such emptiness accelerates Becky's sense of loss. However, the strong sense of emptiness hasn't disappeared, since Becky is not a part of high society, she must find someone whose reputation is indisputable. Lord Steyne's aristocratic heritage guarantees him power and influence to sway the members of high society into accepting her. When Becky is discovered alone with Lord Steyne, she experiences not only a social and financial degradation, but also psychological breaking down. At this moment, Becky feels all her lies and her schemes, her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius have come to bankruptcy. No matter how she explains that she is considered innocent. The only result she could be encountered is she would be doomed to be deserted by her husband and denied by the society.

Becky meets a lot of difficulties and frustrations in her process of fulfilling her ideal “I”. In social status aspect, Becky is a young woman of humble origin so that her status is still hard to be accepted by the upper class in traditional class society. In economic situation aspect, Becky and her husband have no income resource. Therefore it is easy for her to become men's vassal in her way to search for money and position. However, Becky's victory in society does not bring her real feeling of happiness but emotional emptiness and loneliness, because of the indecent way of climbing.

3.3 The Confusion of Ideal “I” and Real “I”

According to Lacan, the mirror stage describes the formation of the “I” via the process of objectification. This “I” is an “Ideal I”, in contrast with “I” in reality. The confusion of Ideal I and Real I would lead to failure of taking effective steps to face reality. In the mirror stage, the child couldn't understand any parts of his own body, because of confusion between the mirror and the reality. Only experienced the post-mirror stage, the child could recognize himself as wholeness in real world, but the reflection of his body and the image is only imaginary. Becky's pursuit of identity could be seen as she experiences mirror stage three times, and her specular image of every time is an “Ideal I”. Compared with “Real I”, “Ideal I” is respectively projected to Amelia, Miss Crawley and Lady Jane. As specular image, these three female characters respectively represent that Becky's identity pursuit in different stage has different requirements. Basically, the level of her pursuit is gradually rising. Meanwhile, her “Real I” in diffident stage also has a new penetration. Amelia Sedley is symbol of “Ideal I” for Becky during her studying in Miss Pinkerton's school and visiting Russell Square. In fact, Amelia is a typical traditional woman—Angel in the House. The way she talks and behaves caters to the Victorian high society's expectations. However, she

has come to find that Amelia sacrifices herself for her husband and family, to bear hardship without complaint, and never cares about personal gains and losses. This kind of life style is exactly what Becky rejected. Miss Crawley's coming to Queen's Crawley brings Becky's second specular image object-projection. Differ from Amelia's image of competent wife and good mother, Miss Crawley has huge wealth which brings her rights of speaking and controlling. As the real controller of Crawley's family, no one dares to disobey her orders and challenged her authority. In order to gain Miss Crawley's wealth and become a person like her, Becky tempts selected inheritor and gets married with him. Becky thinks she is very close to the wealth and her “Ideal I” would be come true. However, their marriage has offended Miss Crawley. As her second “Ideal I”, what Miss Crawley had couldn't satisfy her pursuit. To her, wealth itself is not enough, and she needs to attract people's attention. This kind of attention is not only a feeling of reverence, but also a feeling of admire. Undoubtedly, everyone of Crawley's family is awe of Miss Crawley not admire her. Since then, Becky's “Ideal I” and “Real I” is confused again. Placed herself in all kinds of parties, Becky is beginning to realize that it is hard for her to contact the so-called upper class and be accepted by them. They think she is just an impudent social butterfly without humble origin. With the help of Sir Pitt's funeral, Becky's husband and her come back Queen's Crawley, and then she becomes to be familiar with Lady Jane, a wealthy lady from notable family. In her eyes, Lady Jane comes to her third “Ideal I” who stands for fame and wealth. Ladies admire her distinguished birth and great wealth, while gentlemen appreciate her aristocratic temperament and attractive characters. After all, Becky is not Lady Jane. Becky's success in society more depends on the people around her, not herself. She is granted an audience with the King under Lady Jane's help that marks the summit of her life. However, no sooner does she establish herself in upper society than someone turns up who knows her disreputable history and spreads rumors. So she feels that she could set up her own status without any blocks. “Ideal I” and “Real I” breaks again.

All in all, Becky couldn't distinguish the differences between the “Ideal I” and the “Real I”. In her point of view, she regards the “Ideal I” which is formed in the mirror stage as herself. The confusion directly makes that she constantly repeats her past and never try to change it.

CONCLUSION

In Vanity Fair, Thackeray vividly presents us the life picture of 19th century English upper-middle class and exposes the weakness of human nature. The protagonist Becky Sharp has devoted all her life to the pursuit of fame and wealth, an ideal identity. She is never satisfied

with her own destiny and always desires to seek the next better alternatives. She continually creates and shapes the ideal “I” in her heart, however, what she created or shaped are fictional. Due to the restrictions of caste ideal and female social image in the Victorian age, Becky has been gradually dissatisfied with her current status, which accelerates Becky’s steps for identity pursuit. The identity pursuit needs to be recognized by others, especially the mother. However, the early death of Becky’s mother leads to its primordial lack, so that Becky has to turn to others for recognition. Thus, her mother’s specular image effects have been projected into other three female characters: Amelia—the symbol of “Angle in the House”, Miss Crawley—the symbol of wealth and Lady Jane—the symbol of distinguished origin. However, the specular image is so imagery that Becky’s pursuit always comes to nothing. The temporary material satisfaction couldn’t bring her real feeling of happiness but spiritual emptiness. Meanwhile, she always wanders between the “Real I” and the “Ideal I”. Once her “Real I” gets closer to the “Ideal I”, she realizes that the “Ideal I” has already deviated from the initial imagine. Therefore, it is no doubt that Becky’s

efforts for identity pursuing end in failure. Although the subtitle may mean that there is real hero in the novel, Becky can be the real heroine of the novel in a way.

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