

# The Thematic Function of Dream Description in *My Platonic Sweetheart*

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Mark Twain is one of the most famous writers of the nineteenth century, his works have a large number of descriptions of dreams, in Mark Twain's short story *My Platonic Sweetheart*, the author describes a dream that constantly repeats itself in his life. The dream description in the novel is not only part of the narrative structure of the article, but also expresses the theme of the article, through the close reading of the text, taking dream description as the starting point, the author of this thesis analyzes the dream description in *My Platonic Sweetheart*, exploring the thematic role of dream description in the novel, and analyzing what the author wants to express and how the author expresses his spiritual pursuit through dream description.

*Keywords:* dream description, signifier and signified, adulthood, childhood

## Introduction

Mark Twain, formerly known as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, is an American author and orator. Mark Twain, his pseudonym, was a term used by Mississippi sailors to indicate the depth of water measured on the waterway. At the age of 12, when his father died, he stopped school and worked as a laborer in a factory. He worked as a pilot, miner, and journalist for the Mississippi River. At age 17, he published his debut novel in the Boston humor weekly "Handbag". Gradually he tried to write some interesting novels, began their own writing career. His representative works include the novels "A Million Pounds" and "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer".

Mark Twain was always interested in those psychic phenomena which we call dreams. His own sleep fancies were likely to be vivid, and it was his habit to recall them and to find interest, and sometimes amusement, in their detail. And dream appears frequently as an important matter in his several works. Dreams can also be found in a large number of literal texts, which is a creative way of writing. Dream in the novel is an important way of expression to depict the inner world of the characters in the novel, but also plays a role in promoting the story plot, and is the main way of the story express its theme. In his novel *My Platonic Sweetheart*, the author tells a recurring dream from nineteen to sixty-three. The dream appears five times, in which Mark Twain and his dream sweetheart fall in love with each other and finally be separated. In the five different dreams, although the place where the story takes place and the names of the hero and heroine are constantly changing, while the characters remain the same. The different stages of dreams correspond to the different stages of the author's life. The generation of dreams represents his memory of his childhood life and the past, and his escape

from the present life. And the dream description in this novel is very attracting and plays an important role in expressing Mark Twain's artistic pursuit.

### **“Signifier”and” “Signified “ in Dreams**

Both “signifier” and “signified” are terms for Saussure linguistics. Saussure believes that any linguistic symbol is composed of “signifier” and “signified”, signifier refers to the sound image of the language, and “signified” refers to the concept of things reflected by the language. “Signifier” and “signified” are inseparable, just like two sides of a coin. Language symbol is a combination of a form (signifier) and a meaning (signified), the “signifier” and “signified” themselves are the stylized division of sound level and thinking level. Although the “signifier” and “signified” are linguistic terms, it is also applied to the analysis of dreams, and plays a great role.

### **Image and Metaphor of the Dream Text**

Roland Barthes believes that: literature is a kind of “code” to create the world, is a symbol, and essentially shows its own duality—provides some meanings, has a signified function; and makes itself have meaning, turning itself into signifier (Barthes, 1989, p. 16). Therefore, in the literary works are full of “signifier” and “signified”. The same can be found in dream texts. In real life, the author's intentions and desires are not directly obvious in dreams, but are realized in various other forms. Saussure thinks that the relationship between referring to is arbitrary, this “signifier” and “signified” actually refer to the image and metaphor of the dream text. In the novel, the repeated images of lovers in the dream are actually the pursuit of his career and art in the author's heart. Although the form of image realization has been changing, the essence of the image metaphor is unchanged.

Simpson sees Mark Twain's portrayal in *My Platonic Sweetheart* as a reflection of his career (Simpson, 1983, pp. 44-47). By giving up to Mark Twain a biography we can speculate that the dream lover in which Mark Twain describes in the novel is Laura Wright. Mark Twain, who was then a sailor, met his friend on a boat in Orleans and exchanged greetings, and he met Laura, she was on a short trip with her uncle. She and Mark Twain stayed together in New Orleans for only three days, and they have since met only once in 1860. The latter two were separated from Laura's mother's objection. But in a sense, they are never separated. In the later years, she often walked into his dream, and even enlightened his writing. Therefore, the platonic sweetheart is likely his muse, his inspiration. Her earliest visitations correspond with his earliest journalistic and literary work, and her later visitation, averaging once every two years, correspond with the initiation or completion of Mark Twain's stories. His assertion that “she was so given to repair herself and getting up doubtful improvements” (Mc Namara, 1963, pp. 18-21) can be read as an allusion to his method of composition. So Mark Twain's thoughts of Laura form the main part of the novel's dream.

Mark Twain's own real life adds to the details of his dream, and at the age of seventeen, he emerged in the literary circle and began his writing career. In the novel, the protagonist first dream happened when the author was 19 years old, the dream began in a Missouri village, but actually through analysis we can conclude that the dream actually refers to Hannibal, in the autumn of 1839, Mark Twain moved to Mississippi port in Missouri Hannibal, where he began his creative career, and life in the city became the inspiration of Tom Sawyer and urchin in the city of St. Petersburg. At that time, slavery was established in Missouri, and the young Twain began to understand slavery, which became the subject matter later on in his adventure novels. So Hannibal is a

profound city for the author to impress him. In the real life of the first dream, the protagonist of the novel lives in Pennsylvania, when he was nineteen, and actually Mark Twain at this time was working in Pennsylvania for two newspapers. In the second dream described in the novel, the real protagonist is 29 and works at the newspaper agency in San Francisco, which corresponds to the real life of Mark Twain, who published his famous short story, the famous jumping frog in Calaveras County at this place. The occurrence of the following dreams, such as Hawaii, Athens, and India, are where Mark Twain himself gave speech. From the analysis, it can be seen that the author constructed the framework of dreams with his own personal experience. He condensed his own life experience into these five different dreams. Although this novel is not long, it is a record of the author's life.

The scene of the story when the heroine leaves in the story also corresponds to the change of language style in the author's life.

In the first dream, in the second half of the dream, the heroine proposes that she wants to go to another room, and then the two separate, and the dream ends. In the first dream, the heroine's departure is peaceful. The two people were just temporarily separated for a while. In the second dream, the heroine's departure begins to become fierce. The heroine said she wanted to take a bit of sleep the heroine's parents appear, and let the hero do not disturb her rest, from here it can be seen that the heroine left has began to struggle. The departure of the heroine in the first two dreams symbolizes the author's hopeful and positive writing technique in the early stage. Although the heroine left, she left only for a short time. The two are not completely separated and always have the chance to meet.

In the third dream, the heroine and the hero are separated because of death, an arrow penetrated through her body, he watched the soul walk away from her body, and finally her body turned into a pile of mud. The language here becomes more intense and desperate, the heroine died, the two never have any chance to reunite and he lost her forever, which corresponds to the middle mark Twain's writing technique becomes spicy, which is full of irony.

In the last two dreams, the hero once again meets his dream lover, but the sweet interaction between the two people disappears, and the two people calmly discuss philosophy. After a while, everything in the dream slowly dissipates, and everything becomes nothingness. In the last two dreams two people's relationship correspond with the Mark Twain's last stage of writing technique, in the last stage, Mark Twain language become indifferent, his language is full of despair, two people in the story has not only physical contact, but more ideological discussion, at this time, these two people have a common thoughts. At this stage they become true Platonic lovers.

### **The Change and Unchange of Characters in the Novel**

What is impressive in the novel is the author's description of their names and ages in five dreams. In the dream, the names of the hero and the heroine are constantly changing. In the five different dreams, the names of the hero are George, Jack and Robert, and the names of the heroine are Alice, Helen and Agnes. Unlike the changing names, the two are ages, always 17 and 15, no matter how the dreams change.

In the novel, although the age of the author has been changing in the outside world, the age of the two people in the dream has not changed. Whenever they meet in the dream, the author is always 17, and his lover is always

15. These two numbers have special significance to the author. He published his first book in 1952 when he was 17, thus seventeen marked the beginning of his writing career. When he met Laura, Laura was 15 and later separated from Laura, but the failure of the relationship engraved on his mind all the time, Laura's age became the age resource of his dream lover.

The title of the novel is my Platonic lover. What is the Platonic lover? Zhong Xia of Xiamen University believes that the so-called "spiritual love" of understanding Platonic love as asexual desire is a distortion of Plato's thought (Xia, 2011, pp. 367-371). Simple physical love can not purify the mind, this love can not sublimate the earthly life and transcend the shackles of the world. In sharp contrast, platonic love, as the unity of truth, goodness and beauty, will purify and enhance life. The aesthetic significance of Platonic love to life is mainly reflected in the following three aspects, that is, to realize the artistic transformation, liberalization and transcendence of life.

By reading Plato, we know that Plato's idea is the full embodiment of the concept of things. In reality, we can meet only different types of people with different emotions. They may exhibit many different characteristics, but fundamentally, all kinds of men and women called lovers exist as copies of platonic sweetheart. On the stage of life, men and women can only copy the lover's truth. No one can show the nature of the lover, we can only be a part of the lover, and therefore is somewhat incomplete, it is because of this incomplete, the lover on the stage can perform scenes different kind of stories. Thus, Plato's "idea" is also a spiritual thing. The idea of "lover", that is, the ideal lover, is never found in men and women. But spiritually is true, eternal, and knowable. And the lovers around our lives can only be "so-called" lovers, which is phenomenal, fickle, and unreliable. If we use Plato's "idea" to deduce the whole world, except for the spiritual world of the heart, the material world that we live on, which we hear and witness, is prone to decay, and is meaningless. This is, of course, going against our materialist values.

In the novel, "When I first met her, I was 17, and she was 15. She calls me George, and I call her Alice" (Twain, 1898, pp. 292). Ten years later, one day after Mark Twain was 29, Mark Twain found her in another dream. I'm 17 again, she's still 15, my name is Jack, and she's Helen. Thirty years has passed, and the dream begins again. She is still 15, and I am 17. She is Agnes, and I am Robert. Alice, Helen, Agnes, these natural names as symbols; Mark Twain noticed the changes in her eyes and hairs, but thought there is no difference; Mark Twain's dream lover is his love, is the essence of the word "lover", the illusion of things can become eternal.

### **The Aspirational Nature of Dreams.**

The essence of the dream is the illusory satisfaction of the suppressed desire. Freud believed that it was caused by childhood experiences, past traumatic events and inner chronic suppressed anxiety, and these dreams are also the reflection of the subconscious. And he believed that the suppressed emotions of patients do not disappear: they subconsciously burst into potential, bypassing the "prosecutor" (super-ego) to show their existence (Stevens, 2002, pp. 39-41). In the novel, the author's dream of the dream lover appears repeatedly, which is a kind of repetitive dream, Gerald Genette first applied "frequency" to the study of narrative writing. One thing can not only happen, but repeat. Even if "appears in the same thing many times, it can not be completely consistent or same" (Genette, 1990, p. 73.). The "repeated flashback" of the dream is a repeated narrative of the past events in the dream. The dream itself is a presentation of the heart image of the characters,

and the repeated flashbacks of the dream highlight the events that are unforgettable to the characters, helping us to peep into the inner world of the characters.

Dreams are free, desire in life can be vent out in the dream freely, in the novel, the author describes his dreams as deep, strong and sharp and real. But with referring to real life, he describes real life as vague and dull-tinted artificial world, in dreams where he and his lover play carefree on the grass, they walk with arm intertwined; they kiss gladly, yet sexlessly. Later, she goes through the door to another room, where the hero is waiting for her, and when he gets up to look for the heroine, the dream suddenly dissipated he finds himself in bed. In other dreams, there are many similar scenes, an accident such as separation and death separates the two apart, so the hero returns to the real world. In the Eugene Mc Namara's view, these doors and accidents become the channel to the reality to smash the dreams (Zhongxia, 2011, pp. 367-371). In his dream, he and his lover live together happily, two people like children enjoying life carefreely, and in real life Mark Twain when writing the novel has entered the later years, his own creative inspiration is exhausted day after day, he bears a lot of financial debt, not only that, his favorite daughter died, the death of his daughter also brought great impact to his family relations, his relationship with his wife soured.

Before people enter adulthood, especially in childhood, because of their nature, they like to play in a pleasant way, they can get happiness and freedom in the game, and thus they are divorced from the disturbance of reality. However, in the process of socialization, people gradually lose their childlike innocence and childlike interest in the past, who has experienced everything, curiosity is lost, and sink in heavy work and various life trifles. Therefore, the author's age of childhood in the dream is the author's good memories of childhood. When the author was writing, Mark Twain had reached the twilight of his life. Facing all kinds of complicated trifles in his life, he naturally began to recall the good times of his youth, remembering his youth, his lover and his carefree self.

### Conclusion

Through the analysis of the dream description in the novel, we can conclude that the five different dreams selected by the author actually represent the author's writing career, and the transformation of the dream also represents the different stages of his life. The love between the two people in the dream shows the author's memory of the carefree youth.

In life, the constraints of the reality are difficult to change, making people have a strong desire to transcend the reality, the desire exists in the heart of the author and the hero of the story. Writer uses the dream that a kind of temporarily technique to go beyond the objective reality of the hero, thus makes readers get feelings of happiness and sadness. In the dream, the author outlined good wishes, but after waking up, the dream becomes unreal again, it can not only arouse the same feelings with the author, but also can makes the reader understand the author desire after dashed nothingness.

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