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‘The Faculty for Myth’: The Narrative Strategy of *The Moon and Sixpence*

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Somerset Maugham has been often denounced for using actual persons too much in his works, partly because of his sardonic tone, but mainly because of his use of facts in an obvious manner. *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) is also one of these controversial novels.

Firstly, there are a lot of studies which have compared Charles Strickland with Paul Gauguin. Above all, students of art have attacked this novel, for the novel might cause misunderstandings about Gauguin to the common readers. In the same way, the obscure and extraordinary character of Strickland has suffered harsh criticism from the literary critics. To take but one example, Catherine Mansfield says:

Then, we are not told enough. We must be shown something of the workings of his mind; we must have some comment of his upon what he feels, fuller and more exhaustive than his perpetual: ‘Go to hell.’ (Mansfield 140)

Although Mansfield seems to be unknown that the model of Strickland is Gauguin, this is a typical criticism for this novel.

These accusations appear to be based on the same concern as the historical facts they believe are falsely made up abused, consumed as popular amusement, and finally the invented fictions might become superior to their original facts, in respect of the reception by the public. However, it is likely that Maugham wrote first two chapters on purpose in anticipation of these

accusations. That is to say, he did not think of making any biographical novel, but of dramatizing the historical facts and inventing fictions. He calls it "the protest of romance" (7).

Secondly, we tend to identify the first-person narrator with Maugham. As other narrators of his novels, this anonymous 'I' in *The Moon and Sixpence* has quite similar background to Maugham.¹ Maugham also writes in his essay that he regards or pretends himself as a character in the story, and speaks through the creatures of his invention. For these reasons, critics have got excited too much to regard the shadows of the author or actual people in the narrators or some other characters who have the similar background with Maugham.

It can not be denied that Maugham uses actual people including himself as his materials of his works. Take one novel for example. Commenting on the characterizations of Edward Driffield and Alroy Kear in *Cakes and Ale* (1930), who are also considered to be modeled on the actual writers, Thomas Hardy and Hugh Walpole, Maugham controverts that:

This character [Kear] was a composite portrait: I took the appearance from one writer, the obsession with good society from another, the heartiness from a third, the pride in athletic prowess from a fourth, and a great deal from myself. (Author's Preface in *Cakes and Ale* 7)

It seems reasonable to suppose such kind of characterization to the characters of other novels. Accordingly, not only the narrator but Strickland and Strove can be regarded as one of Maugham's personas. However, these themes have been argued enough especially by a lot of earlier critics, and we will find no proper answers to them, even by Maugham himself.

Furthermore, what earlier critics mostly paid attention to was mainly Paris episode and the first scene in London, and

other parts of the story were regarded even as unnecessary or harmful to the whole construction. For example, Anthony Curtis says "These early scenes in *The Moon and Sixpence* anticipate the great short-story writer that Maugham was soon to show himself to be." (Curtis 101) But his opinion suggests that the novel consists of several short-story-like alien episodes, although they seem to be a little disorganized at first sight. I would rather argue that Maugham intentionally made these episodes apparently separate for some reasons. I will consider this problem later.

On the other hand, recent critics see this novel from different perspectives. For example, Sheldon W. Liebman is probably the first critic who says that "... the central character in *The Moon and Sixpence* is not Strickland, but the narrator." (Liebman 331) But he still regards this novel as an unreliable biography fabricated out of the narrator's "imagination" (Liebman 332), as we can see the title of the essay, 'The Unreliable narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence*.' J. David Macey, Jr. also agrees with Liebman on "the inadequacy of Maugham's novel (1919) as a "biography" of its ostensible subjects" (Macey 61). He insists that "*The Moon and Sixpence* is a story about story-telling, and it raises important questions about the role of narrative in both discovering and concealing the "truth" about its subject." (Macey 62) He emphasizes other narratives such as Mrs. Strickland, Dirk Stroeve and Captain Nichols, and states that "Each tells a different story about the painter who recedes into increasing obscurity as the novel progresses." (Macey 62) Based on his argument, each narrator tells their own versions of Strickland's episodes imposing their own desire upon him, and by such narratives, Strickland is gradually mythicized. In this paper, I would like to develop the argument of Liebman and Macy and make it clearer.

I Strickland

Before considering *The Moon and Sixpence*, it will also be significant to look at the former novel, *Of Human Bondage* (1915), which is frequently compared with the former. *Of Human Bondage* is a story of Philip Carey. It begins with his birth and ends with his marriage, and it is regarded as a typical bildungsroman. Though Philip has a similar background to Maugham, this is not Maugham's autobiography. Firstly we can already see previous suggestions of the next novel in *Of Human Bondage*. For example, the author mentions Gauguin without suggesting the name directly:

'D'you [Philip] remember my [Clutton] telling you about that chap I met in Brittany? I saw him the other day here. He's just off to Tahiti. He was broke to the world. He was a *brasseur d' affaires*, a stockbroker I suppose you call it in English; and he had a wife and family, and he was earning a large income. He chuckd it all to become a painter. He just went off and settled down in Brittany and began to paint. He hadn't got any money and did the next best thing to starving.' (*Of Human Bondage* 243)

The quotation above seems to be a short summary of the next novel. Gauguin's legend had already been created among many artists when Maugham went to Paris in his youth.² Although deeply impressed by the life of Gauguin, Maugham did not use Gauguin for his novel for about 15 years. During the World War I, he went to Tahiti and gathered stories about the painter, and even bought a picture that remained.

While *Of Human Bondage* depicts Philip's development, the better part of the novel is about the artists in Paris. Most of them are virtually unknown and did not succeed. One of the different things between two novels is that there is no genius

in *Of Human Bondage*, whereas the protagonist of the next novel is emphatically described as a genius. After seeing many artists who can not achieve fame in frustration, Philip comes to a conclusion that he has no artistic gift as his companies. And a genius is only personified in the nameless painter, seemingly Paul Gauguin. That is, a genius is a kind of illusion that cannot be reached in *Of Human Bondage*. In addition, Maugham throws the notion of general genius into doubt repeatedly:

It seems to me that what makes genius is the combination of natural gifts for creation with an idiosyncrasy that enables its possessor to see the world personally in the highest degree, and yet with such catholicity that his appeal is not to this type of man or to that type, but to all men. . . .
He is supremely normal. (*The Summing Up* 75)

If we apply such a representation of a genius to Strickland, the obscurity of him seems to be appropriate in a sense.

As to the comparison between Strickland and Gauguin, I certainly admit the importance of comparing their details. However, if we repeat such reading, it turns out that we will regard *The Moon and Sixpence* at the same level as art critics. That is, by such comparison, we will also regard this novel as one of the parodies of Gauguin's biography, and will miscomprehend the author's intention. His purpose in this novel is to make out the process or structure, in which one person is built up into a genius. And the more critics argue against the influence on the historical facts by the novel, the more they demonstrate its power of faculty for invention. As a result, some misunderstandings about Gauguin brought by this novel, such as his nature or career, seem to prove Maugham's success in that attempt. However, such effect is a little weird, because it seems

to be related to mass manipulation.

In the next place, let us consider the characterization of Strickland. First of all, his career is too much dramatized from Gauguin's. Secondly, his characterization is surely artificial and banal. For example, the narrator mentions that he is possessed with the creative instinct and is mindless to anything except painting:

Strickland was distinguished from most Englishmen by his perfect indifference to comfort... was indifferent to what he ate... was indifferent to sensual things... There was something impressive in the manner in which he lived a life wholly of the spirit. (76-77)

He has impetuous temperament and harms other people with delight. He is sexually attractive, and although he is indifferent to women mostly, sometimes he makes use of women to satisfy his sexual urge. He is bigoted and unsocial. It would be inappropriate to say that every artist has such temperament, as Mansfield criticized violently. As one might say, Strickland is narrated as a kind of caricature of the artists. He fills widespread impression against artists as Mansfield protests in an obvious manner. That is, he is nobody in the first place, and it is difficult for the reader to imagine such a man as real.

Thirdly, we cannot understand the psychology of the painter well, for there is not enough explanation by Strickland himself. He is characterized as reticent and brusque by nature. Because of his dirty language that is well-nigh impossible to be transformed into intelligible words, the narrator rewrites his words into more polite ones, giving explanations for the understanding of the readers. But we never comprehend the nature or mind of Strickland as Mansfield says. Moreover, we cannot help raising such questions as why he wants to draw, or why

he must go to the South Seas, or why he comes to talk with the narrator all the way. However, the only answer given to us by the narrator is his artistic instinct.

As a matter of fact, the narrator does not know Strickland well as a biographer. He meets Strickland only a few times. Despite his limited experiences with Strickland, the narrator insists on his superiority as a biographer toward other biographers with plenty of confidence. The truth is that neither he nor other narrators were well acquainted with Strickland. To make up for his lack of knowledge, he fully uses his faculty as a writer. This lack of credibility can be also appropriate to other minor narrators, and the outstanding example is Captain Nichols, a beachcomber, who comes to beg the narrator for drinks or cigarettes in exchange for his story about Strickland:

... but I am aware that Captain Nichols was an outrageous liar, and I dare say there is not a word of truth in anything he told me. I should not be surprised to learn that he had never seen Strickland in his life, and owed his knowledge of Marseilles to the pages of a magazine. (173)

What kind of biographer adopts a most implausible episode in his biography with his confession? The narrator adopts Nichols' episode only because the story is interesting and suits for his characterization of Strickland. Captain Brunot, a French planter is another typical example of such narrators, who interprets and romanticizes Strickland as his hero. He equates himself with Strickland for the reason that both of them create something out of nothing:

'It is not strange that I, at all events, should have had sympathy for him,' he said at last, 'for, though perhaps neither of us knew it, we were both aiming at the same

thing.'

'What on earth can it be that two people so dissimilar as you and Strickland could aim at?' I asked, smiling.

'Beauty.' (195)

In addition, we have to remember that there is a possibility that the main narrator converts these Tahiti episodes by other minor narrators for the sake of his work.

It is concluded that we have to rely on the primary narrator mainly, who disguises a biographer but thinks nothing but making his own novel using Strickland as a material of his work. We also have to rely on interpretations of some other minor narrators reworked by the main narrator. Therefore the characterization of Strickland will become increasingly ambiguous for us, and finally be close to a kind of vague image of prevailing artist. That is to say, Strickland is a generalized artist who has no selfness. And he is a kind of phenomenon named genius, as Maugham implied in *The Summing Up*.

Here, let me return to the first chapter of the novel. As is obvious in the artificial description of a psycho-pathologist named Dr Weitbrecht-Rotholz, there is little doubt that Maugham bears in his mind the knowledge of psychoanalysis in those days. In addition to that, he also uses the same technique in the beginning of the famous short story:

Now, I have read a good deal by Freud, and some books by his followers, and intending to write this story I have recently flipped through again the volume published by the Modern Library, which contains his basic writings. ("The Kite", *Creatures of Circumstance* 284)

And the passage by the narrator in "To my mind the most interesting thing in art is the personality of the artist..." (5), resembles the following one from the thesis of C. G. Jung; "the

artist is an especially interesting specimen for the critical analysis of the psychologist" (Jung 102). Jung says:

Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. . . . he is "collective man," a vehicle and moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind. (Jung 101)

Their ideas of an artist here are exactly alike, whether they are scientifically correct or not. And the concept of "collective man" by Jung is precisely valid for the characterization of Strickland.

As has been noted, we have to bear in mind that Strickland, the genius, is made up by these unreliable narrators. And we read the story in conscious of the fabricated details, for the main narrator has the tendency to romanticize his hero as he recognizes it himself; "But with his poor gift of expression he gave but indications of what he had gone through, and I had to fill up the gaps with my own imagination." (76) Then I would like to consider this problematic narrator in the next chapter.

II The Narrator

Here, I should sum up some natures of this first-person narrator, which I have discussed by now separately. First, the narrator has a faculty to gather episodes of Strickland told by other narrators, such as Dirk, Captain Nichols, Cohen, Tiaré, Brunot and Dr Coutras. However, his collections are through his preference, and also considered to come under the influence of his invention.

Next, he has a strong notion that he is a writer, and has a

faculty to invent fiction. He is quite similar to Maugham both in nature and background, but not equal to Maugham. To say nothing of Maugham and Dirk, the narrator is also affected by the aestheticism. As a writer, he has an inclination to observe any people as a material for his novel, and Strickland is a most interesting character to him:

‘You’ll never really dislike me so long as I [Strickland] give you the opportunity to get off a good thing now and then.’

I had to bite my lip to prevent myself from laughing. What he said had a hateful truth in it, and another defect of my character is that I enjoy the company of those, however depraved, who can give me a Roland for my Oliver. (138)

He does not have much interest in making a biography based on historical truths in the first place. He stresses making legend over revealing historical truths. It is not too much to say that what he calls a legend or myth is a kind of fiction. But he insists that “wise historian would hesitate to attack it [legend]” (8), and accuses such biographies that reduce the romance. He realizes that “the legend commonly received has had no small share in the growth of Strickland’s reputation.” (8). His disposition becomes the target of criticism as irresponsible or cynical. Because of his career as a medical student, he fancies himself as an objective observer as a scientist. However his characterization of Strickland is full of his subjective inventions, as he says “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.” (174) In fact, his conversation with Strickland seems to be a medical examination by a psychoanalyst. At times, his analysis seems to get at the

heart of the matter:

‘Let me tell you. I imagine that for months the matter [love] never comes into your head, and you’re able to persuade yourself that you’ve finished with it for good and all. . . . And then, all of a sudden you can’t stand it any more. . . . And you find some woman . . . and you fall upon her like a wild animal. You drink till you’re blind with rage.’

He stared at me without the slightest movement. I held his eyes with mine. (80-81)

However, his analysis tends to be so sentimental and moralistic that Strickland is often against them, saying “You blasted fool” (48) or “Melodrama” (78). Likewise, the narrator also makes a hero of Strickland as a kind of apostle of the beauty rather arbitrarily. He uses a lot of mythic or biblical expressions for Strickland in obvious ways. For example, he says Strickland is “very sensual, neither cruel nor kindly, but suggested rather the inhuman glee of the satyr” (80); then at the Tahiti episodes, Strickland is made into Polynesian Adam. And the narrator seems to run with Strickland’s trace like a pilgrim, for he follows in Strickland’s footsteps in order from London to Tahiti via Paris, tries to interpret Strickland’s mind, makes up for Strickland’s word by his own invention, and tells us the plausible stories, in other words, his own exegesis. In short, the narrator has several roles, which are seemingly quite alien; not only as a writer but also as a psychoanalyst and a person of religion. But they have one nature in common, that is, the faculty of interpretation.

According to Archie K. Loss, “In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the narrator, a novelist, is very much the observer who tells what he knows but never becomes too substantial as a character.”

(Loss 38-39) However, "the device of the narrator" (Loss 38), which is apparently problematic, is very indispensable to the whole structure of the novel as recent critics say. Liebman points out that:

... the central character in *The Moon and Sixpence* is not Strickland, but the narrator ... the narrator borrows other people's ideas, speculates in order to fill in the gaps of his very limited knowledge, and projects his own fantasies onto the artist. The result is a romantic portrait of Strickland that tells more about the narrator than about the subject of his investigation." (Liebman 331)

Liebman is right in that he indicates the projection to Strickland by the narrator and other characters. But Macey goes on with the discussion farther. He states that "Lieberman recognizes the inadequacy of Maugham's novel (1919) as a "biography" of its ostensible subject, the fictional painter Charles Strickland, but he fails to grasp the complexity of Maugham's design in constructing as intentionally flawed "biography". (Macey 61) Because of the narrator's too much invention, Macey calls the novel not a biography of Strickland, but a narrator's autobiography. He also says that "Instead of discovering the truth about Strickland, he [the narrator] writes a novel that contributes to the creation of a myth." (72). For the most part, his comment is very persuasive, but his explanation to the narrator as an autobiographer and "myth-making" (Macey 72) faculty of narrator seems to need a little more consideration. So I would like to consider this problem in the next chapter.

III The Faculty for Myth

Maugham observes not only Strickland, the narrated genius,

but the narrator, who imposes his own desires on the artist rather fanatically. Thus, from the unreliability of our narrator and existence of other story-tellers of Strickland, we can vaguely notice the author's intention, to describe a genius told by many people. After all, our narrator is only one of them. It is true that Maugham had rather old notion about artist, as an insane man. However, it is likely that the purpose of the author is not to write the artist as in many other artist-hero novels in those days, nor to write the pseudo-biography of Gauguin, but to write a genius told and made gradually through the narration of ordinary people. He seems to have regarded that to write a biography is a kind of projection by the biographers, in other words, a myth creation by them. So Strickland should be written not as a real man, but as an enigmatic man, who tells almost nothing by his own, in order to accumulate discourse of other people. And it is those biographers who create a legend of the genius by their faculty for myth. *The Moon and Sixpence* is not only a story about a genius as a collected man, but also a story about narrators who impose their desires on a genius.

The narrator reveals the secret of making this novel at the very beginning of the novel. He justifies his invention of the legend and insists that:

The faculty for myth is innate in the human race. ... It is the protest of romance against the commonplace of life. The incidents of the legend become the hero's surest passport to immortality. (7)

But what he says about myth or legend, or invented fiction of Strickland, is not accomplished in the novel. So to speak, it is not a myth or legend at this stage. Still, it consists of a mass of accumulated fictions, which may develop into a myth or

legend. And this process of making myth is accelerated drastically from the Tahiti episodes, after the death of Strickland, who was against the intention by the narrator. Superficially, this mythogenesis, the process of making myth, is accomplished only by such pompous metaphors as Greek gods or biblical expressions. Especially, in Strickland's last moment, the style is turned into archaism all of a sudden:

'Let the others go if they choose, but I [Ata] will not leave thee [Strickland]. Thou art my man and I am thy woman. If thou leavest me I shall hang myself on the tree that is behind the house. I swear it by God.' (202)

It is obvious that Strickland and Ata are compared to Adam and Eve, and their garden is compared to "the Garden of Eden" (191) or "a Polynesian garden of the Hesperides" (212). However, these biblical or mythic expressions are not the only devices of the mythogenesis in *The Moon and Sixpence*. The more important device is the narrator himself, his ability to accumulate other narratives, his ability to invent fictions, and his unreliability, which remind the reader that there must be many other latent fictions of Gauguin or Strickland. To begin with, it will be impossible to make a myth or legend without masses, for it is those ordinary people who project their desires onto one person called a genius. But it takes a lot more people's projections and more time to turn Gauguin and Strickland into a true mythical hero. It follows from this that Maugham promoted the process of the mythogenesis in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

If we make a legend or myth imposing our depressed desire to one genius or episode, and if the narrator's facility of making a fiction or invention for his catharsis is called mythogenesis, we, the readers, also play a part in this

mythogenic process. As Strickland, most of us feel to be bounded to convention or civilized society or something. So it would be natural longing for us to get rid of it, and we can consume this oppressed desire by making our own visions of Strickland. It is likely that the novel itself has the facility of accumulating much more projections by the readers. *The Moon and Sixpence* is still in the process of developing a myth so long as it can gain new readers.

NOTES

1. Maugham changes the names of his first-person narrators, who have the same backgrounds as himself. The names shift from anonymous 'I' in *The Moon and Sixpence*, to Mr Ashenden in *Cakes and Ale*, then finally to Mr Maugham in *The Razor's Edge*. In addition, Philip in *Of Human Bondage* also has the same backgrounds.
2. Maugham joined a circle of artists including Arnold Bennett, and he had a chance to talk with an Irish painter, Roderic O'Conor, who had lived with Gauguin in Brittany in 1894 and appears as Clutton in *Of Human Bondage*.

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