

Intermedial Elements: Building Identity and Selfhood

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Abstract

The given paper is a case study of intermedial elements used to build distinct cultural identities and the image of selfhood in W. S. Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) set in England, France, and Polynesia. The peculiarities of intermedial language used by the writer to enlarge the contextual field of his literary artefact are demonstrated through specific examples, primarily the analysis of available ekphrastic depictions via close reading and hermeneutic methodology. Thus, through the depiction of pictorial arts and the turbulent life of a self-made painter at the turn of the century, as seen through the eyes of a fictional popular writer, Maugham collides painting and writing as arts, English and French/Polynesian cultures, Apollonian and Dionysian as creative processes, modern and primaeval as the origins of art, as well as discusses success and creative search for self-expression as artistic drivers. Ekphrastic fragmentation-type extensions of the novel build, justify, showcase the conflicts, construct binaries, question the selfhoods of two artists, and serve the purpose of establishing two diverse cultural identities and mentalities – English and non-English, own and strange, acceptable and weird, accomplished commercially and accomplished spiritually. The paper concludes that intermedial elements are actively employed to deepen the conflicts and enlarge the contextual field of the novel so that to reflect on the English mentality as opposed to the French/Polynesian as an alien element.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Englishness, Intermediality, Selfhood

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Introduction

William Somerset Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) is one of his most popular and widely read works which is rather rejected by the scholars of British literature of the first half of the XX century – primarily, due to him being perceived as a second-rate writer and a non-modernist in the modernist age (Blackburn & Arsov, 2016; Borg, 2022). However, Maugham is one of those writers who raised modernist topics and thus could be equalled to his modernist contemporaries, even though his literary works were more transitional than experimentative.

From the perspective of intermediality, similarly to James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence or E. M. Forster, Maugham also refers to well-known myths and fables, integrates other arts into his novels with specific purposes. From the standpoint of cultural studies, he is British by citizenship but remained foreign by mentality, like Joseph Conrad, which makes his writing particularly interesting in terms of the synthesis and/or opposition of cultures and mentalities, as well as tracing the impact of his own multi-cultural personality in his writing.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to see his novel *The Moon and Sixpence* as a “late-imperial languor”, both attractive and signalling a cultural decline (Griffin, 2023), a fictional dive into arts at the junction of three streams: the threefold goal is to demonstrate (1) the perception of English and non-English mentality (French and Polynesian) through its (2) re-presentation via two artistic identities (and, respectively, the vision of the life by a newbie painter transformed by the fictional writer-narrator) as conveyed via (3) various intermedial elements, mostly ekphrastic depictions. These three layers are closely intermingled and complement each other to build a holistic fabric of the novel with certain external artistic fragments enlarging it beyond the text.

Methodology-wise, this matter is investigated through the close reading of the text of the novel (with consideration of the historical and cultural developments of the period described) and comparative analysis of the ekphrastic passages and the paintings of the prototypes used by Maugham, as well as the application of the hermeneutic method.

To avoid confusion and misinterpretation, “intermedial” in this context would refer to intermediality as “(the study of) specific relations among dissimilar media products and general relations among different media types” (Elleström, 2017). Even though intermediality has been a subject of scholarly attention since the 1980s and still undergoes academic “refining” in terms of its theory, its objects of study – intermedial artefacts – have existed since early periods of the history of art and can be detected in Maugham's novel, primarily due to the fact of Paul Gauguin, a French post-impressionist painter, being the prototype for the main character, Charles Strickland, “a palimpsest” (Wright, 2019) and the novel being a story of two artists, a painter and a writer-narrator, which presupposes the use of certain intermedial elements while describing their artistic becoming.

From Cultural Oppositions ...

At the basic surface of the novel, the whole story can be divided into three acts, like a play – London, Paris, Tahiti – with two key characters, two artists, Englishmen, surrounded by representatives of other cultures and nationalities. The peculiar *chronotope* of the novel, which results in the crossing of two artists in different *loci*, as well as travelling to the same places but with a time gap of several years, creates the explicit opposition of cultures and

mentalities when a successful writer-narrator does not understand Strickland as a newbie painter who abandons his well-set home and family in London and tries to “put down” the fire of his creative instinct in Paris. Whereas the writer-narrator seems to remain unchanged throughout the narration due to the “imperial totality” framework (Dellamora, 2020), being just a professional story-teller, like an ancient *aoidos*, his antagonist Strickland demonstrates a change of his creative and obsessed side that goes ever deeper into his “demonic” artistic evocation and, in the narrator’s perception, transforms from a respected English family man to stereotypically poor French painter and ends up being a free primitivist Polynesian genius. This transgression as represented through the narrator’s perception delineates the identities of the artists, their views and, eventually selfhoods based in three different *loci*.

While building a direct mentality-based opposition between two Englishmen does not seem to be logically possible as Maugham does not question British traditionalism in his works (Griffin, 2023), he opposes the cultures of the “acts” which serve as the setting and creative context for Strickland and demonstrate the development of his artistic self. Primarily, this opposition is built through the ekphrases of the paintings that Strickland drew, or the pictorial ekphrastic depictions of nature and urban areas which contrast the overall style of the novel and seem to be the alienated insertions. Thus, this is a description of the café in Marseille which reminds early urbanistic paintings of Paul Gauguin, a prototype for Strickland, or Van Gogh, Cezanne, and other post-impressionists:

In the bar ... a mechanical piano was loudly grinding out dance music. Round the room people were sitting at table, here half a dozen sailors uproariously drunk, there a group of soldiers; and in the middle, crowded together, couples were dancing. Bearded sailors with brown faces and large horny hands clasped their partners in a tight embrace. The women wore nothing but a shift. Now and then two sailors would get up and dance together. The noise was deafening. People were singing, shouting, laughing; and when a man gave a long kiss to the girl sitting on his knees, cat-calls from the English sailors increased the din. The air was heavy with the dust beaten up by the heavy boots of the men, and grey with smoke. It was very hot. Behind the bar was seated a woman nursing her baby. The waiter, an undersized youth with a flat, spotty face, hurried to and for carrying a tray laden with glasses of beer. (Maugham, 1972, p. 178)

One cannot indisputably attribute this ekphrasis to Gauguin’s *Night Café at Arles* (1888) or any other painting of the café by the post-impressionist but the ekphrastic *intermezzo* serves its purpose – the informed audience may feel the mood and the atmosphere of France which is alien to an English reader, and consciously or not link it to the well-known works of Gauguin or any other relevant painter (Wright, 2014).

On the other hand, the Polynesian ekphrases in the novel certainly remind of later works of Gauguin and Van Gogh with the same colours dominating the description as seen in their paintings, making the captures real-life coordinates (Wright, 2019). The feeling of exotic alienation is planted into the text, which reminds of specific pictorial styles and, as per the writer’s intention, should create the feeling of the mystery that separated the painter and the narrator, European and Polynesian, modern and primitive/primaeval:

Grey clouds chased one another across the sky. Then the wind dropped, and the sea was calm and blue. The Pacific is more desolate than other seas; its spaces seem more vast, and the most ordinary journey upon it has somehow the feeling of an adventure.

The air you breathe is an elixir which prepares you for the unexpected. Nor is it vouchsafed to man in the flesh to know aught that more nearly suggests the approach to the golden realms of fancy than the approach to Tahiti. Murea, the sister isle, comes into view in rocky splendour, rising from the desert sea mysteriously, like the unsubstantial fabric of a magic wand. With its jagged outline it is like a Montserrat of the Pacific, and you may imagine that there Polynesian knights guard with strange rites mysteries unholy for men to know. The beauty of the island is unveiled as diminishing distance shows you in distincter shape its lovely peaks, but it keeps its secret as you sail by, and, darkly inviolable, seems to fold itself together in a stony, inaccessible grimness. It would not surprise you if, as you came near seeking for an opening in the reef, it vanished suddenly from your view, and nothing met your gaze but the blue loneliness of the Pacific. (Maugham, 1972, p. 167)

Such ekphrastic depictions are repeated throughout the third “act”, in Tahiti, and they can be easily traced, as they “jump out” of the canvas of the novel due to Maugham’s referring to specific colours, with England having no palette of its own, France being very bluishly impressionistic, and Polynesia being the most pictorial and most post-impressionistic with bright “toxic” colours and unconventional shapes and forms. Thus, the choice of words reminds of brush strokes of white (cities), red (trees), blue and purple (sky), and brown (Polynesians), which makes the descriptions very vivid and makes them resemble a palette imposed on the canvases by post-impressionists when viewed from a distance.

When reading the descriptions of regular scenes and objects, the impact of Gauguin and his paintings could be felt strongly by the informed reader, as the everyday scenery, houses, and household objects are depicted aligned with his techniques – the lines are crooked, the shapes are weird and primitive. For instance, this is how the writer-narrator sees one of the still-lives by Strickland:

I remember a still-life of oranges on a plate, and I was bothered because the plate was not round and the oranges were lop-sided. (Maugham, 1972, p. 156)

In addition to documenting the reality as per Gauguin-Strickland’s vision, the narrator once again expresses his opposition to this picture of the world and artistic perception – he cannot embrace it due to differences in selfhoods and identities of two artists, which are implanted in opposing perception of money, society, creativity, success, different choice of mediums.

... to Artistic Binary ...

Speaking of still-lives which trouble the writer-narrator the most, the whole story is the literary rejection of the painter’s vision by the writer-narrator – caused by his inability or unwillingness to perceive it and go that deep into the origins of art and grasp the primitive nature of the creative process. Thus, this depth of troubling primitivism and naturalism is best described through the longest ekphrasis of one of Strickland’s still-lives drawn on Tahiti, where he found peace with himself and expressed his creativity manifold:

It was a pile of mangoes, bananas, oranges, and I know not what. And at first sight it was an innocent picture enough. It would have been passed in an exhibition of the Post-Impressionists by a careless person as an excellent but not very remarkable example of the school; but perhaps afterwards it would come back to his recollection, and he would wonder why. I do not think then he could ever entirely forget it.

The colours were so strange that words can hardly tell what a troubling emotion they gave. They were sombre blues, opaque like a delicately carved bowl in lapis lazuli, and yet with a quivering lustre that suggested the palpitation of mysterious life; there were purples, horrible like raw and putrid flesh, and yet with a glowing, sensual passion that called up vague memories of the Roman Empire of Heliogabalus; there were reds, shrill like the berries of holly – one thought of Christmas in England, and the snow, the good cheer, and the pleasure of children – and yet by some magic softened till they had the swooning tenderness of a dove's breast; there were deep yellows that died with an unnatural passion into a green as fragrant as the spring and as pure as the sparkling water of a mountain brook. Who can tell what anguished fancy made these fruits? They belonged to a Polynesian garden of the Hesperides. There was something strangely alive in them, as though they were created in a stage of the earth's dark history when things were not irrevocably fixed to their forms. They were extravagantly luxurious. They were heavy with tropical odours. They seemed to possess a sombre passion of their own. It was enchanted fruit, to taste which might open the gateway to God knows what secrets of the soul and to mysterious palaces of the imagination. They were sullen with unawaited dangers, and to eat them might turn a man to beast or god. All that was healthy and natural, all that clung to happy relationships and the simple joys of simple men, shrunk from them in dismay; and yet a fearful attraction was in them, and, like the fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil they were terrible with the possibilities of the Unknown. (Maugham, 1972, pp. 216-217)

On the one hand, this fictional ekphrasis can be easily applied to any still-life by French post-impressionists – Gauguin, Cezanne, Van Gogh. On the other, it summarises the conflict between the identities of the writer and the painter, as it reveals the depth of Strickland's paintings: they are very suggestive and syncretic, as they force the reader to think of things that cannot be attached to the paintings logically. Thus, the narrator gets lost in his thoughts and leads the reader away from modern European life and any aspects of it, as the transition to Polynesia forces the musing on the history of humanity, distant past, mythology, and biblical fables – they are perceived as common legacy, inherited through generations of ancestors and implanted in basic mythologems and plots of readers' subconsciousness. Consequently, they bring to the surface of the readers' minds a sacral fear, adoration, and submissiveness – this allows speaking of Maugham's synthesis of pictorial and verbal mediums to relate to collective primaevial fear, which was attributed to Pan in Ancient Greece. This also re-enhances the oppositions of cultures, mentalities, selfhoods, and identities in the novel by referring to the subconscious fear planted in all human beings through their animalistic ancestors. At the same time, this may be seen as an outcome of the attempt “to capture the significance of the object of a description” (Borg, 2022).

This layer of fear which separates the artists, the readers and the book, the civilisations and at the same time merges them all into one fabric of the novel, culminates in Strickland's grasping the sense of life, painting it in his final work, whilst his Polynesian wife Ata is allowed to co-exist in this process, be his medium between the world of art and world of people, which also relates to images of moon and money in the title of the novel. Eventually, Ata is the one who burns this painting, a link or a border between the art and the world to cut ties between Polynesian, French and English components of the story, to mystify it even more in the narrator's perception and cement the genius nature of primitivism.

... and Nietzschean Duality

Altogether, this helps Maugham present his vision of art – which is mixed – due to the involvement of two artists in the story and, consequently, two visions of the world, two identities that do not match especially in the view of constant movement between different cultural *loci* – it fluctuates between seeing art as pictorial only, or exclusively verbal, or, closer to the end of the novel, as something synthetic in between, similar to syncretic art in the womb of mythology – it becomes the “slow coming-into-awareness” of the characters (Borg, 2022). The application of ekphrastic elements and the description of pictorial artefacts through the prism of the writer-narrator helps Maugham build the image of art as an attempt to convey something wild, primaeval, primitive, satyr- and nymph-related, in Nietzschean terms – Dionysian – as true art becomes a deep and primitive instinct. This is how the writer-narrator perceives Strickland:

He seemed to express himself with difficulty, as though words were not the medium with which his mind worked; and you had to guess the intentions of his soul by hackneyed phrases, slang, and vague, unfinished gestures. But though he said nothing of any consequence, there was something in his personality which prevented him from being dull. (Maugham, 1972, p. 64)

This perception of Strickland goes through the whole novel – an artist who is looking for the right medium and whose medium is not literature. Therefore, he is depicted as a silent, gloomy, untalkative “demon” fighting his own passions, an alien, which is not accepted by the writer-narrator who believes that Strickland chose the wrong means of expression. Consequently, due to their difference, the narrator cannot always describe what exactly is depicted in Strickland’s paintings, thus promoting Maugham’s vision of art as the right action, not the content (Adams, 2016). Thus, as seen in the examples above, he often replaces the depiction with the emotions raised in him as a writer. This fully aligns with the purpose of ekphrasis in literature – to evoke feedback from the receiver, to raise emotions, and feelings (Elleström, 2017) – and Maugham employs it masterfully throughout the novel. Consequently, the combination of all ekphrastic depictions, related to Paul Gauguin and parallels with his life allows seeing the whole novel as an ekphrasis of his painting *Hina Te Fatou/The Moon and the Earth* (1893).

Through doubting the pictorial art of Strickland at the beginning of the novel and praising its genius nature at the end, the narrator also raises the matter of art for art’s sake, questioning the possibility for a writer to write on a desolate island, knowing that no one would ever read his works. Here lies the stumbling block of the novel’s philosophy: the narrator requires the public and its approval of his works, as he represents Apollonian, whereas Strickland cares not about the outcome of his art, its material side – he is haunted by demon-type Dionysian side of his personality. This also makes the narrator a living popular on-demand creator, whereas Strickland becomes a true master of his medium and is understood and praised only after his death, by the next generation of perceivers.

The alien-type demonic identity of Strickland also helps build a vision of the artistic process as a co-operation between love and art when art becomes equal to a feeling. As an outcome of all these processes, Maugham presents Strickland’s final masterpiece, which is a combination of pictorial presented through the verbal, narrator’s perception of the painter’s product – the mystery which balances between two Nietzschean dualities, Apollonian and Dionysian, with the slight intrusion of Pan and Marsyas as lower-level divine artists:

It was strange and fantastic. It was a vision of the beginnings of the world, the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve - it was a hymn to the beauty of the human form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime, indifferent, lovely, and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the infinity of space and of the endlessness of time. Because he painted the trees I see about me every day, the cocoa-nuts, the banyans, the flamboyants, the alligator-pears, I have seen them ever since differently, as though there were in them a spirit and a mystery which I am ever on the point of seizing and which forever escapes me. The colours were the colours familiar to me, and yet they were different. They had a significance which was all their own. And those nude men and women. They were of the earth, and yet apart from it. They seemed to possess something of the clay of which they were created, and at the same time something divine. You saw man in the nakedness of his primeval instincts, and you were afraid, for you saw yourself. (Maugham, 1972, p. 214)

The purposeful planting of these dualities of personality, alienated identities, and artistic selfhoods into the novel in the form of two silently polemising characters is linked to Gauguin's primitivist art and post-impressionist artists, their willingness to re-invent the paintings as a non-commercial non-documenting but self-expressive form, like it used to be several thousand years before. An attempt to document post-impressionistic artefact by a realistic writer-narrator also manifests the "insufficiency of realism as an approach to works of art" (Borg, 2022). It also explains all the other creative forces behind the novel:

There was in him something primitive. He seemed to partake of those obscure forces of nature which the Greeks personified in shapes part human and part beast, the satyr and the faun. I thought of Marsyas, whom the god flayed because he had dared to rival him in song. Strickland seemed to bear in his heart strange harmonies and unadventured patterns, and I foresaw for him an end of torture and despair. I had again the feeling that he was possessed of a devil; but you could not say that it was a devil of evil, for it was a primitive force that existed before good and ill. (Maugham, 1972, p. 109)

Similarly, Strickland's identity is formed by a Marsyas-type passion and aggressive leaning toward arts, which must end tragically: like Marsyas being de-skinned by Apollo, Strickland dies of lepra. The choice of a skin disease is another link between nature, society, and a person, as it is the human's outer surface and what people see in each other at first. The skin-related death is another way to show that Strickland was distant from society and would not be understood during his lifespan. Whereas Marsyas challenged *musagete* Apollo, the god of arts, a masterful player of harp, Strickland challenges the whole society and universe by touching the fear strings in each person. Dionysian part of him triumphs in orgies, drinking, and self-destruction caused by his closeness to nature, which he found in Polynesia, and which attracted Maugham himself (Dellamora, 2020). Meanwhile, the narrator must remain with his socially accepted side of a popular writer-presenter, an *aoidos*, who serves Apollo and his muses and whose selfhood is defined by a popular divinity rather than a primitive bestiary.

Conclusion

Maugham employs intermedial elements, in particular ekphrases, to build distinctions between England, France, and Polynesia, as well as oppose English and non-English mentalities and cultures. Enlarging the contextual field by linking various works of pictorial

art, on the one hand, the writer builds, justifies and showcases conflicts rooted in cultures and mentalities and arts.

The representation of the turbulent life of the fictional newbie painter (with Paul Gauguin serving as a prototype) through the perception by the successful fictional writer-narrator helps Maugham oppose pictorial and verbal mediums, Englishness and non-English culture, which results in a deeper conflict of two Nietzschean dualities – Apollonian and Dionysian – which represent modern and primitive, success and misery, commercial art and art as relief of the creative burden.

Altogether, the placement of key characters, two English artists in foreign *loci* and opposing their varying perception of art as an instinctive call help depict two conflicting mentalities – Englishness and non-Englishness – through questioning of identities and artistic selfhoods of the key characters, speaking of acceptable and weird, own and strange, common and alien.

Thus, the use of intermedial elements helps the writer deepen the culture and art-based conflicts and enlarge the contextual field of the novel so that to reflect on the English mentality as a norm and French/Polynesian as a different and alien element.

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