

## **“Ideal I” or “Real I”: Becky Sharp’s Pursuit of Identity**

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**Abstract.** In 1848, one of the greatest English critical realistic writers, William Makepeace Thackeray published his novel *Vanity Fair*. In this novel, Thackeray presents a panoramic picture of English society in the early half of the nineteenth century, and reveals its social darkness and moral crisis. From childhood to adulthood, all the “Ideal I” she creates are all imaginative self. And from the beginning to the end, she always desires to identify herself with the imaginative “Ideal I”, which is like the moon in the water, flower in the mirror and is never attainable. In her quest, she always wanders between the “Real I” and the “Ideal I”.

### **1. Introduction**

“I think I could be a good woman, if I had five thousand a year,” observes beautiful and clever Becky Sharp, one of the wickedest—and most appealing—women in all of literature. Becky is just one of the many fascinating figures that populate William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel *Vanity Fair*, a wonderfully satirical panorama of upper-middle-class life and manners in London at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the novel, Thackeray creates two different female characters, the angelic Amelia Sedley and monstrous Becky Sharp. Contrary to Amelia’s predominant family background, Becky’s family is nothing of wealth and high social status. The wretched family condition has never brought Becky any material comfort and spiritual equality with the upper class, but only discrimination. Dissatisfied with this, Becky determines to climb to the class of wealth and fame with her beauty and intelligence, and to change her fate through a profitable marriage. Becky’s pursuit of vanity is the quest of an ideal identity. Though she obtains the material comfort in the quest of a new identity, her soul and spirit has never been satisfied. To achieve the real happiness, Becky must distinguish “real self” and “ideal self”, or her pursuit of identity must fail at last. In this paper I am going to analyze Becky’s quest of identity with Jacques Lacan’s theory of mirror stage, and illustrate what impels Becky to start this quest, how she pursues the new identity and why she gets lost in the quest.

### **2. Mirror stage of Lacan’s theory**

Inspired with Sigmund Freud’s narcissism, Jacques Lacan proposes the theory of mirror stage, which is about the formative function of image on the human entity’s self development. Lacan’s theory of mirror stage is based on the baby’s act of looking into the mirror, and he names all the scenes in the mirror as mirror experience, regardless of that they are the reality or the imagination. From birth to six-month old, the infant has no sense of itself as a separate entity and no distinction between self and other. During this pre-mirror stage, the baby only passively accepts the things from the outside world. Therefore, the infant’s impression on the world is fragmentary. From the sixth month, there occurs an instrumental change in the baby’s cognition, and the baby turns from being passively dependent on other to being able to act independently.

According to Lacan, the period between sixth to eighteenth month is the mirror stage. At this stage, though the baby cannot control its body movements and need other’s support, it can recognize its image in the mirror, realize the integrity of its body, and identify itself with this reflection. Similarly, in reality the baby identifies itself with its mother. In this identification, both the image in the mirror and the mother are defined as “other” and the baby takes the “other” as an “Ideal I”. But this image is not a real one, since Lacan’s mirror stage takes place in imagination, and the image in

the mirror is only an imaginative existence. Despite of its illusive nature, the baby still tries to develop and form its self in accordance with the imaginative self and to attain an ideal identity. However, when the baby reaches its hand to touch the image in the mirror, it finds that the specular image does not exist. Likewise, there are also some discrepancies between its real self and the ideal self represented by “other” in the real world. Therefore, Lacan’s mirror stage does not only refer to the stage of time, but also the stage of performance, where the tragedy of the ego’s loss is on show. By the early 1950s, Foucault’s mirror stage is no longer confined to the moment in the life of the infant, but it extends to an individual’s later life.

### **3. Becky Sharp ’s quest of self identity**

#### **3.1 Self Identity**

Before we talk about Becky’s sharp’s quest of self identity, please allow me ask two questions. During our lifetime, we are always told to study and work hard by our parents, teachers and bosses. Are we supposed to do so for ourselves or for someone else? And is there any social force requires us to fulfill these tasks? The reasons for our hard work may be variant. But when we come to the second question, we always get some similar answers that the social convention and moral codes expect people to be like this. Without exception, in any society, there is a set of social norms and code of conducts that influence people’s thought and behaviors both consciously and unconsciously.

During the Victorian age, what are the social norms of the Great Britain? What is the force that propels Becky Sharp’s awakening of the sense of identity? In the nineteenth century, along with the progress of the industrial revolution, capitalism develops rapidly and the upper and middle classes becomes the dominant force of the society. Almost every one of these two classes is busy striving for power and position, so as to get the social and public identifications. In addition, there is another criterion to determine their social status for the women. Under the Victorian ideal, woman is expected to be an angel in the house, whose most precious qualities is her purity and submissiveness. For a woman, the most important thing in her life is to find a good husband. As Ana Moya states, “Everything they had been taught had one purpose, getting a husband (77).”

#### **3.2 Analysis of Becky Sharp**

In *Vanity Fair*, the protagonist Becky Sharp is an intelligent and ambitious girl. Before she goes to Miss Pinkerton’s School, she always believes that her outstanding ability would be an advantage to gain her respect from the others. She might not have ever thought of her family background’s great potential adverse effects on her. During this period, like a baby in its pre-mirror stage, Becky does not see much distinction between her and the other, and her understanding of the outside world is fragmentary and intermittent.

After attending Miss Pinkerton’s School, Becky finds that no one cares about her, and she lives in a friendless and helpless world. When she is to leave the school, Miss Pinkerton does not want to give her a *Johnsons’ Dictionary* that is only two-and-nine pence, and no one takes any notice of her. On the contrary, Amelia Sedley always receives Miss Pinkerton’s authentic praises and has a lot of friends at school. Without any doubt, the major cause for their different treatments is that Amelia’s father is a merchant in London and Becky is an articulated pupil. In addition to the wealth of her family, Amelia’s good qualities of an angel also gain her much more respect and attention. It is during her stay at this school that Becky learns the distinction between her and the other, and the merciless social injustices on a girl of lower economic and social status. She begins to feel dissatisfied with her current situation and aspires for an “Ideal I” that enables her to achieve the social and public identifications. Aware of her current status as a huge obstacle of her future happiness, Becky must do something. What is the easiest and fastest way for her to get out of the poverty-stricken situation? Is there any better way than to marry a prestigious and wealthy man? Definitely no. A good marriage is the best way.

#### **3.3 Analysis of Becky Sharp According to Lacan’s Theory**

According to the theory of mirror stage, mother plays a very important role in a child’s identity development, and she is an “other” and functions as an “Ideal I” for the child. However, Becky’s

mother died early and she is lack of a specular image to identify. Therefore, she has to turn to someone else in her life to get herself to be recognized. During the first stage of her pursuit of an ideal identity, Becky projects her mother's image into Amelia Sedley --- the symbol of the angel in the house; because Amelia is the first person of high status she has ever met in her life.

Desiring to be respected like Amelia and to gain the social identification, Becky decides to marry Amelia's brother Joseph, who is a man of wealth and status. To become a member of the Sedley's family, first of all, she wins favor and sympathy from Amelia's family through her appropriate manners and deeds. Then in order to arouse Joseph's interest in her, as Jadwin remarks, she has to mimic the discourse of the "paragon of virtue" and utilize her female duplicity to camouflage her real defiance and achieve power of trapping and attacking her game (664). Therefore, in the novel Thackeray writes, "She was dressed in white, with bare shoulders as white as snow --- the picture of gentle unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity. 'I must be quiet,' thought Rebecca, 'and very much interested about India' (22)." However, unfortunately, her tricks do not work well on Joseph at last, but arouse the dissatisfaction among everyone in the house, except Amelia. Just during two weeks, Becky experiences both the other's recognition and the loss of the other's trust. Though she once comes very close to her specular image, she finally fails to unify with it and even deviates from this "ideal self". As Micael Clarke remarks, "Raised by a dissolute father to mock convention, Becky lacks the innocence and sweetness of the angelic feminine ideal, although she understands its power and knows how to play the angelic, innocent role (28)." Therefore, disgusted with the angel's submission and sacrifice, the "Ideal I" based on Amelia could no longer be Becky's specular image after she leaves Amelia's house.

After the specular image of Amelia is abandoned, who will be her next "Ideal I"? Right leaving Amelia's house, Becky begins her work as a governess at Sir Pitt Crawley's house and very soon she gains favor from all the people in the house with her intelligence and capability. More importantly, she obtains the trust and appreciation from Sir Pitt Crawley. He is so fascinated with her charm and exceptional abilities that Sir Pitt makes a proposal to Becky after the premature death of Mrs. Crawley. But to his surprise, Becky refused to marry this man of wealth and status. Why does she give up such a good opportunity of moving up and promoting her social status? Because the title of being Mrs. Crawley could hardly bring any material benefits for her, but only her servant's respect and very little legacies. By contrast, Miss Crawley's material affluence is much more attractive. Therefore to be an "Ideal I" of Miss Crawley is more profitable than to be an angel in the house.

In order to obtain her fame and wealth and realize her "Ideal I", Becky needs to gain Miss Crawley's trust and to get married with her selected heir. When Miss Crawley gets sick, Becky takes this chance to take good care of her and to be her intimate maid. Meanwhile, she also tries to make friends with everyone around her, and aims to get support from her intimates. Staying with the Crawley's for some time, Becky knows that Rawdon is her favorite nephew and he is most likely to be the old lady's heir. Thus, Rawdon's appearing undoubtedly becomes a turning point of Becky's plan of pursuing the "Ideal I". Relying on her physical charm and pretended tenderness, Becky captures Captain Rawdon's heart pretty quickly. Then they get married secretly. Despite of the repeated failures of her pursuit, Becky never gives up and continues to pursue the next "Ideal I" and convert to the new specular image. Rachel Pietka remarks that "Yet after her marriage to Rawdon, Becky takes on the role of the man ... She continually thwarts conventional gender roles in her relationship with Rawdon while at the same time using her femininity to gain social position (239)." It seems that she is more ambitious, and even wants to be as powerful as man. When Miss Crawley dies, Becky's pursuit of identity enters into a new stage. Returning back, they live together with Rawdon's brother Parliamentarian Sir Pitt and his wife Lady Jane. By then, Miss Crawley's wealth has already been inherited by Rowdon's brother, and Lady Jane has become the real holder of wealth. Besides, Lady Jane also was born from a prestigious family. Therefore, Lady Jane has become her new specular image --- the symbol of distinguished origin.

Through Lady Jane's recommendation, Becky is admitted into the Court and granted a meeting with the King. Her intelligence and skill helps her to become a shining star in the upper society, and

her social status is improved rapidly. Even Lord Steyne shows his admiration for Becky. Finally she becomes the social butterfly of the upper society. At this moment, she has almost reached the peak of her life and her “Real I” has got temporal satisfaction and is almost identified with her “Ideal I”. However, at the summit of her success, she gradually finds out that she is denied by the upper-class in a less obvious way.

#### 4. Conclusion

From angelic Amelia to wealthy Miss Crawley, then to prestigious Lady Jane, Becky sharp continually takes them as the “Ideal I” in her quest of identity. From Lacan’s theory of mirror stage, these women naturally take place of her mother and become the specular image for her at different stages of identity pursuing. Each time, when Becky identifies herself with her reflection in the mirror, three women in reality, she will start her quest of ego. Unfortunately, each time she fails to unify her “Real I” with the “Ideal I”. Why does such situation happen all the time? The novel ends with Becky’s wandering in foreign country, because the author wants to imply the power of social morality. From the surface, Becky is given up by the upper society and her fate sinks to the bottom of valley. But in fact it is Becky’s banishment of self as a subject of the desire. Because there is always the lack of the object of desire, and this type of desire is always impossible to attain. According to Lacan, the subject of desire always fails to find the object of desire. It is not because of the deficiency in the subject’s cognitive ability, but the very essence of the desire is deficiency. In other words, it is one’s deficiency that leads to one’s desire.

At last, though Amelia has become a bright star in the upper society, she never feels satisfied with her fate, and always aspires for a better condition. From childhood to adulthood, all the “Ideal I” she creates are all imaginative self. And from the beginning to the end, she always desires to identify herself with the imaginative “Ideal I”, which is like the moon in the water, flower in the mirror and is never attainable. In her quest, 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 her initial imagination. Therefore, the nature of desire has predestined Becky’s failure of pursuing the ideal “I”.

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