

The “Give-up” Spirits in W. Somerset Maugham’s “The Moon and Sixpence”

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Abstract

The paper explores the “give-up” spirits of the main character Strickland and his supporters Dirk, Blanche and Ata in W. Somerset Maugham’s novel “The Moon and Sixpence”. The conclusion is that Strickland gives up secularity for artistic creation which brings him immortal fame, and his pursuit of the ideal is based on the artistic, materialistic and biological support of his followers.

Keywords

“Give-up” spirits, Strickland, Dirk, Blanche, Ata.

1. Introduction

W. Somerset Maugham’s second novel “The Moon and Sixpence” wins him lasting fame. Critics often analyze the novel from the perspectives of the contradiction between the pursuit of the ideal and reality, feminism, symbolism etc. However, the novel can also be explored from the angle of the give-up or sacrificial spirits of the main characters, especially those of Strickland. It seems to be the law of nature that the gain of something always means the loss of something else. For the main character Strickland, it is practically impossible to strike a balance between secular life and true spiritual pursuit, which leads to his give-up of the former. The present paper will focus on the exploration of the “give-up” spirits of the main character Strickland and his supporters Dirk, Blanche and Ata.

2. Body

2.1. The “Give-up” Spirit of Strickland

At the age of forty, Strickland suddenly gives up everything conventional that he has gained through his diligence and persistence. Strickland has a stable job as a broker and an enviable family, but he is determined to give up the secular happiness and decides to paint. Strickland has a beautiful wife from the upper class who engages herself in holding parties and discussing literature with other celebrities. Everything seems to be perfect in the eyes of the outsiders. Different from most painters who paint for economic purposes, Strickland does not paint for money or fame. Rather, painting for him has become a way or expression of life. Strickland uses a simile to emphasize the necessity and inevitability for his painting: “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 be drown.”[1] Strickland may have expected the tough and ragged life after deserting all the secular comforts once and for all. “Brave” is not an appropriate word to describe Strickland’s decision, as he chooses to leave his job and family out of his own will and without the slightest hint of hesitation. He considers himself to be doomed.

Strickland has chosen the right time to convert to painting. He dreams of becoming a painter when he is just a child, but his ideal request is bluntly turned down by his father. Forty years of living in a secular world and seventeen years of a married life offer him the necessary secular experiences, which strengthen his yearning for his pure pursuit of artistic ideals. To some extent, Strickland’s secular experiences serve as inevitable tests of his final choice of the soul.

Only by experiencing material aspects of life can he see all through and begin to commit to his life-long passion---painting. Strickland's give-up is also a gradual process in which he changes from showing conformity to secular life at the beginning to his striving to balance between survival and the pursuit of artistic ideals to his final complete devotion to artistic creation. Relatively speaking, it is easy for Strickland to give up his respectable wife and lovely children. And he is also capable of showing his indifference to the comments from the community and his possibly to-be-damaged reputation. However, Strickland has trouble overcoming his biological desires. He has been throughout his life accompanied by three female figures. His abnormal relationship with Blanche out of wedlock shows his dependence on sexuality, a human instinct that possibly fades away over time, especially in the last years of his life when he focuses all his attention on his masterpiece. Strickland is eager to get rid of his sexual desires and hopes one day that he can avoid the influence of it and focuses all his attention and energy on painting.[2] As is expected, he makes it in the end. Strickland also ends up choosing the right place to realize his dream. By inhabiting on Tahiti, he gives up all the so-called secular "happiness" of the outside world and manages to return to the primitive state of life.

Two elements contribute to Strickland's abandonment of almost everything irrelevant to painting. The first element is Strickland's true love of painting. For him, to paint is to live, and to live is to paint. He discards all the social rituals and responsibilities, and sacrifices everything for art. The painting process rather than the painting products is what he pays the most attention to. During the painting process, Strickland experiences the inner joy and calmness. That is why the narrator says, "When I saw him he was spruce enough, but he looked ill at ease: now, untidy and ill-kempt, he looked perfectly at home." [1] For the first time in his life, Strickland chooses to live for himself. By creating art for art's sake, Strickland succeeds in giving up "the six pence" and reaching the "moon", which defines himself as a real human being and exploits the significance of his life to the fullest.

The other element is Strickland's unspoken pursuit of ever-lasting fame. In chapter one, Maugham offers the following views: "The faculty for myth is innate in the human race. It seizes with avidity upon any incidents, surprising or mysterious, in the career of those who have all distinguished themselves from their fellows, and invents a legend to which it then attaches a fanatical belief. It is the protest of romance against the commonplace of life." [1] Strickland sustains his "surprising or mysterious" traits in character by deciding to destroy his last work--a masterpiece. After the death of Strickland, his paintings are highly appreciated by critics and become popular among the rich. While most of his works are sold to the aristocrats and are kept in their hands, his masterpiece finished upon his death is burned to pieces, thus becoming inaccessible to anyone alive. In this way, Strickland establishes a "legend" for himself. And fans of his painting in the coming generations will be forever enchanted by this "myth". So, we can see that Strickland is not yearning for immediate fame, but what he is truly after is immortal fame characterized by surprise and mystery. Maugham, who penetrates into the minds of his readers, well knows how to become an expected artist with unique personality and anti-convention spirit and how to satisfy his readers. [3] Perhaps ever-lasting fame is also what the author Maugham is constantly seeking for, as the novel "The Moon and Sixpence" in nature is surprisingly and mysteriously "romantic", defying any comprehension about Strickland's motives of his wholehearted pursuit of art creation.

2.2. The "Give-up" Spirits of Dirk, Blanche and Ata

Dirk, who appreciates Strickland's talent a lot, is the talent scout for him. Although not a decent painter himself, Dirk excels in appreciating and evaluating artistic works. The "give-up" spirit of Dirk is vividly shown in his full support he gives to Strickland. While almost all critics show contempt for Strickland's works, Dirk seems to be the only person who shows his admiration and praise. When Strickland falls ill and is in a critical state, Dirk pleads with his wife to invite

Strickland to their home. Dirk and his wife take turns to look after Strickland. Dirk's studio is even occupied by Strickland. Having been driven out of his own studio, Dirk does not show the slightest dissatisfaction. In a word, Dirk supports Strickland both materially and artistically, and tolerates him at the cost of his own interests.

Attracted by his unique character, Dirk's wife Blanche loves Strickland heart and soul despite her identity as a married woman. Blanche has been so desperate in love that she would like to sacrifice all for Strickland. Things turn out that she commits suicide at last after being mercilessly deserted by Strickland. While Blanche's give-up spirit leads to her final tragedy, it also contributes a lot to the professional development for Strickland. On the one hand, she satisfies Strickland's sexual desires. On the other, she serves as a nude model to give Strickland the very inspiration he needs. Paradoxically, Blanche's love strengthens Strickland's rationality, enabling him to avoid the influences of love and other human emotions.

Ata, who is characterized by her complete obedience to Strickland, is the soul mate of him. Ata appears to be an ordinary woman who marries Strickland and takes care of him and their kids in daily life, but in essence she has become the incarnation of sacrifice. That is, Ata is a person with no self. As a primitive, her simplicity and loyalty are what most attract Strickland. Ata has unconsciously given up her own value of existence of a human being for Strickland. When Strickland gets down with leprosy, Ata refuses to leave him and makes up her mind to take care of him until his death. Ata risks her life to accompany Strickland, which fully illustrates her unconditional give-up spirit.

3. Conclusion

In Maugham's novel "The Moon and Sixpence", the protagonist Strickland gives up all secular happiness to pursue art. He chooses the right time for his give-up program, and also reaches the ideal place for his artistic creation. Strickland gives up a secular life for two reasons: on the one hand, he indulges himself in art or painting to be accurate; on the other, his give-up program, especially the give-up of his masterpiece makes him a legend filled with surprise and mystery. In this way, Strickland's give-up enables himself to gain ever-lasting fame. While Strickland is in hot artistic pursuit, Dirk, Blanche and Ata have all given their respective support for Strickland's lifelong passion. The three followers have offered without reservation their artistic, material or biological support which makes Strickland's pure pursuit of art feasible.

References

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