

# An Analysis of Ethical Dilemma in the Moon and Sixpence with Confrontation between Love and Career

Xinyi Yang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hangzhou Normal University Qianjiang College

\*Corresponding author. Email: Yangxiaoyang233@163.com

## ABSTRACT

The Moon and Sixpence wrote by novelist W. Somerset Maugham tell the story that Strickland, an ordinary stockbroker living with his happy family in London, suddenly went to Paris to chase his dream of painting and abandoned superior life and finally finished his great work in Tahiti. This book expresses the contradiction between genius, personality, material civilization, and modern marriage. From a moral perspective, this thesis tries to analyze how the protagonist balances his career and love.

**Keywords:** *The Moon and Sixpence; Maugham; moral; career; love*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The introduction to W. Somerset Maugham

W. Somerset Maugham was one of the most popular writers and the highest-paid British authors during the 1930s. After both his parents died before he was 10 years old, Maugham was raised by his uncle. Due to severe stuttering, he was often humiliated by older kids. His early childhood life casts a painful shadow on his tender mind, and gradually develops his lonely, sensitive and introverted character, which has a profound impact on his worldview and literary writing style. In many works he has written, his deep understanding of life, art, and faith slowly emerged.

At the beginning of 1892, he went to study at Heidelberg University in Germany for a year. There, he was exposed to the philosophical thoughts of the German philosophical historian Quinault Fisher and the new drama trend represented by Ibsen. Then in the same year, he returned to the UK and worked as a trainee for a six-week practice at an accounting firm in London. He then went to the St. Tomas Medical School in London to study Medicine. The five-year medical career not only allowed him to learn about the life of poor people but also taught him to use sharp eyes to look at life and society.

### 1.2. The introduction to the Moon and Sixpence

The Moon and Sixpence first were published in 1919. It is told in first-person narrator, a young, aspiring writer

in London, who first develops an acquaintance with Strickland's wife at a literary party, and later meets our protagonist Charles Strickland, a 40-year-old man doing stock business.

But one day, abruptly Strickland abandons his family and children to pursue his painting dream in Paris. Although entanglement of poverty and the torture of the disease have always been two main awkward problems during his life in Paris, he never gives up painting. However, no one wants to buy his works except a painter named Dirk Stroeve. But for various reasons, Dirk pleads with his wife Blanche to take good care of this talented artist. Unexpectedly Blanche falls in love with the painter and decides to leave her husband, but finally commits suicide when Strickland discards her after a few months.

Strickland keeps wandering and comes to Tahiti. In there, he marries a girl named Ata. Living in a world where he is painting every day, he seems to be content and feel peaceful. But unfortunately, he soon becomes infected with leprosy, and in the year before his death, he becomes a blind man. Ata takes care of him all the time until he completes his giant mural and died. According to his last words, his wife burns the house, not even leaving a piece of wood.

The theme of escapism revealed by the novel is consistent with the pursuit of many people in western countries and has become a popular topic in the 20th century, even today. In the novel, Maugham explores the contradiction of the interaction between life and art. In my opinion, after reading these two books, I believe that

the “Moon” represents the arts or behaviors that normal people cannot understand easily; however, the “Sixpence” represents the dilemma of social norms today or the world we live in now.

### **1.3. The framework of the thesis**

This thesis mainly studies the way the protagonist is pursuing ideals, aiming to study how Strickland makes choices in his love and career when confronting his ideals and social traditions.

On one hand, from the aspects of marriage, family, and love, the first part studies the ethical conflicts faced by the main character Strickland. The first part mainly talks about the relationships between the protagonist and three different kinds of women as well as the point of conflicts between them. Since the prejudice against women can be seen in the whole book, in the first part, this paper focuses on the significance of gender equality nowadays and the contradiction between his inner ideals and outer traditional society.

On the other hand, the second part mainly focuses on three places where Strickland sticks to painting every day, which reflects the painting characteristics of the protagonist in different periods. From totally immature painting techniques to superb painting levels, the growth of being an excellent painter is seen in three different spaces.

### **1.4 The purpose of the study**

Through the description of three kinds of women, some conclusions can be roughly drawn that what real character and personality protagonist has. For this part, there are many ethical conflicts in the two books about Strickland’s choice between career and love, which gives some tips for readers about philosophy about love and ethics.

## **2. EMOTIONAL CONFLICTS WITH THREE WOMEN**

### **2.1 Family conflict with Mrs. Strickland**

#### **2.1.1 The character of Mrs. Strickland**

She is born in a family in the upper class in British and loves to make friends with social celebrities. Her clothes are decent, and the furnishing in her house is chic and fashionable. She is also a good wife and mother, caring for children and making them educated. What’s more, her husband is loyal and honest. In short, she has an enviable middle class and fully meets the requirements demanded by the upper class in the 20th century.

Unfortunately, one day her husband abruptly leaves his current life to go to Paris to chase his painting dream

and search for a true him, which brings endless suffering to Mrs. Strickland. She can’t accept it at all, and can’t imagine her husband’s departure for the sake of ideals. Even though, Mrs. Strickland chooses to forgive him and work hard to raise two underage children alone. She is a great mother and she also has the characteristics of a great woman.

#### **2.1.2 The prejudice against Mrs. Strickland**

The author believes that women do not do anything but talk about love when Mrs. Strickland affirms her husband must go off with a woman. He also thinks that the most eager thing a majority of women want is nothing except love. ‘what poor minds women have got! Love. It’s always love. They think a man leaves only because he wants others. Do you think I should be such a fool as to do what I’ve done for a woman?’ (W. Somerset Maugham, 2017)

Moreover, the protagonist’s attitude to marriage and family is indifferent. ‘I like them all right when they were kids, but now they’re growing up I haven’t got any particular feeling for them.’ (W. Somerset Maugham, 2017)

From these sentences, Strickland is a selfish man without sympathy, showing a total disregard for other people’s feelings. He ignores the responsibility of a husband in dealing with his wife and children as well as the family. Moreover, the opinion he holds that women only live alone for love is against the feminism supported by most people in the 21st century.

#### **2.1.3 Necessity of the existence of the social norm**

Charles Strickland, a commonplace man without social gifts, has no interest in arts but one day, abruptly abandons all the things about him to go to Paris to chase his dream. However, from the book, there is no clue to prove that this decision made by Strickland is premeditated. That means the reason why the protagonist does this is unknown.

Although this strange and mysterious behavior only occurs in one family, the harm is great. Assuming that in some families husbands abandon their wives to just stay away from society, which is equivalent to ignoring social norms, absolutely there shows numerous social problems such as the heavy burden of taking care of children and the shortage of labor force. In this case, all the actions man has made will be a stimulus, and it will grow bigger and bigger that the world has become a mess. So, the experience of Strickland is extremely bad for the young to imitate.

Normally, in the process of shaping the protagonist, the author does not consider moral standards and social norms at all. After creating the mysterious departure of

the protagonist, however, the author completely ignores the reality factors, which has an extremely bad impact on readers. The necessary social norms are the main factors in maintaining world peace. The author does not take into account the harm caused by lacking realistic factors but forces readers to accept the great existence of the protagonist, which is not conducive to readers developing correct moral values.

## ***2.2 Conflicted sexual problem with Blanche***

### ***2.2.1 The character of Blanche***

Before she has a love affair with Strickland, she is a nice woman who respects and takes care of her husband and family. However, when she knows Strickland and takes care of him, what women chase for all their lives are family, love, and a sense of security and that's what men can offer to them. And Blanche is the representative of this kind of woman. (Liu Qingyang, 2017: 21) She is blind when she falls in love and behaves much crazy after she is abandoned by Strickland. However, she is a poor woman too. She used to be a tutor of a Roman aristocrat and was deceived by a male master of pure love. In Maugham's description, Blanche is a narrow-minded woman who is occupied with material things; she is dissolute and irresistible to sexual attraction from the male (Liu Qingyang, 2017: 24). So Blanche has a complicated personality and seems to be one of the most feared women in the Eastern world during that time.

### ***2.2.2 Differences in views on love between Blanche and Strickland***

The relationship between these two people is quite simple. The poor Blanche wants to get Strickland's love, but Strickland thinks that love is a kind of disease when women want to be this career assistant or partner in marriage. He also believes that Blanche can just bring him pleasure in the body, not the spiritual happiness or the burden of love. However, it should be pointed out that although Strickland escapes the bondage of civilized society, he can never control his sexual desire (Li Yuzheng, 2013: 22) The different views of love between two people lead to an inevitable tragedy.

### ***2.2.3 The anti-social performance of Strickland***

Strickland agrees that love and marriage are the cages for keeping himself away from doing his own business. The marriage and family he wants is a carnal pleasure, not a spiritual exchange. But as social animals, human beings cannot live without their environment-society, and meanwhile, people are greatly influenced by it. (Liu Dou, 2017) People make rules and laws to encourage themselves to behave good or become more disciplined because nobody can live as he likes.

The behavior of Strickland is a kind of anti-social performance. First, he destroys other people's families without any regret. It is because of Strickland's sexual relationship with Blanche that Dirk and Blanche break up and Blanche dies. Second, he has a relationship with women at will. He is not willing to give women safety and happiness but always gets a lot from women. He supports that men and women are unequal and men are superior, which is wrong in the 21st century.

## ***2.3 Abnormal love with Ata***

### ***2.3.1 The real relationship with Ata***

Ata is the girl who can support the family, and obey and serve her husband Strickland without asking for any material or emotional things. Strickland can also get her loyalty and firmness without paying anything. Maugham writes the simple and pure woman in primitive society, but the true nature of this kind of woman is ignorance. This is a woman dreamed of by a man with empire colonialism.

Any woman in the civilized society can't accept this kind of man, so Maugham puts this plot on an uninhabited or nonexistent island to achieve his fantasy. Also, no one will convince himself that this is romantic love. For me, it is an abnormally sexual relationship between Ata and Strickland. Comparing the three women, Maugham cannot treat women as human beings.

### ***2.3.2 About Bigamy***

Bigamy means marriage during the lifetime of an existing husband or wife, marriage with a widow (formerly regarded as bigamous by the church). In my opinion, Strickland married Ata on a small island without civilization which is an escape from reality and getting rid of the control of anti-bigamy law, reflecting some of his personality characteristics such as lacking confidence.

The first marriage with Mrs. Strickland is lack passion, but the second one cannot be said to be perfect. On a moral level, Ata gives birth to two children and sadly no one grows up in good health. Strickland does not fulfill his responsibility to take care of his family. The only thing he wants to do is draw and he does all the time. And another thing is irrelevant even though these things are involved in social norms such as bigamy. He is a man despising everything.

### **3. CAREER CONFLICTS IN THREE PLACES**

#### ***3.1 Career Conflicts in London***

##### ***3.1.1 The reason why Strickland wants to become an artist***

Strickland works as a usual stockbroker in a small company before going to Paris. He was just a good, dull, honest, plain man. He was null. (Maugham, 2017) Strickland is a common man without any extraordinary characteristics. At the party, he shows no interest in art or literary when the narrator first met him.

However, readers can never wonder if he will leave his wife and children one day to pursue his career because there are no details about his leaving. It seems too decisive, abrupt, and even horrible. Most of the readers do not even know what he wants to do or why he does this. What readers only know the result, not the whole story. Maybe Maugham wants to leave some space to let readers think more, but they cannot understand at all. Or maybe artists should be a group of people that keep their distance from the real-life to focus more on their inner world and create their works.

##### ***3.1.2 The solution to family conflicts***

Badly Strickland does not handle the relationship very well but even makes things worse. He pursues his career without considering his family, which means that he is not a qualified artist. He makes no effective solution to solve his family conflicts. Moreover, his family conflicts do cause some problems for him such as the narrator's visit to Paris. He perfectly ignores family conflicts and avoids explaining them anymore to the narrator. This negative response is a kind of irresponsible behavior toward his family.

#### ***3.2 Career conflicts in Paris***

##### ***3.2.1 His situation in Paris***

After leaving London, Strickland lives alone with poverty and illness all the time. He paints day and night but sells no pictures. Compared with some painters, they attempt to sell every work to make enough money. Strickland paints only for arts, not material things.

Strickland believes that critics, writers, stockbrokers, and women make fame. He would never send his works to exhibitions because if he got famous, his dream changes to a different one. He also believes that he lives in a dream, and that reality meant nothing to him. (Maugham, 2017) Such men are reliable in their careers and work hard to do one thing.

When hearing that Strickland is almost dead, the narrator visits his house, having a rapid glimpse of a tiny and stuffy attic, there was nothing but a bed and some canvases. He never ceases to paint. His spirit is worth learning.

##### ***3.2.2 The influence on teenagers***

Now, there are a great number of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in our society. NEET refers to adults who can make money but completely rely on the support of family. An investigation indicates that China has a depressingly large number of NEETs. Also, the number of NEETs is constantly expanding, which becomes a social problem in our society. The story of Strickland is so inspiring that can encourage those people to live their dream. Young people will change through his story or find beliefs.

Furthermore, the story of Strickland is about explaining the significance of the spiritual world to people, which is also a constant topic from ancient to now. The Moon means the ideal world and Sixpence means the real world. The readers should figure out the differences between the real and ideal world and make appropriate decisions in the future.

##### ***3.2.3 The essential differences with other artists***

But one thing that can be assured is that the decision he makes never changes. He lives in a dark, airless hotel, however, his pursuit of love and beauty and his obsession with art make him different. So even if facing poverty, despair, hunger, disease, misunderstanding, and ridicule from others, as well as the possibility of being separated and abandoned by society (Zhu, Mengyuan, 2017), Strickland chooses this difficult way and sticks to painting, which makes readers moved by his bravery and strong will.

However, Strickland's approach to pursuing art is very different from other artists. Strickland shows indifference to the life and lifestyle of common people at that time, especially his attitude towards women, which frightens most of the readers. The success he makes in painting is based on the lives of others. A good artist should respect others first, and then should figure out what is important in his career.

#### ***3.3 Career conflicts in Tahiti***

After the Paris episode, the story continues in Tahiti. This period can be said to be the peak of his art road. During this period, Strickland paints as much as he can and those paintings are beautiful, outstanding, and perfect to some extent. He says that he only paints what he sees and in that time he did.

There are no other messy and no trouble things in his world so he cannot be bothered to do anything. The works

he paints are truly unique and perfect in the world. In this materialistic society, it is quite hard to maintain a true heart. What he pursues in Tahiti is not his dream anymore, but his innocent nature and passion to work hard. He still puts his career high priority. In the choice of career and love, he will always choose the career. How he lives and who he lives with, his career is the first thing to continue.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Moon represents the ideals and the Sixpence is the cheapest silver coin in the UK at that time, representing humbleness and reality. This strong contrast is reflected in the characters created by Maugham. After reading this novel and analyzing the character of each person, the conclusion can be drawn that to some extent this book is harmful to read because of some extreme views and ethical principles that do not conform to modern society.

First of all, it is obvious that through the description of Maugham, the status of these three women is very low. He may add his unreal fantasy to the three women through his own experiences. Three women have their personalities: Mrs. Strickland, the hypocritical woman who had different faces toward different people; Blanche, the dissolute woman who was crazy about love and revenge; and Ata, the simple local woman who was the perfect wife for Strickland. (Liu Qingyang, 2017) However, the fact is that these three women are victims at that time. Mrs. Strickland is a kind woman and mother, Blanche is just a simple woman whose behavior seems to be out of control when Strickland abandons her. As for Ata, she is not a perfect wife at all because of Maugham's unreal fantasy.

Moreover, the existence of ethics is necessary. So far, a great number of scholars and philosophers have studied morality abroad and at home. Morality is the regulator of social conflicts. People living in society always have many kinds of relationships with others. Therefore, it is inevitable that various contradictions will occur. This requires special forms such as customs, social standards, or inner beliefs to regulate the behavior of people in society or to guide and correct people's behavior. So the example of Strickland, who pursues his dream of abandoning many social norms such as killing Blanche indirectly without any regret, is not a good example for us to imitate.

#### REFERENCES

[1] William Somerser, Maugham. *The Moon and*

*Sixpence* [M]. BEIJING: Knowledge Publishing House,2017.7

[2] Sun Yongxin. *Strickland's Ethical Dilemmas in The Moon and Sixpence* [D]. HEBEI: HEBEI NORMAL UNIVERSITY, 2017:8-22

[3] Liu Dou. *An Anatomy of Human Dilemma in the Moon and Sixpence from Fromm's Humanistic Theory* [D].XI'AN: XI'an International Studies University, 2017

[4] Liu Qingyang. *The Image of Female Characters in the Moon and Sixpence-A Feminist Perspective* [MA]. Guang Dong: Jinan University, 2017

[5] Li Yuzheng. *The affective ethics of Maugham's novels* [MA].Jiangnan University, 2013

[6] Wang Huizhong. *The choice between body and soul -- a brief analysis of the Moon and Sixpence by William Somerset Maugham*[J]. *The Border Economy and Culture*, 2014,(5):68-69.

[7] William Somerser, Maugham. *The Moon and Sixpence* [M]. Li Jihong. TIAN JING: Tian Jing People's Publishing Press

[8] LI Lumin. *Contradiction and Opposition: A tragic study of the role of The Moon and Sixpence*[J]. *JOURNAL OF LANZHOU INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION*, 2018,(6):31-33.

[9] Tian Junwu, Tang Bo. *Satisfaction of self-desire — The Daydream Complex in William Somerset Maugham's the moon and sixpence*[J]*GUANGXI SHEHU I KEXUE*,2007(7):106-108

[10] On "The Moon and Sixpence" in Maugham's *Exploration of Human Nature*[J]*The Science Education Article Collects*,2011.02: 77

[11] Zhu Mengyuan. *A brief comment on the images of artists in the moon and sixpence*[J].*Masterpieces Review*,2017(26):37-38

[12] Zhou Siting. *On the qualities and abilities of artists from moon and sixpence*[J]. *Art Education Research*, 2017(12):48

[13] E.M. Clarke, E.A. Emerson, *Design and synthesis of synchronization skeletons using branching time temporal logic*, in: D. Kozen (Eds.), *Workshop on Logics of Programs*, Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol. 131, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 1981, pp. 52–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BFb0025774>