

THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN AND ART IN THE NOVEL “THE MOON AND SIXPENCE” BY W. S. MAUGHAM

Iroda Kaharova Sidikovna
Bukhara State University, Bukhara
UZBEKISTAN

ABSTRACT

The article is about the literary trends in the 20th century in English literature and literary activity of great author W.S.Maugham. As it is dedicated to the novel “The Moon and Sixpence” step by step is discussed the novel. The main task is given the utmost information about the problem of Human and Art in the novel. Moreover there is given the opinion of the writer about the problem of art in the novel and realistic expressions of his literary works.

INTRODUCTION

The name of Somerset Maugham is connected with critical realism in the English literature. He possessed a keen and observant eye and in his best works he ridiculed philistinism, narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, self-interest, utilitarian approach to art. His links with realistic art, however, were not so solid as to place him among the best English writers of this period. His work is marred by cynicism and disbelief in human nature. Maugham thinks that it is not in the power of man to reform the world. In his works he compares life to the theatre where human comedy, as old as the world itself, is being staged. As the course of human life cannot be altered, Maugham believes in the wisdom of those who see the failings of this world but learn to accept it as it is.

Maugham was always proud of his dispassionate and composed view of life. He always tries to observe life itself objectively and clinically with great efforts for all his life, and describes the result of observations faithfully in his novels. His novels start mainly from a character. Though his novels are realistic and gloomy, Maugham's novels are very interesting. I think it is due to the fact that he writes the truth of human nature. John Brophy writes about this in his “Somerset Maugham”, as follows; “It is one of Maugham's distinctions that he presents his stories as matters of fact, with the minimum sacrifice of verisimilitude, and yet makes them readable. He achieves this without relying on the detective story's device of mystification. Indeed, Maugham's stories often do without suspense, which is commonly regarded as an essential element of any good story. Nor does he rely upon topicality, as the political reporter does, or upon argument as the philosopher does, both of whom can create a kind of indirect suspense because the conclusion of their narrative may affect the reader's personal life. In a Maugham's story the reader's self-interest is not involved: nothing is presupposed in the reader but a potential interest in the diverse conventions and oddities of human beings.”

W. S. Maugham was a prolific writer. Numerous novels, short stories and plays came from his pen. His best novels are “Of Human Bondage”, “The Moon and Sixpence”, “Cakes and Ale”. Maugham says in “Of Human Bondage” as follows; “...It was a strange life, dark and tortured, in which men and women showed to remorseless eyes the evil that was in their hearts; a fair face concealed a depraved mind; the virtuous used virtue as a mask to hide their secret Vice, the seeming-strong fainted within with their weakness; the honest were corrupt, the chaste were lewd.”[1;142-143]

As we can see in “Of Human Bondage”, Maugham suffered from the physical deficiency. In his youth he thought that if he had a strong religious faith in god, and religious, pious life, his physical deficiency would be all right. And so he put it into practice, but the religious and pious life, and the earnest prayer to god every morning and every night could not do anything good about the physical deficiency. So he despaired and gave up his faith in god. Maugham had another reason in giving up the faith in god. That is to say, he realized the dilemma between his uncle's preaching and his selfishness, and disliked his uncle very much. And besides he began to have the distaste for all the clergyman. In my opinion, the hypocrisy of his uncle's, aroused not so much indignation as distaste in Maugham's mind in his youth. But this pessimism might have been in the inner part of his mind. The bitter experiences that he had at his uncle's house, together with his physical weakness and his original character made the habit of confining himself within himself apart from others. In my opinion he is essentially a man of solitude and retrospective character. For instance in love affairs he was afraid of being laughed at and despised by others rather than absorbed in love. But his lonely solitude brought forth many dreams. They are sometimes very romantic, but in most cases sarcastic, cynic, ironical, and gloomy mainly because of his retrospective character and physical weakness. Maugham learned Freud's mental analysis and adopted this psychological theory in writing novels and short stories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first reason is that Maugham is a man of good sense in a certain sense. He looks at human being, human society, and nature as the practical liver planting his foothold strongly upon the reality, and keeps his own dispassionate attitude toward them.

The second reason is that as a medical student he saw many patients and could look into the human nature very closely. He learned the real distress and disquiet of the poor personally. He participated in the war as a medical officer and went through all kinds of the naked bitter experiences in the battlefield. It might be said that it is mainly due to these experiences in the battlefield that he got the truth, the philosophy of life for himself.

It goes without saying that in such a place as battlefield all men and women disclose truly naked human nature, throwing off all vanities, which in any other place could not be seen. It is in such a place that the true psychology of human mind could be understood in a true sense. In a word Maugham may be called a man of experience.

I think, Maugham heard many precious life stories from a lot of patients at many army hospitals, which could not be heard in any other place, and so that he was well versed in the psychology of human mind. These experiences became the main source of the literary materials for him to write his novels, short stories, and dramas.

The third reason is that Maugham was greatly influenced by Flaubert, Balzac, and Tolstoy. The fourth reason is his original character and weakness in health. These four reasons made him take the clinically sarcastic attitude toward life and literature.

In some sense, Maugham's novel may be the record of the result of his dispassionate observation. He would not like to write about the human actual life, based on the philosophical theories, and not like to adjust human behaviours to the theoretical ideas. Namely he wrote everything as it was. But as long as the report of his dispassionate

observation is novels and literature, it can not take the form of an academic report in which many facts and theories are arranged orderly.

Therefore not by arranging the result of his observation, but by describing the human real life in his own literary method of writing, he brings the truth of human nature into relief. Of all writers Maugham is best at describing it.

“The Moon and Sixpence” is a short novel of 1919 by William Somerset Maugham based on the life of the painter Paul Gauguin. The story 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, a middle-aged English stockbroker who abandons his wife and children abruptly to pursue his desire to become an artist.

In “The Moon and Sixpence”, the pursuit of beauty is the main theme of the novel. If this novel is essentially a realistic novel, the absolute beauty is only a vision. Strickland's (the main character) aestheticism, his passionate pursuit of beauty, and faith in beauty, comes not from the realistic attitude but the romantic, aesthetic attitude. If life is noble and fine because of the existence of beauty, the realization of beauty is the best and greatest ideal of human being. Human being can make himself more than what he is by the realization of the ideal beauty. This thought is evidently idealistic and romantic.

DISCUSSION

The novel is an illustration of one of Maugham's favourite convictions that human nature is knit of contradictions, that the workings of the human mind are unpredictable. Strickland is concentrated on his art. He is indifferent to love, friendship and kindness, misanthropic and inconsiderate to others. His pictures fall flat on the public and recognition comes to him only after death.

Maugham borrowed the title of the novel from a review of his book "Of Human Bondage". Speaking of the principal character of the book, the reviewer remarks: "Like so many young men he was so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence at his feet." The title served to Maugham as a symbol for two opposing worlds — the material world quit by Strickland, where everything is thought of in terms of money, and the world of pure artistry craving for beauty.

The inspiration for this story, Gauguin, is considered to be the founder of primitivism in art. 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. How many of the details of the story are based on fact is not known. However, Maugham had visited the place where Gauguin lived in Tahiti, and purchased some glass panels painted by Gauguin in his final days.

“The Moon and Sixpence” is the story of Strickland is a well-off, middle-class stockbroker in London some time in the late 19th or early 20th century. Early in the novel, he leaves his wife and children and goes to Paris, living a destitute but defiantly content life there as an artist (specifically a painter), lodging in run-down hotels and falling prey to both illness and

hunger. Strickland, in his drive to express through his art what appears to continually possess and compel him inside, cares nothing for physical comfort and is generally indifferent to his surroundings, but is generously supported while in Paris by a commercially successful but hackneyed Dutch painter, Dirk Stroeve, a friend of the narrator's, who immediately recognizes Strickland's genius. After helping Strickland recover from a life-threatening condition, Stroeve is repaid by having his wife, Blanche, abandon him for Strickland. Strickland later discards the wife (all he really sought from Blanche was a model to paint, not serious companionship, and it is hinted in the novel's dialogue that he indicated this to her and she took the risk anyway), who then commits suicide - yet another human casualty (the first ones being his own established life and those of his wife and children) in Strickland's single-minded pursuit of Art and Beauty. After the Paris episode, the story continues in Tahiti. Strickland has already died, and the narrator attempts to piece together his life there from the recollections of others. He finds that Strickland had taken up with a native woman, had two children by her (one of whom dies) and started painting profusely. We learn that Strickland had settled for a short while in the French port of Marseilles before traveling to Tahiti, where he lived for a few years before finally dying of leprosy. Strickland left behind numerous paintings, but his magnum opus, which he painted on the walls of his hut in before losing his sight to leprosy, was burnt down after his death by his wife by his dying orders. After his death he is recognised as a great artist whose works are considered priceless.

Strickland's decisive quality as an artist is, in Maugham's own word, "simplification," although the irony is that this "simplification" is anything but simple. It is extraordinarily hard to understand. It is almost as though Maugham is poking fun at his own presumable simplicity as well as at the myth of the modern artist whose rejection of all that is conventional turns out to be obfuscating rather than clarifying. Modern art, whether Gauguin's or Maugham's own, is indeed difficult, although one need not be hit over the head with it for its subtleties to emerge.

The directness that Gauguin represents mythologically is, in Maugham's rendering, actually the reverse of what it seems to be – inscrutable, oblique, without the manifest meaning it appears to offer. Rather than find and disclose a fugitive secret that will explain Strickland and his art, Maugham's narrator is faced instead with an interpretative impasse. The more he learns about Strickland, the less he knows. To the question, "What is the secret of modern artistic creation?" there is no available reply. "It is a riddle," says Maugham at the book's start, "which shares with the universe the merit of having no answer." Contrary to the very mythology he narrates, Maugham finds Strickland's, or Gauguin's, vaunted directness of purpose and expression to be utterly mysterious, altogether unobliging to analysis despite the endless temptation to engage in it. Strickland and his work are not as simple as they look.

The innovative complexities of "The Moon and Sixpence" are not, however, limited to temporal experimentation or the refusal to allegorize. If the novel resembles Conrad in narrative structure and tropical site, it also departs from Conrad in its suspension of sympathy for the visionary. Maugham's first-person narrator does not construe his relation to Strickland along the familiar lines of the secret sharer or double (the narrator who recognizes his own dark or repressed side by identifying with his perplexing subject), the combined technical and psychological device that Maugham borrows from Conrad and turns on its head. Unlike Conrad's Marlow, Maugham's narrator is drawn to the visionary not by sympathy but by mere curiosity, circumstantially created by the entreaties of Strickland's abandoned wife, whom he meets in London at the book's start, and, later on, by the circumstances of World War I, when he finds himself in Tahiti after Strickland has died. Even though Maugham's narrator is

himself an artist (a professional writer), he does not glorify the artist's pain and suffering. "I have nothing but horror," says Maugham in a 1917 entry in "A Writer's Notebook", "for the literary cultivation of suffering which has been so fashionable of late." Despite the narrator's fascination with Strickland, there is no kinship, nor is there antagonism. There is instead a preposterously cool neutrality, made convincing by the charming avuncularity of tone that is Maugham's stylistic signature.

This charm is what makes the Maugham narrator the central force in "The Moon and Sixpence", and a special voice in English fiction as a whole. Nameless in "The Moon and Sixpence", this persona came to be used more and more by Maugham over the years, acquiring the name of Ashenden in many of Maugham's stories. He even survives his incarnation as Ashenden with the publication of "The Razor's Edge" (1944), when he takes on Maugham's own name. Endearingly paradoxical, the Maugham narrator is sophisticated and cynical, but also affable and companionable; dry and indirect, but also vivid and straightforward. While it may appear that his exact descriptive powers in "The Moon and Sixpence" contrast with the lack of an explanation to the puzzle of Strickland, his unwillingness to offer allegorical answers to aesthetic, existential, or metaphysical quandaries is of a piece with his trenchant exactitude. If something cannot be described, what is its status? Maugham had little use for the ineffable, not because his sympathy for Romantic vision was nil, but because the realist in him bridled at the excessive poeticity to which the description of inward states of mind might lead. He mocks the dangers of such rhetorical self-indulgence in the opening chapters of "The Moon and Sixpence", finally throwing up his hands in the face of the bad writing that results from it in order to get on with his story.

The novel is written largely from the point of view of the narrator, who is first introduced to the character of Strickland through his (Strickland's) wife and strikes him (the narrator) as unremarkable. Certain chapters are entirely composed of the stories or narrations of others which the narrator himself is recalling from memory (selectively editing or elaborating on certain aspects of dialogue, particularly Strickland's, as Strickland is said by the narrator to be limited in his use of verbiage and tended to use gestures in his expression).

The novel "The Moon and Sixpence" is about the problem of human and art in every sense of the word. The character of Charles Strickland, the mild mannered stockbroker who rejected everything in life for a single-minded pursuit of his art, as the archetype of what art is and what the artist must do to achieve it. His relations with others show the depths to which one must truly stoop in order to create something of enduring truth and meaning. In contrast, the character of Stroeve is the archetype of love, and he conducts himself in the way all must who wish to put love above all else. Their conflict over Stroeve's wife Blanche is extremely interesting when viewed in this context, to say nothing about Blanche's motivations for choosing Strickland (art) over Stroeve (love). The real ending of the book should have been with the image of the pictures Strickland painted on the walls of his Tahitian home, pictures painted while going blind from leprosy, pictures that were beautiful and obscene, pictures that revealed an understanding of the workings of the universe man was never meant to know, and pictures Strickland would surround himself with after going blind and study in the dark center of his mind's eye, seeing more than anyone had ever seen before. The few paragraphs that follows this are a bit of an anticlimax, but probably necessary. The final scene with Strickland's abandoned wife and child potential degree. Presumably Strickland's "moon" is the idealistic realm of Art and Beauty, while the "sixpence" represents human relationships and the ordinary pleasures of life.

“The Moon and Sixpence” can be read as a treatise on the tension that exists between the idealistic pursuit of art and the ability to maintain healthy human relationships and from that perspective its disturbing message is clearly that the artist can have one or the other, but not both.

We believe there’s a deeper reading of “The Moon and Sixpence”, a much more fascinating reading that puts the tension not between competing ideals and forces of the world at large, but within the artist himself. The narrator refers to Strickland’s inward focus and a kind of desperate inner struggle again and again in the novel. Like when he first visits Strickland in Paris. He says that he never cared for Paris, for the sightseeing, as if he travelled Paris for 100 hundred times. The author tells the reader that any person whoever visits Paris for several times will anyway be fascinated by the sights and monuments of it, but Strickland was really not interested in it, he was very cold toward the beauty of the city. He is possessed by some outer force. He is in search of something which he does not know himself. He is so much devoted to art and painting that even forgets about himself. He is transformed into some kind of machine, if we can say so.

Another important aspect of Strickland’s “transformation” is the way he draws pictures. Meanwhile he had never ceased to work at his art; but had soon tired of the studios, entirely by himself. He had never been so poor that he could not buy canvas and paint, and really he needed nothing else. He painted with great difficulty, and in his unwillingness to accept help from anyone lost much time in finding out for himself the solution of technical problems. He was aiming at something, and perhaps he hardly knew himself; 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, 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.

CONCLUSION

English literature is passing through a period of transition and any forecasts concerning its further development would be arbitrary. One thing seems certain, however – the best works of contemporary prose and poetry are being put at the service of the momentous issues of today and bear relevance to the needs aspirations of humanity. Literature is the vision of life. Its main aspect is human being, his acts, his fights, his love, his hatred, happiness and grief. Human being is considered to be the leading core in the creation of literature, because the author creates the overall content of the work through the human being. While creating literary image, the writer shows his individual aspects as well. It is not an easy task to get to the heart of the readers through the books. One of the great writers of the English Literature William Somerset Maugham could combine both human character and the art in his novel “The Moon and Sixpence”. The novel could show us the devotion of a man to art, his sacrifice and finally his grief. He ends up his life getting blind and living a miserable life. William Somerset Maugham can be considered as one of the brightest representatives of the English Literature. That’s why, in my opinion, it is important to read, analyze and spread his novels to the people.

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