

The Narrator as Biographer in W. Somerset Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence

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Abstract

W.Somerset Maugham is considered to be one of the most substantial figures in the early twentieth-century literary landscape. His short stories embody his best work and some of his novels occupy considerable fame. The Moon and Sixpence is famous for its fictional portrayal of the post-impressionistic painter, Paul Gauguin and through this novel, Maugham sets out his usual conversational tone and introduces the character of a narrator who plays a significant part in shaping the unknown accounts of the protagonist, Charles Strickland. In my paper, I argue about the relevance of the first-person narrative style, and the use of biographical techniques for a work that is far from a biography. I draw on the parallelisms between the fictional protagonist and the prototype he is modelled on. I aim to study questions such as how the author engages with the reader to mould his story, what is the true nature of the narrator and to what extent author's interpretation plays a role in character portrayal. I also examine the function of memory and reminisces that influence the narrative and language as a mode of expression.

Keywords: Somerset Maugham, The Moon and Sixpence, Narrative Theory, Narrator as Biographer, Story-telling, Early Modern Literature.

1. Introduction

The role of a biographer, according to Samuel Johnson, is to accurately and truthfully portray the life of their subject stating that "nothing can be more just than to give every man his due, and to place him in the light in which he would wish to be seen." He emphasized that a biographer should strive to understand their subject's motives and desires to a degree that helps them provide insights into the human condition and what makes them stand apart from the rest of the world. Somerset Maugham's seminal work The Moon and Sixpence attempts to depict the biography of the fictional painter Charles Strickland from a similar perspective.

As a first-person omniscient narrator, Maugham relies on memory rather than facts that serve his purpose of authentically laying bare the mystery that comes along with genius, the ugly with truth, and the hostility with redemption. Drawing on the experiences of one of the most famous painters of the post-impressionistic period, Paul Gauguin, “many critics recognized its inadequacy as a biography” (Macey 1997) and derided his subject as an obnoxious and unsentimental idol even when the narrator repeatedly expressed his inability to separate from biases. This unorthodox approach to storytelling which Sheldon Liebman condemns as being more about the anonymous narrator rather than his subject of observation is befitting to speculate and consider the narrator as an alter-ego of Strickland.

This raises the question of the autobiographical investments in the narrative. Like Maugham, the narrator aspires to write and “wanders among his recollections of the world of letters in London” (Maugham 2008) even though the first few pages of the novel directly apprehend the various accounts written either in praise or abnegation of the posthumous success of Strickland. These fictional biographers, as pointed out by David Macey-

“..the art critic Huret, the artist’s son Robert, the German scholar Weitbrecht-Rotholz, and the American Van Busche Taylor, each tell a different story about the painter who recedes into increasing obscurity as the novel progresses. In the end, the novel is not about Strickland at all, nor is it the story of the anonymous narrator or of Somerset Maugham.” (62)

Who is the story about or what is the story about, if storytelling is the essence of a narrative, its drive, and motive? Through this paper, I will study the parallels between the function of a biographer and a fictional narrator keeping *The Moon and Sixpence* as reference. I will explore the themes of truth, mystery, and identity of the narrated “I” with that of the real “I” and attempt to locate the problems of language in author-identity formation.

2.Portrayal Vs Interpretation

The basic problem raised by Maugham through his many works is the motivation of human choices. In this particular case, the most perturbing question for readers is why Charles Strickland chose to abandon his loving wife, his innocent children, and his comfortable lifestyle in London to pursue his passion. This predicament portrayed by Maugham is interpreted as a curious misfortune rather than a distressing one for the narrator who had not learnt the contradictoriness of human nature. The narrator as a novice novelist “proposes not to create but to recreate his subject’s life by weaving a variety of stories into a single, coherent narrative” (Macey 1997) that can best portray what he interpreted to be the valid reason for his choices.

There is a keen association and an early indication of the plausibility for change, not just for the protagonist and the narrator with their shared passion for the unknown but also for the readers who peak into the reality of ordinariness in life and relationships through the words of the narrator-

“...the story of innumerable couples, and the pattern of life it offers has a homely grace. It reminds you of a placid rivulet, meandering smoothly through green pastures and shaded by pleasant trees, till at last it falls into the vasty sea; but the sea is so

calm, so silent, so indifferent, that you are troubled suddenly by a vague uneasiness. Perhaps it is only by a kink in my nature, strong in me even in those days, that I felt in such an existence, the share of the great majority, something amiss. I recognised its social values, I saw its ordered happiness, but a fever in my blood asked for a wilder course. There seemed to me something alarming in such easy delights. In my heart was a desire to live more dangerously. I was not unprepared for jagged rocks and treacherous shoals if I could only have change -- change and the excitement of the unforeseen." (Maugham 2008)

Whether Strickland believed in the same philosophy is never directly pointed out in the novel however it suggests an intimacy, an inescapable propensity between the biographer and his subject, the interpreter and art, the storyteller and his character, and this becomes the spirit of the novel.

Before embarking upon the story, Maugham's narrator provides an inventory of biographical narratives and quickly rejects them for their "calculated" outlines that merely "whet the appetites of the inquiring" (Maugham 2008) masses. He finds Strickland's son's biography "colourless and dull" for his interpretation of the facts of his father's life merely juxtaposes to serve his purpose of removing certain misconceptions that plagued his contemporary world. The German scholar further refutes the young Strickland's biography for its untruth and bias. Each of the pieces written through reminiscences, fascination, and contempt are incompatible to be called biographies because none of them knew him the way the narrator did and this emphasizes his need to give voice to a character even if he is amoral or vile, in a language that represents the truth.

Here language is the primary source of expression for the narrator while his subject "seemed to express himself with difficulty, as though words were not the medium with which his mind worked" (Maugham 2008) which becomes a guessing game for the narrator to put forward the best reasons for Strickland's placidness and indifference. When asked about what gave Strickland the idea of being a painter, he is unequipped to answer or rather provide the most reasonable explanation that allows the narrator to take liberty and psychologically devise a predicament of his own-

"I asked myself whether there was not in his soul some deep-rooted instinct of creation, which the circumstances of his life had obscured, but which grew relentlessly, as a cancer may grow in the living tissues, till at last it took possession of his whole being and forced him irresistibly to action." (Maugham 2008)

In Chapter 47, the acquaintance between Strickland and Captain Nichols in Marseilles is also condensed to the extent that produces an unfounded story that questions the legitimacy of the narrative. It serves as an important test for the biographer to either acknowledge his source, Captain Nichols, or dismiss him for his tendency of being an "outrageous liar" (Maugham 2008). With this confession, according to Macey, "the biographer's pretense to historical accuracy collapses" (1997) and in turn, the "biography" transforms into a work of art. But, at the same time, the concluding chapters of the novel echo autobiographical traces that again displaces the role of narrator to a biographer. The characters who had known

Strickland during his final years and who report on his decline and death are modeled after characters whom Maugham met in Tahiti who told him about Gauguin. What is portrayed as fact becomes an interpretation of truth as long as the writer of either a biography or fictional story is “more concerned to know than to judge” (Maugham 2008). Like a surgeon who dissects the organs to root out the disease without naming it beforehand, the narrator was both puzzled and horrified by the truth. This leads to catharsis for the author because he realizes what characteristics make the human heart so brittle and tough at the same time- the cosmic law of opposite interconnectedness. Hence, the intention of the biographer/narrator to stay true to the facts and reality to portray his subject becomes a constant battle to theorize truth and rationale in order to write the best interpretation of his subject.

3.A Study in Paradox and the Role of Memory

Throughout the text, while commenting on idealism and social values, the narrator adopts an experienced and mature tone, rich in contemplation, and reflections and starts many passages with the phrase “looking back”-

“I was very young when I wrote my first novel.” (9)

“When I reflect on all that happened later, I ask myself if I was thick-witted.. (23)

“I did not know then how great a part is played in women’s life by the opinion of others.” (34)

“Now that I look back I am more than ever impressed by Stroeve’s acuteness...” (131)

“Looking back, I realize that what I have written about Charles Strickland must seem very unsatisfactory.” (148)

What makes the narrator fallible or the biographer unreliable is his own judgment of himself differing from the instances when they happened and his wiser self piecing together the actions and constructing a coherent flow of events that he did not witness. At the same time, the occurrences which he personally witnessed leave him puzzled and confused. However, the narrator’s perfect understanding of his shortcomings as a chronicler informs the reader that memories play an equally important role in the narration. Unlike Somerset Maugham, the narrator knows little about art and even less about the implications of his biographical project- “I am in the position of a biologist who from a single bone must reconstruct not only the appearance of an extinct animal, but its habits.” (Maugham, 2008, p. 171) The fragmentary nature of the narration both restricts and elicits the readers to a state of fantasy where the true motivation of Strickland’s arbitrary decision becomes irrelevant. Just like the narrator who cannot invent solutions to the crisis, the reader is forced to justify Strickland as long as his true genius unfurls for criticism.

According to Richard Cordell (1961), *The Moon and Sixpence* is a study of Maugham’s favourite conviction- the half-truth and the unpredictable nature of human mind. He depicts himself as observing and recording- detached, calm and unruffled- the absurd and unexpected behaviour of all sorts of people whereas his character is introduced in the most paradoxical manner. Charles Strickland, a commonplace man without social gifts, has no interest in arts but one day, abruptly abandons everything to go to Paris to chase his dream.

But whether it was his dream to paint is not attested as a fact in any instance other than the narrator's disparaging persuasions that prompt Strickland's vehement conviction- "I tell you I've got to paint. I can't help myself. When a man falls into the water it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown." He also has a strong aversion towards social norms and filial love that only satisfies his material and carnal desires. He 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. What he longs for is spiritual fulfilment that is only possible through escapism. From one city to another, from one town to another till his final destination of settlement, the narrator further distances his subject from the familiar ground lending more obscurity to the narrative. "The artist's progressive withdrawal, from London to Paris to Marseilles to Papeete to Taravao, gives a special dimension to the psychological isolation that marks each stage of his career" (Macey, 1997, p. 66). This makes it increasingly difficult for the biographer to extract all the details of the remnants left behind in each place of sojourn and ultimately fails to enter his subject's sub consciousness. In the end, he has no choice but to elucidate or mould the stories told by other witnesses. Therefore, change his role from a subjective narrator to that of an objective biographer.

4.The Hero Vs His Real Prototype

There are similarities and differences between the hero of the novel, Charles Strickland and his real prototype, Paul Gauguin. Maugham was interested in the life and work of Gauguin as a result of his communication with the Irish artist Roderick O'Connor (1860-1940), whom the writer met in Paris in 1905. In early 1917, Maugham decided to travel to Tahiti, where he spent about a month talking with people who knew Gauguin and visiting places associated with the artist. Using facts from the biography of Paul Gauguin, Maugham explores the personality of the artist without having any opinion about the art, presenting the reader with an anomaly, a puzzle piece mistakenly put on the wrong board, a creator striving towards creativity, and a sense of freedom of the spirit- "I think that the most interesting thing in art is the artist's personality, and if that is singular, I'm willing to excuse a thousand faults" (Maugham 1). By urging the radical unknowability of people even those accepted as intimates, Maugham through his fiction is only concerned to create a "plausible harmony" between the real people and the hidden ideals that make them unique. In the words of Laurence Wright (2014), "The surface story is still there but another lies behind it" (p. 45)

With these declarations, Maugham starts the apparent biography with burgeoning objectivity only to admit repeatedly that he has rewritten the painter's life to conform to his novelistic sensibility. The confrontations between Strickland and the narrator and their friendship with Dirk Stroeve form an unreliable solidarity that takes the narrative in a different direction. The middle part of the novel concentrates on a minor character who is an object of both ridicule and empathy and there is a sharp parallel to his real prototype. Behind the fictional representation of Stroeve stands the figure of Emile Schuffenecker (1851-1934), Gauguin's benefactor during his time in Paris in 1878. Much like Charles Strickland, Gauguin

pushed around Schuffenecker who repeatedly supplied Gauguin with free paints, boards, and accommodation. Through this revelation, Maugham takes an idea from their relationship to further create a subplot between Strickland and Mrs. Blanche Stroeve, a scandal that does not have a factual foundation.

The main differences between Gauguin and Strickland are that Gauguin was French rather than English, and while 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 post-impressionists in the 1880s or rather a held a favourable position among his contemporaries. As mentioned by Wright (2014), “There is nothing in Strickland of Gauguin’s child-like zest for life, his exuberance, his fantasies, his extrovert willingness to explain his art to friends.” One of the few stark parallels that occur between the hero and his prototype comes at the end of the novel which highlights the extensive research done by Maugham to create the fictitious realm borrowed from his own travels to the Pacific Ocean and his interpretation of primitive art. How Charles Strickland arrives in Tahiti is told by the narrator after making contact with native people on the island of Tahiti like the proprietress of the hotel de la Feu- Tiare Johnson, Captain Brunot, and Dr.Coutras. What becomes is a concise concluding story of a man who by accident “hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs” (Maugham, 2008, p. 177) similar to Gauguin who arrived in Papeete in 1891 and decided to shun modernity and immerse in the exotic, wild and natural way of life.

“Strickland reached Tahiti about six months after he left Marseilles. He worked his passage on a sailing vessel that was making the trip from Auckland to San Francisco, and he arrived with a box of paints, and easel, and a dozen canvases. He had a few pounds in his pocket, for he had found work in Sydney and he took a small room in a native house outside the town. I think the moment he reached Tahiti he felt himself at home. Tiare told me that he said to her once: ‘I’d been scrubbing the deck, and all at once a chap said to me: “Why, there it is.” and I looked and I saw the outline of the island. I knew right away that there was the place I had been looking for all my life.” (Maugham,p. 176)

According to Anthony Curtis (1974), “Maugham in the final Polynesian section of the novel transforms his hero from a prickly and tiresome human being into the incarnation of a myth” and this is achieved through multiple voices- “a skillful pseudo-hagiography in which the personality of One is re-created through the recollections of many.” Here is the narrative device or technique that closely resembles that of a biographer. As long as Maugham keeps the prototype, his primary source of model at the centre stage, his hero has the opportunity to dominate the narrative. This requires a sense of abdication or wilfully rejecting to address the reader as a narrator and in turn, subdue his voice. Like traditional folk tales, the narrator has to be both a chronicler and an active listener.

The paintings mentioned in the novel have a strangeness and a vague fantastical element that leave the narrator perplexed because he is unable to penetrate them. In his many interactions with Strickland’s paintings, language fails him, and he is unequipped to express

their hidden meaning in words. According to Macey (1997), “the narrator’s biographical project fails because his text can never encompass the object that embodies its subject’s self-understanding” (p. 68), this allows Maugham to introduce his novelistic characters that best describe the nature of art. For instance this description by Dr. Coutras, who in the final days of Strickland’s debilitating life witnesses the myriad of drawings and paintings in his house with both awe and horror-

“It was strange and fantastic. It was a vision of the beginnings of the world, the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve.. it was a hymn to the beauty of human form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime, indifferent, lovely, and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the infinity of space and of the endlessness of time. Because he painted the trees I see about me every day, the coconuts, the banyans, the flamboyant, the alligator pears, I have seen them ever since differently as though there were in them a spirit and a mystery which I am ever on the point of seizing and which forever escapes me.” (Maugham 207)

Some paintings bear distinctive resemblance to those of Gauguin especially the Tahitian artworks and landscapes reflecting a subtle crudeness that the narrator thought of as “incomprehensible farce”. When Strickland undertakes a commissioned portrait “of a retired plumber for two hundred francs” (Maugham p. 82), Maugham evokes the prevalent system of artists willing to tackle low subjects, a trend that was readily adopted by Gauguin and his contemporaries. All these subtle references point to the flawed caricature of the art scene and also to the fact that Maugham used his knowledge of Gauguin’s paintings in rather specific ways to represent the artistic output of his fictional artist.

5. Who is the ‘I’

After discussing the uncanny parallelisms between fact and fiction as well as their disparities, it is important to identify the true narrative voice that attempts to bridge this gap. The narrative voice from the beginning is engaged with creating the best possible biographical sketch of his subject, Charles Strickland, which includes a psychoanalytic understanding of truth. The narrator differs from the author in nearly all works of fiction. While the narrator and author can share similarities in terms of perspective and style, they are ultimately distinct entities within the storytelling process.

Considering Barthes’ postulations, the “I” in a text is a single instance of saying “I”, it denotes a subject (syntactic position) rather than an individual, a person. Its referent is irrelevant (as well as inaccessible) to comprehending its function and meaning in the writing. Assigning the text to an author is equal to imposing a limit or closure on the mesh. In that sense, the “I” is the narrator whose sole occupation is to produce a better biography than his contemporaries or tell a better story than his fellow novelists. Like Rose Waterford, he needs to treat Charles Strickland as a “raw material” rather than a human being whose life he hopes to chronicle. Since Strickland’s life is art itself, which is as elusive as inept social skills, the narrator has to resort to the ways of a journalist. His insistence on knowing his subject better than other biographers fuels his vocation whereas the truth is nobody knows the true nature of

the artist. To make up for this lack of knowledge, he has to utilize his faculty as a writer. Writing performs rather than records or documents.

If Maugham had any intention to write a true biography of Paul Gauguin, he would have omitted the "I" even when the first-person narrative has a more personal impression. Despite his limited interactions with Strickland, the narrator shares a remarkable affiliation with his hidden soul- "He used gestures instead of adjectives, and he halted. I have put into my own words what I think he wanted to say" (Maugham, p. 76). The narrator conjectures, fancies, and predicts. He guesses or speculates everyone's intentions and is suspicious of their motives making him an unreliable source. Thus, according to Liebman (1995), "when the narrator blithely says, "There's no last word," he may be revealing more about his own estimate of Strickland and his endeavour to set the record straight than about the world of letters in early twentieth century London" (Maugham, p. 334). In the words of Archie Loss (1974), "the narrator, a novelist is very much the observer who tells what he observes but never becomes too substantial a character" (p. 38). However, the narrative persona creates a space for the reader to understand the artist-hero, which was the whole purpose of the novel, not to cement a position for the narrator in his story but to be a torchbearer in the dark mystical alleys of the artistic mind. The result is an endorsement for the artist while the reader is detached on a plane where they can judge the merits of his art.

6. Conclusion

Maugham's story comes full circle from the point of the narrator's introduction in Mrs. Strickland's household to his return bearing the news of her husband's death. Another biographer/novelist Mr. Van Busche Taylor is on a mission to write about the famous celebrated artist with the help of Strickland's wife. But instead of painful derision, she is now beholden to the responsibility of "having been the wife of a genius" (p. 213). Her two grown children, Mrs. Ronaldson and the Reverend Robert Strickland, also desire to disguise and falsify the terrible betrayals they suffered, so that they can bask in their father's posthumous fame. The narrator deliberately refrains from telling them the whole truth omitting the details about Strickland's marriage to Ata and his son. He chooses to remove the colourful and exotic details of Strickland's Tahitian adventures and sticks to what was "necessary" to narrate- his lamentable death from leprosy. "The self-conscious dishonesty of his oral account of Strickland's life participates in the more general although unintentional dishonesty of the written account that both precedes and encompasses it" (Macey 1997) and in this way the "truth" becomes a distorted semblance of the unreal or fancy.

Whether the narrator can be called a true biographer is still ambiguous to conclude but it is certain that the narration is more a product of creativity than objective reality. There are more fictitious episodes than fictitious names and this fiction creates a myth that is always subject to perspective interpretations. Each narrator in the story tries in vain to translate Strickland's philosophy and mind and in the end, inevitably defeats their hero into a holy realm- a myth that will remain impenetrable by civilization. The legend of Strickland is created not out of sympathy but mere curiosity that has cool neutrality and the narrator in his quest for enlightenment, striving towards the centre or the meaning, realizes the impossibility

of ever knowing the unknown. He is similar to the author in his intention to invent fiction, in his style and background but never equal to the author who knows the actual truth.

Like any other research, this paper is not without limitations. As mentioned by Maugham himself, his objective was to create a work of art inspired by the life of Paul Gauguin and not a biographical sketch per se. One can dismiss the whole argument by directly quoting the author but my study analyzes how the narrator could have been perceived as a biographer and the subsequent interpretations of the text thereof. I would encourage a thorough examination of Paul Gauguin's paintings and how those are mentioned in the text to best formulate a critical analysis of comparison between the protagonist and his model.

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