

# An Existentialist Interpretation of Strickland's Journey of Self-realization in *The Moon and Sixpence*

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**Abstract:** *The Moon and Sixpence*, one of Maugham's most famous novels, tells a story of a stockbroker Strickland, who gives up his comfortable life in London, chases his dream of arts in Paris and eventually achieves his ideal in Tahiti. During the process of self-realization, he has experienced the following three stages: self-loss, self-exploration and self-realization. Strickland constantly makes free choices to create his own essence, thus adding meaning to his life, which embodies existentialism, a philosophical theory centering on such themes as absurdity, alienation and freedom. This paper attempts to interpret Strickland's journey of self-realization from the perspective of existentialism: his self-loss in his boring marriage life and empty spiritual world reflects the existentialist view that "the world is absurd; life is painful" and "existence precedes essence"; his self-exploration in alienating himself from others and pursuing his dream reflects "free choice", "alienation" and "responsibility" of existentialism; his self-realization by reestablishing a harmonious family and accomplishing his final painting not only reflects the "freedom of choice" but also indicates that "existence precedes essence". This paper also points out that Strickland's self-realization still has some limitation: even if Strickland finally realizes himself by going through the three periods, he actually fails to obtain true freedom because he has ignored the importance of responsibility.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Absurdity, Alienation, Free Choice, Self-realization

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction to Maugham and *The Moon and Sixpence*

Maugham, born in 1894, is a famous British novelist, essayist and playwright. His parents died early and he was brought up by his uncle. After graduating from medical school, he abandoned medicine and started writing. His works include novels, short stories and comedies. His full-length novels and short stories are especially well received by readers all around the world. *The Razor's Edge*, *Of Human Bondage*, and *The Moon and Sixpence* are his representative works. Maugham is skillful at handling plots and adept at exploring the complexity of human nature and exposing the ugliness of society.

*The Moon and Sixpence*, which was published in 1919, is one of Maugham's most famous novels. It was made into a film in 1942 because of its popularity among readers. *The Moon and Sixpence*, the prototype of which is the French impressionist --- Gauguin [1], tells the story of Strickland, an ordinary stock broker, who gives up the comfortable and

happy life in London and goes to Paris to chase his dream of art. As a matter of fact, he has always been looking for a place where he can paint without being disturbed. Little by little, he becomes increasingly indifferent and ruthless to the people around him, which results in his alienation from Stroeve and even the tragedy of Blanche's suicide. Eventually he succeeds in finding such an ideal place --- Tahiti, where he has no preoccupations other than his painting and gets married to a kind-hearted considerate woman Ata. Although he is later unfortunately diagnosed with leprosy, he still insists on completing the last painting in his life, achieving his self-realization.

### 1.2. Introduction to Existentialism

Existentialism is one of the main schools of contemporary Western philosophy. After World War I, people became homeless and their families were ruined. At the same time, people began to get rid of the bondage of religion. Therefore, with no homes for shelter and with no religious beliefs for spiritual support, they began to doubt the world around them

and their own values. Existentialism came into being in such a situation.

Existentialism originated in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and was first put forward by Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s, during which period, the theory was represented by Heidegger and Jaspers. Promoted by Sartre in France during World War II, existentialism began to flourish in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, the theory was represented by Sartre, Marcel and Merleau-Ponty.

Many scholars gave definitions to existentialism. "Existentialism is a particular existential ethical theory. It is a form of humanism in that it views human beings as valuable in themselves and nothing else as having such intrinsic value. But it is existential in that it sees this value as rooted not in human achievements or abilities, but in the structures of what it is to be human" [2]. "Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts" [3].

There are four main theoretical views on existentialism. To begin with, existentialists believe that "existence precedes essence", which means that man exists as an individual at first, and then his essence is created through choices and actions. Secondly, existentialists show pessimistic attitudes towards the interpersonal relationship, holding that people should be alienated from each other. Thirdly, existentialists argue that "the world is absurd and life is painful". According to Sartre, "in this 'subjective' society, there must be conflict, resistance and cruelty between people, full of ugliness and crimes, and everything is ridiculous. And man is only a painful person in this ridiculous and ruthless situation" [4]. Fourth, existentialists emphasize that people should possess rights to have free choices. People may have freedom to realize their own values, but at the same time, they have to take the corresponding responsibilities. All of these theoretical viewpoints of existentialism are vividly reflected in *The Moon and Sixpence*.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Moon and Sixpence* is considered as one of Maugham's most successful novels. It has caused a great sensation among scholars and critics since it was published. Strickland's complex personality, in particular, has attracted much attention at home and abroad in recent years.

In foreign countries, in *The Description of Charles Strickland's Character in the Novel "The Moon and Sixpence"* by William Somerset Maugham, Nargiza Vokhidova analyzes Strickland's complex character, holding that his obedience to his wife makes him appear to be kind and honest at first, but in fact, he is irresponsible and indifferent because he eventually chooses to abandon his family to pursue his dream [1]. In *The Problem of Human and Art in the Novel "The Moon and Sixpence"* by W. S. Maugham, Iroda Kaharova Sidikovna analyzes the problem of human and art in Strickland's pursuit of an artistic dream and points out that although Strickland

makes free choices to achieve self-realization in the end, he fails to undertake corresponding responsibilities [5]. In *A Study in W. S. Maugham's View on Freedom of Mind for Artists: Especially as Seen in The Moon and Sixpence*, Masayo Muraoka analyzes the role of Tahiti in Strickland's self-realization, concluding that this uncivilized place stimulates Strickland's passion for creation, which finally enables him to gain complete freedom of mind and body and to accomplish the last painting [6].

In China, Tang Qianye thinks that Strickland's insistence on artistic ideals is not constrained by poverty and he finally shakes off the bondage of absurd reality and obtains freedom [7]. Sun Yajie uses existentialism to analyze Strickland's relationship with others, pointing out that Strickland's indifference to his first wife and to Stroeve ultimately leads to alienation, while the harmonious relationship between Strickland and Ata finally helps him realize his ideal and gain freedom [8]. Chen Ziyun uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs to analyze the three stages of Strickland's life: in the first stage, he needs a happy life and spiritual enrichment; in the second stage, he needs painting skills, and in the third stage, he needs physical and mental freedom [9].

To sum up, some foreign and domestic scholars have done many studies on Strickland's character, his relationship with others and his pursuit of artistic ideal, but few studies use certain theories to analyze it. This paper attempts to adopt existentialism to interpret the process of Strickland's self-realization.

## 3. Absurd World and Painful Life --- Strickland's Self-loss

Existentialists emphasize that "the world is absurd and life is painful" and "existence precedes essence". They think that people in such an illusory world are doomed to be painful. In this novel, Strickland is a character who gradually loses himself in his painful life. Only by creating his own essence can he free himself from the bondage of absurd reality. The absurdity is mainly reflected in two aspects --- his marriage life and his spiritual world.

### 3.1. Getting Weary of Married Life

According to existentialism, there will inevitably be confrontations among people. The subjective world, full of ugliness and crime, is quite absurd. Man is just a painful existence in this absurd world, which can only make people feel pessimistic, negative and depressed. People's lives tend to be miserable, regardless of their social status [10]. In the *The Moon and Sixpence*, Strickland is a stockbroker who lives a wealthy and peaceful life in London. He has a beautiful wife and they have two lovely children. His wife always keeps everything in order. In other people's eyes, he has such a happy family that he should have been content with his life. However, he is tired of such a routine life. He neither shows concern for Mrs. Strickland nor reveals his heart to her. He just plays the role of an obedient husband. For him, handling the

relationship in marriage is not out of love but out of duty. Therefore, marriage is like an invisible shackle for Strickland, which prevents him from pursuing his own value, thus weakening his existence.

One day, Mrs. Strickland invites her friend to a dinner party and introduces her husband to the guest, but Strickland only shakes his hands coldly, saying nothing. Even if those people who are invited to the party are either important or well off, Strickland shows no interest in them. The party is lively and everyone is talking even more loudly than usual. By contrast, Strickland says very little at dinner, which embarrasses not only the guests sitting next to him, but also his wife. They find it difficult to cheer Strickland up. Although his wife looks anxiously at him, hinting that he should be more sociable, he remains unmoved. At first Strickland tries to adapt to this life, but with the increasing frequency of such happenings, he becomes more and more painful and weary. And his painful feelings reflect the intense conflict between his subjective existence and his objective existence.

Existentialists also believe that individual existence precedes individual essence, and essence is formed on the basis of existence. "If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be" [11]. The essence is both subjective and objective. On the one hand, essence is subjective because it is only through the individual's own choice and creation that the essence can be created. On the other hand, essence is objective. This nature is not innate to individuals, but gained through practice in society or in the process of interacting with others [12]. In this novel, Strickland's life at first is meaningless. He does his routine job and takes care of his family mechanically. He does not even realize that this is not the life he wants. Therefore, although he exists in this world at this time, his existence is nihilistic and painful. It is after Strickland and his family spend three days in the countryside, where he can play golf with his friends leisurely, that he comes to realize that he actually enjoys such a life of ease. Having made the decision to get away from the hectic and monotonous life in London, he feels eager to pursue his dream of art.

Therefore, Strickland goes to Paris for a holiday, but his wife chooses to remain in the countryside for a few more days. Later, when Mrs. Strickland informs him of the date of her return to London, Strickland replies that he has decided not to live with her any more. The time spent in the countryside may have reminded Strickland of the days when he painted in his hometown, but his dream was denied by his family at that time. Beyond his own expectations, his desire to pursue his dreams is stimulated by this vacation. Having realized what he really wants, Strickland decides to break free of the seventeen years of marriage, during which he has lost himself and has become a person who sees no meaning of life. So when he is conscious of the absurdity of his married life, he makes up his mind to leave for Paris to pursue his dream of painting.

All in all, as Sartre once said, "man is nothing else but

what he makes of himself" [11]. Strickland's own essence is created not only by his own determination to break free from marriage, but also by the oppression of marriage that strengthens his desire to pursue his dream.

### 3.2. *Feeling Empty of Spiritual World*

Pain is an indispensable feeling for people living in the absurd world. This kind of feeling is not only reflected in the bondage of material life, but also in the emptiness of the spiritual world. Only by realizing the meaning of life can people make free choices, create essence and get rid of pain. At first, Strickland follows his parents' advice on giving up painting and taking a steady job. Having got used to the monotonous life, his inner desire for painting gradually yields to reality. At this point, it is obvious that Strickland has not yet realized the absurdity of the world and what he really wants to pursue, so he cannot create his essence with his own actions or choices. And in this state, his spiritual world is empty. However, when his desire for painting is ignited and his consciousness of freedom is aroused, he suddenly realizes that he has been tired of this kind of life, which has made him a painful person living in the absurd world. Heter and Ebrary believe that "freedom of consciousness requires being free in and against one's situation" [13]. So, though he has not left London yet, Strickland decides to study painting to lay the groundwork for his dream in Paris. And he has no intention of telling his wife that he decides to take lessons to improve his painting skills. Though they have been married for ten years, they always lack mutual understanding and Strickland never confides in his wife. Mrs. Strickland does not know his inner desire at all, taking it for granted that he spends much time playing bridge at the club, but in fact, at that time, her husband is learning painting. Therefore, without his wife's knowledge, Strickland takes painting lessons to fill the emptiness in his spiritual world. His wife has been kept in the dark for so long that when she is told that Strickland has left not because he falls in love with another woman, but because he wants to paint, she still cannot believe it. In her eyes, Strickland is not adept at drawing at all, since she has ever seen her husband's painting before their marriage. "He used to potter about with a paint-box. But you never saw such daubs. We used to chaff him. He had absolutely no gift for anything like that" [14]. Therefore, it is evident that she does not understand Strickland's inner thoughts, which is the primary reason for the emptiness of his spiritual world.

At last, he determines to leave London because he is deeply disappointed with the routine of working as a stockbroker mechanically, obeying the rules of the society, and following his wife's wishes every day. This kind of life is undoubtedly conducive to the progress of work and the harmony of family, but in such a seemingly fulfilling life, Strickland gradually loses his own value. He can neither express his own ideas nor make his own choices. Inevitably he will be submerged in the absurd world, thus feeling deeply empty and disappointed. To chase his dream, he has no way out but to run away.

## 4. First Free Choice --- Strickland's Self-exploration

Existentialists also emphasize alienation, free choice and responsibility. Strickland encounters many things in the process of self-exploration in Paris. Among them, he abandons his family and comes to Paris to pursue his dream, which mainly manifests his first "free choice". And he sabotages his relationship with Stroeve and Blanche, which embodies "alienation".

### 4.1. Seeking for His Ideal

Strickland cannot resist the strong desire for painting. It is similar to the case that if he falls into the water, it does not matter if he swims well or not, because he has no choice but to get out, otherwise he will drown [14]. In the novel, Strickland's eagerness to pursue his artistic dreams is described like this: "there was real passion in his voice, and in spite of myself I was impressed. I seemed to feel in him some vehement power that was struggling within him; it gave me the sensation of something very strong, overmastering, that held him, as it were, against his will" [14]. Thus it can be seen that there is some deep-rooted instinct of creation in his soul, "which the circumstances of his life had obscured, but which grew relentlessly, as a cancer may grow in the living tissues, till at last it took possession of his whole being and forced him irresistibly to action" [14]. According to Heter and Ebrary, other people "bring a 'factual limit' to my freedom by imposing on me meanings, definitions, images and assumptions." [13]. Therefore, in order that his plan may not be interfered with, Strickland decides to go to Paris to pursue his dream, telling nobody beforehand. In term of his work, he has been narrowing down his business in the year before, and he has not informed any of his working partners of his departure, leaving the rest of the work to them nonchalantly. As for his family, he just leaves a brief letter in which he makes no apologies to his wife and children, leaving the responsibility of taking care of the two children to his wife relentlessly.

Existentialists also believe that although life is painful, a man is the master of his own life and he can add meaning to his life through free choice, and thus everyone's life has infinite possibilities [4]. Those who want to be painters start painting when they are very young. However, Strickland is now already in his forties. Thinking that he can realize his dream in Paris even if he does not make it in London, he chooses to go to Paris without hesitation.

In Paris, Strickland leads a very different life. He casts off the constraints of interpersonal relationships and social norms and begins to enjoy freedom. Instead of dressing like a gentleman and keeping his appearance tidy, now he wears a red beard and stained clothes. He is also much thinner than before. He breaks free from the shackles of the orderly life in London and ignites the energy inside him. Only the unfettered life in Paris can truly stimulate him to explore himself. Although his life in Paris is not so rich and comfortable, he

spares no pains to do a variety of jobs so that he may have enough money to take painting lessons.

In addition to material difficulties, he is also very persistent and even stubborn in painting. After Strickland takes painting lessons, he says that "the blighter came round this morning --- the master, you know; when he saw my drawing he just raised his eyebrows and walked on." [14]. Although his teacher is not satisfied with his works, he does not care about it but still adheres to his painting. Since he is not easily influenced by others' comments, he may create endless possibilities. When he encounters a bottleneck in painting, he does not ask others for help. Instead, he explores solutions by himself. In fact, these problems have already been solved by predecessors [14]. But these actions are part of his free choice, which helps him to gain rich experiences and a meaningful life.

Strickland makes free choices to pursue his dreams in Paris without taking responsibility for the people around him. Existentialists emphasize that in the face of absurd existence, man should create essence and realize real existence by making free choice and taking corresponding responsibilities [8]. Strickland's irresponsibility for others is mainly manifested in the fact that he shows no concern for his family members and his working partners, but selfishly leaves them behind to go to Paris for self-exploration. Therefore, from this point of view, Strickland has not yet gained real freedom [15].

### 4.2. Alienating Himself from Others

Sartre once said, "Hell is other people." People live in the society, so it is inevitable to have contact with others. If a person cannot correctly deal with relationships with others and treat others' judgment on him, this will lead to alienation [8]. Other people's opinions can also be terrible because they can interfere with your decisions or force you to make choices [4]. When Strickland leaves for Paris to pursue his dreams, Mrs. Strickland takes it for granted that he has fallen in love with another woman. With the determination that she will never divorce him, Mrs. Strickland asks her friend to look for him and find out why he leaves her for Paris, only to be told that her husband is adamant that he does not love her any more and he does not feel guilty about abandoning them at all. He even harbors the view that he has taken care of them for seventeen years and that they may continue to live on their own. Not until Mrs. Strickland learns that his purpose is to pursue his dream of painting does she come to realize that her husband is unlikely to return. She always assumes that she understands him, but the reality tells her that there has already been an impassable chasm between them. His irresponsible abandonment has caused him to become totally alienated from his wife.

In Paris, Strickland lives a difficult life in a shabby house. He has to do all sorts of odd jobs to pay for the paint and the canvas. He devotes himself to painting, but never succeeds in selling even one of his pictures. When nobody speaks highly of his works, Stroeve, an unknown painter, regards him as a great painter. Though Strickland is indifferent and even sarcastic to him, Stroeve never deserts him. Strickland often eats only a piece of bread and drinks a glass of milk a day.

Many times, because of poverty and illness, Strickland is almost on the verge of death. Stroeve makes the decision to take Strickland, who has been seriously ill, back home to take care of him, which is strongly opposed by his wife, Blanche. Eventually Blanche is persuaded into assisting her husband in looking after Strickland. Unexpectedly, Blanche cannot help falling in love with Strickland and decides to leave Stroeve. Strickland, cold and unsympathetic, shows no apology for Stroeve, and even kicks him out of his home. Nevertheless, Strickland does not really love Blanche, especially when he realizes that Blanche's love for him, like Mrs. Strickland's, will only constrict his pursuit of dreams. So he finally chooses to abandon Blanche. Unable to accept the fact, Blanche commits suicide by drinking pesticides. Stroeve, who has always showed respect for him before, becomes resentful of him. Even though Stroeve still admires his paintings, they cannot restore their original relationship, which leads to their eventual alienation. In the end, Stroeve is so distressed about his wife's death that he decides to return to his hometown. It is Strickland's indifference to everyone around him, even to those generous and helpful people like Stroeve, that makes him unable to manage these relationships, so Stroeve and Blanche become hell for him.

However, Sartre discovers that "while other people may be hell, they are also our only hope of salvation. We establish our own personalities, projects and our practical freedom only through the recognition of others" [13]. During Strickland's self-exploration, he makes many free choices, such as choosing not to reject Blanche at first, driving Stroeve out of his house and abandoning Blanche. But while making these free choices, he behaves in an irresponsible manner, which finally leads to his alienation from others. In other words, he ignores the feelings of others while creating his own value. In Paris, therefore, Strickland still cannot obtain real freedom.

## 5. Last Two Free Choices --- Strickland's Self-realization

At last, Strickland chooses to go to the beautiful island ---Tahiti, where he makes the last two free choices --- getting married to Ata and finishing his final painting. Even if he suffers from leprosy, he succeeds in making his ideal come true. The theoretical features of existentialism, "freedom of choice" and "essence precedes existence", can find expression in all of this.

### 5.1. Reestablishing a Harmonious Family

Existentialists believe that people are born to be free and should live a free life. People should not be bound by various social relations. If a person cannot make decisions according to his own will, he will lose his individuality and cannot create his own value [4]. Making free choices is the most effective way for the individual to get rid of pain in this absurd society. Strickland always makes his free choices to seek freedom that really belongs to him.

The original existence of man is lacking in essence. Only by making various free choices can people create their essence [10]. In order to find a suitable place for his painting, Strickland decides to go to Tahiti. It seems to him that Tahiti is the place he has been looking for all his life [9]. Tahiti, a place completely untouched by material civilization, provides Strickland with a quiet environment, in which he can draw freely and achieve his own value. However, Strickland has no home in Tahiti, so he has to live with indigenous people, which is not very decent. Besides, employers in Tahiti are reluctant to hire him because they think that Strickland will quit the job once he makes enough money. Therefore, one day, Tiare, the owner of a restaurant in Tahiti, introduces him to a beautiful and naive woman called Ata, and advises him to marry her, because Ata is very frugal and never squanders money. Not knowing Ata well enough, Strickland hesitates at first, fearing that she may also restrict his freedom just like his first wife and Blanche. He just agrees to live with Ata for a month before making his final decision. During this month, Strickland finds that Ata is not like other women. She is so considerate that she even does not care about whether Strickland will give her a wedding. She does everything out of love for Strickland. Ata also has a steady job and a small house in Tahiti, which means she can relieve him of some of his financial burden.

The years of his marriage life with Ata have been the happiest time of his life. Ata devotes herself to their family, cooking for him and looking after their children. Even though Strickland is later diagnosed with leprosy, Ata never gives him up. When the other villagers stay away from Strickland, Ata says that she will always look after him and accompany him. "There was something immensely forcible in the way she spoke. She was no longer the meek, soft native girl, but a determined woman" [14]. Ata resolutely chooses to stay with Strickland. She does not interfere with his pursuit of dreams but gives him spiritual support. Strickland used to think of women's love as a bondage for him, but this time he finds that Ata's love is totally different. Ata never bothers Strickland since she knows that he likes to paint in a quiet environment. She just does her duty quietly, giving him the maximum space of freedom. Unlike Strickland's first wife and Blanche, Ata does not confine him to her side. Instead, Ata chooses to give him full freedom and to accompany him if he really wants. Strickland, therefore, is at his ease, which is favorable for his creation of individuality. Strickland's happy marriage with Ata and his harmonious family in Tahiti make it possible for him to create his own value through various actions and free choices. After staying there for a while, Strickland, with his long beard and hair, looks more like a local resident. His strange appearance manifests his wild nature. Together with Ata, in Tahiti, he enjoys his free life. All of these are the evidences that Strickland has made a correct choice.

All in all, "as an individual and active existence, each man must have the freedom of choice, and create his own existence. A man becomes a man only when he thinks his own thoughts, lives his own life and keeps his individuality" [14].

### 5.2. Accomplishing His Final Painting

Sartre believes that the environment does not limit the freedom of individuals. On the contrary, it is the existence of the environment that gives individuals more possibilities of choice and finally makes individuals obtain real freedom [16]. Strickland finishes his last painting in almost complete isolation. Having been diagnosed with leprosy, a infectious disease for which there is no cure, Strickland needs to be quarantined in his own room all day long. The villagers are so afraid of the couple that once Ata comes out of the house, they will throw stones at her. Even if Ata has not been diagnosed with leprosy, the local residents still keep a distance from her. So, it is almost impossible for Strickland to leave the house. He has to confine himself in his room all day. However, it is because of this that he decides to finish his last painting on the wall of his room.

From the perspective of existentialism, the essence of things is given by people. The objects themselves are passive, unable to make choices like humans, so the external world composed of things has no essence and significance at first. Only when the external world exists as the object of human activity can it have essence and significance [10]. While leprosy has caused a panic among local villagers, Dr. Coutras is deeply concerned about Strickland's illness. He calls on Strickland again to see if he is getting worse, but he is turned away. Strickland is seriously ill; his voice is hoarse because of leprosy. However, he does not stop his painting on the wall of his room. Even though Strickland knows that he is almost dying very soon, he is still unwilling to give up his painting. Having heard about his deteriorating health, Dr. Coutras pays a visit to Strickland again. As soon as he steps into Strickland's house, he feels extremely shocked by Strickland's work of a big painting on the wall, a painting that occupies the whole wall from floor to ceiling. The work is not only elaborate but also mysterious, which fills Dr. Coutras with awe and joy.

"It was the work of a man who knew things which it is unholy for men to know. There was something primeval there and terrible. It was not human. It brought to his mind vague recollections of black magic. It was beautiful and obscene. 'Mon Dieu, this is genius.' The words were wrung from him, and he did not know he had spoken" [14].

Strickland has dedicated all his remaining life to the last painting, which strikes Dr. Coutras a lot, who even knows nothing about painting. In the novel, there is a description of what Dr. Coutras witnesses after he has finished his appreciation of the painting, "his eyes fell on the bed of mats in the corner, and he went up, and he saw the dreadful, mutilated, ghastly object which had been Strickland. He was dead". [14] It can be seen that Strickland suffers great physical pain in the process of completing this last painting. However, "the threat of death does not diminish the man's liberty, which consists in his having a choice of action" [13]. In the last year of his life, he becomes blind, but he is so determined that he keeps on pursuing his ideal and freedom.

According to Sartre, the process of pursuing freedom is

eternal. In the end, Strickland makes up his mind to ask Ata to burn the house and the painting after he dies, which seems puzzling to others. However, what he does confirms what he has said before, "I don't think of the past. The only thing that matters is the everlasting present". [14] "The everlasting present" refers to the eternal process of self-exploration. In Strickland's view, once the goal has been achieved, it will be a thing of the past, which is not what he wants. Strickland does not want the painting, a work that shows his inner world, to be a thing of the past. Therefore, as long as the painting is burned, he can pursue his dreams and freedom forever [15].

## 6. Conclusion

*The Moon and sixpence* tells the story of Strickland, a stockbroker, who gives up the comfortable life in London, chases his dream of arts in Paris and eventually achieves his ideal in Tahiti. During the process of his pursuit of dreams, he has gone through the following three stages: self-loss, self-exploration and self-realization. Much of what happens to Strickland in these three stages can be explained by the theory --- existentialism.

First of all, Strickland's self-loss reflects the existentialist views that "the world is absurd; life is painful" and "existence precedes essence". Strickland, accustomed to the mechanical life at first, can only be considered as a being of existence without any essence. When he realizes the absurdity of his monotonous marriage life, he decides to escape from the painful situation and enrich his empty spiritual world. He leaves London for Paris to pursue his dream of art, thus creating his own essence and making his existence meaningful. Secondly, Strickland's self-exploration reflects "free choice", "alienation" and "responsibility" of existentialism. Although he is brave enough to make the first free choice to seek for his ideals, he fails to take his responsibility, leaving his wife, children and working partners behind ruthlessly. In order to pursue his dream of painting and add meaning to his own life, he takes various jobs in Paris to earn a living and makes great efforts to explore the unknown problems. However, he shows indifference to Stroeve, who admires him a lot and once gives a helping hand to him. He also cruelly abandons Blanche, who leaves Stroeve because of him. Ultimately, his indifferent nature causes him to become increasingly alienated from the people around him. Last but not least, Strickland's self-realization reflects the "freedom of choice" and "essence precedes existence" of existentialism. In Tahiti, Strickland makes the second free choice --- getting married to Ata, a woman who takes care of him wholeheartedly and provides him with enough space so that he may concentrate on his painting. It is this choice that enables Strickland to obtain the happiest time of his life. With freedom of both body and mind, Strickland makes the decision to create his essence. Even if he has been tortured by leprosy, Strickland does not stop his steps; he makes his third choice --- dedicating the rest of his life to finishing his last painting. However, after he has achieved his goal, he asks Ata to burn the house and the painting so that his pursuit of freedom and dreams can be regarded as eternal. In

this sense, the idea of “essence precedes existence” in existentialism finds ultimate expression.

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