

# The Search for Inner Selves: A Study of Spiritual Growth in W. Somerset Maugham's "The Moon and Sixpence" and "The Painted Veil"

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Manuscript received November 2, 2024; revised November 29, 2024; accepted December 11, 2024; published January 22, 2025.

**Abstract**—This paper examines the spiritual growth of two protagonists, Charles Strickland and Kitty Fane, in W. Somerset Maugham's masterpieces "The Moon and Sixpence" and "The Painted Veil." Through an in-depth analysis of these works, this study explores how pure souls seek their true inner selves in modern society. While the two protagonists follow distinctly different life paths and modes of growth, they both demonstrate remarkable qualities: transcendence of worldly concerns, unwavering pursuit of inner conviction, and resilience in their spiritual development. By revealing these two seemingly different yet essentially connected characters, this study aims to uncover the implications of their spiritual growth for contemporary individuals.

**Keywords**—W. Somerset Maugham, self-seeking, spiritual growth, inner selves

## I. INTRODUCTION

In modern society, the conflict between material pursuits and spiritual needs has become increasingly prominent, presenting unprecedented challenges to individual spiritual growth. As a significant figure in 20th-century British literature, W. Somerset Maugham consistently focused on the human spirit and soul in his works. Although "The Moon and Sixpence" and "The Painted Veil" were written 6 years apart, both deeply portray the struggles and transformations of characters in their quest for self-realization and spiritual growth.

Strickland abandons his comfortable life to follow his inner calling for artistic ideals, while Kitty experiences rebirth through a life-and-death ordeal during an epidemic and finds a new direction in life. Despite their different circumstances, both characters embody the resilient qualities of pure souls seeking their true selves. In this context, "pure souls" refers to those who maintain sincere spiritual pursuits in our materialistic modern society, those who can transcend worldly concerns and consistently follow their inner calling.

Through close reading and comparison of these two works, this paper explores the characteristics and value of pure souls in Maugham's writing. The analysis reveals how two individuals, through different paths, achieve similar spiritual enlightenment, demonstrating the possibility of maintaining spiritual purity in an increasingly materialistic world.

## II. THE AWAKENING OF STRICKLAND'S ARTISTIC SOUL

In "The Moon and Sixpence," Maugham presents the remarkable transformation of Charles Strickland from an ordinary stockbroker to a devoted artist, portraying a complete journey of spiritual awakening, metamorphosis, and transcendence. This chapter examines Strickland's

artistic awakening through three aspects: his breakthrough from worldly constraints, the purity of his artistic pursuit, and the ultimate sublimation of his soul in Tahiti.

### A. Breaking Free from Worldly Constraints

Strickland's initial portrayal is an archetypal middle-class figure: a respectable profession, an seemingly happy family, and a stable social position. For outside, he lived the life that London's middle class could only dream of, yet for inside this veneer of respectability lay an imprisoned artistic soul. Through delicate brushstrokes, Maugham depicts this state of superficial prosperity masking inner emptiness: the well-kept sitting room, the regulated daily routine, the polite social interactions—all these seemingly perfect elements of life actually formed an invisible cage constraining Strickland's artistic nature.

A pivotal dialogue reveals the intensity of his artistic calling:

"For God's sake, why did you leave her?"

"I wanted to paint."

[...]

"But you're forty."

"That's why I had to hurry." (*The Moon and Sixpence*, 53) [1].

This brief but profound exchange illuminates Strickland's artistic pursuit. His response is simple but carries immense determination and courage. The age of forty is particularly significant, it is a point where one is deeply used to worldly life. Strickland's choice to change at this moment precisely demonstrates the powerful attraction for art. As Li (2014) [2] notes, this "reverse growth" choice exemplifies modern humanity's yearning for spiritual freedom.

Behind this seemingly prosperous life, Strickland's artistic aspirations remained in a state of constant suppression until the turning point at forty, when his inner longing for art finally broke through the shackles of worldly life. This breakthrough was not coincidental but rather an inevitable result of long-term internal accumulation. When he chose to abandon everything and journey alone to Paris in pursuit of his painting dreams, it marked the liberating moment of a long-imprisoned soul.

### B. The Purity of Artistic Pursuit

Strickland's pursuit of art demonstrates a rare purity, primarily manifested in his complete disregard for material interests. During his time in Paris, he lived in extreme simplicity: A modest attic, coarse bread, worn clothes—yet these external hardships could not shake his devotion to art. Consider his reaction to conventional wisdom:

“You evidently don’t believe in the maxim: act so that every one of your actions is capable of becoming a universal rule.”

“I never heard it before, but it’s rotten nonsense.”

“Well, that’s Kant’s categorical imperative.”

“I don’t care whose it is, it’s idiotic.” (*The Moon and Sixpence*, 62) [3].

This dialogue demonstrates Strickland’s instinctive rejection of established norms. His dismissal of Kant’s universal law stems not from philosophical contemplation but from an aversion to any external constraints that might restrict artistic creation. This near-savage attitude of denial precisely reflects the purity of his artistic pursuit [4].

### C. *Spiritual Sublimation in Tahiti*

The Tahitian period represents the ultimate sublimation of Strickland’s artistic soul. In this land far removed from modern civilization, he found the perfect unity of art and life. A telling observation captures his creative essence:

“I felt that he was trying to express something that he was never able to achieve. His soul seemed to yearn for something his hand could not give. It was as though he were possessed by some demon who would not let him rest until he had accomplished what was impossible to human power.” (*The Moon and Sixpence*, 91) [5]. This profound characterisation reveals the fundamental nature of Strickland’s artistic creation. His work transcended mere technical display to become a direct expression of life’s essence. Even after contracting leprosy, he continued to paint, creating breathtaking murals on the walls of his dwelling. These works demonstrated the most essential force of life, reflecting an artist’s exploration of life’s ultimate meaning [6].

In Tahiti, Strickland achieved deep fusion with nature, reflected not only in his lifestyle but also in his artistic creation. The tropical sunlight, lush vegetation, and primitive vitality all became sources for his art. His paintings began to manifest a primitive force, displaying the harmonious unity between humans and nature. This artistic expression resulted from the profound merging of his soul with nature. As Hu (2018) [7] suggests, “The Tahitian period marked the final sublimation of Strickland’s artistic life.”

Through the analysis of Strickland’s artistic awakening, it can be observed how one might break free from worldly constraints and achieve self-transcendence through pure artistic pursuit. His experience reveals the essential characteristics of artistic pursuit: the need to transcend worldly constraints, maintain inner purity, and ultimately achieve deep fusion with life’s essence. While such pursuit may appear extreme or even destructive, it demonstrates the sublime value of human spiritual pursuit.

### D. *Pain and Redemption in Artistic Creation*

Strickland’s artistic journey is marked not only by spiritual awakening but also by intense suffering and ultimate redemption through art. His creative process is characterized by both physical and psychological torment, yet this very suffering becomes an integral part of his artistic expression. The pain in Strickland’s artistic pursuit manifests in multiple dimensions. Physically, he endures hunger, poverty, and eventually, leprosy. Psychologically, he experiences profound isolation and the torment of creative frustration. However, this suffering serves as a crucible for his artistic

transformation. His physical deterioration paradoxically coincides with his artistic ascension, suggesting that bodily decay somehow liberates his creative spirit. This paradox reaches its apex in his final works, painted while losing his sight to leprosy, where physical suffering transforms into transcendent artistic vision.

Indeed, Strickland’s greatest works emerge not despite his suffering but through it, suggesting that pain serves as a gateway to deeper artistic truth. The murals he creates in his final days, described as “terrible and enchanting,” represent the ultimate fusion of suffering and artistic transcendence.

## III. KITTY’S JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In “*The Painted Veil*,” Kitty’s spiritual journey exemplifies a complete transition from worldly frivolity to spiritual awakening. This chapter focuses on her transformation from a young woman ensnared by the material world and social life to an awakened individual who becomes independent spiritual character, examining the trajectory and significance of her spiritual growth.

### A. *From Socialite to Awakened Soul*

Kitty’s initial portrayal is the archetypal English upper-class young lady, inhabiting a world suffused with material comforts and social engagements. As a beautiful young woman, she relied on her appearance and social skills to get attention and approval. At the story’s outset, her life revolves entirely around balls and social gatherings, her understanding of life limited to superficial pleasures and the satisfaction of vanity. This shallow approach to life directly leads to her sudden marriage choice: she weds Walter Fane not out of genuine love but to escape the social pressure of remaining unmarried.

However, the turning point arrives with the outbreak of cholera. When Walter, driven by vindictive motives, demands she accompany him to the cholera-ravaged Mei-tan-fu, Kitty faces her first genuine confrontation with mortality. In this environment shadowed by death, she is compelled to confront life’s essential meaning. The threat of disease, the spectre of death, and the suffering of those around her profoundly shake her existing value system. This life-and-death trial becomes the catalyst for her spiritual awakening, compelling her to contemplate the true value and meaning of life.

“The officers saluted as she walked out, and she bowed back with dignity. As they traced their way back through the courtyard and got into the sedan chairs, she saw Waddington light a cigarette. A wisp of smoke dissipated in the air—that was what a human life was.” (*The Painted Veil*, 197) [8].

This scene which depicts her husband’s sacrifice to cholera marks the first time the previously frivolous Kitty experiences the profound impact of losing a family member. The smoke imagery in the novel carries powerful symbolic significance, reflecting Kitty’s deep understanding of life’s essence [9]. Through this simple yet poetic metaphor, the author reveals Kitty’s recognition of life’s transience, deepening her understanding of life’s gravity and the importance of present actions.

### B. *The Nuns’ Influence and Spiritual Enlightenment*

In Kitty’s spiritual development, the nuns play a enlightening role. The selfless dedication of the Mother

Superior and other nuns provides Kitty with profound inspiration. In the cholera-ravaged environment, these nuns maintain unwavering respect for life and dedication to duty, demonstrating qualities that transcend personal gain or loss.

"I don't know what it was, as if they possessed a secret that made life entirely different, but I wasn't worthy of sharing it. Not faith, but something deeper, more significant." (*The Painted Veil*, 154) [10]. This thought represents Kitty's spiritual response to the nuns. Though walking alongside them, she feels as if inhabiting a different world. Their greatness and kindness initially lay beyond the comprehension of someone as superficial as Kitty. Through observing and interacting with these nuns, Kitty begins to understand true life value. The passage reveals her reverence for and aspiration toward the nuns' spiritual realm. The reference to "something deeper, more significant" suggests a wisdom transcending religious faith [11], and this nuanced portrayal skillfully depicts Kitty's exploratory phase of spiritual growth.

### C. Rebuilding Self-Worth

Following her life-and-death trial and the nuns' spiritual enlightenment, Kitty begins reconstructing her sense of self-worth. This process first manifests in her fundamental shift in attitude toward life. She no longer centres her life around social entertainment but focuses on helping others and making her life more meaningful. This transformation stems not from superficial behavioural change but from a profound shift in inner cognition.

During this rebuilding process, Kitty demonstrates remarkable inner strength. She actively participates in epidemic relief work, no longer retreating from fear of infection. Through caring for patients and working at the orphanage, she not only acquires practical life skills but, more importantly, develops a sense of responsibility and empathy. Through these experiences, she gradually establishes a new self-awareness and value system.

Kitty's final choice to return to England alone marks the climax of her spiritual growth. She no longer depends on others but finds the courage to face life independently. This decision demonstrates the inner strength gained through her value reconstruction and signals her transformation from a dependent personality to an independent one.

"I have been severely punished and am determined to keep my daughter far from all this. I want her to be fearless, genuine, and forthright. I want her to be independent of others, to possess herself, to embrace life like a free person—to live better than I have." (*The Painted Veil*, 252) [12] Her aspirations for her daughter reveal Kitty's mature mindset following her spiritual metamorphosis. The emphasis on being "fearless," "genuine," and "independent" reflects her new understanding of spirit and soul. Particularly noteworthy is that she not only completes her own reconstruction but wishes to transmit this spiritual wealth to the next generation, demonstrating her deeper contemplation of life's value [13].

### D. Motherhood as a Catalyst for Spiritual Development

The role of motherhood emerges as a significant catalyst for spiritual development in both narratives, though manifesting differently for each character. For Kitty, impending motherhood becomes a transformative force that deepens her spiritual awakening. The realization that she

carries a new life within her during her time in Mei-tan-fu adds profound meaning to her existence and strengthens her resolve to become a better person. Her contemplation of her unborn child's future compels her to examine her own values and lifestyle more critically, accelerating her spiritual growth. The prospect of motherhood pushes her to envision a life focused not just on personal gratification but on nurturing and guiding another human being. Initially, Kitty views her pregnancy with uncertainty and even some reluctance, reflecting her still-evolving spiritual maturity. However, as she continues her work at the convent and witnesses the nuns' dedication to orphaned children, her perspective on motherhood undergoes a profound shift. The prospect of becoming a mother begins to symbolize not just personal responsibility but an opportunity for generational transformation.

## IV. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF PURE SOULS

Through analysing the spiritual growth of Strickland and Kitty, two distinctly different characters, it is discovered that despite their divergent experiences and paths, they share remarkable spiritual qualities. This chapter explores these common characteristics to better understand the essential nature of pure souls in Maugham's works.

### A. Transcendence of Worldly Concerns

Both Strickland and Kitty undergo a process of liberation from worldly constraints. As Liu (2019) [10] observes, transcending worldly concerns is a crucial characteristic of spiritual growth in Maugham's novels. Strickland voluntarily abandons his enviable social status and comfortable family life, choosing an arduous path of artistic pursuit. This renunciation isn't impulsive but stems from a genuine pursuit of art and soul. His indifference to worldly benefits reaches an almost extreme degree: he cares neither for money nor reputation, not even for whether his works receive recognition or preservation.

Kitty's transcendence manifests in her fundamental shift in perceiving material life. She transforms from a socialite preoccupied with appearances and status to an awakened individual who truly understands life's value. Her experiences in Mei-tan-fu teach her that genuine life value lies not in external material pleasures but in caring for others and respecting life itself. This cognitive transformation enables her to break free from her previous superficial lifestyle and pursue more meaningful life goals.

Both characters achieve genuine transcendence of worldly concerns. This transcendence isn't mere negation or escape but is founded on the pursuit of higher spiritual values. They both find meaning beyond material comforts: Strickland in pure artistic pursuit, Kitty in serving others. This transcendence liberates them from worldly constraints, enabling them to pursue true spiritual freedom.

### B. Unwavering Inner Conviction

Persistence in facing difficulties characterises both Strickland and Kitty. Strickland encounters numerous challenges in his artistic pursuit: impoverished living conditions, social misunderstanding, and creative struggles. Yet these difficulties never shake his artistic dedication. Even when afflicted with leprosy, he continues creating until his

final moments, demonstrating an almost obsessive spiritual force.

Kitty displays extraordinary determination in cholera-ravaged Mei-tan-fu. Facing mortal danger, she chooses to stay and participate in relief work. Throughout this process, she continuously overcomes her fears and anxieties, learning new skills and assuming new responsibilities. This persistence manifests not only in her actions but also in her adherence to new values.

Both characters demonstrate powerful determination in following their inner convictions. Their choices often contradict mainstream values, yet they steadfastly pursue their chosen paths. Their experiences indicate that genuine spiritual growth often requires tremendous courage and resolve.

### C. Resilience in Spiritual Growth

Both Strickland and Kitty's spiritual growth processes demonstrate remarkable resilience. As Hu (2018) [14] notes, "Maugham's characters often reveal extraordinary spiritual strength in extreme circumstances." This resilience first manifests in their ability to overcome external pressures. Strickland faces social incomprehension, artistic difficulties, and harsh living conditions; Kitty confronts disease threats, environmental hardships, and inner fears. Yet these external pressures, rather than defeating them, become catalysts for their spiritual growth.

More significantly, both show continuous enhancement of inner strength. Strickland's artistic pursuit evolves from initial rough attempts to mature artistic creation, ultimately achieving unity with life's essence. Kitty's growth manifests in her deepening understanding of life's value, progressing from superficial attitude changes to inner spiritual elevation. This continuous improvement demonstrates the dynamic nature of spiritual growth.

## V. CONCLUSION

Maugham's two protagonists, Strickland and Kitty, possess distinctly lucid and independent personalities. Both gradually liberate themselves from the external accumulation of worldly materialism at the same time firmly pursuing the inner voice of their souls. Though traversing different paths, they ultimately arrive at the same spiritual destination. Their spiritual growth extends beyond mere personal self-improvement to encompass a profound exploration of social values and human nature. Strickland explores life's essence through artistic creation, while Kitty realizes her self-worth through serving others, both demonstrating the social significance and humanistic value of spiritual growth.

Through examining the spiritual development of these protagonists in Maugham's "*The Moon and Sixpence*" and "*The Painted Veil*," this study not only deepens our understanding of Maugham's creative characteristics but also offers an alternative interpretation of the essential nature of human spiritual growth. These insights provide valuable reference points for understanding spiritual predicaments in modern society and exploring directions for personal development.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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