

Two Images of the Artist in Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*

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Abstract

Roughly based on the life of the French painter Paul Gauguin, William S. Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) succeeded in creating an image of the artist — Once a British London stock trader, Strickland suddenly becomes obsessed with art. He abandons his wife and children, forsakes a life of prosperity and happiness, and runs to Paris and then Tahiti to pursuit the artistic dream. In spite of the entanglement of poverty and the torment of illness, this painter has injected all the values of his life onto the canvas. He creates his masterpieces at the cost of the happiness of others, including that of another painter named Stroeve, who lacks of the talent for painting despite that his paintings sell well and he is able to support a relatively well-off family. Two images of the artist fully denote the contradictions between the genius and the mediocre persons, artistic ideals and the materialistic reality. Besides, they reveal Maugham's own artistic temperament as well.

Keywords

Maugham; *The Moon and Sixpence*; The Image of the Artist; Strickland; Stroeve.

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1919, William S. Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* has enjoyed a great popularity among the readers. Researchers from different countries have analyzed and interpreted the novel from various perspectives, concerning Gauguin's archetype, the original characteristics of Tahiti, the theme of searching for the true self and freedom, the theme of spiritual redemption, and so on. These previous studies have already deepened the readers' understanding of the novel and its author, however there is still some space left for a closer examination of the two different images of the artist --images of a genius and a mediocre person. In the eyes of ordinary people, people who engage in the art are either "fools" or "madmen." Their madness is often manifested in abandoning everything around them, such as family, wealth, and interpersonal relationships. They are seemingly unwilling to live an idle life but an industrious one. Perhaps they have only one identity, that is, a creator of the works of music, dance, and painting. They would like to be free, and they just want the freedom. Maugham grasps such images of the artist in *The Moon and Sixpence* and vividly depicts the characters of Strickland and Stroeve, who chase the dreams and freedom in their different versions. This paper will do an overview of the image of the artist, followed by a close study on the relative images in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

2. Overview of the Image of the Artist

The image of the artist is characterized first by the unsteadiness of his attitudes towards others and his artistic dream. Concerning an artist's attitude towards his family and friends, he might suddenly becomes indifferent and cold, for he no longer hides his heart and chooses to leave everything behind to pursue his artistic dreams (Wu, 2006). Thus, in people's eyes an artist is often undependable and irresponsible, who seems always to be in a floating world. The second

characteristic of the image of the artist is being diligent. Wu Hong (2006, p. 56) states that “the obsession with something can be defined as being emotionally possessed by an idea and being strongly fascinated with something”. Diligence comes from such an obsession, and it is the artists' love of creation that in turn evokes their diligence in great artistic efforts. Relatively, the image of the artist is perhaps fundamentally characterized by his perseverance in creating an ideal world. As Nietzsche admits, life might have no meaning, but a man should find a meaning for the meaningless life (Cited by Gao, 2014). Even at a time of crumbling tradition and spiritual catastrophe, when there seems to be no hope, a man can still envisage an “other world” to fight against an “our world,” and these two worlds can be termed as the “compensatory world” and the “habitual world” respectively (Chang, 2018). The habitual world is absurd, without a way out, and when the meaning of the world becomes inexpressible, after reality has split from the other side, or when the traditional way of symbolism becomes difficult, the meaning of the world protrudes and attaches itself to the artist's image (Chang, 2018). An artist, who is unable to find the truth that they seek in the so-called “habitual world”, is determined to leave everything behind to pursue art in the “compensatory world”.

There are mainly two kinds of factors contributing to becoming such a true artist, for an artist's experiences are situated in two connections — one is determined by the external social environment in which the artist finds himself at a given time, while the other is affected by the artist's early personal experience and the mental response schema formed by education and various activities (Tong & Cheng, 2001).

The external factors of the socio-artistic environment ever since the medieval times have been linked to the guild system concerning the whole life of people. That guild has the right to supervise, educate, and to coordinate their relations with their patrons, to regulate and balance the spiritual stability of their members. The guild system is a tool for nurturing artists, but at the same time it might also be a fetter and a yoke for artists to create. The relationship between producers and consumers of fine art are as close and complex as that between the supply and the sale of any other commodity. Thus, it is thus clear that the guild system has a profound influence on the artist and his public image.

As for the internal factors, the artist's self-image is shaped by the artist himself mainly through his own portraits, which contribute to some of the distinctive characteristics and personality traits of the artists. For instance, there seems to be a passion for luxury dressing. With an improvement in the social status of artists, there is a change in their lifestyles. Some artists want to look more like a gentleman in terms of dress and behavior, and they start to quit the hard work of handicrafts. Ornate costumes are used as a sign of the former artisan's entry into the upper classes, and as a sign of the painter's self-confidence and self-esteem. This has become a part of the image of such a successful painter. Anyhow poor artists are not excluded from the right to pursue their artistic dreams. The confidence of artists is still more directly linked to their own temperament instead of any additional prerequisite. This aspect of self-shaping still has a great influence on the image of the artist.

3. Two Images of the Artist in Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*

Maugham, who is good at analyzing the inner world of characters with keen insight, is really prolific. One of the reasons for Maugham's literary prolific power is his extensive reading of the works by others, among whom Nietzsche admits that life has no meaning, but a man should find a meaning for the meaningless life. This coincides with Maugham's characterization of Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*. Strickland has formed a happy and relatively wealthy family, and he himself has a stable job. But he is not satisfied with the status quo and is not interested in his boring job. After more than ten years of marriage, Strickland decides to leave his wife and children behind to pursue his artistic dream. He creates his masterpieces at the

cost of the happiness of others, including that of another painter named Stroeve, who lacks of the talent for painting despite that his paintings sell well and he can support a relatively well-off family. Next, these two images of the artist in the novel will be examined.

3.1. The Image of a Painter -- Strickland

The image of artist Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence* is formulated on the French Impressionist Paul Gauguin. "I chose a famous painter, Paul Gauguin," Maugham once explained, "I know very little about the life of this French artist, but relied on a little factual revelation and used the authority of a novelist to concoct a number of stories to write about the character I had created" (Cited by Zhu, 2017). Strickland's experience is slightly like Gauguin's, but Maugham only adopted a small part of Gauguin's experience. Maugham added his own insights and experiences to shape the artist image of Strickland in a way of a little exaggeration. Maugham's interest in Gauguin arose when he was in Paris and felt firsthand the shock of Gauguin's death on the Parisian literary scenes. It was there that Maugham heard many stories of Gauguin's life and experiences, but all those could not satisfy his curiosity. At last, he created the image of Strickland roughly based on Gauguin as the prototype in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

Gauguin spent his childhood in his grandmother's mother's house in Peru and worked as a sailor and naval officer in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans from the age of 17 to 23. In 1871, Gauguin joined the Parisian firm Bertin as a stockbroker. He gradually developed an interest in painting under the influence of his colleagues. Unlike this, Strickland suddenly and mysteriously resigns and leaves home to paint in Paris. The place where Strickland has lived for forty years and leave in pursuit of his artistic dreams is England. He is a stockbroker with a full family, a smart wife and a pair of lovely children. But he is not willing to live such a dull life and is bent on pursuing his dream -- painting. He never feels sorry for abandoning his wife, because it seems that Strickland has no more feeling for her. And for his children, he says that someone will raise them. However, to some degree this seemingly coldness is one of the decisive factors that contributing to Strickland's success as a famous artist, for this denotes his determination to get rid of any bondage at the risk of great pains — the very quality for a potential true artist.

This painter really suffers a lot. After arriving in Paris, he lives a humble life even without enough food. There, he has an admirer, the artist Stroeve, who calls Strickland "the greatest artist." Stroeve often lends Strickland money and takes him home to care for when his life was in danger, but unfortunately it ended with Mrs. Stroeve running away with Strickland. Finally, Mrs. Stroeve died of suicide. The last place where Strickland stayed is Tahiti, where he meets Ata, a plantation owner who supports his dream of painting by providing him with a home and taking care of his daily life, and it is his last life in Tahiti that really makes Strickland a true artist, who, at the end of his life, understands the value of the art and becomes a true artist.

Concerning these protagonists, Maugham has input his own ideas into them, so there are bound to be some similarities between himself and the protagonists. A. Alexander and B. Danie (2016) notice that in his lengthy essays and book prefaces, Maugham describes how he views of his own work and literary heritage. Throughout, his tone is straightforward and unpretentious, self-effacing without being overly dignified. Early in his career, Maugham has written modestly about his own abilities. His portrayal of the characters is not very detailed. As in *The Moon and Sixpence*, he does not describe the characters' psychological activities too much, but there is just the right amount to express what he wants to convey, which is his unique artistic feature. The characterization of Strickland is rather extreme, whom Maugham portrays as an emotionless, immoral monster. One thing that resembles Maugham is the determination to give up a stable job to chase his dreams, being not afraid of the whole world's misunderstandings and scolds. Maugham's complaint of his status as a second-rate writer, which is totally unfair in his eyes, denotes that he finds nothing wrong with it.

Maugham has always dared to defy the rules of the world, treating fame and fortune like dirt and seeking only the stars. Maugham's characters are three-dimensional and there are no purely good person or unforgivable villains. In his eyes, there is an element of pretension to sincerity — nobility can be hidden in vileness, and virtue can be found even in evil. The theme of many Maugham's works is the contradiction between the material world and spiritual needs, and the ultimate value of human life in the world. There are really some similarities between the image of Strickland and that of Maugham, who himself did not care too much about material life. Just as Strickland gives up his job as a stockbroker to pursue his artistic dream, Maugham abandoned medicine for literature, and persisted in his path as a writer for 70 years.

Maugham's portrayal of Strickland reflects Nietzsche's thoughts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In Maugham's eyes, Strickland's image of the artist is a vivid illustration of the Dionysian, which means to the total release and excitement of human emotions, concerning a god of indulgence. If the Apollonian symbolizes the rational side of man, the Dionysian embodies the primitive instincts of the man--his vitality and his enjoyment of the joys of life. Maugham's Strickland is full of passion and exuberance, with a total devotion to his art that embodies some of the qualities of the Dionysian. When his artistic spirit awakens, his resolution of leaving is so strong. And it is fair to say that at this time he is completely irrational about reality. He does not think that he would not be able to concentrate on painting even if he has no money or someone to look after him. He does not care whether his work would be recognized or whether he would have bread to eat tomorrow, as long as he has the chance to paint, paint, and paint.

Such an obsession with artistic and vital instincts without rational restraint and balance can lead to a breakdown in the interpersonal balance between the individual and others. Strickland, who has no regard for others, takes over the studio of his saviour Stroeve, and possesses the latter's wife, Blanche. Later, when Blanche gains his love in vain and commits suicide, Strickland does not feel guilty at all. He is a Dionysian man as Nietzsche once termed, who can see through the essence of things and gains the truth (Wang, 2020). Strickland's heart has been fully devoted to the painting and he must ignore not only other people but also himself. Both Strickland's behaviors and paintings are frenetic, excessive and unstable, revealing an image of a primitive half-man and half-beast brutality. Even if he does not leave a single work of art behind, his life itself is a rare art and deserves to be examined.

3.2. The Image of Another Painter--Stroeve

"I don't pretend to be a great painter," another painter Stroeve says, "I'm not a Michael Angelo, no, but I have something. I sell" (Maugham, 2005, p. 150). Stroeve is an excellent connoisseur instead of a good painter. He recognizes Strickland as "the greatest artist" when no one else grasps it. He takes care of Strickland without hesitation, supports him financially and offers to help him even when Strickland abuses himself for no purpose. Later, Stroeve's appreciation of the artist proves not to be misplaced. Anyhow, the image of Stroeve denotes both dramatic and tragic elements. On the one hand, as Maugham describes, Stroeve is an extremely ridiculous character: "He is very emotional, yet his feelings, so easily aroused, have in it something absurd, so that you accept his kindness, but felt no gratitude" (Maugham, 2005, p. 150). He is generous by nature and relatively wealthy, and many people would borrow money from him, but then turn to him with unrelenting derision. Maugham's description of Stroeve is much exaggerated and few people in reality have as little self-respect as Stroeve has. On the other hand, Maugham's dramatic and exaggerated depiction of Stroeve also serves to set the stage for his tragedy. In spite of his wife's opposition, Stroeve insists on taking Strickland in ill home to recuperate. Unfortunately, Mrs. Stroeve ends up falling in love with Strickland and plans to go away with him. This poor painter even begs his wife not to leave but stay: "I've worshiped you as no woman was ever worshiped before. If in anything I did I displeased you, why didn't you

tell me, and I'd have changed. I've done everything I could for you (Maugham, 2005, p. 246). But even this doesn't work. After his wife's suicide, Stroeve leaves his beloved capital city of the art. It is Stroeve's cowardly but kind character that indirectly contributes to Strickland's success. Without Stroeve's help Strickland would have been dead in Paris and there could be no his subsequent story in Tahiti. Thus, the image of Stroeve demonstrates the sacrifice and dedication of being an artist. What makes mediocre Stroeve unique is his ability to discover Strickland and lend him a helping hand. While almost all the characters in the novel are looking out for their own interests, Stroeve keep his words despite the repeated humiliations. Concerning this, Maugham holds an ironic attitude towards Stroeve who has an extreme kindness. When the kindness is taken to the extreme it will lead to an irresponsible person for himself and his intimates. Others will not value this kind of kindness. If in real life one encounters such an extreme kindness, to some extent he would feel disgusted.

However, Stroeve is a true connoisseur. Everything he does for Strickland is out of art. If in Strickland, Maugham places individuality, in Stroeve he insinuates selfless devotion. Stroeve belongs to the Apollonian creation that depicts a world in which a person is capable of suffering from pains, but lacks of the originality and emotional color. What an Apollonian artist sees is only the illusion. He obtains all technique and becomes very skillful, but no more. Stroeve is such an unsophisticated painter. He seems to be fascinated with painting Italian landscapes in a romantic way. The motivation behind this fascination is nothing but cater for more clients and make more profits. Thus, he is doomed to be a mediocre painter.

4. Conclusion

Concerning two images of the artist in *The Moon and Sixpence*, the novel revolves around Strickland, who can become a famous artist after the death because he possesses the qualities and abilities necessary for artists. The shaping of Strickland's image is greatly dependent his communication with other characters --He has met three important women in his life, among whom Ata provides Strickland with food and shelter without asking for anything in return; he has been greatly admired for and supported adequately by the painter Stroeve, whose image denotes a combination of two aspects. Stroeve is both warm-hearted and coward, which is exaggerated in the novel. However, it is this tragic character's unique vision of appreciating artists in general and his admiration for Strickland in particular that also contribute substantially to Strickland's success in pursuing his dream. These two different images of the artist shaped in *The Moon and Sixpence* fully reveal Maugham's views of art and his own artistic temperament as well.

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