

## The Construction of Identity in *the Moon and Sixpence*

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### Original Research Article

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**Abstract:** The Moon and Sixpence is told 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. In this novel, Strickland tried to search for his identity that he had lost in the past years. He deconstructed his former identity and constructed his new identity. Strickland searched for this identity through several steps: First, to get rid of the bondage of family. Second, don't care what others think about him. Third, to accept a support. Finally, died but fulfilling his construction of identity.

**Keywords:** Charles Strickland, identity, the Moon and Sixpence, painting.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Moon and Sixpence* is a novel by W. Somerset Maugham first published in 1919. The story is in part based on the life of the painter Paul Gauguin. In this novel, Strickland is a well-off, middle-class stockbroker in London in late 19th or early 20th century. Strickland wants to search for his identity. Such as Lois Tyson has mentioned that "We don't really have an identity because the word identity implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties, and intentions" [1]. An identity is a person's self-conception, social presentation, and more generally, the aspects of a person that make them unique, or qualitatively different from others.

The job of stockbroker is not his interest even though the couple's life was nothing special for the outsiders. "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." In Strickland's whole life, he took a lot of efforts to search for his identity.

"You did meet Charles Strickland, didn't you?"

Not only her face, but her whole body, gave a sense of alacrity. I nodded. I wondered if the poor devil had been hammered on the Stock Exchange or run over by an omnibus.

"Isn't it dreadful? He's run away from his wife " [2].

Early in the novel, he leaves his wife and children and goes to Paris. He lives a destitute but defiantly content life there as an artist, lodging in run-

down hotels and falling prey to both illness and hunger. Even though the life in Paris was miserable for him, this is the first step that he pursued his real interest. If one person wants to indulge his life in arts or some like that, he must have enough time and space to do that. Of course, a happy family will be a big burden for Strickland. Thus, he gets rid of the bondage of family without hesitating.

Strickland, in his drive to express through his art what appears to continually possess and compel him on the inside, cares nothing for physical discomfort and is indifferent to his surroundings. He lived in a very shabby hotel in Paris that the author even can not believe that Strickland really live in this hotel.

"It was a street of small shops subservient to the needs of poor people, and about the middle of it, on the left as I walked down, was the Hotel des Belges. My own hotel was modest enough, but it was magnificent in comparison with this. It was a tall, shabby building, that cannot have been painted for years, and it had so bedraggled an air that the houses on each side of it looked neat and clean. The dirty windows were all shut. It was not here that Charles Strickland lived in guilty

splendour with the unknown charmer for whose sake he had abandoned honour and duty. ”

He is also indifferent to what others say about the abandonment of his wife and children. He thinks they can live a happy life without him. At this aspect, he is nearly mad. He will not care about his wife and children any more. He thought he has sacrifice enough before and now he has to do something meaningful for him.

"How is she going to live?"

"I've supported her for seventeen years. Why shouldn't she support herself for a change?"

"She can't. "

"Let her try. "

"Don't you care for her any more?"

"Not a bit, " he replied.

"Damn it all, there are your children to think of. They've never done you any harm. They didn't ask to be brought into the world. If you chuck everything like this, they'll be thrown on the streets.

"They've had a good many years of comfort. It's much more than the majority of children have. Besides, somebody will look after them" [2].

He needs Blanche who is the wife of his supporter Dirk Stroeve to become a model for his painting, he took away her. Blanche, abandon her husband for Strickland. Strickland later discards her; all he really sought from Blanche was a model to his 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. Blanche then commits suicide, however in Strickland's single-minded, the only important thing was the pursuit of art and beauty. He doesn't care about Blanche's feeling that she even left her husband for loving him. He even thinks the woman's love would be a burden but nothing.

"But why did you want to take her away with you?" I asked.

"I didn't, " he answered, frowning. "When she said she was coming I was nearly as surprised as Stroeve. I told her that when I'd had enough of her she'd have to go, and she said she'd risk that. " He paused a little. "She had a wonderful body, and I wanted to paint a nude. When I'd finished my picture I took no more interest in her. "

"I don't want love. I haven't time for it. It's weakness. I am a man, and sometimes I want a woman. When I've satisfied my passion I'm ready for other things. I can't overcome my desire, but I hate it; it imprisons my spirit; I look forward to the time when I

shall be free from all desire and can give myself without hindrance to my work. Because women can do nothing except love, they've given it a ridiculous importance. They want to persuade us that it's the whole of life. It's an insignificant part. I know lust. That's normal and healthy. Love is a disease. Women are the instruments of my pleasure; I have no patience with their claim to be helpmates, partners, companions " [2].

At Paris, he doesn't have any jobs and the only thing he does is painting. He is helped and supported by a commercially successful but coward Dutch painter, Dirk Stroeve, who recognizes Strickland's genius as a painter. He appreciated the talent of Strickland very much and gave him a lot of help.

After the Paris, Strickland lived in Tahiti. He took up a native woman called Ata who can help him on his living and support his painting in heart and soul. Of course, Ata has some fortune herself and she can give Strickland a little help when he is very poor at that time.

"She was pretty enough. And she knew how to cook. I taught her myself. I've given her good wages and she's saved them, and the captains and the first mates she's known have given her a little something now and then. She's saved several hundred francs. ”

The reason that he settled in Tahiti at last is that only this place will not treat him as a stranger. That place will accept any kinds of odd things. He can do whatever he wants. He can find his lost identity here.

"Here, on this remote island, he seemed to have aroused none of the detestation with which he was regarded at home, but compassion rather; and his vagaries were accepted with tolerance. To these people, native and European, he was a queer fish, but they were used to queer fish, and they took him for granted; the world was full of odd persons, who did odd things; and perhaps they knew that a man is not what he wants to be, but what he must be. In England and France he was the square peg in the round hole, but here the holes were any sort of shape, and no sort of peg was quite amiss. I do not think he was any gentler here, less selfish or less brutal, but the circumstances were more favourable. If he had spent his life amid these surroundings he might have passed for no worse a man than another. He received here what he neither expected nor wanted among his own people -- sympathy.”

Strickland lived in Tahiti for a few years, then died in ofleprosy. Although he is blind for nearly one year, he still insists on painting on the wall. He dreamed of painting whatever in his mind. He always tried to express himself through painting. This is what he is trying to look for. Finally, he fulfilled his dream and

nothing was a pity for him. This is his whole identity that he is looking for all the time.

“Then he gave a start. He could not make out where he was. He seemed on a sudden to have entered a magic world. He had a vague impression of a great primeval forest and of naked people walking beneath the trees. Then he saw that there were paintings on the walls.”

“I had been thinking of it, too. It seemed to me that here Strickland had finally put the whole expression of himself. Working silently, knowing that it was his last chance, I fancied that here he must have said all that he knew of life and all that he divined. And I fancied that perhaps here he had at last found peace. The demon which possessed him was exorcised at last, and with the completion of the work, for which all his life had been a painful preparation, rest descended on his remote and tortured soul. He was willing to die, for he had fulfilled his purpose.”

"I think Strickland knew it was a masterpiece. He had achieved what he wanted. His life was complete. He had made a world and saw that it was good. Then, in pride and contempt, he destroyed, it" [2].

Although at last, he let Ata destroy the masterpiece on the wall he created, this is a pity for all the people who admire the talent of Strickland. For Strickland himself, this work needn't exist in this world anymore, it is meaningless for him because he has found what he really wants.

#### **SUMMARY**

In the whole novel, Strickland was seeking for something. At the beginning, he lived a happy life ostensibly but his life was meaningless for him. We even can not sense the existence of Strickland before he left for Paris. Then Strickland left his family for arts. He tried to find himself. From that, all he does was for his arts. He only cares about his arts. His living was for arts. This is his real identity for him. When he found the real identity, his life was over too. This symbolized that he has already had a whole identity when his dream come true. He has already found his identity.

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