

## A Lacanian Reading of Kate's Self-Discovery in *The Summer Before the Dark*

ZHANG Yechun<sup>[a]\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University for Nationalities, Tongliao, China.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 20 January 2017; accepted 14 March 2017

Published online 26 April 2017

### Abstract

Doris Lessing is a prolific and prominent female writer in English literature. When she is in middle age, Lessing focuses on the living situation and spiritual crisis of middle-aged women, depicting their inner worlds and bewilderment of marriage, family and self. There are many researches focusing on Lessing's works, but few on *The Summer Before the Dark*. This thesis employs Lacan's theory of mirror stage to interpret Kate's mirror image, its causes and its destruction, Kate's self-recognition and self-discovery in order to disclose her spiritual journey from confusion and agony to awaken and rebirth. Moreover, through Kate's story, Lessing not only expresses her sympathy for the dilemma of the middle-aged women, but also helps them to find a way to deal with the relationship with the male, with marriage and with the family properly.

**Key words:** Mirror stage; *The Summer Before the Dark*; Angel; Self-discovery

---

Zhang, Y. C. (2017). A Lacanian Reading of Kate's Self-Discovery in *The Summer Before the Dark*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14(4), 48-52. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/9540>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9540>

---

### INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is an outstanding and prolific contemporary female writer. Her works usually involve woman's experience and history of living, seriously and sincerely, concerning the relations between the male and the female, woman's position and situation and

how woman gains spiritual growth. *The Summer Before the Dark* was published in 1973. *The New York Times* appraises it not only as the best novel of Lessing, but as the best novel after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "Doris Lessing's novels probe deeply into the question of what it means to be a woman in today's complex society." (Greene, 1994)

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate experiences the three mirror stages. In the pre-mirror stage, she is an angel in the house. Kate regards the mirror image as her self-identity and takes the desires of others as hers. Until one day her youngest son screams at her unexpectedly, that breaks her illusion of a good housewife and awakens her self-consciousness. In the mirror stage, the baby senses that itself is an integrated being, a whole person. Just like Kate, when she is faced with her husband's affairs and her children's indifferent attitudes, she realizes herself in the state of "others", trying to seek for her self-identity through the summer real journey and dream journey. In the post-mirror stage, after Kate experiences the spiritual crisis for middle-aged women, she chooses to return home and be a new Kate. Returning to family life seems to be a helpless behavior conforming to the society, but in fact, it is a happy end after mature thinking.

This thesis focuses on the process of self-discovery by using Lacan's theory of mirror stage. Lacan's view on human being's dilemma depicts Kate's resignation to the society. Since the birth of the baby, she is doomed to be alienated and is not able to rebel. As a person, he can never predict his future. He is always on the way of researching himself.

---

### 1. DESTRUCTION OF THE ANGEL IMAGE

According to Lacan, during the pre-mirror stage, there is no self-identity for the baby and the baby is confused to distinguish itself and others. However, this state of no self-identity can be changed in the next stage: mirror

stage. This is a decisive period. In this period, the baby gradually knows the entity of the image in the mirror. "The infant will glimpse at a mirror and finds that the reflection of itself in the mirror is not a real self as itself in the reality." (Lacan, 1988)

As Kate goes through the summer journey, Kate's painful memory will break the armor of the mirror image. As a wife, Kate is always faithful to her husband and their marriage, while her husband has several affairs with different women because of sex. Besides her husband, Kate's children are indifferent to her and see her as their enemy. As to the house, Kate cherishes their house as treasures. In the end, the house is rented at her husband's order and Kate is pushed to do a favor of her husband's friend for the sake of her husband. All the facts like a storm disturbs Kate's mind and eventually her mirror images are torn off.

Once a person begins to be doubtful about his or her early life, he expects and wants to change something. Kate realizes that her changeless family life will have some changes in the near future. In the first page of this novel, "A woman stood on her back step, arms folded, waiting" (Lessing, 1973). The woman is anonymous, which shows two layers of meanings. One is that this woman is in a subordinate position in the man-dominated society and her family, while the other is that this anonymous woman can represent any woman in that certain society. "Arms folded" is probably a gesture when people do some thinking. "She was trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define." (p.5) "Waiting" seems to wait for something expected to happen, like the kettle of water, inside from peace to bubbles to boil, and then singing to the outside to notice its self changes.

## 2. KATE'S SELF-DISCOVERY

In Lacan's view, the mirror stage is a significant period for the baby. In this stage, although the baby can not control her own body and must be supported by others, she can see what she looks in the mirror. The reflection of self in the mirror helps study the psychology of the baby's self-consciousness. The mirror stage establishes the self-consciousness which is dependent upon external objects. That is to say, only when a person is recognized by others can he or she realizes the existence of himself or herself.

In the pre-mirror stage, Kate looks an angel in the mirror, while the angel is another. She regards the angel as herself wrongly. Until a day Tim screams at her, which makes her recalls her past life, she realizes the mirror image is an illusion. It is only a reflection of others. After realizing all the dissatisfaction, Kate enters into the mirror stage. She begins to rebel and tries her best to change the angel image of being a faithful wife and a perfect mother. In Kate's four different journeys, Kate identifies herself

with different people and constructs her self. Compared with her previous roles as a housewife, finally Kate discovers all the roles she plays are others and further explores the truth of self-identity.

### 2.1 Working in the Global Food

Kate is a well-educated and talented woman, but after marriage, the lifetime is spent on her husband and four children and she never works outside. Under the help of Kate's husband, Kate officially starts her journey of self-discovery. The self-discovery is full of hesitation and struggle. Away from home, Kate begins to work in Global Food first as a temporary translator. Her talent is developed fully, especially her ability of language and capability of dealing with emergence, which has important meanings to Kate's growth. It affirms her existence and value. At this stage, Kate's self gradually shows its form consciously and slowly. Kate is aware of its existence. She becomes a skilled and professional working woman.

And moreover, Kate becomes independent in the economy owing to her temporary job as a translator, which has great significance to Kate's following summer journey. It is important for women to become independent in economy. Virginia Woolf thinks that "women had always faced social and economic obstacles to their literary ambitions" (Woolf, 2004). So, if a woman wants to get free from the family life, she must have economic independence. After economic independence, Kate can make many changes which she expects in the twenty five years marriage. It not only rewards Kate a sense of success by her own ability, but also gives her the opportunity to buy different clothes and to do a special haircut in a hairdresser. In other words, Kate has a chance to choose freely without considering her husband and children. "None of the clothes were any use, anyway. At some point, during that week she rushed out to buy the dresses that would admit her, like a passport, to this way of life." (p.29) Kate gains her new image. She is not Kate Brown but Kate.

### 2.2 Traveling With Geoffrey in Spain

Actually, Kate is not a woman who totally conforms to the society. Conformity is so powerful that even after Kate realizes the stifling nature of the society in which she lives, she is powerless to change her fate as a member of conformist society. Therefore, she tries to escape from the society and has a new kind of life in which she can find herself and does what she is willing to.

At the end of her job in Global Food, Kate meets her young admirer Jeffrey who inspires her desire for sex. In the early period of their marriage, Kate believes that husband is the center she must be loyal to. As time goes by, the affairs of her husband deeply hurt Kate and destroy her impression upon Michael: A loyal and responsible man that she can trust and rely on in her life. Kate feels that sex with husband is something that she is

more and more reluctant to have at all. Thus, in Kate's view, the relationship with Jeffrey must be experienced to find out the meaning of sex to her. To some extent, Kate identifies herself with her husband Michael. Michael can unscrupulously make affairs with other women, so Kate can do. It is not only revenge to her husband's behaviors, but also a reconsideration of sex to her. Kate's extramarital affair with Jeffrey frees her from the stereotyped image of being a wife. But this young lover is still an ordeal to Kate's emancipation from a dedicated mother. Because of Jeffrey's illness in Spain, Kate spends a lot of time alone and has much time to retrospect and introspect. She finds that Jeffrey is so immature that he does not understand her emotion. Mostly, Kate regards Jeffrey as a child and she plays the role of a mother. Kate finds consciously this mother-son relationship may be wrong and she would rather go back to London than enjoy this spiritual crisis. In addition, she feels accused of the love affair by the society.

Finally, Kate gets ill too, but her illness is more psychological rather than physical. This is the beginning of the climax of Kate's self-discovery. After retrospection and introspection in this stage, Kate's housewife image and her lover image are highly conflicted, while she cannot unravel this complicated relation, and settle down their collision once and for all, so she gets sick. As a matter of fact, Kate has to get sick, because she has no other choice but to take on the form of morbid. Kate decides to leave sick Jeffrey in the convent and return to London. Kate's getting rid of sick Jeffrey suggests her free from the stereotyped image of mother imposed by the social convention.

### 2.3 Staying at the Hotel

Ending the journey in Spain, Kate moves into a hotel due to illness and homelessness. There she experiences the truth of another self-confident quality-virtue that she cherishes a lot.

"As she enters her own private room completely, the perspective of abnormal consciousness takes over." (p.209) After Kate gets to this deluxe hotel in London, she immediately feels a cocoon of warmth and love, which is a comparison with later Kate's anguished feeling towards being ignored. Tortured by illness, Kate finds her appearance has changed. A hunk of gray hair has come out; her face becomes saggy; clothes are like sacks wrapping on her bonny body. When Kate takes a look at her home in such an appearance, she finds her neighbor Mrs. Hatch and even her best friend Mary Finchley do not recognize her and stare at her like a tramp, except Mr. Jasper's spaniel, which is ironic that only this dog knows Kate truly while people just know Kate's housewife image that the social convention gives to her, here especially referring to Kate's appearance. Watching Mary changing her appearance helps Kate apprehend different disguises

from Mary. "Far from being saddened by it, she was delighted, she felt quite drunk with relief that friendship, ties, 'knowing people', were so shallow, easily disproved." (p.147) Those violent emotions, mixture of her conflicts, and her real self prevails, so she feels delighted and relieved instead of sad or anxious even if her friends do not recognize her.

After recovering from illness, Kate goes to watch a drama, in which she has watched before several years, people all wear masks and have no self-identity. When she watches the drama again, she feels everyone plays a certain role, an animal. The gentleman can play a wolf, while the lady may be a fox. Kate recognizes the role she plays and gives a definition of herself.

The dramatic difference between her and the image she plays makes her anxious, mad and loopy. Kate's feeling is as the heroin said in the drama, "I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, save me." (p.172) At that moment, Kate is in the state of madness. She is terribly defeated by the truth of mirror image.

In Kate's eyes, people in the theater are various animals. This part echoes Kate's seal dream in an arena where wild animals are chasing after her and her seal. They are the representation of social convention. Kate finds that animal nature is the common feature of human, and only this feature is covered under different disguises, which allows Kate to look into her self and finds herself a monkey in the mirror. When Kate has the courage to confront her self-identity directly, she approaches a big step to her realization of self-discovery. After people coming out of the theater and sweeping into the street, they become men and women again wearing different social masks according to the social convention.

The significance of Kate's staying in hotel is Kate's direct confrontation with her self. Kate's finding of the universal animal nature of people helps her understand those incipient or original needs like animals are the same among people just under various disguises, and only if those covers are shed, can real self be found.

### 2.4 Living With Moreen

Out of money, Kate decides to check out from the hotel and finds a flat to continue her seal dream and the scrutiny of herself, which is the reason why Kate finds a room in Maureen's flat. Without first-class hotel's care and love, and with her true self showing others, this basement flat is much more amiable for Kate to ponder over her condition. Through the relationship with Maureen whom Kate treats as a friend instead of a daughter, Kate gradually unloads her hostility towards parenting. And this young girl's problem about getting married or not gives Kate another chance to face the marriage. To some extent, young Maureen is the shadow of Kate before marriage. Facing Maureen, Kate releases herself from the issue of aging, the loss of confidence and courage. It is the natural

law that everyone will experience the process of aging. Although losing beauty and youth, Kate gains experience and growth.

Kate becomes conscious to treat Maureen as a sister instead of a daughter, which is a fierce contrast to how she treats Jeffrey as a son rather than a lover. It is a big step in the self-discovery. Maureen's sisterhood is another catalyst to Kate's self-discovery. In light of Maureen's youth, courage, and other representations of her true nature, Kate recalls her true self when she was a young girl. Additionally living with Maureen slowly removes Kate's hostility to be a parent. Kate finds a new way to get along with her children, and discovers that if she becomes an irresponsible mother like Maureen's, how terrible her children's life will be. Discussing the value of the mother with Maureen, Kate confirms that the contribution of all the mothers is to bring up children. This is the first time that Kate approves herself. So Kate decides to leverage a balance between total real self like Mary and the mirror image imposed by the society.

Moreover, as to marriage and family, Kate expresses her own understanding. Of consoling Maureen, Kate says "where I think you may be wrong is that you seem to be thinking that if you decide not to become one thing, the other thing you become has to be better" (p.226). Although she thinks her past life is a failure, Kate recalls the happy time with family unconsciously. Until now Kate identifies her desire that family is her destination. Finally Kate transcends and frees herself by choosing to return home.

Kate finally realizes her self-discovery. In the case of social strength suppressing personality development, one has the courage to rebel against her mirror image; one has the awareness to correctly judge real self; one has the motivation to insistently adjust real self is all the key elements of self-discovery.

### 3. RESORTING TO SEAL DREAMS

In the mirror stage, when the baby realizes the difference between the image in the mirror and herself, alienation generates. And it makes the baby begin to rebel. But according to Lacan, this rebellion is an illusion. The existence of others is some kind of dream. Therefore, such rebellion is useless. Dream is a crucial manifestation to express the inner thoughts and emotions of human beings. People tends to repress their impulses unconsciously, which in a disguised forms and in one way or another. Through their dreams is a way to release these impulses.

In fact, dream is another way to rebel for Kate. Generally speaking, the dreams appear in the middle of the novel, and also symbolize Kate's transformation from confusion to final return. During this summer journey, she experiences a series of seals dreams before she returns to her family. So this seal dream can be regarded as one important clue to Kate's self-discovery.

The first seal dream comes to Kate when she is in Global Food, which suggests that Kate officially starts her journey of self-discovery. In her dream, there is a stranded seal, moaning helplessly on a cold hillside. The wounded seal symbolizes middle-aged Kate. Going north is a metaphor which represents the difficulty and painfulness of self-discovery. The images of "cold wind", "dark land", "snow" not only symbolizes Kate's Metal painfulness and the fear of loneliness and aging, but her situation of helplessness and ignorance by her family. Then Kate starts her dream of delivering the seal back to the sea. Also it is the beginning of Kate self-discovery journey.

The second seal dream comes into her sleep the night before she goes to Turkey. The seal has scars and wounds, while Kate is helping cure the wounds and carrying it to water in northward. This time Kate realizes the importance of this seal since it appears twice continually. Similarly, it shows Kate's spiritual sufferings and at the same time her determination of taking the seal back to the water. The seal's wounds and bleeding represent the indifference of her husband and children and the repressed desires of Kate. Also in the dream, Kate chews bitter shrubs in order to spill the liquid from her mouth on to the seal's wounds. This action shows Kate's maternity. Her maternity is gradually internalized by bringing up her four children. Now this precious quality can help Kate through saving the wounded seal. Unconsciously Kate wants to get away from the state of chaos and bewilderment.

When Kate decides to go to Spain with Jeffrey, she loses her seal in the dream, instead, she finds a turtle. Kate knows the turtle is going to die for she can do nothing for it. Therefore, she must save the wounded seal which is responsibility. The background of the turtle dream is that Kate just knows Jeffrey and decides to travel with him. This dream implies that Kate makes wrong decision on the way to self-discovery. Inland is the opposite direction of the sea and the turtle may kill itself, while Kate's going to Spain with Jeffrey may undermine her way to self-discovery.

The third seal dream accompanies Kate into Spain, nonetheless, this time there is a little different. Except Kate and her seal, there is another man in the dream. It is in a house where Kate finds some water splashing on the poor seal, and then she finds there are so many chores she should do for the preparation of the winter. In the upper room, her lover is waiting there. After Kate serves her lover's sexuality, she suddenly thinks of her seal and her urgent need to take the seal back to the ocean. So apologetically she leaves her lover, and heads for the continuation of her seal's cause.

Kate seems to become accustomed to have this seal accompany in her dream, even to the exact that Kate is expecting to see her seal in the dream every night. She determines to figure out what this seal means to her and be alert to learn from these dreams. The changes of image in the dream indirectly express Kate's self-discovery.

Kate's dreams show her doubt about her marriage, her family life and herself. The seal dreams imply that Kate expects to find her destination in heart. Her desires are suppressed in real family life, so these expectations are released from her dreams unconsciously. During the summer journey, many painful memories trouble Kate, her husband's betraying to their marriage, her children with indifference to their mother, her losing herself in the traditional family life and so on. If she wants to reconstruct her to be a new Kate, she has to overcome all the difficulties. So the seal's return to the sea hints her personal survival, rebirth and a new beginning of her future.

## CONCLUSION

*The summer before the dark* shows its theme of Kate's journey of self-discovering and reconstructing her self-identity. The title not only reveals the season when the story begins, but also implies the self-explored dreams and physical adventure of Kate. The novel comes to an end in autumn before the winter darkness comes. "The dark", in literary terms, indicates biological and psychological self of Kate. It signifies her aging body and final ruin. If she can not find some way to balance her life, she will be destroyed.

Kate is just like the baby in Lacan's mirror stage. From the beginning, the baby is not aware of itself as a whole person and cannot distinguish the differences between itself and others. Just like Kate, she does not know what she really wants. There is no self for the child and the baby is in the situation of confusing itself with others. Later, in the mirror stage, the formation of self-identity appears.

Self-acknowledgement can help women achieve a balanced relationship with male, with marriage and with family. At the end of the journey, returning home symbolizes Kate's transformation and her emancipation from the armor of mirror image. She confirms her value as a woman and possessed the confidence and power to live a new life.

## REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F. (Ed.). (1999). *The self in social psychology*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Freud, S. (1997). *Interpretation of dreams*(A. A. Brill, Trans.). Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Gay, P. (1995). *The freud reader*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Greene, G. (1994). *Doris lessing: The poetics of change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Higgins, E. T. (1996). *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principle*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Klein, S. M. (2002). First and last words: Reconsidering the title of the summer before the dark. *Critique*, 43(3), 228-238.
- Lacan, J. (1988). The seminar II (S. Tomaselli, Trans.). *John Forrester*.New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lacan, J. (1988). The seminar I (S. Tomaselli, Trans.), *John Forrester*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lessing, D. (1973). *The summer before the dark*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Pickering, J. (1990). *Understanding doris lessing*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.
- Woolf, V. (2004). *A room of one's own*. Penguin Book Ltd.