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FROM SOLITUDE TO STEWARDSHIP: IN W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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ABSTRACT
This article reads W. Somerset Maugham's artist figures as moving from solitude to stewardship—from uncompromising private vocation to ethically charged relations with community. Through narrative distance, moral choice, and institutional pressures (market, criticism, colonial setting), Maugham stages epic scale without romantic consecration, revealing creation as a negotiated responsibility.

KEYWORDS: W. Somerset Maugham, artist's vocation, solitude, stewardship, narrative ethics, epic chronotope, The Moon and Sixpence.

INTRODUCTION
What does art ask of a life? In W. Somerset Maugham's fiction, the artist is repeatedly staged as a moral experiment in which private vocation collides with social obligation. This study advances the thesis that Maugham's artist figures trace a movement from solitude to stewardship: they begin in abrasive autonomy—refusing domestic bonds, economic norms, and polite ethics—but inevitably generate ethical claims around them that reframe creation as a negotiated responsibility. Rather than sanctifying genius, Maugham's narrators sustain a cool, ironic distance that keeps heroism under suspicion while preserving the existential weight of artistic choice.

The argument centers on The Moon and Sixpence (1919), read against Of Human Bondage (1915) as a counterpoint in which vocation is tempered by ordinary duties. In The Moon and Sixpence, Charles Strickland's flight from bourgeois London through Paris to Tahiti dramatizes the absolutist impulse of art; the novel's anti-monumental ending—creation followed by erasure—prevents consecration and forces a reckoning with the human costs of autonomy. By contrast, Of Human Bondage edges toward a modest ethic of craft and companionship, suggesting that meaning may arise not from sublime isolation but from limits freely accepted.

Methodologically, the article combines close reading with narrative ethics (after Wayne C. Booth) and field theory (after Pierre Bourdieu) to map how point of view, institutional pressures (market, criticism, colonial frameworks), and speech genres shape the artist's moral horizon. The analysis treats space and time not merely as settings but as structuring conditions—the epic chronotope—through which journeys, ordeals, and witness testimonies scale private intent to public consequence.

By reframing Maugham's artist not as a saint or a villain but as a custodian-in-spite-of-himself, the study clarifies why these novels continue to resonate in classrooms and studios alike: they refuse the easy binary between purity and compromise. The sections that follow examine (1) solitude as rupture and method, (2) the moral ledger of sacrifice, (3) community and witness

as unintended audiences, and (4) the hesitant emergence of stewardship as an ethical afterimage of art.

1) Solitude as Rupture and Method

Maugham consistently frames artistic vocation as a break: a decisive refusal of domestic scripts, wage-time, and civility. In The Moon and Sixpence, Charles Strickland's departure from his family is not merely an immoral act; it is a methodological claim that art requires an environment stripped of obligations. The Paris studio condenses this method: bare walls, irregular meals, and indifference to etiquette become instruments for purifying attention. Solitude functions both as stance (refusal) and technique (concentration), converting deprivation into an aesthetic resource. Crucially, the narrator's cool distance prevents the pose from curdling into sanctity: isolation is shown to enable artistic intensity while simultaneously degrading the relational fabric that sustains ordinary life.

In Of Human Bondage, solitude appears less as a heroic gesture and more as a temporary training ground. Philip Carey's apprenticeship includes phases of self-sequestering, but these are repeatedly interrupted by friendship, love, and work. The contrast marks Maugham's range: solitude can be a crucible, but it need not be a creed.

2) The Moral Ledger of Sacrifice

The novelistic economy is explicit in the title The Moon and Sixpence: the "moon" (absolute vocation) and the "sixpence" (the small change of daily obligations) are placed on a scale that never balances cleanly. Maugham itemizes costs: emotional injury to intimates, parasitic dependence on friends, and the instrumentalization of patrons. The narrative resists a tidy accounting—no narratorly voice declares whether the paintings justify the wreckage—yet it maintains a ledger structure: every aesthetic gain is shadowed by a human loss.

Maugham's technique for keeping the ledger visible is witness choreography. Scenes are frequently triangulated through bystanders whose testimony records the fallout of Strickland's fervor. This dispersed witnessing substitutes for epic choirs: instead of hymns to genius, we get case notes, gossip, and contested recollections. The effect is ethical: it forces readers to hold achievement and harm in the same frame.

3) Community, Audience, and Unintended Stewardship

Despite the rhetoric of isolation, the artist in Maugham cannot avoid creating communities around his absence—spouses, friends, dealers, and, eventually, islanders who must redistribute labor and care to manage the void he leaves. On Tahiti, Strickland's dependence becomes starkly material: illness demands caretakers; food and space must be negotiated. The artist's work thus imposes tasks on others, producing a reluctant, paradoxical stewardship: people organize themselves to keep him painting or, failing that, to survive his proximity.

This dynamic reframes authorship as ecological rather than purely individual. Art does not occur in a vacuum; it reconfigures circuits of attention, care, and scarcity. Maugham's achievement is to show how the "private" calling redistributes public burdens—an unchosen community forms around the artist, tasked with absorbing shock and managing residue.

4) Narrative Ethics: Distance, Irony, and the Refusal of Consecration

Maugham's narrators maintain a controlled distance—observant, skeptical, rarely verdictal. Three strategies sustain this ethic:

- Mediated access: We rarely live inside Strickland's mind; instead, we assemble him from interlocutors and aftermaths.

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- Material detail: Hunger, rent, pigment, weather, and disease pin the sublime to logistics, so vision never floats free of cost.
- Deflationary tone: Potentially mythic scenes (revelations, renunciations) are told in plain register, keeping melodrama at bay.

This poise generates what might be called an anti-consecrating narration. The text allows the paintings to matter without canonizing their maker. In doing so, Maugham invites readers to practice a civic mode of appreciation: to respect achievement while preserving judgment about its means.

5) The Colonial Margin: Mythic Air and Ethical Limit

Tahiti offers the atmosphere of origin—lush nature, taboo, the aura of the "primitive" that Western modernism often fetishized. Maugham leverages that mythic air to stage Strickland's final intensification, yet he also underscores the limits of this fantasy: cultural friction, illness, and the destruction of the murals puncture the dream of effortless consecration. The island is not a passive shrine but a contested space where Western autonomy collides with other lifeworlds. By staging the climax at a colonial edge, Maugham reveals the extractive tendencies of the solitary ethic—how it appropriates care, place, and story—and forces a reckoning with the wider consequences of artistic desire.

6) Emergent Stewardship: Afterlives and Responsibilities

The novel's anti-monumental ending—art created, then erased—seems to annul responsibility to posterity. Yet an afterimage of stewardship persists. The very act of telling the story preserves a communal memory of the labor, costs, and meanings that the canvases embodied. In Of Human Bondage, the afterimage is more affirmative: Philip discovers a modest ethic in limits freely chosen—work, companionship, and ordinary decency—suggesting that art and life need not be zero-sum.

Across both texts, then, Maugham intimates a movement from solitude to stewardship not as a conversion of character but as a structural truth of art-making: the work always generates obligations—curatorial, memorial, relational—that someone must carry. If the artist refuses them, others inherit them. In this sense, stewardship is the unavoidable residue of creation.

7) Synthesis

Putting these strands together: solitude in Maugham is a disciplined refusal that enables intensity; the moral ledger renders costs legible; community coalesces to manage the wake of the artist's choices; narrative ethics blocks easy myths; the colonial margin exposes the global asymmetries underwriting autonomy; and stewardship appears as the unasked-for afterlife of art. The movement "from solitude to stewardship" is not linear or redemptive, but dialectical: autonomy produces responsibility, whether acknowledged or displaced.

Conclusion

Tracing Maugham's artist from abrasive autonomy to the afterimage of stewardship clarifies how these novels keep heroism under suspicion while refusing cynicism. Solitude in The Moon and Sixpence operates as both rupture and method—a disciplined refusal that sharpens attention—yet the narrative never lets us forget the moral ledger it opens: every aesthetic intensification is shadowed by relational loss. The anti-consecrating voice, the choreography of witnesses, and the materiality of labor (hunger, illness, rent, pigment) together produce an anti-heroic epic in which large stakes are narrated without myth.

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Tahiti, as colonial margin, exposes the global asymmetries underwriting the artist's autonomy: other people's care, land, and stories are drawn into the gravitational field of creation. The destruction of the murals completes this diagnosis. It seems to cancel responsibility to posterity, yet it leaves a different responsibility behind—the obligation to remember, to curate the costs as well as the achievements. In this sense, stewardship does not arrive as the artist's conversion but as the unavoidable residue of art: if the maker refuses it, others inherit it.

Read alongside Of Human Bondage, a counter-model emerges in which craft, limits, and companionship offer a modest ethic of making. Across these texts, Maugham's durable lesson is not that purity or compromise must win, but that creation is a negotiation whose terms are always public. Recognizing this shifts criticism and pedagogy alike: we can honor artistic intensity while keeping the human ledger open—teaching readers to admire without absolving, to preserve without forgetting the price that made preservation necessary.

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