

An Analysis of William Somerset Maugham's Sexual Prejudice in *The Moon and Sixpence*

Lu Wang

School of Western Languages Mudanjiang Normal University, Mudanjiang 157000, Heilongjiang China

Abstract: *The Moon and Sixpence*, written by William Somerset Maugham, is a highly influential novel. Maugham employs the first-person narrative technique in this work and portrays three female characters. Due to the limitations of the era and the influence of his personal experiences, Maugham possessed a particular bias against women. This bias is also evident in his depiction of female characters in *The Moon and Sixpence*. Through a feminist lens, this essay aims to analyze the author's portrayal of the characters and their perspectives on life, revealing the author's prejudice towards women. The essay comprises of four chapters: Chapter One serves as an introduction, highlighting the purpose and significance of the essay. Additionally, it provides background information on the author and outlines the main content of the novel. Chapter Two explicitly analyzes Maugham's perception of women as portrayed through the three female characters in *The Moon and Sixpence*. It delves into the prejudice against women and explores the reasons behind this discrimination, including familial influences, the impact of marriage, and other societal factors. Chapter Three elaborates on the practical significance of examining Maugham's bias and prejudice against women in *The Moon and Sixpence*. It aims to raise women's independent conscious and promote gender equality. Lastly, Chapter Four concludes the essay by summarizing the perspectives and main content discussed.

Keywords: *The Moon and Sixpence*; Female characters; Sexual discrimination; Independent consciousness

1. Introduction

"*The Moon and Sixpence*" is a novel written by the English novelist William Somerset Maugham and was published in 1919. Maugham was born in Paris on January 25th, 1874. His father worked as a lawyer in the British Embassy in France. Unfortunately, Maugham lost both of his parents before the age of ten and was subsequently sent back to England to be raised by his uncle. During his time at Canterbury Royal School, Maugham endured bullying and torment from older students, often being humiliated due to his short stature and severe stammer. This lonely and challenging childhood left a lasting impact on his perception of the world and influenced his literary works. As stated by Hastings (2010, p. 50), "His early experiences had a profound effect on his worldview and literary creation."

The novel features a range of female characters, with only a few portrayed as honest and kind, while the majority are depicted as hypocritical and artificial. This essay begins by examining three female characters: Mrs. Strickland, Blanche, and Ata. It analyzes Strickland's different attitudes towards these women, which reflects the author's bias against women. Further exploration is made into why the author harbors a negative attitude towards women, attributing it to the influence of his mother and wife, as well as his own homosexuality. Additionally, the essay emphasizes the importance of examining the sexual bias present in "*The Moon and Sixpence*," as it can highlight the need for women to strive for equality and happiness.

2. Maugham's View of Women Expressed in *The Moon and Sixpence*

Maugham presents Strickland, the protagonist, as a heroic figure who forsakes his conventional lifestyle to pursue painting. Mrs. Strickland, Blanche, and Ata are three female figures who play significant roles in Strickland's life. Through an examination of these characters, Maugham's portrayal of women aligns with the prevailing societal attitudes and expectations towards women at that time.

The predominant social mainstream during that era emphasized certain qualities in an ideal woman, such as gentleness, submissiveness to her husband, obedience, selflessness towards the family, and a willingness to sacrifice her own individuality (Butler,

1990: 8).^[1] Consequently, this paper aims to discern the author's perspective on women through the depiction of these three female characters. While Maugham's portrayal includes rejecting, biased, and disparaging depictions of women, he also portrays women in a rational and multifaceted manner.

2.1 Maugham's Prejudice Against Women in *The Moon and Sixpence*

By dismissing these female characters and constructing them as figments of imagination, they become symbols of the environment in which men exist and create value. In the capitalist society depicted in the novel, women are marginalized, always playing the role of the "other" and becoming the most prominent victims of a patriarchal society. Even if some of these women attempt to challenge their circumstances, their efforts are met with humiliation and tragedy, resulting in their suppression and abandonment of self-discovery.^[2]

On one hand, the protagonist harshly criticizes women, expressing his dissatisfaction and disgust. On the other hand, he idealizes them, projecting his desires and hopes onto them, whether in a malicious or idealized manner. Maugham's view of women was biased, evident in his tendency to present them as mere appendages to men, lacking spirituality, subjectivity, autonomy, and reduced to passive and inferior objects.^[3]

2.1.1 The Dualistic Female Image

In the novel, Mrs. Strickland is widely recognized as a good wife. Coming from a noble family, she has lived amongst the English aristocracy from a young age and has cultivated a prominent social standing. She always manages to find a topic of discussion at social gatherings, breaking the silence and leading the conversations around common themes.

However, beneath this facade lies a falsity. Mrs. Strickland demonstrates a sense of self-righteousness, projecting a sense of happiness to the outside world. "She fails to understand her husband's pursuits and dreams" (Sun, 2016:1)^[4], according to Strickland. In his eyes, she exemplifies hypocrisy.

2.1.2 The Ruthless portrayal of Women

Their seemingly contented marriage turned out to be fragile and susceptible to upheaval. When he came to Strickland's rescue, Blanche, who was typically modest and kind, unexpectedly lost her temper, unleashing rude remarks. Eventually, she relented under her husband's persuasion. It was then that she couldn't help but be captivated by the artist, ultimately forsaking her husband, who had gallantly saved her without hesitation.^[5]

2.1.3 Stupid and Ignorant Female Image

When Strickland arrived on the South Pacific island of Tahiti by chance, his passion for painting captured the heart of Ata, a native girl. The two eventually married and had a child. In essence, Maugham presents Ata as an institution designed solely for Strickland's benefit. She has no desires or aspirations of her own. However, this portrayal represents a significant form of discrimination against women, as it depicts them as devoid of individual thoughts and lives. The reasons behind Maugham's sexual prejudice can be attributed to the following factors.^[6]

2.2 Reasons for Maugham's Prejudice Against Women

Certainly, one's upbringing and environment strongly influence the way they portray characters. Reflecting on his painful memories of women in his life, including his beloved mother, mistress, and wife, Maugham developed a strong misconception of all women. Three specific reasons contribute to Maugham's biased views on gender, namely, family circumstances, the impact of marriage, and other societal factors.^[7]

2.2.1 Family Reasons

When Maugham was just eight years old, his mother passed away due to tuberculosis, leaving him with a lasting symbol of her existence - a picture. Unfortunately, his father also passed away two years later, leaving him orphaned and subjected to the harsh emotional cruelty of his uncle. Maugham endured taunts for his poor English skills and below-average height compared to his peers. The absence of ideal women in his real-life experiences led Maugham to develop a disdain for them.

2.2.2 Influence of Marriage

Maugham's experience with marriage was tumultuous, marked by several unsuccessful romantic relationships. His marriage itself was characterized by unhappiness, lacking any feelings of love or compatibility. He believed that his wife had no right to exert control over him, as their union was forced by moral obligations rather than genuine affection.

In response to his dissatisfaction with real-life marriage, Maugham sought to create an idealized version of a wife in his novel "The Moon and Sixpence," personified by the character of Ata, who embodied the virtues he sought in a partner.^[8]

2.2.3 Social Factors

In society, his unconventional love relationships with his friends are deemed unacceptable. Furthermore, women began to break

free from their traditional roles within the family, actively pursuing their own desires and promoting individualism. This shift, with the diminishing emphasis on motherhood, disgusted Maugham.

There are certain poignant statements in Maugham's book that warrant contemplation. Therefore, the paper explores the concept of feminism and endeavors to awaken women's consciousness through Maugham's work.

Advocating for Gender Equality

3. Exploring the Importance of Analyzing Sexual Prejudice

There are so many sharp words in the article. Indeed, women are used to attaching great importance to love and marriage. Women want the lover to be gentle and considerate, hoping marriage can become a woman's haven. Men, on the other hand, think differently. Love and marriage are only a tiny part of their life. So the paper has some expressions about arousing the awareness of women themselves from feminism. Therefore, the following part will be the practical significance of *The Moon and Sixpence*, which involves waking women's independent awareness and promoting gender equality.

3.1 Fostering Women's Independent Awareness

The Moon and Sixpence explores the male perspective, which often results in an unfair portrayal of women. Female voices are neglected and distorted, disregarding the true characteristics of women themselves. In a society shaped by male consciousness, the progress of men relies on the suppression of women's value. Female subjectivity is repressed, forcing them to abandon their pursuit of freedom and conform to the expectations of the patriarchal society.

Deviating from these standards often leads to tragic consequences. Consequently, readers must critically analyze texts created by men, recognizing and challenging the underlying sexual discrimination within them. This will help readers dismantle the manipulation of ideology presented in these texts.

3.2 Advocating for Gender Equality

The author of this thesis places significant emphasis on analyzing the female characters in order to highlight the unjust treatment they receive, a perspective often overlooked by other authors. However, the author of this paper is committed to deeply analyzing Maugham's bias and prejudice against women in order to promote gender equality.

4. Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, women should possess a sense of female consciousness, challenge the unfair and unjust patriarchal society, and strive for autonomy and marriage. They should be respected by others as their status as women becomes more evident. It is important to also reflect upon the portrayal of women in the paper.

This paper aims to analyze Maugham's prejudice against women by examining the characters of the three women in "The Moon and Sixpence" and exploring the reasons behind Maugham's discriminatory views. Ultimately, women should break free from society's expectations and fulfill their spiritual and material needs while asserting control over their bodies, lives, and destinies. This analysis of Maugham's prejudice against women and its underlying reasons is significant for promoting gender equality and prompting reflection on the social status of women.

References:

- [1] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- [2] Calder, Robert. *The Life of Somerset Maugham*. London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1989.
- [3] Hastings, Selina Shirley. *The Secret Livers of Somerset Maugham*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- [4] Sun Yajie. "The Relationship between Characters in *The Moon and Sixpence* from the Perspective of Existentialism", *Northern Literature*, 2016 (5).
- [5] Rogal, Samuel J. *A William Somerset Maugham Encyclopedia*. London: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- [6] Jing Lili. "An Existential Feminist Interpretation of Maugham's *Veil*", *Modern Chinese*. 2017 (9) Li Yinhe. *Feminism*. Shandong: Shandong People's Publishing House, 2003.
- [7] Wang Mingxia. "Interpreting Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* from a Feminist Perspective", *Overseas English*, 2014 (24).
- [8] Zhang Guangli. *Postmodern Feminist Theory and Women's Development*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2005.