

CHARLES STRICKLAND'S CHARACTER AN IMAGE OF PAUL GAUGUIN

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Abstract. *This article is compared and analyzed the biography and work of the characters Charles Strickland of "The Moon and Sixpence" by the writer of Somerset Maugham and in the 19 century the great French artist Paul Gauguin.*

Keywords: *vigor, canvas, selfish, cruel, pitiless, cynical, misfortune, callousness, bizarre, reticent, brusque, great art, artificial, banal.*

The well-known writer of the XX century William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) is a master of character portrayal. His "The Moon and Sixpence" is

"I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life... Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other." [2;124] William Somerset Maugham is known as a short-story writer, having a deep psychological insight into the human nature. His methods of character-depicting, both direct and indirect, create vivid personages, seeming true to life. Usage of different stylistic devices and expressive means proves Maugham's being expert in his field.

"The Moon and Sixpence" (1919) is a short novel by William Somerset Maugham based on the life of the painter Paul Gauguin. The story is told in episodic form by the first-person narrator as a series of glimpses into the mind and soul of the central character, Charles Strickland. The inspiration for this story, Paul Gauguin, is considered to be the founder of primitivism in art. The main differences between Gauguin and Strickland are that Gauguin was French rather than English, and whilst Maugham describes the character of Strickland as being ignorant of his contemporaries in Modern art, Gauguin himself was well acquainted with Van Gogh.

In this novel the writer makes use of some outstanding incidents in the life of the artist Paul Gauguin. The hero of the novel, Charles Strickland, is a prosperous stock-broker. All those who came in touch with the Stricklands were taken by surprise and puzzled when they learned that Charles Strickland, at the age of forty, had given up his wife and children and gone to Paris to study art. Strickland's life in Paris was difficulty, but the hardships which would have seemed horrible to most people did not affect him. He was indifferent to comfort. Canvas and paint were the only things he needed. Strickland did not care for fame. Nor did he care for wealth. He never sold his pictures. He lived in a dream, and reality meant nothing to him. His only aim in life was to create beauty. The reader dislikes Strickland as a human being: he is selfish, cruel, pitiless and cynical. He loves no one. He ruined the life of Dirk Stroeve and his wife who had nursed him when he was dangerously ill. He did not care for his wife and children, and brought misfortune to all the people who came in touch with him. But on the other hand, the reader appreciates him as a talented artist, creator of beauty. His passionate devotion to his art arouses admiration.

The character of a man insensible to ordinary human relations, who lives the life of pure selfishness which is sometimes supposed to produce great art, has always had its fascination for novelists inspired only by the unusual. Accordingly there have been novels in plenty depicting the conflict of (by ordinary standards) brutal genius with uncongenial environment and Maugham has followed a recognized convention in this story of an imaginary artist of posthumous greatness. He treats him throughout with mock respect, and surrounds his affairs with contributory detail.

The book revolves throughout around the character of Strickland and the quality of his art. Such a passion has always defeated its object. Here once more one is repelled, not by Strickland's monosyllabic callousness, but by the knowledge that this callousness is seen and represented without subtlety. The callousness of the artist is something more complex than it is here shown to be. The callousness of Strickland is merely the conventional brutality employed by other novelists of an older generation, the generation which first found in the behavior of artists a theme to be exploited in fiction. That Maugham uses the elaborations of a modern technique does not create the illusion of reality that he is pursuing. It simply emphasizes the cleverness, the clever unconvincingness, of his

portrait – not at all the vigor and personality of one who will starve and suffer for the sake of his artistic ideal.

All the minor drawings in the book are extremely effective, and the simplicity of the narrative is notable. Technically the whole thing has great interest. But as an illumination of the nature of bizarre and uncompromising genius, ready to sacrifice every person and every association that stands in the way of its fulfillment, “The Moon and Sixpence” fails through its literary accomplishment and its lack of true creative inspiration.

Gauguin’s legend had already been created among many artists when Maugham went to Paris in his youth. Although deeply impressed by the life of Gauguin, Maugham did not use Gauguin for his novel for about 15 years. During the World War I, he went to Tahiti and gathered stories about the painter, and even bought a picture that remained.

As to the comparison between Strickland and Gauguin, we certainly admit the importance of comparing their details. However, if we repeat such reading, it turns out that we will regard “The Moon and Sixpence” at the same level as art critics. That is, by such comparison, we will also regard this novel as one of the parodies of Gauguin’s biography, and will miscomprehend the author’s intention. His purpose on this novel is to make out the process or structure, in which one person is built up into a genius. And the more critics argue against the influence on the historical facts by the novel, the more they demonstrate its power of faculty for invention. As a result, some misunderstandings about Gauguin brought by this novel, such as his nature or career, seem to prove Maugham’s success in that attempt.

In the next place, let us consider the characterization of Strickland. First of all, his career is too much dramatized from Gauguin’s. Secondly, his characterization is surely artificial and banal. For example, the narrator mentions that he is possessed with the creative instinct and is mindless to anything except painting: “Strickland was distinguished from most Englishmen by his perfect indifference to comfort.... was indifferent to what he ate.... was indifferent to sensual things.... There was something impressive in the manner in which he lived a life wholly of the spirit.”[3;76-77]

He has impetuous temperament and harms other people with delight. He is sexually attractive, and although he is indifferent to women mostly, sometimes he makes use of women to satisfy his sexual urge. He is bigoted and unsocial. It would be inappropriate to say that every artist has such temperament, as Mansfield criticized violently. As one might say, Strickland is narrated as a kind of caricature of the artists. He fills widespread impression against artists as Mansfield protests in an obvious manner. That is, he is nobody in the first place, and it is difficult for the reader to imagine such a man as real.

Thirdly, we cannot understand the psychology of the painter well, for there is not enough explanation by Strickland himself. He is characterized as reticent and brusque by nature. Because of his dirty language that is well-nigh impossible to be transformed into intelligible words, the narrator rewrites his words into more polite ones, giving explanations for the understanding of the readers. But we never comprehend the nature or mind of Strickland as Mansfield says. Moreover, we cannot help raising such questions as why he wants to draw, or why he must go to the South Seas, or why he comes to talk with the narrator all the way. However, the only answer given to us by the narrator is his artistic instinct.

As the matter of fact, the narrator does not know Strickland well as a biographer. He meets Strickland only a few times. Despite his limited experiences with Strickland, the narrator insists on his superiority as a biographer toward other biographers with plenty of confidence. The truth is that neither he nor other narrators were well acquainted with Strickland. To make up for his lack of knowledge, he fully uses his faculty as a writer. This lack of credibility can be also appropriate to other minor narrators, and the outstanding example is Captain Nichols, a beachcomber, who comes to beg the narrator for drinks or cigarettes in exchange for his story about Strickland. “...but I am aware that Captain Nichols was an outrageous liar, and I dare say there is not a word of truth in anything he told me. I should not be surprised to learn that he had never seen Strickland in his life, and owed his knowledge of Marseilles to the pages of a magazine.”[3;173]

The narrator adopts Nichols’ episode only because the story is interesting and suits for his characterization of Strickland. Captain Brunot, a French planter is another typical example of such narrators, who interprets and romanticizes Strickland as his hero. He equates himself with Strickland for the reason that both of them create something out of nothing: “ ‘It is not strange that I, at all events, should have had sympathy for him,’ he said at last, ‘for, though perhaps neither of us knew it, we were both aiming at the same thing’.

‘What on earth can it be that two people so dissimilar as you and Strickland could aim at?’ I asked, smiling.

‘Beauty’[3;195]

In addition, we have to remember that there is a possibility that the main narrator converts these Tahiti episodes by other minor narrators for the sake of his work.

First, the narrator has a faculty to gather episodes of Strickland told by other narrators, such as Dirk, Captain Nichols, Cohen, Tiare, Brunot, and Dr Coutras. However, his collections are through his preference, and also considered to come under the influence of his invention.

Next, he has a strong notion that he is a writer, and has a faculty to invent fiction. He is quite similar to Maugham both in nature and background, but not equal to Maugham.

He does not have much interest in making a biography based on historical truths in the first place. He stresses making legend over revealing historical truths. It is not too much to say that what he calls a legend or myth is a kind of fiction.

According to Archie K.Loss, “In ‘The Moon and Sixpence’, the narrator, a novelist, is very much the observer who tells what he knows but never becomes too substantial as a character.”[4;38-39] However, “the device of the narrator”, which is apparently problematic, is very indispensable to the whole structure of the novel as recent critics says. Liebman points out that: “...the central character in ‘The Moon and Sixpence’ is not Strickland, but the narrator...the narrator borrows other people’s ideas, speculates in order to fill in the gap of his very limited knowledge, and projects his own fantasies onto the artist. The result is a romantic portrait of Strickland that tells more about the narrator than about the subject of his investigation”[5;331].

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