



## The Moon and Sixpence

*W. Somerset Maugham*

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Based on the life of Paul Gauguin, *The Moon and Sixpence* is W. Somerset Maugham's ode to the powerful forces behind creative genius.

Charles Strickland is a staid banker, a man of wealth and privilege. He is also a man possessed of an unquenchable desire to create art. As Strickland pursues his artistic vision, he leaves London for Paris and Tahiti, and in his quest makes sacrifices that leaves the lives of those closest to him in tatters. Through Maugham's sympathetic eye Strickland's tortured and cruel soul becomes a symbol of the blessing and the curse of transcendent artistic genius, and the cost in humans lives it sometimes demands.

## The Moon and Sixpence Details

Date : Published August 1st 2005 by Aegypan (first published 1919)

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Author : W. Somerset Maugham

Format : Paperback 192 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Art, Literature, European Literature, British Literature

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## From Reader Review The Moon and Sixpence for online ebook

## **Mohammed says**

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Perry says

## **Beguiling Roman à clef of French painter Paul Gauguin: An Artist's Obsessive Quest for Beauty**

This rather short novel is Maugham's intriguing, thought-provoking study of the life of the painter Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), and partly his mockery of society's ready willingness to turn sinners into saints, as well as a sobering look at an artist's lifelong pursuit of *beauty*, at whatever the cost to himself or to loved ones.

Gaugin was a despicable misogynist and a dreadfully negative person who left his wife and 3 kids in London in his early 40s, without a smidgen of remorse or regret and without ever contacting them again, to pursue a painter's life in Paris. He then stole another painter's wife and soon thereafter rejected her out of hand as no longer necessary, shortly after which he moved to Tahiti to paint masterpieces, and so on I'll omit for you as spoilers. Let's just say he was a destroyer of lives and relationships.

Paul Gauguin, "Where Did We Come From, What Are We Doing, Where are We Going." 1897

I recommend this novel, especially if you favor Somerset Maugham, which I do, despite his being an old lady in temperament at times and seeming a bit of a misogynist himself:

"Women are strange little beasts... You can treat them like dogs, you can beat them till your arm aches, and still they love you." He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, it is one of the most absurd illusions of Christianity that they have souls.... In the end they get you, and you are helpless in their hands. White or brown, they are all the same."

Paul Gaugin, "Fatata Te Miti, aka By the Sea," 1892.

Of course, this is Maugham giving voice to Gaugin; all the same, I've seen many examples in his other works to fairly surmise him a chauvinist to females while loathing himself for being attracted to males in their stead. Notwithstanding, this is an excellent novel sur la vie dans l'art et la recherche de l'artiste et la poursuite de la beauté.

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### **Jeff says**

*"Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognize it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination."*

*"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."*

In addition to plenty of witty bon mots, Maugham dropped several lengthy quotes on the nature of beauty and how relative it is, especially through the eyes of the artist. Maugham's protagonist, Charles Strickland grows indifferent to pretty much everything in his life: wife, children, luxury, polite society and focuses his passions like a laser on the creation of a vision that's perceptible to pretty much only him. Few others see it, but Strickland doesn't care; he's too focused on the creative process to pay anyone any mind. He's kind of a brute, who can only articulate his inner perception on the canvas.

Strickland's a complete ass, losing pretty much all sense of propriety, not caring whether he's mortally offended anyone who's willing to lend him a hand, biting that hand with a furious chomp – leaving broken lives in his wake. The further he runs from society (to Tahiti – "a magical place") and it's distractions, the closer he comes to being able to extract his conception of "pure" beauty from the dark recesses of his mind.

I've known people like Strickland – talented, brilliant, corrosive – people who have that weird light surrounding themselves. Friends and family that have been taken advantage of, cheated, hurt, yet still can't shake being in the presence of this person; it's like having one foot in a tornado. The narrator, a writer, who's been offended by Strickland on numerous occasions still comes around for the proverbial bitch slap. Strickland doesn't achieve success and recognition until after he's dead, his family willing to whitewash his transgressions, something that probably wouldn't surprise or bother him.

The only other Maugham I've ever read is *The Razor's Edge*, that one was a passable read with the same

format (first person narrative observer, main character in search of some sort of truth), but this book has a kinetic energy and spirit. You might loathe Strickland and want to throat punch him, but you still have a deep unspoken understanding of his motivations, that although you don't fully condone, you still respect his vision.

Buddy Read with the artsy, occult branch of the Pantsless Legion of Indecency: Ginger, Kristin, and Stepheny.

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### **Tatiana says**

This novel is by far my favorite account of an artist's life in fiction.

The story of Charles Strickland is based on Paul Gauguin's life. To what extent, I don't know. What I do know is that there is something infinitely irresistible about how artistry is portrayed in this novel. I love the idea that a real artist creates art because he cannot not to. That all other aspects of his life - family, money, acclaim, food even - are secondary to his desire to create. Strickland is remarkable in his drive to paint - he abandons his comfortable life, wife and children, career as a stockbroker - to do something that he feels he can't live without.

What I also love about Moon And Sixpence is how Maugham portrays relationships between men and women. He really makes a case that women are very much into men who treat them badly. He does so with humor, even though a bitter and puzzled humor. This is one of my favorite bits of the novel, where Strickland "proposes" to his Tahitian wife and an observer chimes in afterward:

*"Well, Ata, he said, "do you fancy me for a husband."  
She did not say anything, but just giggled.  
"I shall beat you," he said, looking at her.  
"How else should I know you loved me," she answered.*

*Tiare broke off her narrative and addressed herself to me reflectively.*

*"My first husband, Captain Johnson, used to thrash me regularly. He was a man. He was handsome, six foot three, and when he was drunk there was no holding him. I would be black and blue all over for days at a time. Oh, I cried when he died. I thought I should never get over it. But it wasn't till I married George Rainey that I knew what I'd lost. You can never tell what a man is like till you live with him. I've never been so deceived in a man as I was in George Rainey. He was a fine, upstanding fellow too. He was nearly as tall as Captain Johnson, and he looked strong enough. But it was all on the surface. He never drank. He never raised his hand to me. He might have been a missionary. I made love with the officers of every ship that touched the island, and George Rainey never saw anything. At last I was disgusted with him, and I got a divorce. What was the good of a husband like that? It's a terrible thing the way some men treat women."*

I want to laugh at this quote and say that Maugham's views are outdated and plain wrong, but then I read another 5-star review of Hush, Hush, and think - Nah, things, unfortunately, have not changed *that* much.

On a bright note, I do very much want to visit Strickland's Tahiti.

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### **Steven Godin says**

W. Somerset Maugham's Charles Strickland might not be heading onto my list of the most likeable characters in literature, but one thing is for sure, he is certainly one of the most memorable. Strickland, a bourgeois city gent living in London has a dull, soulless exterior that conceals the fact he just may be a genius. He devotes himself to himself, and hides within him a passion for painting that no one else seems to know about. He doesn't give a stuff about anybody, including his family, and his wife is left baffled when Charles suddenly travels to Paris (and then later on Tahiti) with no intentions to ever come back. She believes he has run away with another woman, but the truth leaves her totally perplexed, after the narrator of Maugham's novel is sent after him, having only met Strickland briefly before.

Derived from the life of Paul Gauguin, our main character is a man insensible to ordinary human relations, who lives the life of pure selfishness which is sometimes supposed to produce great art, which has always had its fascination for novelists inspired only by the unusual. Accordingly there have been novels in plenty depicting the conflict of the abominable genius with the uncongenial environment, and Mr. Maugham has followed a recognised 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. Maugham's story takes a respectable man who deserts his wife after seventeen years of marriage to get fully behind a great idea - to turn himself into a famous artist, having previously had no experience. His break is succeeded by living destitute with a stubborn determination, and by long periods of work and outbursts of savage behaviour.

Now, here's the thing, does Maugham convince us that Strickland is a real man and a real artist with which we can absorb his traits as part of the essential human creature who lives eternally by his work? It seems he does not. Where every detail should be pungently real, one is constantly checked in belief by the sense of a calculated and heightened effect, and by the passion of Maugham for his subject. Such a passion is sometimes defeated by its object. Here one is repelled, not so much by Strickland's monosyllabic callousness, but by the knowledge that this callousness is seen and represented without subtlety. This does eventually change towards the end, but what I liked about Maugham's narrative is he never succumbs to the obvious temptation to seek to explain Strickland's actions to us, we are left in the dark to his motives just like the other characters. Another positive is that he uses the minor elements in the story with an extremely effective manner. There are deeper themes going on here, if you dig hard enough.

The novel is one of a destructive nature, and presents a really terrible philosophy on Modernism which it propounds, but I found it compulsively readable. Maugham's writing manages to be both powerful and austere, with not a moment wasted. I particularly liked the first-person narrative voice, which captured me with a mix of admiration and disdain for Strickland, something that Maugham struck a masterful balance with.

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### **Henry Avila says**

How much do we forgive a great, talented, artist, who is also a despicable human being? Will his admirers look the other way, thinking since he is no longer around and no more harm can be done by him, it is all right now to forgive, and forget, besides, he didn't do anything to their family, but to other people...Shakespeare said, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones" ... Englishman Charles

Strickland, a thinly disguised Paul Gauguin, is one of those men, selfish, cruel, disloyal, an unfeeling cad, you would loathe if you had ever met, nothing matters but his art, everyone else he can and does step on to reach his higher calling, being a superb painter, but nobody believes in his abilities, they see only a primitive man with the same tendencies on canvas, besides there are hundreds of better painters in Paris. Strickland had abandoned his wife and two children in London, leaving his family without any means of support, if they starved he wouldn't care, nothing is really important but his destiny, set at the turn of the 20th century, Somerset Maugham, does not try to hide the fact that he is the person narrating this novel. Having briefly met Strickland in London when the future legend, was just another boring, ordinary, nonentity, a monosyllabic stockbroker, who could guess of his later fame, Maugham is more impressed by the charming Mrs. Strickland, though not pretty, she does radiate what the perfect Englishwoman should be in that era. Later the shocked lady embraces the rumors that her husband had fled with a young shopgirl to France, she could not face the truth which would be humiliating....Mr. Strickland had secretly gone because he needed to paint. In Paris living in squalor, in an one room, filthy, pungent, airless apartment, he ekes out a living by guiding curious Englishmen, to the sordid sections of the city, that no respectable person would go, the kind of areas, policemen hate foreigners to see. This or any other jobs that puts money in his hands, more so for buying things to continue painting, than to eat or pay the rent, he has lost much weight, to rather an unhealthy level. None buys his paintings but he doesn't care. Finally meeting a bad Dutch painter, the humane Dirt Stroeve, who actually sells his mediocre paintings, short, plumb, gregarious, he never takes it personally when fellow artists disparage his product, but his English wife Blanche, does, she has a checkered past and this type of woman can't forgive the man who saved her, Dirt. An ailing Strickland becomes dangerously ill, he is nursed by the generous Dutchman, the only person who perceives his genius, in is own home, the reluctant wife helps, the life of this scoundrel will not end, here, he pays back his huge debt by taking away his Blanche. Maugham, who is now living in Paris, and becomes friends with the always kindly Dirt, writing a play, there, is more upset than her husband, he will forgive, if she returns... but tragedy ensues. Strickland somehow, gets on a ship and after much travels, arrives in the beautiful, tropical, south seas island of Tahiti...Years pass, nothing is heard about this fugitive from civilization, until during WWI, Somerset Maugham, at his government's request, goes to the same island that Strickland was on, there the paintings he had been indifferent to, shocks his senses, the sparkling, plethora of colors, the blues, greens, yellows, reds, violets, and whites, bright, brilliant, a glorious stream of unending shades, it teases the mind, and makes him dizzy, this, never captured before, so well on canvas...now he has seen the real Strickland.

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

The Moon and Sixpence, W. Somerset Maugham

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

## The Moon and Sixpence, W. Somerset Maugham

The Moon and Sixpence is a novel by W. Somerset Maugham first published in 1919. It is told in episodic form by a first-person narrator, in a series of glimpses into the mind and soul of the central character Charles Strickland, a middle-aged English stockbroker, who abandons his wife and children abruptly to pursue his desire to become an artist. The story is in part based on the life of the painter Paul Gauguin.

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## Bruce says

I thought this 1919 novel was amazing. W. Somerset Maugham's use of language and his psychological insights fascinated me. Told by an anonymous narrator, a writer, it is the story of the life and personality of one Charles Strickland, a bland, steady, unremarkable London stockbroker who left his career and family, moved to Paris, and became a painter whose paintings were viewed by few people, most of whom thought they were awful. Eventually he moved to and died in Tahiti, achieving great posthumous fame. The story was apparently inspired by the life of Paul Gauguin, although any parallels between the lives of Gauguin and Strickland are loose indeed.

Based up comments made by other readers, I have several suggestions to make. First, this is not, nor was it intended to be, a biography or work of historical fiction. It is a story quite independent of Gauguin, and I think the reader is advised to forget about Gauguin and not seek similarities. Second, this is not a narrative intending to portray the normative psychological drives of all artists, and attempts to generalize to other painters, authors, composers, etc, are misguided. This is a story of one artist. Third, this is not Maugham's autobiography in disguise. Fourth, the novel's narrator may or may not be reliable and should not be assumed to be an alter ego for Maugham; the narrator's many philosophical comments and artistic judgments are not necessarily those of the true author. This is a probing narrative of personalities and motivations, pure and simple, and the careful reader will find himself responding out of his own experience. And enjoying the language per se.

All that being said, the book is filled with quotable passages. Here are a few:

“Each one of us is alone in the world. He is shut in a tower of brass, and can communicate with his fellows only by signs, and the signs have no common value, so that their sense is vague and uncertain.”

“One (can) be certain of nothing in dealing with creatures so incalculable has human beings.”

“Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognize it you must

repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination.”

“The writer should seek his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of this thought; and, indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success.”

I found myself gasping at page after page of this narrative. The author’s precision of language and his insight into human nature, in particular the nature of one specific fictional character, captivated me. Many readers may find that they are reminded of the social ambiance and subtleties in the fiction of Anthony Powell, and the last part of the book may bring back suggestions of Joseph Conrad.

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## Stepheny says

The Moon and Sixpence is a book that came to be on my TBR list because of Stephen King. He mentions it in Bag of Bones and it peaked my curiosity. As a group of us was scheduled to read BoB in July (some of us are still reading it now), we decided to read that one first. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I’m not sure why I thought I wouldn’t, but it was just a feeling I had going into it.

Our story centers around Charles Strickland. Strickland is a very wealthy man, or was until he decided to give it all up to pursue his need to create art. Seemingly on a whim, he gives up his wife and children, leaving them with no money to go live in Paris.

Strickland gives absolutely zero fucks what anyone has to say or what they may think of his actions. The only thing he cares about is getting this overwhelming need to paint out of his system. It’s like a beast inside him, dying to get out. It’s eating him alive. It consumes him. Morning, noon and night, it’s all he ever thinks about. He has no regrets about leaving his wife and children. He never spares a single thought for them.

He is a vile old bastard, to be honest.

We follow him through our narrator who has happened to meet Strickland at different moments throughout his life. Their paths crossing sometimes intentionally and other times by mere coincidence. Our narrator is both baffled and amazed by Strickland. His fascination results in him getting berated by Strickland on multiple occasions.

I just don’t understand people. I have watched genuine assholes lure people in for so many years of my life. They get the promotions over the deserving. They get acclaim. They get everything it seems. And for what? Speaking their minds? Does that mean they should be made President of the United States of America? Absolutely fucking not. But hey, stranger things have happened. Am I right?’

Strickland is an absolutely appalling character, and his character was based on a real-life artist is sickening to me. But almost worse than Strickland is our narrator who seems to relish Strickland’s despicable behavior. It brings him a joy that reflects everything that is wrong with the world today.

While the book is filled with vile behavior and horrible characters, it is somehow endearing and enjoyable. The writing was both beautiful and profound, content aside. I definitely recommend this one to just about

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anyone. It's a fascinating character study and a quick read.

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### **Matthew says**

my affection for this book may, in part, stem from the fact that it was one of those novels that i read at a period in my life when my tastes in both literature and life outlook were taking shape (that is, while playing hooky from high school) but its appeal has endured far more than the other usual suspects in that category (kerouac's meanderings, pirsig's pretensions, etc.)

apart from its romantic appeal to the Quiet and Solitary Youth demographic (of which i was a card-carrying member) i think that's due to the simple fact that in a quiet, british sort of way, this is a nearly perfect piece of writing. and it's also, out of everything i've read, the novel that i would most liked to have written myself.

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### **Kim says**

Maughan's fictional biography of an artist whose life is based on that of Paul Gaughin, explores the nature of obsession and the creative urge. The central character, Charles Strickland, is a thoroughly unlikeable man: selfish, lacking in empathy and able to abandon his wife and children without a second thought. And yet, as unsympathetic as Maughan makes Strickland, his compulsive pursuit of beauty is understandable.

This is short, powerful and accessible, written in Maughan's beautifully clear prose. Not a word is wasted, and every word is worth reading.

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### **Rajat Ubhaykar says**

Fair warning, this is going to be a long review for this is a book that is close to my heart written by an author whom I deeply admire.

#### **The Right Time**

There are some books that walk into your life at an opportune time. I'm talking about the books that send a pleasant shiver down your spine laden with "Man, this is meant to be!" as you flip through its pages cursorily. Or those that upon completion, demand an exclamation from every book-reading fibre of your body to the effect of "There couldn't have been a better time for me to have read this book!" Now, I come from deferred-gratification stock. So books like these, you don't read immediately,. You let them sit there on your table for a while. You bask in the warm expectant glow of a life-altering read. You glance at the book as you make your way to office, take pleasure in the fact that it'll be right there on your table when you open the front-door wearily, waiting to be opened, caressed, reveled in. And when that moment of reckoning arrives, you don't stop, you plunge yourself straight into the book, white-hot passionate.

The Moon and Sixpence was just that kind of a book for me. I had just completed (and thoroughly enjoyed) a course on Modern Art in college and could rattle off the names of Impressionist painters faster than I could

the Indian cricket team. I was particularly intrigued by Paul Gauguin, a French Post-Impressionist painter, after reading one of his disturbingly direct quotes. “**Civilization is what makes me sick**”, he proclaimed, and huddled off to Tahiti to escape Europe and “all that is artificial and conventional”, leaving behind a wife and five children to fend for themselves, never to make contact with them again. This struck me as the ultimate expression of individuality, a resounding slap to the judgmental face of conservative society, an escapist act of repugnant selfishness that could only be justified by immeasurable artistic talent, genius, some may call it. My imagination was tickled beyond measure and when I discovered there was a novel by W.Somerset Maugham (the author of The Razor's Edge no less!) based on Gauguin, my joy knew no bounds. I was in the correct frame of mind to read about the life of a stockbroker who gave up on the trivial pleasures of bourgeois life for the penury and hard life of an aspiring painter without considering him ridiculous or vain. Supplied with the appropriate proportions of awe that is due to a genius protagonist, I began reading the book. I have to admit I expected a whole lot from it. I had a voyeuristic curiosity to delve into the head of a certified genius. I was even more curious to see how Maugham had executed it. At the same time, I was hoping that the book would raise and answer important questions concerning the nature of art and about what drives an artist to madness and greatness.

## The Book

The book's title is taken from a review of Of Human Bondage in which the novel's protagonist, Philip Carey, is described as "*so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence at his feet.*"

I admired Maugham's narrative voice. In his inimitable style, he flits in and out of the characters' life as the stolid, immovable writer who is a mere observer, and nothing more. His narrator defies Heisenberg's uncertainty principle as in observing his characters, he doesn't change their lives or nature one bit. He has a mild disdain for the ordinary life of a householder and relishes his independence.

*“I pictured their lives, troubled by no untoward adventure, honest, decent, and, by reason of these two upstanding, pleasant children, so obviously destined to carry on the normal traditions of their race and station, not without significance. They would grow old insensibly; they would see their son and daughter come to years of reason, marry in due course – the one a pretty girl, future mother of healthy children; the other a handsome, manly fellow, obviously a soldier; and at last, prosperous in their dignified retirement, beloved by their descendants, after a happy, not unuseful life, in the fullness of their age they would sink into the grave. That must be the story of innumerable couples, and the patter of life it offers has a homely grace. It reminds you of a placid rivulet, meandering smoothly through green pastures and shaded by pleasant trees, till at last it falls into the vasty sea; but the sea is so calm, so silent, so indifferent, that you are troubled suddenly by a vague uneasiness. Perhaps it is only a kink in my nature, strong in me even in those days, that I felt in such an existence, the share of the great majority, something amiss. I recognized its social value. I saw its ordered happiness, but a fever in my blood asked for a wilder course. There seemed to me something alarming in such easy delights. In my heart was a desire to live more dangerously. I was not unprepared for jagged rocks and treacherous shoals if I could only have change – change and the excitement of the unforeseen.”*

In Maugham's hands, Gauguin becomes Charles Strickland, an unassuming British stockbroker, with a secret unquenchable lust for beauty that he is willing to take to the end of the world, first to Paris and then to remote Tahiti. He is cold, selfish and uncompromising in this quest for beauty.

*“The passion that held Strickland was a passion to create beauty. It gave him no peace. It urged him hither and thither. He was eternally a pilgrim, haunted by a divine nostalgia, and the demon within him was ruthless. There are men whose desire for truth is so great that to attain it they will shatter the very*

*foundation of their world. Of such was Strickland, only beauty with him took the place of truth. I could only feel for him a profound compassion.”*

However words such as these serve to romanticize Strickland's actions which at first glance, remain despicable. (view spoiler) Maugham paints him as a rogue loner, an unfathomable apparition, compelled to inhuman acts by the divine tyranny of art.

*“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 from 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.”*

In these beautiful words he describes Strickland's strange homelessness and suggests a reason for his subsequent escape to Tahiti.

*“I have an idea that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid strange surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. They are strangers in their birthplace, and the leafy lanes they have known from childhood or the populous streets in which they have played, remain but a place of passage. They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves. Perhaps some deep-rooted atavism urges the wanderer back to lands which his ancestors left in the dim beginnings of history. Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels he belongs. Here is the home he sought, and he will settle amid scenes that he has never seen before, among men he has never known, as though they were familiar to him from his birth. Here at last he finds rest.”*

By the end of the book, Maugham's narrator somewhat loses his grip over the reader and I could picture him in my mind floundering around the island of Tahiti, interviewing the people who came in contact with Strickland, trying to piece together a story. He finds himself in the “position of the biologist, who has to figure out from a bone, not only a creature's body, but also its habits.”

The reader is promised the ineffable, a study of genius and is only delivered an admission of its elusive nature. Also the tone of the novel tends to get slightly misogynistic in places. But I suppose that is more a failing of the protagonist rather than the author. As compensation, Maugham offers delicious crisp cookies of wisdom throughout. In simple lyrical language, he penetrates to the core of the human condition and offers invaluable advice to the aspiring writer, the hopeful lover and the wannabe genius.

For its unpretentious, sympathetic and humane portrayal of a deeply flawed protagonist, its quotable quotes and its ironic humour, this book shall rank as my one of my favourite books on the life and development of an artist in search of the unknowable.

## **My Master Maugham**

I strongly believe that the adjectives one throws around are a barometer of one's sensitivity or at the minimum, one's desire to be accurate. Both of these qualities are indispensable to the aspiring writer because

honestly, what is there to writing except **fresh verbs, evocative adjectives, searing honesty and an unbounded imagination.** Also, that it's easier said than done.

In this context, there are moments when I feel utterly stupid and unimaginative. My inner monologues resemble the chatter of teenage girls in their lack of content and use of worn-out adjectives. I mean, awesome and amazing, like seriously? Bleuuurghh!! During such exasperating times, my inner world aches to devour a mouthful of good-looking words in the Queen's English. I head to my dusty book-closet and roughly displace its contents until I find a book either by one of the barons of British literature, a W.Somerset Maugham/PG Wodehouse or a laid-back satire along the lines of Yes Minister. The book usually serves its purpose admirably. It manages to extract me from my predicament by either making me split my sides laughing or by drowning me in a stream of sentences so beautifully constructed that I completely forget my insecurities and start shaking my head ponderously at the writer's virtuosity instead.

Coming to the topic of the writer himself, W.Somerset Maugham is one of my favourite writers in the English language. Being an aspiring writer who's yet to find his voice myself, his novels never fail to stab me with a hopeful optimism. My premature belief, that I can write well, is reinforced when I read Maugham. He never intimidates me or bores me, commonplace sins many writers will have to go to confession for. While reading his prose, he possesses the singular ability of making the difficult art of writing seem pretty doable. This, I've realized with the passing of time, is due to one simple reason. It is because W.Somerset Maugham never shows off! Never! Never does he ramble pointlessly. Never does he merely graze the point instead of hitting it fair and square because he was too busy fooling around with the language. Never! He hits bulls eye with eloquence and a kind of frugal, flowing lyricism. There is always a single-minded purpose behind his writings. It is to spin a mighty good yarn by getting the point across without making his readers consult a dictionary. He even propounds profundity in a manner that typically makes me re-read the paragraph(and underline it) to admire the economy and ease with which the thought was expressed in words. I find the writing styles of Hemingway and Maugham similar in form, but while Hemingway's writing is austere to the point of being skeletal, Maugham clothes his words until they can be considered passably pretty.

For his remarkable abilities, Maugham's opinions about his own writing were always modest. He believed he stood "*in the very first row of the second-raters.*" Asked about his method of writing, he simplified it to a matter of keen observation and honest reproduction. "*Most people cannot see anything,*" he once said, "*but I can see what is in front of my nose with extreme clearness; the greatest writers can see through a brick wall. My vision is not so penetrating.*"

## My favourite excerpts

Advice to aspiring writers

*"I forget who it was that recommended men for their soul's good to do each day two things they disliked: it was a wise man, and it is a precept that I have followed scrupulously; for every day I have got up and I have gone to bed. But there is in my nature a strain of asceticism, and I have subjected my flesh each week to a more severe mortification. I have never failed to read the Literary Supplement of The Times. It is a salutary discipline to consider the vast number of books that are written, the fair hopes with which their authors see them published, and the fate which awaits them. What chance is there that any book will make its way among that multitude? And the successful books are but the successes of a season. Heaven knows what pains the author has been at, what bitter experiences he has endured and what heartache suffered, to give some chance reader a few hours relaxation or to while away the tedium of a journey. And if I may judge from the reviews, many of these book are well and carefully written; much thought has gone to their composition; to some even has been given the anxious labour of a lifetime. The moral I draw is that the writer should seek*

*his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of his thoughts; and indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success."*

*"Until long habit has blunted the sensibility, there is something disconcerting to the writer in the instinct which causes him to take an interest in the singularities of human nature so absorbing that his moral sense is powerless against it. He recognizes in himself an artistic satisfaction in the contemplation of evil which a little startles him but sincerity forces him to confess that the disapproval he feels for certain actions is not nearly so strong as his curiosity in their reasons. The writer is more concerned to know than to judge."*

On the ironic humour of life

*"Dirk Stroeve was one of those unlucky persons whose most sincere emotions are ridiculous."*

On the nature of art

*"Why should you think that beauty, which is the most precious thing in the world, lies like a stone on the beach for the careless passer-by to pick up idly? Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognize it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination."*

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

This was a perfect follow-up to Fabrizio Dori's *Gauguin*, a graphic novel I reviewed earlier in the month. Maugham's short novel functioned like a prequel for me because, whereas Dori focuses on the artist Paul Gauguin's later life in the South Pacific, Maugham concentrates on his similar character Charles Strickland's attempt to make a living as a painter in Paris.

*The Moon and Sixpence* – the unusual title comes from the *TLS* reviewer's description of the protagonist in *Of Human Bondage* as so absorbed in reaching for the moon that he doesn't notice the sixpence at his feet – is narrated by an unnamed author drawn into Strickland's orbit through his wife Amy Strickland's attendance at London literary soirées. He hasn't gotten to know the couple very well at all when he hears that Charles, a stockbroker, has abandoned his family and left for Paris to pursue painting – a hobby for which he's never previously shown any aptitude.

Amy sends the narrator off to Paris to talk sense into her husband, but Charles never shows the least remorse. The narrator marvels at his insouciance and utter conviction that he is meant to be an artist.

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.

I noted familiar themes from *Of Human Bondage* (published in 1915, four years prior to *The Moon and Sixpence*), especially the artist's struggle, nomadism and the threat of poverty. Dirk Stroeve, the talentless Dutch painter who becomes friendly with the narrator in Paris and recognizes Strickland's brilliance even as he lets the man walk all over him, reminded me of the happy-go-lucky Thorpe Athelny in *Bondage*.

At less than a third of the length of that earlier novel, though, *The Moon and Sixpence* struck me as a condensed parable about genius and sacrifice.

Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. ... It was the work of a man who had delved into the hidden depths of nature and had discovered secrets. ... There was something primeval there and terrible. It was not human. It brought to ... mind vague recollections of black magic. It was beautiful and obscene.

This is a fascinating character study, whether or not you're aware of Gauguin's life as the inspiration, and would be a great introduction to Maugham's work if you've not read him before.

Originally published with images on my blog, Bookish Beck.

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### **Sara says**

It must be said up front that I am a huge fan of Maugham. I like his writing style, which always makes me feel as if I am sitting with a friend and he is telling me about someone he actually knows. With this conversational tone, Maugham leads you into the depths of the human soul and sometimes leaves you to find your own way out.

Based very loosely on the life of Paul Gauguin, this novel is a study in how much a true artist will do for the sake of his art: not only how much he will endure, but how much he will inflict upon others. You cannot like Maugham's character, Strickland, nor, I think, can you truly understand him. Even our narrator never manages to understand the man, and he has been observing him for a lifetime. I can't help wondering how much Maugham felt that he was, himself, a man who had to follow his art at any cost. Of course, for Strickland and anyone who happens to come too close to him, the costs are extreme.

One of the important questions Maugham raises in this novel is what makes up success and who gets to decide if you are successful. Is it truly about how much you acquire outwardly or how much you acquire inwardly?

*"I wondered if Abraham really had made a hash of life. Is to do what you want, to live under the conditions that please you, in peace with yourself, to make a hash of life; and is it success to be an eminent surgeon with ten thousand a year and a beautiful wife? I suppose it depends on what meaning you attach to life, the claim which you acknowledge to society, and the claim of the individual."*

I think Maugham thought that we too often attach the wrong meaning to life, that we strive too often for what others tell us should be our want instead of the things that our soul cries out for in the night. None of us wishes to be Strickland. Hell, we don't even want to know Strickland, but each of us is faced with his same choice--cut our own path or follow the dictates of society--and too often we make the wrong decision.

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### **Rowena says**

**"Art is a manifestation of emotion, and emotion speaks a language that all may understand." - W.**

### **Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence***

I'd only ever read one Maugham before this ("Of Human Bondage") but even with just that one read I could tell Maugham was a very special writer and destined to be one of my favourites. I picked up this thin book thinking it would be a quick, simple read, but I wasn't prepared for the depth and profundity in it. There is a lot going on in this little book, lots to think about.

Reading the back of the book you'll know that the main character in this book, Charles Strickland, was modelled after Paul Gauguin. There's no way I would have guessed that for most of the book, until Strickland/Gauguin moved to Tahiti. Even without knowing much about Gauguin's life, this book was interesting as it took us on a tour of his life, done by a narrator who operates as an unofficial biographer, taking us through Strickland/Gauguin's life from England to Paris, and finally Tahiti.

Strickland is an awful person and extremely misogynistic. It's been a while since I've read such an odious character in literature. I despised him:

**"He was a man without any conception of gratitude. He had no compassion. The emotions common to most of us simply did not exist in him, and it was as absurd to blame him for not feeling them as for blaming the tiger because he is fierce and cruel."**

It was surprising to witness how the passion in Strickland seemed to remain dormant for years but eventually caused him to act like a man possessed and completely re-evaluate his life as that passion needed an outlet:

**"That must be the story of innumerable couples, and the pattern of life it offers has a homely grace. It reminds you of a placid rivulet, meandering smoothly through green pastures and shaded by pleasant trees, till at last it falls into the vasty sea; but the sea is so calm, so silent, so indifferent, that you are troubled suddenly by a vague uneasiness. Perhaps it is only by a kink in my nature, strong in me even in those days, that I felt in such an existence, the share of the great majority, something amiss. I recognised its social values, I saw its ordered happiness, but a fever in my blood asked for a wilder course. There seemed to me something alarming in such easy delights. In my heart was a desire to live more dangerously. I was not unprepared for jagged rocks and treacherous shoals if I could only have change -- change and the excitement of the unforeseen."**

Gauguin comes up a lot in discussions on primitivism and orientalism, and reading up on his time in Tahiti really leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. The discussion on place and how we might be searching for a place where we are free to be really spoke to me, but Gauguin being himself meant taking child brides in the tropics, and that reminded me of the fact that Europeans had/have free reign in some parts of the world all due to their perceived power. But still, the idea that we can be perceived differently in different areas, and therefore be more suited to one area than another, is interesting:

**"I have an idea that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid certain surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. They are strangers in their birthplace, and the leafy lanes they have known from childhood or the populous streets in which they have played, remain but a place of passage. They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves. Perhaps some deep-rooted atavism urges the wanderer back to lands which his ancestors left in the dim beginnings of history. Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs. Here is the home he sought, and he will settle amid scenes that he**

**has never seen before, among men he has never known, as though they were familiar to him from his birth. Here at last he finds rest."**

It's hard to summarize this book without bringing up the racist language. There were quite a few racial epithets which, I'm not sure spoke of Maugham's insensitivity to different races, or just that he was reflecting the language and sentiments of the time. Either way, they were shocking, and I could have done without them.

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## **Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says**

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I'm working my way through an omnibus edition of Maugham's work, and man, he can *write*. I'm torn between the impulse to swim leisurely through his prose or just gleefully cannonball into it. Unlike some writers of this time, Maugham is not particularly flowery, but he has an interesting way of presenting ideas and constructing sentences that makes you want to read over them several times, just to appreciate their ideas and form.

MOON AND SIXPENCE, which could just as easily be called "Portrait of the Artist as a Douche," is based loosely off the life of the artist, Paul Gauguin. I tried to pronounce his name several times, ineffectively, ranging from gewgaw, to Google, to *gaijin*. As it turns out, the way it's actually pronounced makes him sound like a creature from a Japanese monster movie (it rhymes with "Rodan"), which is only the *first* way this book surprised me.

Strickland seems like he has the ideal of the moderately successful life: a wife, children, a good job with steady pay. But he is discontent, and one day, coldly decides to leave his wife and job and go to Paris, living in squalor. Why? So he can paint. The confusion of his family, neighbors, and the narrator himself is palpable. To paint? Not because of madness, or because of another woman - but just... for art? For art's sake, and not for fame?

The narrator follows Strickland, as he wrecks yet another marriage, paints more art, and eventually goes to Tahiti, where he finds the climate agreeable and even obtains one of the locals as a "wife." The whole time he is cruel and scornful, dismissive of others' feelings, wants, or desires, and even his own comfort. Everything must be sacrificed for art. Ultimately, I'd say this is a tragedy, because that vision ends up consuming Strickland; he pours his entire being into his art, and like many artists, it isn't until he's dead that his work becomes first a curiosity and then something far more powerful.

A lot of my friends did not enjoy this book and I can certainly see why. Strickland is a jerk, and so is the narrator. There's a casually dismissive attitude towards the things that people generally consider worthy in a human being: compassion, empathy, loyalty, family, kindness, charity, etc. Art here is portrayed as something wholly selfish, and the message here seems to be that it is somehow okay; that an artist is allowed to be an egotist, because self-absorption is necessary for introspection. I don't like that message, so I can see why some people might write off *MOON AND SIXPENCE* as too dark and grim and irritating. However, I found myself fascinated by these terrible characters.

I enjoyed this book a lot. I've read Maugham before and really liked his work, so this isn't really surprising. His other book was more of a comedy of manners, though; it was nothing like this. I'm really looking forward to working my way through his repertoire and seeing how his stories vary, while enjoying his beautiful writing and compelling, yet flawed characters.

4 stars

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### **Sarah Booth says**

I read this right after I read *The Painted Veil*. I guess I am on a Somerset Maugham kick. His characters are richly developed and yet hard to know. I imagine that he may find them and humanity that way, though he does his best in bringing you along on his journey of discovery. I am never quite sure what he thinks about women. Sometimes, such as in *The Painted Veil*, he finds them redeemable and then in other instances trifling and slow-witted.

*The Moon and Sixpence* was the story based upon the painter Gaughan though referred to as Strickland and it was an examination of the mindset, passion, be it good or evil, and focus that is required in being an artist and how it can own ones soul through out. The artist was Machiavellian in his pursuit of what he knew not in his art, and in finding it, it both saved and damned him. Those who could put up with his personality were privy to a genius that was not swayed by the opinion of others but deeply committed to his art. He lived to paint and painted to live; nothing else held value.

A great book. Some slow parts and i find Maugham's beginnings a bit over taxing, but like the other things I've read of him, they are thought provoking stories that slightly change your view of the world.

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### **Mary says**

We want the world. We want it all. We want the moon. And still it's not enough.

It's my long term goal to read everything Maguham wrote, a goal that I doubt will be very difficult to reach. He writes with such poignant observation and wit and in *The Moon and Sixpence* he captures the all encompassing, obsessive and brutal nature that perhaps it takes to be an artist.

Told by an unnamed narrator, we are introduced to Charles Strickland, a beastly yet seemingly ordinary man who one day leaves his wife, his children, his job and his entire life to paint. The drive to create is all there is

in him, and leaving a trail of destruction he goes to Paris (don't they all?) and then to Tahiti. He is displaced, disassociated and curiously unappealing. It is a wonderful and extreme portrait of the innate need some have to follow their calling, or better still, the lack of choice they have to do so.

*I have an idea that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid certain surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. They are strangers in their birthplace, and the leafy lanes they have known from childhood or the populous streets in which they played, remain but a place of passage. They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that send men far and wide in search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves. (p.135)*

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## **Jamie says**

Someone would have had to physically pry this book out of my clutches last night to get me to eat dinner. Finished it in five hours flat without intending anything of the sort. I couldn't put it down. I know I say this a lot but Maugham, *goddamn*.

“But who can fathom the subtleties of the human heart? Certainly not those who expect from it only decorous sentiments and normal emotions.”

And this:

I remember saying to him: “Look here, if everyone acted like you, the world couldn't go on.”

“That's a damned silly thing to say. Everyone doesn't want to act like me. The great majority are perfectly content to do the ordinary thing.”

And once I sought to be satirical.

“You evidently don't believe in the maxim: Act so that every one of your actions is capable of being made into a universal rule.”

“I never heard it before, but it's rotten nonsense.”

“Well, it was Kant who said it.”

“I don't care; it's rotten nonsense.”

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