

# The ubiquitous contradictions between logistic reality and mental activities--analysis of Sansom's writing style in *Among the Dahlias*

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**Abstract:** Based on the short story *Among the Dahlias*, this paper mainly probes into William Sansom's writing style featuring frequent contradictions between logistic reality and mental activities via detailed analysis of Sansom's writing techniques, careful diction and significant parallels with his other pieces of work. Further, this paper sheds light on the spiritual core beneath Sansom's style, which is the constant debate between being and nothingness in addition to the call for humanity and self consciousness.

**Key words:** William Sansom; *Among the Dahlias*; writing style; spiritual core

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## 1 Introduction

After reading the short story *Among the Dahlias*, readers may be deeply impressed by the author's idiosyncratic style, which features the frequent contradictions between logistic reality and mental activities.

## 2 Analysis of Sansom's writing style

On the one hand, William Sansom is an expert in portraying characters with extreme self-consciousness. Not only does the protagonist possess a mind of exceptional cerebral quality, but he is also made particularly aware of his mental activities. At first glance, Doole can be easily labeled by readers as too "practical". He leads his ordinary life with dreams, desires, whims, fancies, hates and loves--none particularly strong or frequent. However, Doole is significantly different from a numb nobody as in common works by other authors. Opposite to "a nervous type", Doole is depicted as somewhat "phlegmatic". He compulsively makes gestures like pulling up "the brace of his trousers with his left hand" while patting "the back of his head" with his right hand, not because he feels an urge to do so, but only because others do "exactly the same". Doole cares nothing about why others have to do so, nor does he even hesitate for a sec before twisting his own body to mimic these odd movements. It seems that his own mentality and spirit are cut off from his own flesh and blood. In his cold eyes, physical being is separated from sensuous impressions and mental activities. And this explains to some extent why Doole is able to keep his mind functioning even when his life is severely threatened by the lion.

To help arrive at the effects above, William Sansom also resolves to a wide use of psychological description. When Doole observes the large white owl, he is busy thinking about the owl's appearance and rewarding himself with satisfaction and pleasure through this kind of mind wandering. When he enjoys the process of being occupied with mental activities, everything appears very right with the world. And probably, this very "world" is a world of his own mind, a sensuous

one that originates from his inner feelings rather than objective reality, a spiritual one that is far away from his social existence among the crowds. As we readers can all see, throughout the author's promotion of plots, William Sansom replaces at least some part of his narration with the protagonist's sensuous feedbacks and mental activities. For example, when William Sansom tries to underscore the ominous stillness of the zoo, he pays little attention to the description of layouts other than the dahlias, and instead spares no effort to enhance the thoughts and imagination of the protagonist. Through Doole's comparison of the zoo to a deserted due to plague or fear, the author successfully highlights the surrounding motionlessness and a place filled with loneliness where the feelings of the sole individual are dramatically amplified. As Doole walks in the zoo, he never ceases to keep his mind running. Most sarcastically, even when his own life has been put in danger by an escaping lion, Doole is still able to image a leap through the hedge as a clown through a circus hoop. He has devoted himself to wondering whether to identify his fear in petrification as an animal instinct or educated sense until he is totally overcome by it. Just as the protagonist from William Sansom's another work *In the Maze* says, "My brain, alone from my other organs, is never still. My brain is the eternally active limb." Sansom elaborately portrays his character's perceiving and understanding and reacting to the world via total or even exaggerated consciousness. Thus, frequently they both narrate the events and simultaneously react to their consciousness of their minds functioning.

Meanwhile, a large quantity of detailed sensuous depiction is applied in a gesture to enhance Doole's character that is deeply absorbed in his own world of mind. For example, Sansom captures a variety of colors in his depiction of different creatures and surrounding environments. From the white owl and the blue creature with colored features to the "golden blue sky" and "red, yellow, purple and white" dahlias like blotches from a paint box, hard as the colors of stained-glass windows, every single component of Doole's sensuous world has its own color. Additionally, this, in turn, highlights the striking liveness and sensitivity of Doole's sensuous impressions and his mental world.

On the other hand, Sansom intends to form contradictions or at least strong comparisons between a world of reality and a world of mind. On that pleasant Monday afternoon in the zoo, extraordinary creatures, the golden blue sky, "charming zinnias" and bright dahlias all contribute to a physical world bathed in an air of peace and beauty. Nevertheless, in Doole's imagination, he would rather relate them to a deserted parks haunted with ghosts. Here, the same sceneries should have generated opposite atmospheres, realistically and mentally. Typically, the world of mind is grounded in the world of reality. People change their moods and thoughts according to what happens, and the world of reality becomes the final solution. However, William Sansom thinks otherwise and let the world of mind determine the world of reality, which may be the most prominent feature of his style. While Doole senses a feeling of foreboding in a zoo of vitality, the two contradictory air mixes together beyond notice when Doole sees the colors of dahlias as both "vivid" and "motionless" at the same time. Here the path with dahlias aside somehow blurs the boundary between the two conflicting worlds and allows the world of mind to invade into the other. Walking on such a path with a sense of magic that is not quite real, Doole steps out towards the lion that seems not quite real as well. Generally speaking, a strolling lion should not have escaped its cage without alerting zookeepers and the crowds. But now here is the lion padding its silent pace forward. And the more efforts Sansom devotes to describing the "heavy disgruntled jowls", "muscled flesh" and flickering eyes of the animal, the more lively and real the lions image becomes, and the more likely Doole and readers are to sense a not quite real feeling of absurdity and untruthfulness apart from fear for life.

Despite the newspaper's final explanation of a defect in the cage bolting, a momentary blank in the keepers mind and a piece of blown carton wedged in a socket, the real reason for the lion's escape remains veiled. Sansom also willingly admits that the answer is never properly known and never can be explained. Compared to a more logical or convincing reason, a chance in a million may lose some persuasive ground but actually serve better to convey an idea of the muddled

division between reality and fantasies. In this process, as has been pointed out by John B. Vickery, Sansom sets the breaking events to be "improbable" rather than absolutely "impossible" [1], thus opening up the space for different interpretations and wonders. Readers then cannot hold back their curiosity whether the lion appears just as the result of a series of real-world coincidences, or indeed arises from Doole's very daydreams on that mystical and "unreal" path with dahlias.

Similar to this dreadfully condemned sense felt in nightmares, in Sansom's another story *One Sunny Afternoon*, the protagonist suddenly grasps the imminence of an unpredictable event when a maniac, who has just murdered his wife and baby, slips into his room. His previously imagined, formless menace has taken on shape and he is confronted with "realizing it, while its reality grew greater and greater". Sensuous impressions as well as mental acts like imagining are, then, in Sansom's world, capable of creating reality. By infiltrating the power of the mental world into that of the real world, Sansom solves the contradictions mentioned above with a birth of reality through the mating of imagination and will [2].

However, when Doole is further confronted with the escaping beast, his mental world finally succumbs to his animal instinct of running for life. Doole screams and cries with his fingers covering his eyes. He eventually realizes that his mental world which he has always indulged himself in is now no more than "a stuffed dummy" of dispensable hobbies and trivial profits on fire-surrounds. His proud spirits turn out to be dull and distasteful. Then, stripped away of its luxury veneer, Doole's life ends up in a modern jail of isolation and emptiness where he can find no way out. Consequently, Doole's body is never found. He can never go back to his previous life of numbness and ignorance yet innocence. Worse still, by imitating the social conventions and writing off their dreams or desires as impracticable, too many other people are doing exactly the same even before they get the chance to realize their situations as Doole has done.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question." Hundreds of years ago, Shakespeare had pointed out the predicament of survival. Unveiling plots after plots to strangle him, Hamlet struggles with thoughts of suicide and revenge. As a matter of fact, readers can possibly draw some parallels between the tragical prince and the protagonist of this Sansom's short story. They both live in a world full of delicate disguise and lead a life of vulnerable balance. Nevertheless, their divergent decisions greet them with different endings, yet miserable likewise. While Hamlet is haunted with the idea of revenge when he could have played the innocent role of the Prince of Denmark, Doole retreats to his only privilege remaining of crazy delusions. In the end, Hamlet has to die, and Doole gets overcome by insanity. Outside the literary works of art, people tend to find themselves in similar dilemmas. There always exists a gap between ideal and reality. Sometimes people have to turn an alternative blind eye, fool themselves and settle with sham relationships, just in a desperate gesture to keep everything the way it is. Confronted with hot waters as Hamlet and Doole has faced, they may as well try to escape before having to take a stand.

### **3 The spiritual core beneath Sansom's style**

Further still, there arise debates between being and nothingness. As Hamlet sighs, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought". Nihilists has all the time been criticized by followers of utilitarianism as coward and mediocre. Admittingly, he who is on a constant run after the meaning of life always ends up the one who lacks a reason to sustain his own survival. As André Gide puts in *Theseus*, Icarus, throughout his short life and long before his death, has been an image of human's uneasiness, exploration and poetic ascension. He keeps up his head in his chase after the sun of truth and meaning, but he just flies too high. Icarus falls down in his solemn pursuit and perhaps that is why the vast majority of crowds choose to play the safe role of "a stuffed dummy", ignorant yet cosy.

Nevertheless, we still need those thinkers. We still need nihilists like Hamlet to remind us in the chaotic mess of life

how substantial and indispensable contemplation is. We still need them to question us on the ultimate subject of "to be or not to be". This is the call of humanity, the revival of self-awareness.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Therefore, when we again look at the question posed by Sansom at the end of the story, we may cast some light on what Doole has been running away from--the unsolved contradiction between logistic reality and mental activities, or perhaps our spiritual survival and physical existence, which also shapes the unique style of William Sansom and leaves the readers in profound ponderation.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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