



REALISM AND EXISTENTIALISM IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S THE MOON AND SIXPENCE: THE ARTIST'S SEARCH FOR ABSOLUTE FREEDOM

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Abstract. This paper analyzes Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* through the dual lens of realism and existentialism, focusing on the protagonist's pursuit of absolute freedom as an artist. The novel's realist foundation captures the tangible world of bourgeois morality and social convention, while its existential undercurrents reveal a man's rebellion against that very structure. Maugham's narrative thus becomes a bridge between two aesthetic worlds — one concerned with the external reality of life, the other with the internal necessity of freedom. The study argues that Charles Strickland's journey from social conformity to artistic transcendence reflects not only the crisis of the modern individual but also the paradox of freedom that defines twentieth-century thought.

Keywords: Maugham, existentialism, realism, freedom, individuality, alienation, art, modernism, morality, authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* occupies a unique place in the canon of modern English literature. Published in 1919, the novel appeared at a moment when traditional realism was giving way to introspective modernism and existential inquiry. While Maugham is often classified as a realist, his treatment of the human condition in this novel goes far beyond descriptive representation. Through the figure of Charles Strickland, Maugham delves into the metaphysical questions of being, choice, and freedom — issues that would later define existentialist literature.

The central paradox of *The Moon and Sixpence* lies in its protagonist's radical rejection of social norms and moral expectations in pursuit of art. Maugham depicts the artist not as a romantic idealist but as an existential figure who must sever all ties with conventional life to achieve authenticity. In this sense, Strickland's flight from London's



materialistic society to the primitive landscapes of Tahiti is both a realistic event and a symbolic journey toward absolute creative freedom.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Maugham's realism stems from his acute observation of ordinary life. His depiction of middle-class England — its manners, hypocrisies, and moral codes — provides the necessary background against which Strickland's rebellion gains significance. The first part of the novel is structured almost like a sociological study: the narrator observes the conventions that define success, respectability, and decency in Edwardian society.

Yet Maugham's realism is never superficial. He exposes the emptiness of social appearances and the fragility of moral authority. Through irony and understatement, he portrays the polite world as spiritually sterile. Strickland's decision to abandon his family thus appears as an act of violent clarity — a rejection of the false values of a world governed by money, reputation, and habit.

The author's precise and detached style strengthens the effect of this realism. Maugham describes the emotional consequences of Strickland's choices without moral commentary, allowing readers to confront the raw facts of existence themselves. His prose reflects the realism of human psychology rather than external circumstance, anticipating the existential concern with individual consciousness and moral ambiguity [1].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Existentialism, as later formulated by thinkers like Sartre and Camus, centers on the individual's confrontation with the absurdity of life and the necessity of self-creation. Although Maugham wrote before existentialism became a formal movement, *The Moon and Sixpence* embodies its core concerns. Strickland's life is a radical act of self-definition — he refuses all predetermined roles and seeks meaning solely through his creative act.

For Strickland, the bourgeois life represents a form of imprisonment: a series of mechanical routines that deny the self's authentic desires. His departure from home is not motivated by selfishness alone; it is an existential awakening. Maugham portrays his journey as a stripping away of illusions — social, moral, and emotional. The artist's path becomes a pilgrimage toward truth, where freedom is achieved not by comfort but by confrontation with loneliness, pain, and mortality.



The existential quality of Maugham's narrative is intensified by the narrator's uncertainty. The storyteller cannot fully comprehend Strickland's motives or his art, symbolizing the limits of human understanding. This epistemological tension — between knowledge and mystery, empathy and judgment — aligns the novel with existentialist fiction, where the quest for meaning often ends in ambiguity rather than resolution.

Absolute freedom, as depicted in Maugham's novel, is both the goal and the curse of the artist. In rejecting every bond that ties him to others, Strickland achieves autonomy, yet that autonomy isolates him completely. His art, born of this isolation, becomes a substitute for human connection — an immortal expression of what he can no longer feel.

Maugham reveals the paradox inherent in such freedom: liberation from society entails exile from humanity. Strickland's moral indifference, his contempt for compassion, and his pursuit of beauty at any cost reflect a tragic transformation. The artist becomes godlike in his creative power, but in doing so he loses his human dimension [2].

This duality resonates with the existential theme of alienation. Strickland's condition mirrors what Sartre would later describe as "existence preceding essence." By rejecting all inherited definitions — husband, father, gentleman — Strickland attempts to create his own essence through art. Yet, in the absence of ethical grounding, his freedom turns into solitude and self-destruction. Maugham thus anticipates the existential insight that total freedom, untempered by moral awareness, leads not to fulfillment but to despair.

One of the most compelling aspects of *The Moon and Sixpence* is how it unites the visible and invisible realms of existence. Maugham's realist technique anchors the story in tangible detail, while the philosophical undercurrent transforms those details into symbols of transcendence. Tahiti, with its natural abundance and sensual vitality, represents a world uncorrupted by civilization — the antithesis of European restraint [3].

In this exotic landscape, Strickland attains the creative vision that eluded him in Europe. He paints not what he sees but what he feels — the eternal essence behind appearances. Maugham describes this process in simple, unadorned prose, yet the imagery evokes spiritual revelation. Strickland's art fuses matter and spirit, body and idea, life and death. The act of painting becomes a ritual of transcendence through which the artist confronts the divine within himself.



However, Maugham resists romanticizing this transcendence. Strickland's vision is absolute but inhuman; it annihilates everything personal. His final masterpiece, painted on the walls of his Tahitian hut, is both a triumph of artistic creation and a symbol of mortality — destroyed upon his death, leaving only the legend of its beauty. Maugham thereby suggests that the pursuit of transcendence is inseparable from destruction; the artist's freedom exists only in the fleeting moment of creation.

A distinctive feature of Maugham's novel is the use of an unreliable, reflective narrator. The narrator admires Strickland yet cannot fully grasp his inner world. This narrative distance produces irony — the gap between what the narrator perceives and what the reader intuits. Through this device, Maugham emphasizes the impossibility of comprehending the artist's experience from an external, rational standpoint [4].

This ironic perspective transforms the novel into a meditation on perception itself. The narrator's failure to understand becomes a metaphor for humanity's inability to fathom genius or freedom. Realism, which seeks to capture life objectively, here collapses before the mystery of subjectivity. Thus, Maugham fuses realist observation with existential questioning, showing that the more faithfully we record reality, the more we perceive its unfathomable depth.

Maugham's treatment of morality is deliberately ambiguous. He does not condone Strickland's cruelty, yet he refuses to moralize it. Instead, he presents art as a realm where conventional ethics cease to apply. Strickland's indifference to suffering challenges the reader's sense of justice and empathy, forcing a reconsideration of moral values in the face of creative necessity.

This moral ambiguity reflects the novel's existential realism. Freedom, for Maugham, is inseparable from responsibility, yet the artist's responsibility is to truth, not to comfort. Strickland embodies the Nietzschean notion that the creator must “go beyond good and evil” to reveal the essence of life. In doing so, he becomes both a visionary and a destroyer — the ultimate symbol of modern man's divided soul [5].

Maugham's ethical vision thus transcends simplistic judgment. He portrays the artist as a tragic hero of the modern age — a man who achieves eternity through art but loses the capacity to love. The price of freedom, the novel implies, is isolation; the reward, immortality.



CONCLUSION

Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* stands at the crossroads of realism and existentialism, uniting empirical observation with metaphysical inquiry. Through the figure of Charles Strickland, Maugham explores the modern artist's search for absolute freedom — a quest that leads simultaneously to creation and destruction, fulfillment and alienation.

Maugham's realism grounds the narrative in the recognizable world of human behavior, while his existential insight transforms that world into a stage for moral and spiritual revelation. The novel suggests that true freedom is both the artist's salvation and his curse: to live authentically, one must stand apart from all that binds ordinary existence.

Ultimately, *The Moon and Sixpence* is not only a story about art; it is a profound reflection on the human condition itself — the perpetual tension between the desire for transcendence and the necessity of belonging. Maugham's synthesis of realism and existentialism reveals that the search for freedom, though it may lead to solitude and death, is the defining act of creative life.

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