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Buddhism and the Maugham Persona: Navigating Alterity in *The Moon and Sixpence*

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Abstract

This paper argues that W. Somerset Maugham's cross-cultural turn to Eastern religion and philosophy and the development of the "Maugham narrator" in *The Moon and Sixpence* are interrelated phenomena, arising out of the British novelist's persistent preoccupation with the problem of desire. Whereas critics predominantly read the novel strictly in connection with the French painter Paul Gauguin, the author demonstrates that the character arc of Maugham's fictional painter, Charles Strickland, is primarily modeled upon the quasi-biographical accounts of the Buddha's life found in the *Lalitavistara*, *Buddhacarita*, and Sir Edwin Arnold's influential *The Light of Asia*. The paper connects Maugham's budding interest in Indic thought to his concurrent development of the Maugham persona, illustrating the subversive potential of this narrative device with respect to twentieth-century constructions of British masculinity and pointing to the relevance of Maugham's exotic fiction to our rapidly expanding understanding of

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modernism and its transnational dimensions.

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> "No action is in itself good or bad, but only such according to convention."
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> —W. Somerset Maugham

> "From passion and desire, /Sensuousness and lust, /Arise grief and fear."
>
> —*Dhammapada*

The Moon and Sixpence (1919) marks a significant and complex transition in the direction of W. Somerset Maugham's writing. The first of Maugham's published writings in which his Eastern imaginary plays a considerable role,[1] the novel signals a radical shift toward the literary exoticism that dominates Maugham's fiction and travel writing throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. In its exploration of the possibility of renouncing desire—a theme that Maugham will be preoccupied with for decades—the novel is also the first in which Maugham's sustained engagement with Eastern religion and philosophy can be discerned. Finally, *The Moon and Sixpence* is the first text in which the "Maugham persona" appears in fully realized form. Yet heretofore, Maugham's interest in the East and his development of the Maughamian narrator have been treated largely as separate phenomena.

This essay suggests that these concurrent developments in Maugham's writing are far more interrelated, and can be better

[1] Definitions of "East" and West" are notoriously fluid, shifting historically, regionally, and politically over time. For the purposes of this essay, I suggest that as manifested in his exotic fiction Maugham's Eastern imaginary includes the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, the Far East, the islands of Oceania (extending east of the Society and Sandwich groups to Pitcairn Island), and, arguably, Russia (as figured in the Ashenden stories).

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understood in the context of Maugham's lifelong attempt to grapple with the problem of desire. Throughout his exotic fiction, Maugham's Eastern and Western imaginaries function as rigidly defined symbolic realms, the former offering opportunities for personal freedom, the latter choked with the oppressions of social convention. The Maugham narrator—always an interloper, always an outsider—is the device Maugham created and continued to develop during the second half of his career specifically in order to negotiate a liminal discursive space between these two extremes. In what follows I demonstrate how Maugham's borrowings from Buddhism in *The Moon and Sixpence* operate in this modern novel's inquiry into the possibility of renouncing desire—the first of many such literary experiments in which both the East and the Maugham persona play central roles.

The extent of Maugham's familiarity with Buddhist thought circa 1914-1919 is debatable, although glimmerings of his subsequent and sustained interest in Indic philosophy can be traced to this period (and possibly earlier). In the travel writing of the 1920s and '30s and in such novels as *The Narrow Corner* (1932) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944), Maugham's knowledge of Eastern thought—particularly Hinduism—increaseingly becomes apparent, a fact that has led Anthony Curtis to observe that "Maugham's interest in comparative religion was that of a well-informed layman" ("Introduction" xvi). In these later works, Ted Morgan writes, "Maugham considered Buddhist nonattachment as a viable solution to life. . . . Through his characters Maugham the unbeliever was in search of a rule of life, and was interested enough in Buddhist thought eventually to travel to India for a firsthand look" (Morgan 358-9). Robert Calder, however, argues that "Maugham's interest in mysticism and Eastern philosophy is not a sudden development of his later life" (*Quest* 229). He traces this interest as far back as 1899,

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claiming that Indian philosophy "had clearly fascinated him [Maugham] for a great many years" (*Quest* 228). In *The Summing Up*, Maugham describes how at the age of forty (precisely the time he was beginning to conceive *The Moon and Sixpence*) he turned to an "industrious study of philosophical literature to which I was prepared to devote some years" (255). It is highly likely that he devoted some of this energy to the study of Buddhist thought as he prepared to write his novel dealing with the renunciation of desire.[2] Indeed, although the novel is ostensibly based upon the life of Paul Gauguin, the character arc of Charles Strickland bears a much stronger resemblance to the mythic, quasi-biographical accounts of the Buddha's life in the *Lalitavistara* and *Buddhacarita*. If Maugham had not encountered these works in translation, he most certainly would have been familiar with Sir Edwin Arnold's adaptation of the former text, *The Light of Asia*, an immensely popular and influential work that between 1879 and 1930 saw no fewer than twenty-six editions and which was instrumental in establishing what Cleo McNelly Kearns calls "T. S. Eliot's imaginative involvement with Buddhist texts" (Kearns 67). A habitual and heavy reader with eclectic tastes, Maugham was an opportunistic novelist with a keen eye for fashionable trends in literature. Popular interest in Eastern thought from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century was pervasive—and Buddhism in particular was of great interest to Maugham.

It may seem odd that Maugham would turn to Buddhism in a novel based on the life of Paul Gauguin, and in which the exotic Eastern setting is an island nation largely untouched by Buddhist thought. Yet critics have consistently noted (often with a degree of perplexity) the stark

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[2] It is worth noting that Maugham's play, *Caesar's Wife*, which premiered the same year as the publication of *The Moon and Sixpence*, shares this theme, which Maugham described as "the triumph of will over passion" (qtd. in Calder, *Willie* 154).

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disparities between the life of Gauguin and that of Maugham's fictional painter Charles Strickland. J. David Macey Jr. writes: "Maugham models Strickland's career on that of Paul Gauguin, although his fictional character bears little resemblance to the French painter" (Macey 62). Calder also acknowledges that Strickland "is loosely based on Gauguin, but is more fictional than biographical" (*Willie* 154). "What seems to have happened," Calder remarks elsewhere, "is that Maugham used the basic Gauguin situation and the bits of gossip (with their characteristic aberration) that he accumulated in Paris and Tahiti, and then constructed his novel around these, filling out the picture with imaginative hypotheses about the painter" (*Quest* 136-7).

This critical problem evaporates with the recognition that Gauguin himself was heavily influenced by Buddhist thought. Art historian Jacquelynn Baas argues that "Gauguin's interest in Buddhism is hard to miss: its imagery shows up regularly in his art from 1888 on," and that "In Buddhism, Paul Gauguin sought release from desire—the source of human misery, according to the Buddha" (35). Baas attributes Gauguin's interest in Buddhist thought to his associations with fellow artists Vincent van Gogh, Emile Schuffenecker, and Jacob Meyer de Haan, pointing to passages from *Noa Noa* that echo the Buddha's teachings in the *Dhammapada* (37-41). Noting "Gauguin's attraction to Eastern philosophy" Wayne Andersen comments extensively on the Buddhist symbols evident in many of Gauguin's paintings, adding that the Buddha's belief that "life is suffering and sorrow" is one to which "Gauguin clearly subscribed" (Andersen 209, 119). During his quasi-bohemian days at Paris circa 1903-05, Maugham became intrigued with Gauguin's paintings and the anecdotes told around the table at Le Chat Blanc by Roderic O'Conor and other artists who had known the enigmatic painter (Hastings 95). The perceptive Maugham undoubtedly

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would have picked up on the Buddhist iconography so prevalent in Gauguin's work, and for the next decade Maugham toyed with the idea of writing a novel based on the artist's life. In Gauguin Maugham had found a ready-made template for the troubled artist figure he had in mind for *The Moon and Sixpence*, and the painter's association with Buddhism provided Maugham with the spiritual heart of his novel about renunciation.

Certain parallels and discontinuities between Charles Strickland, Gauguin, and the Buddha demand close inspection. Like Gauguin, Strickland shocks his wife and family by resigning his comfortable position as a stockbroker in favor of a penurious career in painting. From here, however, fiction parts company with fact. The note Strickland leaves for his wife, Amy, reads in part: "I have made up my mind to live apart from you…My decision is irrevocable" (*Moon* 32). The cold calculation with which Strickland has spent a year planning his "desperate plunge" and his conspicuous lack of remorse for leaving his family without support strike the narrator as evidence of an "extraordinary callousness," sending him into a state of "moral indignation" (38-40). By contrast, Gauguin's estrangement from his family was largely initiated and upheld by his wife, Mette, and her Danish family—and at any rate was a far more prolonged affair that caused Gauguin considerable anguish.[3] After leaving his position on the Bourse, Gauguin moved the family to Rouen in 1884 to save expenses, and later that year he followed the increasingly embittered Mette to her family home in Copenhagen:

[3] Biographers Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson write: "Gauguin's break from Copenhagen has been freely represented as the turning-point in his life…yet the fact is that Gauguin's act was neither so dramatic nor so final as has been assumed" (Hanson 74).

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> To accept the separation and remain in France would have been equivalent to admitting that the past was dead; and Gauguin refused to admit it. However chagrined he may have been at times by Mette's behaviour, he did not want to be deprived of what he called her 'affection.' He did his best to persuade himself that the old life, in spite of its disagreements, was continuing. (Perruchot 99).

Biographer Henri Perruchot writes that in Copenhagen "Mette herself demanded a temporary separation. When Gauguin had a job, they could think again...This break in their life together, which was being forced on him [Gauguin], would only be temporary" (109). Similarly, Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson assert that "Gauguin did not leave Mette in 1885—he left her relations and her country...He wanted Mette and the children to live with him—but not in Denmark; he declared again and again that he would set up a home for them all when he had made enough money" (75). The highly romanticized accounts of Gauguin abandoning his family for art's sake that were circulating in the first decades of the twentieth century would doubtless have appealed to Maugham—and as a novelist he was adept at altering the facts to fit the demands of the story.

In certain respects, Strickland's flight from the comforts of domestic life more closely resembles that of the Buddha, as told in Sanskrit texts dating to the first and third centuries CE and retold in Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879). The *Buddhacarita*, for instance, tells of how the prince Siddhartha Gautama, having devoted some years "to the duties of householder," abandons his family in order to pursue a higher calling, vowing never to return "till I have seen the further shore of life and death" (*Buddhacarita* 67, 79). Similarly, Strickland's preternatural compulsion to paint necessitates (in his view) breaking all ties with his

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wife and children, a task he undertakes with "cheerful effrontery" (40). "I've supported her for seventeen years," Strickland says of Amy, "Why shouldn't she support herself for a change?" (39). With respect to his offspring, he tells the narrator, "They've had a good many years of comfort...Besides, somebody will look after them" (40). Strickland's desertion is a deliberate, determined, and permanent act more akin to that found in the Buddha story than to the prolonged marital strife of the Gauguins.[4]

Common to all three narratives is a period of wandering that ensues after the respective family obligations have been, in one way or another, dispensed with. Gauguin's travels would take him first to Panama and Martinique, then to Pont-Aven and Arles, and finally to Tahiti, where he would find new inspiration and paint the pictures that would eventually establish his posthumous reputation. The Buddha, as is well known, "exhibited difficult tasks for six years" as a traveling ascetic, apprenticing himself to Hindu and Jain teachers and practicing stringent austerities in pursuit of spiritual liberation (*Lalitavistara* 239). Strickland's artistic demons propel him first to Paris, then to Marseilles, and finally to Tahiti. Poverty, increasing asceticism, and near-starvation are burdens borne by all three figures—a point that would not have escaped Maugham's notice. Yet in each of these wanderings a sense of the isolato or cultural exile predominates, a figure with which Maugham strongly identified. As

[4] It is worth noting that from the Axial age until the mid-twentieth century it was common practice for Indian men, having fulfilled domestic obligations, to abandon their families after middle age to seek spiritual wisdom. Thus the Buddha's action is unusual primarily in that he is reported to have taken this step at the age of twenty-nine (see Ross 7). Maugham's narrator recognizes that Strickland's behavior is "abominable" only because the "contract…which a man accepts by his marriage" is a conception shaped by modern, Western values—the point at which he must bite his "lips in order not to laugh" at this matter so "immensely serious for all the parties concerned" (*Moon* 40).

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Archie K. Loss put it:

> One reason that he wrote so much about exiles was that, in a literal sense, he was an exile himself: an Englishman born in a foreign country whose language became fundamental to his life as an adult. Exile forms a major part of the pattern of Maugham's life. It accounts for the interest Maugham shows in exiles in his work, and also, in large measure, it explains his own peripatetic life…His travels were also an escape from a style of life with which he could not always come to terms. (Loss 1-2)

Arriving in Tahiti after Strickland's death, the narrator conceives the

> idea that some men are born out of their due place. . . . They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves. Perhaps some deep-rooted atavism urges the wanderer back to lands which his ancestors left in the dim beginnings of history. Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs.
>
> (*Moon* 165)

Here Maugham conceptualizes this yearning in spiritual (rather than artistic) terms, a longing for permanence that, in Buddhist thought, is the cause of all human suffering.

Indeed, in his asceticism and renunciation of the world, Strickland

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can be read as an updated, modern Buddha figure that ultimately transcends desire and achieves spiritual liberation. From the time he leaves England Strickland leads an increasingly austere life. In Paris he occupies a "dirty and shabby" rented room, dining and drinking on the cheap at seedy cafés (37). At last "having come to the end of his resources," he is found by Captain Nichols on the French coast at the Asile de Nuit, "a large stone building where pauper and vagabond may get a bed for a week, provided their papers are in order" (151). The threat of having his throat cut by the vengeful master of a boarding house for sailors forces Strickland to sign ship's articles and flee Marseilles. He eventually winds up inhabiting a small, remote bungalow in Tahiti with "no furniture except the mats they used as beds and a rocking-chair," where he and the native girl Ata live "on the produce of the land" (173). "I never knew a man so entirely indifferent to his surroundings," the narrator remarks, later stating that "His life was strangely divorced from material things" (90, 131). Like the Buddha, Strickland takes what is offered with neither relish nor distaste:

> He did not want arm-chairs to sit in; he really felt more at his ease on a kitchen chair. He ate with appetite, but was indifferent to what he ate; to him it was only food that he devoured to still the pangs of hunger; and when no food was to be had he seemed capable of doing without. I learned that for six months he had lived on a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk a day. He was a sensual man, and yet was indifferent to sensual things. He looked upon privation as no hardship. There was something impressive in the manner in which he lived a life wholly of the spirit. (69)

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Strickland's asceticism and indifference to bodily discomfort once again recall the stories of the Buddha, who before his enlightenment is said to have accepted the food offered to him in his alms bowl with detached equanimity (D. Morgan 103). In the *Lalitavistara* the Buddha tells his disciples, "I knew, O Bhikṣus, how to subsist on a single grain of rice," a widely known detail to which Strickland's bread and milk appear to allude (238). Maugham's narrator often seems at great pains to describe Strickland's "extreme thinness" and "cadaverous" body, noting how during his illness in Paris Strickland "was nothing but skin and bone. His clothes hung upon him like rags on a scarecrow" (*Moon* 66, 89). These passages evoke similar imagery found in the Buddhist texts. Of the Buddha's wasted frame during the period of his harshest austerities it is written: "Through his belly, his backbone could be seen like a string of beads" (*Lalitavistara* 242). "[W]henever I touched my stomach with my hand," the Buddha relates, "I touched my spine too" (238).

Although in his asceticism Strickland often seems immune to physical suffering, his desires cause him considerable psychological distress. In fact, through most of the novel Strickland is depicted as a creature of desire, driven by selfish passions, lusts, and cravings to the exclusion of all else. He is always content to partake of a meal or a bottle of absinthe at the expense of the narrator, and when libidinal energies arise he appeases them swiftly in order to get back to painting: "sometimes I want a woman. When I've satisfied my passion I'm ready for other things" (131). Of his betrayal of Dirk Stroeve with the man's wife, Blanche,[5] Strickland merely states: "Damn it all, I wanted he. . . .

[5] In a noteworthy instance of sympathetic naming, Maugham juxtaposes the ungrateful and unfaithful modern Englishwoman Blanche with the supportive and pliable Tahitian girl Ata. Blanche suggests the Old French *blancher* (to take the color out of) or *blanche*, the feminine of *blanc* (white). Ata suggests the French *atavisme*, a return to past, primitive methods or behaviors.

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At last I took her" (131). However, the insouciance with which Strickland speaks in these passages is belied by his telling confession that "I can't overcome my desire, but I hate it; it imprisons my spirit; I look forward to the time when I shall be free from all desire" (131). Beyond the disruptive inconvenience of carnal desire, though, Strickland is beset by an intense inner, spiritual turmoil that expresses itself in his painting. During one of his last conversations with the painter, the narrator states, "I had an inkling of a fiery, tortured spirit, aiming at something greater than could be conceived by anything that was bound up with the flesh. I had a fleeting glimpse of a pursuit of the ineffable" (134). Reflecting upon his first viewing of Strickland's paintings in Paris, the narrator states that his "final impression" was that Strickland "was under an intolerable necessity to convey something that he felt. . . . It was as though he had become aware of the soul of the universe and were compelled to express it" (137-8). In a notable reference to Buddhist metaphysics, he then admits to Strickland, "I do not know what infinite yearning possesses you, so that you are driven to a perilous, lonely search for some goal where you expect to find a final release from the spirit that torments you…I do not know to what inscrutable Nirvana you aim" (138). This consuming desire to express in art the transcendent visions that plague him causes Strickland much suffering—and in Buddhist philosophy, as is well known, the root cause of suffering is desire (*dukkha*).

In Tahiti, wholly free from the material and societal constraints of Europe, Strickland finally achieves artistic and spiritual liberation. Like Philip Carey before him, the exotic East tempts Strickland with a suggestion of mystical meaning, an answer to the question that compels him in his artistic endeavors: "Sometimes I've thought of an island lost in a boundless sea, where I could live in some hidden valley, among strange

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trees, in silence. There I think I could find what I want" (71). The island provides sustenance, and Ata attends to Strickland's other requirements: "She leaves me alone. . . . She cooks my food and looks after her babies. She does what I tell her. She gives me what I want from a woman" (177). In Tahiti, the narrator muses, Strickland "found in his surroundings the accidents necessary for his inspiration to become effective," and that "Here he found himself" (145). Strickland goes "native with a vengeance" and paints his great masterpiece on the walls of Ata's bungalow, which Dr. Coutras finds to be "the work of a man who had delved into the hidden depths of nature and discovered secrets which were beautiful and fearful too" (176, 190). The narrator imagines that in this work "Strickland had finally put the whole expression of himself," and that "perhaps here he had at last found peace" (191-92). If Strickland's release seems an unconvincing or superficial analogue for Buddhist enlightenment, one need only consider Maugham's rather ham-handed (though well researched) treatments of the subject in *The Narrow Corner* (1932) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944). Alone, any of the parallels between *The Moon and Sixpence* and Buddhist scripture that I have described might seem nothing more than intriguing but unrelated similarities. Considered together, they demonstrate that Strickland's artistic and spiritual journey is a kind of mythopoetic mash-up of details drawn from Gauguin's life and the Buddha story, in whatever forms Maugham may have encountered these narratives in his diverse reading and conversation.

Strickland, of course, is unlike the Buddha in two significant respects. First, he is completely lacking in the compassion integral to the Buddha's teachings. "He had no compassion," the narrator reflects, and "His callousness was inhuman" (173, 221). In this respect Strickland makes a very unconvincing Buddha-figure indeed. Second, if Strickland

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does achieve a kind of "enlightenment" at the end of the novel, it comes at the cost of his life. Maugham's novel thus appears to suffer from the common misconception in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Buddhist enlightenment entails the extinction of the physical self and the annihilation of the individual who achieves it.[6] It is unlikely that Maugham labored under this misapprehension. The inconsistency between the results of Strickland's enlightenment and that of the Buddha, I suggest, probably has more to do with Maugham's mastery of plot and the particular demands of his story. For the narrator to conclude his tale, Strickland must complete his masterwork, achieve spiritual release, and perish—otherwise the experiment that so fascinates the narrator would remain incomplete, and the plot would remain unresolved. As it stands, the narrator concludes that into the completing of his magnum opus:

> Strickland had finally put the whole expression of himself…I fancied that perhaps here he had at last found peace. The demon which possessed him was exorcised at last, and with the completion of the work, for which all his life had been a painful preparation, rest descended on his remote and tortured soul. He was willing to die, for he had fulfilled his purpose. (328)

Clearly, if Strickland had lived to explicate and defend his works, there would have been no reason for the narrator to chronicle the spiritual journey of an enigmatic artist whose "influence," we are told, "has so enormously affected modern painting" (232). At the level of plot the ending makes sense, and Maugham was nothing if not a master of tightly

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[6] Both Emerson and Melville, among others, labored under this mis-apprehension.

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plotted fiction. If Strickland's character is not entirely consistent with the stories of the Buddha's life, Maugham nonetheless manages to bring his story to a satisfying conclusion. Furthermore, it must be observed that Strickland expresses spiritual meaning through art—a distinctly modernist conception. Whatever else it may be, *The Moon and Sixpence* is a classic example of the modernist *Kunstlerroman*, or artist novel. Forrest D. Burt writes that "*The Moon and Sixpence* takes up a subject of growing concern to Maugham, namely, the relationship between an artist's life and his or her art" (99). Anthony Curtis remarks that "Strickland was a more ruthless portrait of the Artist than anything comparable in fiction at the time when Maugham created him" (*Pattern* 106). In the increasingly secular environment of the early twentieth century, Maugham, like many of his contemporaries, adopted the idea that art could provide the meaning over which the church no longer had absolute, unquestioned authority. Not only is this a strong argument for Maugham's modernity, it also bears some resemblance to the secular, quasi-humanist turn in Buddhist philosophy.[7]

Strickland's apocalyptic renunciation of desire, which provides a poignant, if ironic, climax to the novel, is contrasted with two other models of renunciation, one of which the narrator abhors, the other of which he respects. Broken by betrayal, the collapse of his marriage, and Blanche's suicide, Dirk Stroeve adopts a passive, acquiescent approach to life:

> The world is hard and cruel…We must go through life so inconspicuously that Fate does not notice us. And let us seek the love of simple, ignorant people. Their ignorance is better

[7] Buddhism is not a revealed religion and emphasizes a soteriology based in the effort of the individual. See Ross 4, 15-6.

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> than all our knowledge. Let us be silent, content in our little corner, meek and gentle like them. That is the wisdom of life." (203)

Maugham's narrator is sickened by this display of docile submission, stating, "To me it was his broken spirit that expressed itself, and I rebelled against his renunciation" (203). By contrast, in Tahiti the narrator relates to the proprietress of the hotel the story of Abraham, a doctor of "remarkable gifts" he had once known at St. Thomas' Hospital, who gave up "Honours and wealth" and a "coveted position on the staff" to take a "halfpenny job in the medical at Alexandria" (282, 286). When the doctor's replacement tells the narrator that he considers his lucky break to be the result of Abraham's lack of character, the narrator muses, "Character? I should have thought it needed a good deal of character to throw up a career after half an hour's meditation, because you saw in another way of living a more intense significance" (286). This is a pivotal moment in the novel, for it is with this allegory fresh in the reader's mind that Maugham turns to the account of Strickland's life and death in Tahiti. The placement of this scene just prior to the novel's climax is clearly intentional. Taken together, these three narratives of renunciation and self-sacrifice operate in terms of Bakhtin's *heteroglossia*, creating a novelistic multiplicity of voices and perspectives, a set of contrasting variations on a theme of the type that Maugham later uses—with a great deal more complexity and arguably with more success—in *The Razor's Edge*.

Just as Melville had transfigured Indian thought into a modern context in *Moby-Dick*, in *The Moon and Sixpence* Maugham reformulates the story of the Buddha's life, adapting it in service of his exploration of desire, suffering, and renunciation in the age of modernity. Unlike Sir

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Edwin Arnold and Herman Hesse, however, Maugham does not simply import the Buddha story wholesale. His novel is not merely a "retelling" with modern implications, for the Buddhist elements in *The Moon and Sixpence* underlie and inform the present action, beliefs, and behaviors of the characters. The sophistication of Maugham's technique has more in common with Pound's notion of palimpsest, or with the subtle and balanced way that Eliot incorporated Indian philosophy in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*.[8]

The Moon and Sixpence thus marks the first of Maugham's sustained engagements with the East; yet it also marks the debut of the detached Maughamian persona—concurrent developments in Maugham's writing that are far from coincidental. In the mid-1990s, a minor critical kerfuffle transpired over the function of this narrative device in the novel. A common criticism of the novel is its failure to satisfy the expectations of biographical writing by denying access into the mind and motivations of Charles Strickland.[9] In 1995 Sheldon W. Liebman addressed this charge by arguing that "the central character in *The Moon and Sixpence* is not Strickland, but the narrator," an unreliable narrator that projects "his own wishes and desires" onto Strickland, the subject of his inquiry (Liebman 331, 333). In *The Moon and Sixpence*, he concludes, "Maugham is solely interested in exploring the process of projection, the biases from which it derives, the moral shallowness that it reflects, and the consequences that it engenders" (341). In his subsequent article David

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[8] Cleo McNelly Kearns writes of Eliot's dialectical technique: "He made both the mind of Europe and the mind of India a part of his 'conscious present,' drawing from their juxtaposition kinds of awareness that neither of them, taken alone and in themselves, could show" (Kearns 90).

[9] Among the first of many critics to make this charge was Katherine Mansfield, whose review appeared just after the novel's publication in 1919. See "Inarticulations," *W. Somerset Maugham: The Critical Heritage*, Anthony Curtis and John Whitehead, eds. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) 144-47.

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J. Macey argues that such a reading "fails to grasp the complexity of Maugham's design in constructing an intentionally flawed biography" (Macey par. 1). Macey views the narrator's function as that of compiler, a sort of novelistic hagiographer or mythmaker that has collected and arranged various anecdotal narratives related to him by those who knew Strickland. The text fails as biography, he contends, because the narrator "seeks to understand Strickland in novelistic terms, by telling a story" built on fragments that can never be verified (par. 13). "In the end," he asserts, "the novel is not about Strickland at all, nor is it the story of the anonymous narrator or of Somerset Maugham. *The Moon and Sixpence* is a story about storytelling" (par. 3).

While both articles succeed in drawing sharper attention to the role of the narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence*, however, both Liebman and Macey fail to adequately account for the novel's curious conflation of author and narrator—the distinguishing characteristic of the Maugham persona and its most technically innovative attribute. Liebman ducks the issue entirely, content to poke holes in the narrator's reliability. Macey devotes a short paragraph to the question, noting that the "actual relationship between the novelist and the fictional narrator is more complex" (par. 8). After hastily ticking off a handful of similarities between Maugham's life and that of his narrator, however, he downplays the issue by asserting that "Maugham exploits the full range of dramatic irony in his characterization of the narrator," who, he suggests, lacks his creator's literary and artistic sophistication (par. 8). Thus while Macey's study of the narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence* is the more critically incisive of the two, it does little to address the intriguing complexities inherent in the reflexive subject position Maugham creates as the novel's author/narrator. To fully understand what Maugham accomplished in his development of the Maugham persona and articulate its particular

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relevance for twenty-first century readers, it is necessary to properly contextualize this shift in Maugham's narrative technique.

That one must be wary of confusing or conflating an author with his or her fictional narrators is an idea that teachers of undergraduate literature often cannot overemphasize. In Maugham's case, however, critics have little choice but to recognize and consider the many parallels. In Maugham's exotic fiction the narrator is frequently cast as a quasi-fictional version of the author himself—sometimes explicitly, as in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor's Edge*, more often as an anonymous author figure traveling through Asia and the South Seas to gather material. The temptation to draw parallels between Maugham's life and art thus receives a degree of validation, especially in light of Maugham's admission that "I have put the whole of my life into my books" (*Summing Up* 9). On the blurring of lived experience and fictional representation in his work Maugham reflects:

> In one way and another I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life. Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme and I have invented a series of incidents to illustrate it; more often I have taken persons with whom I have been slightly or intimately acquainted and used them as the foundation for characters of my invention. Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other. (*Summing Up* 1)

In the same work Maugham comments on the peculiar relationship between himself and his narrators: "I have been held back also by the irksomeness of setting down my thoughts in my own person. For though I

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have written a good deal from this standpoint I have written as a novelist and so in a manner have been able to regard myself as a character in the story" (7). Of this fluid, osmotic boundary between self and character Philip Holden has observed that the "The problem of the relation between Maugham the narrator and Maugham the author has…proved a stumbling block for critics" (Holden 20). Certainly Maugham's frequent positioning of some version of himself as the narrator of his exotic fiction poses particular critical problems for those wishing to explicate this work, and one must resist the impulse to simply and unquestioningly conflate person with persona. Nonetheless, Maugham's own musings on the cocktail-like mixtures of reality and imagination in his fiction and travel writing do offer insight into the author's methods and motivations. When Maugham's author-narrators speak on the subjects of travel, writing, and their own personal views, it is often the case that they speak for him.

Maugham's 1915 novel *Of Human Bondage*—considered by many critics to be his best—is, by the author's own admission, an instance of a writer engaged in exorcising the demons of his youth, with the young medical student Stephen Carey "standing in" for his creator. It is therefore puzzling that *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham's next novel, is not more widely regarded as a similar (though necessarily more guarded) attempt to deal with the various crises of Maugham's middle age. To properly understand the role of the Maugham persona in *The Moon and Sixpence*, I suggest, it is necessary to consider the personal difficulties Maugham was attempting to resolve through the process of writing the novel. My assertion that Maugham's central thematic concerns in *The Moon and Sixpence*—the price of artistic freedom, the demands of social duty, and renunciation of desire—were of significant personal relevance to Maugham himself is not made hastily or without grounds. As Robert Calder puts it, Maugham's "dissatisfaction with the

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direction of his life made *The Moon and Sixpence* almost as much a personal statement as *Of Human Bondage* had been" (*Willie* 154). A brief biographical sketch of this period of Maugham's life will make this patently clear.

The years 1914-1919 mark a pivotal period in Maugham's life and career. On one hand, he was riding high. Already a popular and prolific playwright—an editorial cartoon in *Punch* had once depicted an anxious Shakespeare biting his nails in front of advertisements for Maugham's plays—Maugham had achieved a measure of financial stability and notoriety (Meyers 69). Having banished his childhood demons through the cathartic process of writing *Of Human Bondage*, Maugham was also emerging, at the age of forty-one, as a novelist of some significance and promise.[10] On the other hand, the increased visibility that accompanied this success posed problems for Maugham in his personal life. His daughter Liza had been born the year previous, the issue of an illicit affair with Syrie Wellcome (then wife of pharmaceutical magnate Henry Wellcome) that culminated in a divorce case with Maugham named as correspondent (Morgan 204). "The whole matter has been a great distress and worry to me" Maugham wrote to his brother Frederic in 1916 (qtd. in Morgan 204). In addition, owing to his homosexual tendencies the specter of the 1885 Labouchere Amendment—under which Oscar Wilde had been famously prosecuted and sentenced to hard labor in 1895—must have consistently haunted Maugham as he became more widely known.[11]

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[10] Although his first novel *Liza of Lambeth* had created a stir in 1897 and was very popular, subsequent novels sold less well and languished in relative obscurity until Theodore Dreiser's 1915 review ignited sales of *Of Human Bondage*.

[11] As popular essayist Christopher Hitchens put it, "Maugham was a young man during the Oscar Wilde scandal, and he developed all the habits of subterfuge that were necessary to his survival. It seems certain that he married Syrie Wellcome partly as 'cover,' and thereby doomed himself to decades of misery

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Thus by the time he was finishing the last chapters of *Of Human Bondage*, Maugham's thoughts had already turned to marriage as a respectable and convenient course of action. In *The Summing Up* he writes:

> If I meant to marry and have children it was high time I did so and for some time I had amused my imagination with pictures of myself in the married state. There was no one I particularly wanted to marry. It was the condition that attracted me…it offered peace; peace from the disturbance of love affairs [and their] troublesome complications…peace that would enable me to write all I wanted to write without the loss of precious time or disturbance of mind; peace and a settled and dignified way of life. I sought freedom and thought I could find it in marriage. I conceived these notions when I was still at work on *Of Human Bondage*, and turning my wishes into fiction, as writers will, towards the end of it I drew a picture of the marriage I should have liked to make. (193-4)

In these lines Maugham expresses the principal attractions that marriage held for him at this juncture: peace, freedom, and dignity. In addition to providing a sense of stability and comfort conducive to his writing, a marriage of convenience would help to protect his reputation from suspicion or scandal. However, Maugham's thoughts at this time were not solely of a domestic turn, for a native wanderlust had begun to lead him in a much different, though perhaps not unexpected direction. He writes in *The Summing Up*:

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and litigation" (Hitchens 244).

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> I was tired of the life . . . I was leading. . . . It was stifling me and I hankered after a different mode of existence and new experiences. But I did not know where to turn for them. I thought of travelling. I was tired of the man I was, and it seemed to me that by a long journey to some far-distant country I might renew myself. (192-3)

Thoughts of this nature are also manifested in *Of Human Bondage*, as when Philip remarks on "the desire, which was now an obsession, for Eastern lands and sunlit islands in a tropic sea" (725). Philip's conclusion that "There was no meaning in life" leaves him restless, and he imagines that "he would get a ship and go to the East . . . he had a feeling that he would learn something new about life and gain some clue to the mystery that he had solved only to find more mysterious" (655, 729). These autobiographical and fictional utterances support my contention that from 1914 to 1916 the particular problems Maugham faced in his personal life brought to a head the tensions between desire and duty, personal freedom and social responsibility, which figure so prominently in his early novels and plays.

It was under these circumstances that, in the autumn of 1916, Maugham left England with his American secretary and lover Gerald Haxton on a journey to Tahiti to gather material for *The Moon and Sixpence*. A telling passage in *The Summing Up* reads: "I wanted to recover my peace of mind shattered through my own foolishness and vanity by occurrences upon which I need not dwell and so I made up my mind to go to the South Seas" (196). Upon his return to England in 1917, Maugham and Syrie married, in what novelist Glenway Wescott characterized as "a marriage of convenience on both sides" (qtd. in Morgan 221). Faced with the choice between settling into a respectable

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but somewhat awkward marriage and running away to the East, Maugham's protagonist Philip chooses the former: "His wedding present to his wife would be all his high hopes. Self-sacrifice!" (*Of Human Bondage* 755). Maugham, faced with the same choice, did both.

Given these complications in Maugham's personal life and his reaction to them, it is understandable that, in his next novel, the author chose to explore the possibility of renouncing desire—a theme he would return to a quarter century later in *The Razor's Edge*. The problem Maugham faced in writing *The Moon and Sixpence* was that of creating a liminal subject position between the two extremes of personal freedom and social convention, without drawing undue attention to his own alterity as a homosexual author—for as Archie K. Loss has noted, "Whatever its causes, Maugham's homosexuality remained something he could not and would not acknowledge publicly" (4). Throughout the novel, the narrator attempts to present himself as an objective, disinterested documentarian of the unaccounted for years in the life of the now-famous painter Charles Strickland—especially those at Tahiti, "that part of his tragic career which has remained most obscure" (8). He is a detached observer who (to paraphrase Melville's Ishmael) floats on the margins of the scene. Of the literary lions and guests that attend the parties of the London literati the narrator states, "I wanted no one to take notice of me, so that I could observe these famous creatures at my ease and listen to the clever things they said" (11). The narrator's discreet circumspection is most smartly encapsulated in his claim: "my own practice has been to deny everything" (39).

If the narrator's pose is a façade, it is nonetheless an ingenious one, for his professed detachment from the people and scenes he inhabits creates a discursive space in which Maugham the author can explore his preferred themes without fear of implicating himself or explicitly

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committing himself to any one worldview. Burt writes that "the Maugham persona is not just a clever literary device that proved artistically effective and commercially profitable. It is rooted in and emanates from Maugham's own personality" (30). It is a device so effective that Maugham would continue to refine and employ it in his exotic short stories and novels for the next twenty-five years, for as Philip Holden suggests, *The Razor's Edge* is "the final part of an effort to . . . manufacture textually a Maugham persona which will have so much extratextual life that it will cover over, or closet, the life of W. Somerset Maugham as a homosexual man" (142). Holden's insightful book is the first to examine in detail the relationships between Maugham's homosexuality, his exotic fiction and travel writing, and the Maugham persona. However, his ultimate conclusion—that the Maugham persona merely functions to facilitate, maintain, and perpetuate the construction of British masculinity—does not account for the highly subversive manner in which this device actually works, for as Burt argues,

> through the use of the dramatized first-person narrative technique, Maugham is able to achieve an effect similar to that in *Of Human Bondage*—objectivity of presentation, lack of a conventional moral or message. Furthermore, this technique allows the reader to remain relatively free to experience the narrative and to draw conclusions—influenced, of course, by the rather undogmatic, objective, cynical, and somewhat amoral Maughmian narrator. (99)

Maugham uses this liminal subject position to give himself a legible voice capable not only of negotiating the related tensions between East and West, the exotic and the familiar, freedom and conformity, but of

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doing so in a manner that specifically works to undermine the oppressive sociopolitical system with which he is in conflict as a homosexual writer—all without tipping his hand. In effect (to borrow a Buddhist formulation), in creating the Maugham persona, Maugham found a particularly useful "Middle Way" that enabled him to negotiate issues of alterity and sexual morality in his writing with a high degree of both equanimity and plausible deniability.

Maugham's relevance to the twenty-first century reader by now should be apparent. Given the increased awareness and visibility of LGTB issues such as gay marriage and the promising (though as yet insufficient) progress in terms of securing equal rights for these marginalized groups, it is astonishing that sharper attention has not been paid to the highly coded yet clearly subversive dimension of Maugham's exotic fiction. In his study of closeted writing, David M. Robinson remarks that

> something crucial is lost to LGTB Studies and queer theory when, conditioned to anthropomorphize texts, discourses, and ideologies, we ignore that they were written, spoken, and thought by *people*, some of whom loved and lusted after members of their own sex, under conditions that prevented them from communicating their thoughts and feelings openly. (ix; emphasis in the original)

Then again, too much attention is often given in this regard to writers of manifestly lesser talent. For instance, Harry Oldmeadow contends that "Christopher Isherwood's reputation as a novelist is in well-deserved decline although interest in him as a 'personality' does not seem to have abated—note the widespread interest in his interminable and

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self-important diaries!" (81). What Maugham's exotic tales contribute to this discussion is what Klaus W. Jonas describes as the "tolerant and realistic attitude towards life which is typical of some of his characters who have lived in the Far East" (129). In this sense the Maugham narrator becomes a perhaps more subtle instance of what M. C. Kuner calls "the non-conformer who battles a disapproving world" so prominent in Maugham's fiction:

> Like a sensitive physician attending his patient, Somerset Maugham had been able to diagnose our condition in a language we can understand; wary of prescribing, he nevertheless bids us remember that though we may not be fortunate enough to find release from bondage in the wisdom of the East or in devotion to the arts, at least we need not twist by our intolerance the chains our brothers wear. (Kuner 38, 95)

Similarly, given Maugham's emphasis on the European encounter with the East in his exotic fiction, the dearth of postcolonial criticism on Maugham is surprising—if for no other reason than that these texts collectively form an expansive document of Western attitudes toward the colonized East during the interwar period. Philip Holden notes that "The amount of academic writing on Maugham is surprisingly small," adding:

> Nor have the texts attracted attention from postcolonial critics, in marked contrast to the explosion of re-readings of Forster and Conrad in the late 1980s. The reason…may well be that Maugham's writings are not, and have never been, part of the English literature canon at British and North American universities. (4, 6)

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As yet, Holden's study remains the only sustained attempt to draw attention to the complexity of Maugham's representations of gender, race, and sexuality from a postcolonial perspective.

I wish also to emphasize that the Maugham persona—considered as a device Maugham used to give voice to his alterity—is a technical innovation on par with those of Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Pound. Forrest D. Burt writes:

> Maugham turned from drama to fiction and created the dramatized first-person narrator. Gradually learning the potential of this device as it suited his experience, outlook, and talents, Maugham eventually would refine it to a point that would enable him to appeal to and involve his readers in ways—certainly unusual for traditional narrative—comparable to that of the more innovative stream of consciousness/interior monologue techniques being used by certain of his contemporaries. (97)

Maugham has long been criticized for the absence of formal experimentation in his work and the remote indifference of his narrators, who typically observe, comment upon, and occasionally converse with other characters with a "cynical" reserve and disinterestedness. M. K. Naik writes of both the aloof detachment of Maugham's narrators and his finely honed sense of irony, even going so far as to state that "The strongest point of Maugham's style is its irony," yet he fails to recognize these as distinctly modernist traits (155-7, 172). Clearly, if one accepts Peter Nicholls' assessment that a tone of ironic detachment is the distinguishing characteristic of the "modern style," then Maugham must

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be ranked among the most modern of the modernists.[12] Not only is the Maugham persona a remarkable achievement strictly at the level of technical innovation, it is a highly subversive literary device that necessitates a complete reassessment of Maugham's oeuvre, literary reputation, and (non)-canonical status.

Finally, Maugham's turn to the East must be placed in its proper context. Critics have overwhelmingly judged either *Of Human Bondage* or *Cakes and Ale* as Maugham's best work of fiction, dismissing the exotic short stories and novels variously as escapist fantasies, misguided exercises in navel-gazing, or unjustifiably sordid appeals to popular taste. Taken together, such assessments smack of an entrenched provincialism that throughout the twentieth century impeded the proper understanding not only of Maugham's work, but that of other Eastward-looking moderns such as Eliot, Pound, Conrad, Lawrence, Forster, and Huxley. Of Maugham's exoticism Jonas has argued that "Although quantitatively these narratives and dramas amount to less than half of his collected writings, they are of far greater importance for his development as a man and as a writer than their actual volume would indicate," a sentiment that, essentially, could be applied equally to any of these other writers (96). Maugham's engagement with the East must be properly understood as part of the widespread upsurge of interest in Eastern thought so prevalent in the Euro-American art and literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This modernist tendency toward cultural contrast is an aspect of what Michael Levenson refers to as "widening," or "enlarging contexts…establishing relations between contexts, by situating motifs within an increasingly elaborate set of cultural parallels"

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[12] In *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* Peter Nicholls identifies "a distinctively 'modern' style" typified by "a certain complexity of *tone*," an "ironic distance" created by the writer and interposed between the author and his or her subject matter (1, 3; emphasis in the original).

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(Levenson 201). Maugham's cosmopolitan ethic and his interest in Eastern thought thus place him in company with numerous other Euro-American modernists, as well as establishing him in an intellectual lineage that runs from the New England Transcendentalists through the Beats and beyond.

Maugham's Eastern travels brought the author not only a wealth of material for his writing, but also a liberating sexual freedom impossible to realize in England. Of the South Sea Islands he stated: "I was there long enough to convince myself that Europeans were sexually deranged and the Polynesians sexually sane" (qtd. in Menard 10). The inevitable returns to Europe and the resulting textual products of these voyages necessitated what must have seemed to Maugham a stifling need for discretion. As Ted Morgan puts it, "He was a man divided between a wife and child, who meant social conformity, and a male lover, with whom he shared an adventurous and professionally rewarding life" (246). Maugham's interest in Indian philosophy (with its emphasis on desire as the cause of suffering) and the Maugham persona arose and continued to develop principally out of these conflicting impulses. As I have shown, this reading offers new ways of thinking about and assessing Maugham's exotic fiction.

With *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham gave himself an assignment that was of particular moment to him personally during this period of his life: an exploration of the possibility of renouncing desire. Taking Gauguin and the Buddha as his models, he contrasted an exoticized, primitive Tahiti with a staid, civilized Europe and incorporated elements of Buddhism in a novel that established a number of the principal themes, techniques, and intellectual questions that dominate the exotic fiction of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. However, although Maugham uses Buddhist tropes to provide a broad contextual

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framework for the narrative of Strickland's desire, suffering, and eventual liberation, he does so with little in the way of direct engagement with Buddhist metaphysics. Still, in Maugham's first attempt to use Eastern religion in his writing in an extensive and focused manner (to use yet another well known Buddhist image), a wheel had been set in motion. In his autobiography Maugham would later write of his first trip to the East:

> I wanted . . . to get material for a novel I had long been thinking over based on the life of Paul Gauguin. I went, looking for beauty and romance and glad to put a great ocean between me and the trouble that harassed me. I found beauty and romance, but I found also something that I had never expected. I found a new self. (*Summing Up* 196)

As with his contemporaries Eliot, Pound, Forster, Conrad, Huxley, and Lawrence, Maugham discovered in Eastern thought a set of discourses remarkably suited to the task of diagnosing the ills of Western modernity, and Indic philosophy in particular had a transformative impact on Maugham's writing that can no longer be lightly dismissed.

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