

The Interpretation on the Essence of Human Nature in the Moon and Sixpence

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Abstract: *Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence is a masterpiece depicting human nature. With a humorous tone, it not only highlights the contradictory conflicts between the reality and ideal, but also manifests his contradiction to the human nature as well as his profound exploration of internal complexity in human life. This paper analyzes from three aspects: the contradiction and complexity of humanity, the exploration of human nature from the perspective of existentialism, and the self-redemption and sublimation of human nature. It has a tendency to excavate the soul of the novel from a deeper level.*

Keywords: *Humanity; Existentialist Dilemma; Self-redemption*

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of the author

William. Somerset. Maugham, the author of *The Moon and Sixpence*, lived a fulfilling and legendary life. In his early years, short in stature, he suffered from a severe stutter, and was often bullied by the peers, in a consequence that his heart left a very painful shadow in his childhood, resulting in his formation of a solitary, sensitive, introverted character. However, from another perspective, Maugham became strong and compassionate in heart, allowing him to have a thorough and subtle view of many details of life, which bestowed him a profound analysis of life, art and faith. The multiple experience of affluence, impoverishment and disability provided the impetus for his literary creation. Maugham was a pessimistic observer of the world, who experienced both plain and rich life. He adopted a subtle perception that is based on real people and events, in order to gain a thorough insight into the secular world. Illuminated by his own experiences, his literary works were present from the perspective of grounding and irony. With the sufferings of Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin as the material, he depicted the contradictions reflecting personality and reality, material civilization and traditional marriage, which analyzed multidimensional human nature with the scalpel of disinfected flavor in the broad life.

1.2. Introduction of the novel

The Moon and Sixpence narrated the story of Strickland, a traitorous painter who left his enviably happy family for Tahiti pursuing art and freedom. In terms of Strickland, painting was no longer an individual preference, but a critically significant means of self-realization. He endeavored in vain to find reassurance that he belonged in his native culture, the remote eastern islands rendered him inexhaustible comfort and tolerance nevertheless. In the process of striving for his ideal, Strickland lived his own way and discovered the unique meaning of life, which embodied the human nature in few different perspectives and eventually surfaced the essence of humanity.

It is precisely through the recombination of the two images and symbols of "moon" and "sixpence" that the three symbols of faith, love and region are created. Under the rendering of this artistic technique, the work becomes more vivid, vivid, meaningful and readable. The first-person tone was employed in the novel, in accordance with the narration way of flashback, describing Strickland's life from the perspective of the onlooker with an impartial attitude.

The moderation and slight commend of linguistic style give rise to the plumpness and vividness of the novel. Correspondingly, the author expresses criticism for diluting the character's shortcomings to cater to the audience. The modernity of *The Moon and Sixpence* is first expressed in its ideal. Maugham

superficially described the fate and encountered of the protagonist, but in fact, he reflected his own thinking on the relationship between art and life. Strickland's mind was haunted by questions such as what was the essence of art, how to deal with the relationship between art and experience, whether traditional means of expression were reliable, and how to explore the new forms of modern thinking. After going through constant twists and turns, he finally realized that art is something with great autonomy and independence. If you changed the narrative angle, you could have got a different ending. Real life is real, ugly, cruel and merciless, so the seemingly beautiful and elegant art is just a whitewash of reality, while the essence of art is false. In the novel, Strickland also embodied a deep distrust of traditional artistic means, which made it difficult for him to express himself in painting. For a time, he fell into a predicament of silence and panic, and had to find a new way suitable for his own expression. Maugham added thinking on artistic issues to the novel, which gave the novel a strong conceptual character, which made the novel rich, complex and multiple. Through the confrontation between surface and depth, narrative and concept, the novel has broad tension and connotation, showing strong characteristics of modern novels.

2. The contradiction and complexity of humanity

2.1. *The conflict between ideal and reality*

The contradiction and complexity of human nature can ultimately be attributed to the conflict between ideal and reality. It is believed that life philosophy must be contained in great literary works and diversities of human conflicts can be ascertained. As regards the title *the moon and sixpence*, the moon symbolized the lofty ideal, whereas sixpence typified the physical reality. There is an absence of specific description of the moon and sixpence nevertheless, the essence of humanity was revealed in this novel. As Wright (2019) mentioned, In nineteenth-century England, what most people aspired for was respectability, a happy family and a visible future^[1], which spawned an ineluctable dissipation of their passion for adventure gradually. Nevertheless, the seemingly cozy life tends to drain people of energy and talent. Spiritual emptiness can be a common phenomenon performing as a symptom of the people at that time, which foreshadowed Strickland's departure later. When the majority succumbed to their destiny, Strickland followed the ardour of his heart and went to Paris alone to pursue his childhood dream of painting. Ignoring all the gossip, Strickland left London, immersing himself into his artistic pursuits. Completely broken away from all the shackles and fetters brought by the past life and social moral principles, he led his own life and opted for the former one between ideal and reality.

Ideal and reality are a pair of indistinguishable contradictions. In order to realize the ideal, all assortments of behaviors must be realistic and close to reality. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the protagonist interpreted the contradiction between ideal and reality incisively and vividly, and presented it in front of readers and the world. To some extent, in order to realize the dream in his heart, he neglected various problems in real life, and failed to handle these problems well. The author also made the symbolism of "moon" and "sixpence" reasonable. However, in daily life, ideal and reality are not completely a pair of contradictions, because the pursuit of "moon" is based on "sixpence". In the novel, Strickland was also inseparable from the support of "sixpence" in the process of crazy pursuit of "moon", never leaving the necessity of making a living.

In the face of unknown life and abject poverty, the protagonist's artistic road is paved under the cloak of idealism. That is to say, in his self-realization, all external factors are his auxiliary force. And this kind of assistance is a kind of fantasy color. Each person is an independent individual, acting as a social role, shoulder a responsibility. It's part of our society. It was clear that Strickland had abandoned his social attributes and returned to his natural ones. At that time, he was already in his 40s. It's the equivalent of a family patriarch in his 40s changing careers, leaving his family and his career to an unknown void in search of another murky world. The self-realization of Strickland's artistic ideals is incubated in a greenhouse of idealism. At his worst, his friend Stroeve, out of friendship, gave him light and hope in his desperate life. However, it is such a home heart kind of friend, but eventually ended up their own originally peaceful family life is riddled with holes. His wife leaves him, and Strathlander has a carnal relationship with the wife of his friend, motivated only by physical desire. Stroeve accepted all this. His wife died and he grieved. It is a tragedy. Too many human tones have been violated for the sake of artistic ideals. This group of people seem to be the presets of each site of his life. Self-sacrifice, the achievement of Strickland, seemed to be the priority. In the last moments of his life, the hero and seventeen year old Ata unite. Because of her, his artistic dream has been difficult to continue. On this unblemished island, they lived in straitened circumstances, and Strickland realized his dream. These

people without exception sacrifice self, fulfil Strickland's ideal.

2.2. *The warning to the contemporary society*

In the contemporary era, the increasingly materialistic society has obviously agitated people for a more extravagant life, considering the fact that most of them perform in the ordinary state that they strive as an average middle-aged officer for bread-hunting. In real life, swarms of people merely look up at the moon at an instantaneous moment and then continue to look down in pursuit of the sixpence they require. In the novel, the author profoundly demonstrated the contradiction and interaction between ideal and reality, which revealed the theme similarly applicable for the contemporary youngsters. As Yang(2022) mentioned, the protagonist's behavior is nothing different from that of a madman in the eyes of outsiders^[2]. Judging from people's wildness for fame at that time, his behaviors appeared incompatible. Nevertheless, he went beyond the bondage of material things, which made his soul gradually sublimated. As a literate individual, it can be an obligation to discriminate between the ideal and reality rationally. Consider the definite truth that ideal and reality are indispensable. An seemingly unattainable dream can be reached provided that the less focus was emphasized on the material things.

Everyone lives a devil inside, nevertheless, long-term moral constraints allow us to abandon the release of this desire which can be expressed through various forms. Human nature is so complex that something no matter how small and great, evil and good, hatred and love can coexist in the same heart. In the novel, the author affirmed the attitude that the protagonist waived his sixpence, ignoring the judgments of others, and pursued his dream without moral constraints. In this sense, Maugham's purpose in writing this way is the virtual fulfillment of his own desires. In reality, we have more or less ideals of our own, nevertheless we never spend our lives looking up at the moon. As time goes on, we will look down at sixpence on the floor, because we fail to do so without eating and drinking. When we run out of energy, we will give in to reality, bend down and pick up the sixpence, and begin to live a regular life under the supervision of the world. Just spend the rest of your life with sixpence. In order to work and run around, to joy and sorrow, in order to gain marriage and family, for the growth of children and do their best, but no longer for their own simple ideal and pay, thus the life that we have undergone is a kind of seemingly calm actual injustice.

This book is to teach people to be human, but also tell us not to lose our hearts. Wearing a mask is fine, but don't forget to take it off. And never forget that masks are masks indeed. The process of pursuing dreams is to chase their own bad luck, because the process of chasing dreams is also a process of suffering, whether to overcome the suffering is still unknown. In the end, we want to become a happy person, because of happiness and noble. Whether you choose the moon, or choose sixpence, just be yourself, never become someone you're not. We are human beings, each of us unique, not formulaic symbols. Keep your uniqueness, so that you will always know yourself: this is still me.

3. **The exploration of human nature from the perspective of existentialism**

When we examine human nature from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism, the existentialist dilemma arises at the corresponding moment. Sheldon(1995) asserted that the world is a chaotic and absurd mess made up of incomprehensible contingencies^[3]. The absurdity lies in the fact that the world is always against human beings, brutally hindering the pace of people's pursuit of dreams, and plunging people into the abyss of despair. In such an objective world full of absurdity, the relationship between people is destined to be full of false feelings and meanings, which forms what is called an existential dilemma.

The view of happiness reflected in the Moon and Sixpence coincides with the ethical thought shown by Sartre's existentialist philosophy, and literature and philosophy have intersected here. Jean-paul Sartre, a French existentialist philosopher, studied Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's works, and gradually formed his own existentialist philosophical thought system from the study of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Several core viewpoints of Sartre's existentialism connect art and freedom. First, the purpose of creating literature and art is to "escape" or "conquer". The deeper reason lies in satisfying the essential requirement that human beings are the producers of the world. Secondly, man is free, freedom is the essential requirement of man, and art is just the call to freedom. The freedom he summons is not the freedom to act, but the creative freedom to complete the work. Sartre proposed "concrete morality" -- combining everyone's living environment and practical problems to discuss the specific morality generated by the specific living environment, so as to regard the pursuit of happiness and ethical issues as the inevitable practical problems that everyone must face in life.

Sartre emphasized the absurdity of the world, but what he really emphasized was a free choice. People living in the world must be brave enough to accept the absurd social reality, through free choice to obtain their own essence, with practical actions to give value and significance to the absurd world and nihilistic life, so that the freedom of choice is to obtain connotation. From the perspective of the existentialist theory, Strickland realized that the nature of the world was of absurdity, thus pursuing his essence as a human being. In the dilemma, he eagerly sought to leave the unbearable life and pursue his soul, which reflected his personal subjective initiative as well as his yearning for freedom and dream. At that time, everyone in the society followed the social statute, and the protagonist's pursuit of art seemed out of place. Nevertheless, as *Philip* (2011) mentioned, from Sartre's existentialist perspective, it is only when people's perceptions of themselves, the world, and others become congenial that they can find a comfortable lifestyle in this world^[4]. The protagonist discovered this truth and chose to follow the heart, thus breaking the secular shackles and choosing the "moon", which reflected the core value of existentialism.

4. The self-redemption and sublimation of human nature

Distinctly, the life in Tahiti Island is the best embodiment of the protagonist's human redemption and sublimation. Granted, multitudes of reasons account for it. First and foremost, the culture and scenery of the island motivated him to plough into art. Strickland witnessed the unfettered free life of the locals, and felt the meaning of life from other cultures. According to *Randall*(2002) , in this Eden-like place, Strickland got along well with the native people. Furthermore, he and Ata became the enviable Adam and Eve, and they lived a carefree life^[5]. As far as the protagonist is concerned, nevertheless, he had been redeeming himself during the whole period. It was in the island that he realized his sincere yearning for art and completed his self-redemption. Perhaps, the stunning beauty in the island is quite unusual in the eyes of Europeans. However, when the prejudice against other culture surrendered, both the narrator and other defenders of European culture have to appreciate the splendid scenery of Tahiti Island, as well as Strickland's artistic talent and great works. Looking back on Strickland's renegade journey to redeem himself, undoubtedly, it is easy to see that this extraordinary experience, seemingly absurd, contained great courage and strength though. It was with this power that he achieved his ultimate redemption and sublimation.

In the next place, the bewildering act of burning all his works before his death sublimated his humanity to the greatest extent. He didn't expect his paintings to become a fortune, despite his sincere love for art. Strickland endeavored to create his own ideal world -- sacred and beautiful -- and then completely destroy it with pride and contempt. According to *Tattam*(2008), it was the "gift of eternity" he sought and his last "bigotry" was to burn all his masterpieces^[6]. People were shocked by his madness and lamented his irrational behavior. His struggle for mission, his selfishness, his eccentricities and even his ruthlessness, constitute his persistent pursuit of spiritual freedom. He devoted all his talent and his life to the world, thus fulfilling his own redemption and sublimation.

The story is bizarre, the feeling is real and shocking nonetheless. There is a Strickland in each of us, but we keep him so deep in our hearts that we never contribute to the occurrence of appearing. Then he disguised himself with hypocrisy, and lived the same life as Strickland at the beginning of the story, ordinary and stable. No man could have had the courage of Strickland to abandon his immediate stability and pursue the dream that lay in his heart. There is nothing wrong with being ordinary, but there is nothing wrong with sacrificing the ordinary to pursue a dream, as Strickland did.

5. Conclusion

Dedicating all his lifetime, Maugham endeavored to explore the instinct relation between human nature and the life of freedom, and thus Strickland was spontaneously placed with his yearning for freedom. Strickland was like a square plug, whereas the real world a round hole. They failed to be incompatible with each other. Completely following the primal inner impulse, he rejected the stubborn view from the world. Another theme of independent personality was revealed indirectly as far as the exploration of human essence. The degree of tolerance for independent personality reflects the degree of development of a society. In Strickland's era, people were lacking in unambiguous recognition for independent personality, indicating that imperfection of the social development at that time. Maugham aspired to set a benchmark for later social development through the book *The Moon and Sixpence*, encouraging people to break the shackles of the real world and bravely pursue their own spiritual world.

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