

The description of Charles Strickland's character in the novel
"The Moon and Sixpence" by William Somerset Maugham

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Abstract

This article discusses the means of the characterization of the inner world of Charles Strickland, the main character of the novel «The Moon and Sixpence» by William Somerset Maugham. The article will also speak in brief about Dirk Strove, Dutch painter and a friend of Charles Strickland in Paris.

Introduction

The public outline of W. Somerset Maugham's long life used to be well known. With the steep drop in his reputation since he died in 1965 at the age of 91, I'm not sure it still is. Briefly, then: Queen Victoria is still on the throne when a young medical student publishes his first novel in 1897 and resolves to live by his pen. After ten years of diligent, unremunerative effort, he achieves fame not as a novelist but as a playwright. In 1908 he has four plays running in London's West End (he will eventually see 29 produced in 26 years). In 1911 he turns his back on the theater to write an autobiographical novel, "Of Human Bondage," published during World War I. During the 1920s he travels widely in the Far East, collecting material for such stories as "Rain" and "The Letter." He buys a villa on the French Riviera that once

belonged to the King of Belgium. There he writes every morning from 9 to 12:45, then stops for a single Martini before lunch with his guests, who include statesmen, royalty, actresses and a select few writers. Over the years he earns \$ 4 million from his writings. By the time he turns 80 he is unchallengeably the most famous writer alive. "In his old age he was granted the kind of veneration that is usually associated with Oriental societies," his biographer observes. "Maugham growing old was an international spectacle. He was a historical curiosity, a man who had started writing in the nineteenth century and was still at it." (Morgan 1980)

Somerset Maugham was an unusually versatile author, one who realized considerable success in at least three genres. Among his twenty novels, "Of Human Bondage", "The Moon and Sixpence", and "Cakes and Ale" are achievements of a high order. His twenty-five plays put him in the forefront of dramatists on both sides of the Atlantic for nearly three decades, and "The Circle" and "The Constant Wife" will continue to be revived for many years. Taken together, his more than 100 short stories are a collection to match that of any other twentieth-century British writer. Finally, his dozen works of non-fiction includes "The Summing Up", which has become a classic philosophical autobiography. (Calder 1994, 364)

Some facts about "Moon and Sixpence"

"The Moon and sixpence" is considered to be one of the best novels written by Somerset Maugham. It 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. This novel is

dedicated to the fate of an artist and it reveals the correlation between the creative personality and society. The life of a famous French artist Paul Gauguin served as an inspiration for creating this novel. Gauguin, is considered to be the founder of primitivism in art. **Primitivism** is a Western art movement that borrows visual forms from non-Western or prehistoric peoples, such as Paul Gauguin's inclusion of Tahitian motifs in paintings and ceramics. Borrowings from primitive art has been important to the development of modern art. (Atkins 1993)

According to Ruth (2010) in Somerset Maugham's novel "The Moon and Sixpence," there is a scene in which Dirk Stroeve, a painter, visits an art dealer to inquire after the work of another artist, Charles Strickland, whose paintings he has persuaded the dealer to take on. Stroeve is himself a mediocre painter of blatantly commercial landscapes and peasant scenes, unrepentant about his lack of originality. "I don't pretend to be a great painter," he says early on, "but I have something. I sell." Yet he recognizes Strickland's work as genius. He tells the dealer, "Remember Monet, who could not get anyone to buy his pictures for a hundred francs. What are they worth now?" The dealer questions this logic. "There were a hundred as good painters as Monet who couldn't sell their pictures at that time, and their pictures are worth nothing still. How can one tell? Is merit enough to bring success?" Stroeve is infuriated. "How, then, will you recognize merit?" he asks. "There is only one way--by success," the dealer replies. "Think of all the great artists of the past--Raphael, Michael Angelo, Ingres, Delacroix--they were all successful."

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 largely ignorant of his contemporaries in Modern art (as well as largely ignorant of other artists in general), Gauguin himself was well acquainted with and exhibited with the Impressionists in the 1880s and lived for awhile with Van Gogh in southern France (Wiggins 2012). The aim of the writer was to create a novel which was based on some aspects of Gauguin's life and bring up the problem of art, creativity and decorous. Reading this novel one gets an impression the real and genuine art demands from its creator self sacrifice and total loyalty.

Charles Strickland – a man possessed of an unquenchable desire to create art

Charles Strickland, the main character of the novel lives an ordinary life of a broker, he is the head of the family, and he leads quite a commonplace life. But inside of him lives a genius who decides his fate for him. The urge to paint and to create tears him apart and he leaves his family, work and place in the society to satisfy this urge. Strickland lives in poverty, misery, under terrible conditions. But he does not care for comfort at all. He does not care for the fate of the people around him. He creates masterpieces but at the end he takes revenge from the urge that turned his life upside down. He orders to destroy his best work after his death.

The only aim of Strickland's life was to create beauty. Not long before his terrible death of leprosy, far from his native land, on the remote island of Tahiti, Strickland realised his lifelong dream. The pictures on the walls of his dilapidated house were his

masterpiece. In them Strickland had finally put the whole expression of himself. W. S. Maugham tries to be impartial to his characters. They are neither all good nor all bad: "There is not much to choose between men. They are all a hotchpotch of greatness and littleness, of virtue and vice, of nobility and baseness..." (Maugham 1945)

Maugham uses various means to describe the inner world of his characters. He provides an accurate description of their outlook, speech, actions that enable us to grasp the peculiar features of the characters. Maugham likes to give the reader facts about the characters and the reader must accept what the author says if he decides to continue reading. Maugham likes to give a physical description in order to portray a visual image of the total character. Maugham indicates, "The physical traits of a man influence his character and contrariwise his character is expressed, at least in the rough, in his appearance" (Maugham 1945)

The writer also makes a good use of stylistic devices as epithet, simile, and antithesis to describe their personality. Characterizing Charles Strickland Maugham tries to provide the reader with the traits of his hero so that the reader will understand his personality clearly. The passage below is an example of how the writer describes Strickland.

"He made enemies rather than friends. It is not strange, then those who wrote of him should have eked out their scanty recollections with a lively fancy, and it is evident that there was enough in the little that was known of him to give opportunity to the romantic scribe; there was much in his life that was strange and terrible, in his character something outrageous, and in his fate not a little that was pathetic" (Maugham 1972, 23-24)

This description informs us of the fact that Strickland's life was full of extraordinary twists and turns and his character that was unbearable at times. Maugham gives a careful description of the appearance of his characters and through this gives clue to their inner world. In his work "A Writer's Notebook" he states, "" "One of the difficulties that confront a writer is how to describe the appearance of his characters. The most natural way is of course the formal catalogue, the height, the complexion, the shape of the face, the size of the nose, and the color of the eyes. This may be given all at once or mentioned as occasion arises and a salient trait by repetition at opposite moments may be impressed upon the reader's attention. It may be given when the character is introduced or when interest has already been excited in him" (Maugham, 1952)

Appearance

When the writer describes Strickland's appearance when he first encountered him we can understand that he differed from people around him and that it was evident that he did not belong to that society.

"He was bigger than I expected: I do not know why I had imagined him slender and of insignificant appearance; in point of fact he was broad and heavy, with large hands and feet, and he wore his evening clothes clumsily. He gave you somewhat the idea of a coachman dressed up for the occasion. He was a man of forty, not good-looking, and yet not ugly, for his features were rather good; but they were all a little larger than life-size, and the effect was ungainly. He was clean shaven, and his large face looked uncomfortably naked. His hair was reddish, cut very short, and his eyes were small, blue

or grey. He looked commonplace. It was obvious that he had no social gifts, but these a man can do without; he had no eccentricity even, to take him out of the common run; he was just a good, dull, honest, plain man. One would admire his excellent qualities, but avoid his company. He was null. He was probably a worthy member of society, a good husband and father, an honest broker; but there was no reason to waste one's time over him. (38) That man is incalculable" (Maugham 1972, 38, 42)

Maugham continues that Strickland was *not a fluent talker*. He seemed to express himself with difficulty, as though words were not the medium with which his mind worked. There was something in his personality which prevented him from being dull. Perhaps it was sincerity. He was blind to everything but to some disturbing vision in his soul. He had the directness of the fanatic and the ferocity of the apostle. He was independent of the opinion of his fellows. Here was a man who sincerely did not mind what people thought of him, and so *convention* had no hold on him; he was like a wrestler whose body is oiled; you could not get a grip on him; it gave him a freedom which was an outrage. (Maugham 1972, 66, 64)

But it is noteworthy to point that Strickland was a single minded person. His *relations to women*; and yet they were but an insignificant part of his life. It's an irony that they should so tragically have affected others. *His real life* consisted of dreams and of tremendously hard work. With Strickland the sexual appetite took a very small place. It was unimportant. It was irksome. His soul aimed elsewhere. He had violent passions, but he hated the instincts that robbed him of his self-possession. I think, even, he hated the inevitable partner in his debauchery. It seems strange even to myself when I have

described a man who was cruel, selfish, brutal, and sensual, to say that he was a great idealist. The fact remains (Maugham 1972, 162, 163)

Artist

Some vehement power was struggling within him. It gave me the sensation of something very strong, overmastering, that held him, as it were, against his will. He seemed really to be possessed of a devil, and I felt that it might suddenly turn and rend him. Yet he looked ordinary enough. He has genius. (84) He painted with great difficulty, and in his unwillingness to accept help from anyone lost much time in finding for himself the solution of technical problems which preceding generations had already worked out one by one. He was aiming at something. I knew not what, and perhaps he hardly knew himself; and I got again more strongly the impression of a man possessed. He did not seem quite sane. He would not show his pictures because he was really not interested in them. He lived in a dream, and the reality meant nothing to him. He worked on a canvas with all the force of his violent personality, oblivious of everything in his effort to get what he saw with the mind's eye; and then, having finished, not the picture perhaps, for I had an idea that he seldom brought anything to completion, but the passion that fired him, he lost all care for it. He was never satisfied with what he had done; it seemed to him of no consequence compared with the vision that obsessed his mind (Maugham 1972, 84, 90)

When out of a sudden Strickland abandons everything he had and leaves for Paris, his

wife asks the writer to find him and persuade him to come back to his previous life.

When the writer meets him and asks the reason why he was doing all that Strickland answers: "I tell you I've got to paint. I can't help myself. When a man falls into the water it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown."

(Maugham 1972, 38)

The passion to draw possesses Strickland like a devil and he cares neither for his wife nor for his children when the writer wants to convince him to go back to London. The writer describes Strickland's condition when he saw him in Paris as following:

"There was real passion in his voice, and in spite of myself I was impressed. I seemed to feel in him some vehement power that was struggling within him; it gave me the sensation of something very strong, overmastering that held him, as it were, against his will. I could not understand. He seemed really to be possessed of a devil, and I felt that it might suddenly turn and rend him. Yet he looked ordinary enough. My eyes, resting on him curiously, caused him no embarrassment. I wondered what a stranger would have taken him to be, sitting there in his old Norfolk jacket and his unbrushed bowler; his trousers were baggy, his hands were not clean; and his face, with the red stubble of the unshaved chin, the little eyes, and the large, aggressive nose, was uncouth and coarse. His mouth was large, his lips were heavy and sensual". (Maugham 1972, 62-63)

Strickland's first move, from London to Paris, is represented as the beginnings of a journey to a more natural sense of self. "I couldn't get what I wanted in London," Strickland tells the narrator, "some vehement power . . . struggling within him". The

narrator describes his own decision to go to Paris with a gloss of urbanity, but the motive is the same, a wish to escape the "tedious banality" of the English metropolis (Holden 1994, 67)

In Paris Strickland lives under difficult conditions but nothing stops him from creating. Starvation and poverty means nothing to him. He ignores people, does not make friends and the only thing he does except painting is playing chess at Avenue de Clichy. There he meets a Dutch painter Dirk Stroeve who discovers his talent and gives him a shelter in his house. Stroeve is a talentless artist, but he has a good taste for art and recognizes a true art in Strickland's paintings. He is naïve and open hearted. The author writes he resembled jolly, fat merchants that Rubens painted. Dirk was a constant victim of Strickland's humiliations and mockery. Strickland would never think that his bitter words might hurt somebody's feelings and that his actions may be considered immoral or impolite. The writer describes Strickland's character and his attitude towards Dirk as following: "I saw Strickland not infrequently and now and then played chess with him. He was of uncertain temper. Sometimes he would sit silent and abstracted, taking no notice of anyone; and at others, when he was in a good humor, he would talk in his own halting way. He never said a clever thing, but he had a vein of brutal sarcasm, which was not ineffective, and he always said exactly what he thought. He was indifferent to the susceptibilities of others, and when he wounded them was amused. He was constantly offending Dirk Stroeve so bitterly that he flung away, vowing he would never speak to him again; but there was a solid force in Strickland that attracted the fat Dutchman against his will, so that he came back, fawning like a clumsy dog, though he knew that

his only greeting would be the blow he dreaded.” (Maugham 1972, 95)

Dirk Stroeve

Dirk Stroeve was a kind man but a bad artist, though he possessed a keen sense of beauty and was the first to appreciate Strickland's talent. The narrator had met him in Rome.

Stroeve had a genuine enthusiasm for the commonplace. His soul palpitated with love of art and his studio was full of canvasses that were carefully drawn and carefully painted.

Dirk did not pretend to be a great painter, the only thing he wanted to do was to bring romance to the houses of all sorts of people. The ideal he painted was a poor, common, and shop-soiled person. His fellow-painters felt contempt for his works, but Stroeve earned a fair amount of money, and they did not hesitate to make free use of his pursue.

Dirk was generous, and the needy, very emotional. Nature had made him a butt and an object of ridicule, but had denied him insensibility. He was constantly wounded and could not bare malice, but he never learned by experience. Stroeve's life was a tragedy written in the terms of knock-about farce. But though so bad a painter, he had a very delicate feeling for art and to go with him to picture-galleries was a rare treat. His enthusiasm was sincere and his criticism acute. He had not only a true appreciation of the old masters, but sympathy with the moderns. He was quick to discover talent, his praise was generous, his judgement was sure, he was better educated than most painters and his advice and guidance were of incomparable value (Maugham, 1972, 77, 78)

Maugham continues that, Stroeve had absurd appearance as he was a fat little man, with short legs, he was no more that thirty, but prematurely bold. His face was perfectly round, and he had a white skin, red cheeks, and red lips. His eyes were blue and round and be

wore large gold-rimmed spectacles. He was satisfied in himself with what was hackneyed and vulgar beyond belief. He painted stale, obviously picturesque things that were all false, insincere and shoddy (Maugham, 1972, 80, 83)

The narrator writes that some primitive force got hold of Strickland and it is not clear what force it is: “There was in him something primitive. He seemed to partake of those obscure forces of nature, which the Greeks personified in shapes part human and part beast, the satyr and the faun. I thought of Marsyas, whom the god flayed because he had dared to rival him in song. Strickland seemed to bear in his heart strange harmonies and unadventured patterns, and I foresaw for him an end of torture and despair. I had again the feeling that he was possessed of a devil; but you could not say that it was a devil of evil, for it was a primitive force that existed before good and ill.”

This power made Strickland its captive and it totally subdued Strickland’s physical desires. But the nature would take revenge from his spirit from time to time. And it became obvious in the relationship between Strickland and Dirk Stroeve’s wife Blanche. Strickland never loved her. The author writes that Strickland was not capable of love. He did not let anything that might interfere with his art close to himself. He used Blanche only to satisfy his physical desire. Strickland even did not have the feeling of remorse to hurt the feelings and pride of Dirk who helped him when he was in need. The narrator who does not believe that Strickland fell in love reflects on this matter as following:

“Love is never quite devoid of sentimentality, and Strickland was the least inclined to

that infirmity of any man I have known. I could not believe that he would ever suffer that possession of himself which love is; he could never endure a foreign yoke. I believed him capable of uprooting from his heart, though it might be with agony, so that he was left battered and ensanguined, anything that came between himself and that uncomprehended craving that urged him constantly to he knew not what. If I have succeeded at all in giving the complicated impression that Strickland made on me, it will not seem outrageous to say that I felt he was at once too great and too small for love.” (Maugham 1972, 122-123)

Maugham also uses monologue to describe the inner world of Charles Strickland. He expresses his attitude towards love through his speech:

“I don’t want love. I haven’t time for it. It’s weakness. I am a man, and sometimes I want a woman. When I’ve satisfied my passion I’m ready for other things. I can’t overcome my desire, but I hate it; it imprisons my spirit; I look forward to the time when I shall be free from all desire and can give myself without hindrance to my work. Because women can do nothing except love, they’ve given it a ridiculous importance. They want to persuade us that it’s the whole of life. It’s an insignificant part. I know lust. That’s normal and healthy. Love is a disease. Women are the instruments of my pleasure; I have no patience with their claim to be helpmates, partners, companions.” (Maugham 1972, 152)

Though Blanche Stroeve knows that Strickland does not love her, she cannot help falling

in love with him. When Dirk finally realizes it he asks Strickland to leave his apartment. Strickland starts to pack his belongings without saying anything. He becomes surprised when Blanche wants to go with him. Because the only thing that made Strickland interested in Blanche was the desire to paint her body. And having done this he loses his interest in her and leaves her. A little later after this Blanche commits a suicide and dies. But Strickland is not moved by this and puts down her act to foolishness and does not even want to spare time to talk about her with the narrator.

“You have not the courage of your convictions. Life has no value. Blanche Stroeve didn’t commit suicide because I left her, but because she was a foolish and unbalanced woman. But we’ve talked about her quite enough; she was an entirely unimportant person. Come, and I’ll show you my pictures.”(Maugham 1972, 153)

After some time Strickland leaves for Marseilles. He lives there in poverty and has no roof over his head. Impoverishment makes him sleep in the shelter at nights and wander in the streets looking for the job in daytime. He survives only on the bread and soup, which he gets at the shelter. When Strickland find a job at the ship that goes to Australia he leaves Europe.

Charles Strickland spends the last days of his life in the island of Tahiti. He marries a woman named Ata and she gives birth to two children. He finds what he has been looking for all his life in the island. He finds peace and a place to create. The local people of the island accept him as he is. They don’t judge his eccentric character and his odd behavior does not surprise or bother them. He finds sympathy, which he could not find anywhere

else. He creates his best works here in this fairylike island, and satisfies his desire to paint. At the end of his life Strickland becomes sick with leprosy and his eyes cease seeing. But even blindness does not stop him from painting and he finishes his masterpiece, the picture on the wall of his hut. The beauty of Strickland's masterpiece is describes as following in the novel: "It was strange and fantastic. It was a vision of the beginnings of the world, the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve — que sais-je? — it was a hymn to the beauty of the human form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime, indifferent, lovely, and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the infinity of space and of the endlessness of time. Because he painted the trees I see about me every day, the cocoa-nuts, the banyans, the flamboyants, the alligator-pears, I have seen them ever since differently, as though there were in them a spirit and a mystery which I am ever on the point of seizing and which forever escapes me. The colours were the colours familiar to me, and yet they were different. They had a significance which was all their own. And those nude men and women. They were of the earth, and yet apart from it. They seemed to possess something of the clay of which they were created, and at the same time something divine. You saw man in the nakedness of his primeval instincts, and you were afraid, for you saw yourself."(Maugham 1972, 214)

This description helps us to understand or at least imagine what held Strickland as its captive for so many years. This was the power of art, the urge to create something above ordinary and commonplace, something genuine and pure . After all Strickland manages to draw what he has envisioned all his life. But before his death Strickland wishes his masterpiece to be destroyed and his wife Ata burns this exquisite work of art. He does not

want share this beauty with the world or may be takes a revenge from the desire that turned his life upside down. But there in Tahiti he dies with peaceful soul and mind. The narrator reflects on the life and character of Strickland and puts it down, “He lived more poorly than an artisan. He worked harder. He cared nothing for those things which with most people make life gracious and beautiful. He was indifferent to money. He cared nothing about fame. You cannot praise him because he resisted the temptation to make any of those compromises with the world which most of us yield to. He had no such temptation. It never entered his head that compromise was possible. He lived in Paris more lonely than an anchorite in the deserts of Thebes. He asked nothing his fellows except that they should leave him alone. He was single-hearted in his aim, and to pursue it he was willing to sacrifice not only himself — many can do that — but others. He had a vision. Strickland was an odious man, but I still think he was a great one.”(Maugham 1972, 164)

In conclusion I would like to say that Maugham’s descriptions of a personality have been analyzed and praised by many literary critics, His accurate description of a character’s outlook, clothes, speech, actions, facial expression, body movements, gestures, non-verbal behavior gives all the clues to the reader about the character’s inner world. His writing is characterized by euphony and simplicity. These qualities make Maugham popular for many decades. And the character of Charles Strickland will remain one of the best characters that Maugham created.

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