The Moon and Sixpence Study Guide

The Moon and Sixpence by W. Somerset Maugham

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The narrator, Crabbe, knows a man named Charles Strickland for a few years, and many years later, Strickland becomes a famous painter. Crabbe decides to write a book about Strickland, and he talks about what he remembers of his experiences with Strickland. He also goes around Tahiti where Strickland lived his last years, and Crabbe hears the stories of various people who remember Strickland. For most of Strickland's painting career, he is anti-social, and considered by all to be without talent, so it is a great surprise when he turns out to be a painting genius.

Crabbe first meets Strickland through his wife, Mrs. Strickland. Crabbe is a young writer in London, and Mrs. Strickland loves hosting parties for writers. When Charles leaves his wife, she sends Crabbe to Paris to beg him to come back, certain he has left her for another woman. When Crabbe confronts Strickland, Strickland says that he wants to paint. Crabbe moves to Paris years later, and he looks up Strickland. Crabbe is friends with another painter named Dirk. Strickland will never let anyone see or buy his paintings, but Dirk is convinced that Strickland is a genius.

When Strickland gets sick, Dirk insists on bringing him into Dirk's apartment to get better, against his wife Blanche's wishes. Dirk is destroyed when Strickland kicks him out of his own studio, and then Blanche decides she is leaving Dirk for Strickland. Dirk desperately wants to get back together with her, but after Strickland dumps her, she commits suicide. When Crabbe tells Strickland that he should feel guilty for what he did to Dirk and Blanche, Strickland expresses no remorse, but instead shows Crabbe his paintings. Crabbe is disappointed to find that they are nothing special.

After months of gutter poverty, Strickland manages to sail to Tahiti, where he finally settles and finds his painting style. In the island paradise, Strickland lives a happy, simple life, painting in his hut, and being taken care of by his Tahitian wife, Ata. When he learns that he has leprosy, Strickland tries to send everyone away, but Ata insists on staying and caring for him until his death. Although Strickland is blinded by his leprosy, he paints the walls of his hut until his death, and creates a jungle masterpiece. After he dies Ata burns the hut down.

Chapters 1-6

Chapters 1-6 Summary

The narrator recollects the circumstances in which he first met Charles Strickland, who is now famous. He begins by pointing out that there seems to be nothing special about Charles Strickland, but then says that the man is a genius. The narrator talks about how Strickland is relatively obscure in life, and that his emotional style of art is misunderstood. He then lauds the legends which have risen up about Strickland, saying that such legends are the key to immortality.

The narrator says that, although he knew Strickland in early life, he would not be writing about his friend if he had not gone to Tahiti. Apparently, the most obscure parts of Strickland's life took place in Tahiti, and now the narrator has a chance to interview those who knew Strickland during this time in his life. The narrator muses on how writer George Crabbe was once popular but has faded into obscurity, replaced by more modern writers like Keats and Shelley. Then the narrator hints that he is Crabbe himself.

Crabbe reminisces on his early days as a writer in London. He especially remembers the social guidance and hospitality of Rose Waterford and Mrs. Strickland. Crabbe goes to a lot of dinner parties, tea parties, and luncheons for a group of writers. Crabbe is intimidated by all the other writers, but Miss Waterford takes him under her wing. She tells Crabbe that he must meet Mrs. Strickland, who is crazy about his first book. Crabbe becomes friends with her, and tells her he would like to meet her husband. The Stricklands have a son who is sixteen and a daughter who is fourteen.

Finally, one day Crabbe is invited to a dinner party to meet Mr. Strickland. In the invitation, he is warned by Mrs. Strickland that the party will be incredible dull, but that perhaps they can have a chat by themselves. The party is loud and uncomfortable, and Crabbe does not enjoy himself. Finally, Charles Strickland stands up and adjourns with the men to another room for cigars and brandy, leaving the women to themselves. The men discuss various manly subjects among themselves, like polo, wine, and cigars, but Crabbe has little to contribute.

Chapters 1-6 Analysis

When Crabbe asks Mrs. Strickland if he can meet her husband sometime, she seems embarrassed, and says that he is only a boring stockbroker. He is not at all into books, and Mrs. Strickland wants to surround herself with writers. He arrives and finds that it is one of those dinner parties where there has to be an even number of men and women, and he has been invited because one woman's husband is unavailable. The party is uncomfortable and loud, with everyone speaking too loudly and excitedly, to make it seem like they are having a good time. It is clear that the people there are not really the Stricklands' friends, but just people to whom the Stricklands owe some sort of social

obligation, now being fulfilled in a dreary dinner party. Crabbe concludes that the reason Mrs. Strickland is reticent to bring her husband to parties is because he is so unexciting, so plain, hard-working, honest, and good. For the woman who craves eccentricity and artistic passion, Charles Strickland is something of an embarrassment.

Chapters 7-12

Chapters 7-12 Summary

Crabbe runs into Rose Waterford, who excitedly tells him that Charles Strickland has left his wife. She is happy to be presenting the newest and most exciting gossip, and hints that Strickland has run off with a young woman. Crabbe, feeling bad for his friend, goes over to her house, and finds her wiping away tears, talking with her brother-in-law, Colonel MacAndrew. Mrs. Strickland does some semblance of hospitality, then asks Crabbe what he has heard. He tells her that he knows that people say silly things, and that all he knows is that Rose told him that her husband has left her. MacAndrew angrily suggests that Mrs. Strickland should divorce her husband as soon as possible, and she says that she will never divorce him, no matter what. She is convinced that he has run off suddenly with another woman, and she does not want him to be able to marry this woman. Charles Strickland has left her a note, stating that he does not want to live with her anymore, and that he has gone to Paris. He says that he will not change his mind.

MacAndrew worries about what is to become of the Strickland family, who now have no money, and Mrs. Strickland bursts into tears. She finally asks Crabbe to do her a favor, by going to Paris to talk to Strickland. She begs Crabbe to tell her husband to come back, and all will be forgiven and forgotten. She feels sure that Charles is simply infatuated with the other woman and will soon tire of her and want to come back to his family. Crabbe goes to Paris and manages to find Strickland in a sleazy hotel. Crabbe goes into Strickland's room, and introduces himself, since Strickland does not remember him. Crabbe tells Strickland why he is there, and Strickland suggest that they leave his disgusting room and go out for absinthe and conversation. The men go down to a cafe.

Crabbe repeats all the arguments that MacAndrew and Mrs. Strickland have given him, appealing to Strickland's love for his children, his sense of duty, and his sympathy for his wife. None of these have any effect on the man, who answers that he has supported his family for long enough and it is time for them to do something for themselves. He no longer feels strongly for his wife or children. When Crabbe confronts him about the other woman, Strickland bursts out in laughter. He says that he would certainly never give up all that he has just for a woman. No, he has come to Paris to paint. He feels a fever to paint, and can not deny the desire. When Mrs. Strickland thought he was seeing his mistress, really he has been taking painting classes, and he now wants nothing more than to paint. Crabbe points out that Strickland is far too old to start such a career, and Strickland answers that that is exactly why he must not put it off any longer. Although he does not already possess much skill, he is sure that he will gain it, if he practices. Besides, he feels such a consuming desire to paint, that he can not resist any longer. Then Strickland says that he is glad that they have gotten the confrontation over with, so they can go eat dinner.

Chapters 7-12 Analysis

Mrs. Strickland thinks she has obtained the name of the hotel where Charles is staying in Paris, and MacAndrew describes the place as a luxurious palace, where Charles can entertain his young mistress in comfort. Crabbe feels very awkward about the thought of confronting Charles and his mistress, especially since he has only met the man one time, about a year before. Nonetheless, he wants to help out his friend, so he agrees. He worries about Mrs. Strickland's motivations. It seems that she is equally concerned with saving her marriage, and avoiding a social scandal. At first, Crabbe can not find the hotel, but finally he checks in a sleazy district. There, he finds the worst hotel around, and sure enough, this is the new home of Charles Strickland. Strickland does not in the least mind the insults that Crabbe throws at him, telling him that he is worthless to abandon his family for something he will probably fail at anyway.

Crabbe runs into Mrs. Strickland one day with her children, and the four of them have ice cream together. He is impressed with what nice, pleasant, attractive children they are. The Strickland family strikes him as utterly ordinary, a white-bread, average suburban family with no dark secrets, living a happy, healthy life. Mrs. Strickland loves her husband, and the children seem destined for pleasant, if unimpressive, things. In fact, Mrs. Strickland has told her children that their father is away on business, rather than telling them the truth.

Chapters 13-18

Chapters 13-18 Summary

Crabbe and Strickland go to a restaurant for dinner, and Crabbe awkwardly tries to think what to say next. He does not know how to deal with Strickland's indifference, and his admissions that he has done a heartless thing to his family. In the face of such resignation, Crabbe does not see the point of trying to appeal to Strickland's conscience. Instead he asks Strickland what his fellow art students and art teachers think of his painting. Strickland wryly admits that others make fun of him, and do not think he has any talent. Strickland also does not seem to care about any of the glamor of Paris, nor the beautiful women there. A young whore tries to take him home with her from the restaurant, saying that she will not even charge him. Strickland tells the girl to get lost, and then tells Crabbe that if he wanted women, he would have stayed in London.

Crabbe goes straight to see Mrs. Strickland, after arriving back in London. Mrs. Strickland is visiting with her sister and Colonel MacAndrews, and asks Crabbe what news he has of her husband. When Crabbe reveals that Strickland has gone to paint, and that there is no other woman, they are shocked and disbelieving. Mrs. Strickland can hardly believe it. She protests that she would much rather be married to an artist than a stockbroker, and she does not understand any reason to leave her. She remembers, before marrying Charles, how he would paint a bit, but she also remembers making fun of him, for having no real skill. Although Mrs. Strickland's sister continues to insist that there is another woman involved, Mrs. Strickland decides that she will never forgive her husband. If he had left her for another woman, she could easily take him back and forgive all, but leaving her for an idea is too much.

Mrs. Strickland does what she can to gracefully recover from her abandonment. She encourages the spread of a rumor that Charles has left her for a ballerina he saw in London, and this gains her much sympathy. Since she already knows so many writers, Mrs. Strickland decides to learn how to type and write in shorthand, and offers her services to writers who need their work transcribed. In a few years, she has a successful business, with an office and four girls working under her. Her son is studying at Cambridge and her daughter has prospects of marrying well. Mrs. Strickland is determined that her own daughter will not have to work for a living, like she does, and that she should be kept away from Bohemian types of people.

Crabbe decides to move to Paris, having gotten bored with his own monotonous life and friends. He goes to see Mrs. Strickland for the first time in years, to say farewell. Crabbe suggests that he may run into Charles in Paris, and asks if Mrs. Strickland would like him to let her know what is going on. She replies that Crabbe should tell her if her husband needs money, and she will send some to him. Crabbe suspects that her motives are not so kind, and that she would be happy to hear that Charles is miserable without her.

Crabbe rents a small apartment in Paris, and then goes to see his friend Dirk Stroeve, a painter he met in Rome. Dirk is a hack. He loves painting, and his work sells well, but it falls into the classification of "chocolate-box art": pretty, realistic paintings of imaginary, idealistic peasants, with no real message. It is popular in various parts of Europe, and Dirk says that these paintings are how he imagined Rome to look, before he went to Rome. Other painters hate Dirk's work, and make fun of him all the time, but he always has more money than they do, and he generously lends money to his mockers. Crabbe is one of the few people who does not make fun of Dirk, so they get along well. Dirk loves the arts, and has a real appreciation of good painting. He understands that his paintings are not especially good, but he does have an eye for talent and genius, and he shares his observations with Crabbe, when they tour galleries.

Chapters 13-18 Analysis

When Crabbe is trying to figure out why Charles Strickland has abandoned his family, job, and life, in order to paint, he uses several metaphors. First, he compares the latent artistic passion to a cancer, growing secretly, ignored for years while Charles goes about his everyday life. Finally, the cancer has become so big that he is forced to deal with it, having no choice but to give in and take care of it. Crabbe also compares it to a cuckoo egg hatching in another bird's nest. Rather than building a nest of it's own, a female cuckoo waits until another bird leaves the nest, and then lands and lays her egg among the other bird's eggs. When the cuckoo egg hatches, the baby bird stretches until it pushes all other eggs or baby birds out of the nest, and so the foster mother never knows that she is raising the murderer of her own babies. Crabbe imagines that Charles's artistic passion has hatched, and will push out any other influences which try to have any hold on his life. Finally, Crabbe compares Charles to a religious fanatic, with the same sort of focused priorities. He points out that for some people, conversion to a religion is an explosive occurrence, but with others, conversion takes the form of a gradual wearing away of resistance. Crabbe imagines that the desire to paint has been gently pressing on Charles for all the years of his marriage, until one day, the desire suddenly got too strong to resist.

Chapters 19-23

Chapters 19-23 Summary

Having just moved to Paris, Crabbe pays a visit to the tiny apartment/ studio of Dirk Stroeve. Dirk is delighted to see his old friend, and happily introduces his wife, Blanche. It is obvious that Dirk is head over heels in love with his wife, and also that he has spoken glowingly of Crabbe. Dirk chides him for not calling and getting his help in moving. Dirk shows Crabbe his recent work, and Crabbe sees that Dirk is still painting the same sentimental Italian scenes as always. The paintings of peasants in the streets are very charming and pretty, though terribly vulgar. Blanche raves about how good they are. To change the subject, Crabbe asks Dirk if he knows Charles Strickland. Dirk is surprised to hear that Crabbe knows the man, and says that Strickland is certainly an artistic genius. Dirk goes on to say that one time Strickland came to his apartment, and saw all of his pictures without comment. He then asked to borrow some money, which Blanche thinks was terribly rude. Dirk says that no one else likes Strickland's work, and no one ever buys anything. Nonetheless, Dirk has confidence in his own ability to sniff out artistic genius, and he is sure that Strickland is something very unusual.

The following evening, Dirk and Crabbe meet at a cafe, where Strickland comes every night. When Dirk points out Strickland playing chess in the corner, Crabbe does not even recognize him. Strickland has gone from a beefy, conservative, clean-shaven, forgettable fellow, to a caricature of a crazy hermit. His clothes are threadbare and filthy, and his hair falls to his shoulders, as does his long red beard. He is emaciated, and his filthy hands have long, ragged nails. Strickland ignores Dirk and Crabbe until he finishes his game. He then insults Dirk and declares that he does not know Crabbe. When Crabbe mentions Mrs. Strickland, Charles starts laughing, finally remembering. Charles Strickland says that he will not let Crabbe see any of his paintings, and that he has no intention of selling any either. Crabbe takes him to dinner.

Since Crabbe can see that Strickland has no desire to talk, he reads a newspaper during dinner. Finally, Strickland breaks the silence, asking what is going on in Crabbe's life. Crabbe makes his answer short and dull, so that Strickland will be encouraged to liven up the conversation with his own story. Strickland does open up, but he is not a very communicative man, so it takes a lot of effort for him to make himself understood. For the last five years, he has been living in extreme poverty, barely scraping by, but always finding money for paint and canvas. He lives in a shabby room, wears the same clothes every day, and eats very little, but he does not seem to mind any of these hardships. He has done some odd jobs in order to buy paint, from translating medicine ads, to painting houses, to giving tours of Paris's underbelly to English tourists. He constantly paints. He does not allow anyone to instruct him, so in his passionate, stubborn way, he slows down his own progress, having to solve technical problems for himself, when much easier methods are available. Strickland does not care in the least what anyone else thinks about his paintings, so he hardly ever lets anyone see them.

Strickland has no interest in what has become of his wife and children. Despite the squalid circumstances of his life, he says that he is happy. He imagines that he could properly paint if perhaps he were alone in the silence of a desert island. Strickland claims to also have no interest in women, but Crabbe does not believe him. Crabbe thinks that Strickland can not deny the soul-cleansing catharsis of coarse, passionate sex.

Crabbe settles in Paris, and begins writing a play. He often dines with Dirk and Blanche. One day, they go to see the one art dealer who exhibits three of Strickland's paintings for sale. The dealer tells them that Strickland has recently come and taken them back. The dealer does not mind, because he hates the paintings anyway, having only exhibited them as a favor for Dirk. The dealer thinks that Strickland shows no potential, and Dirk protests that everyone laughed at Monet. One evening, Strickland asks Crabbe if he can borrow some money, and Crabbe laughs and says no. Strickland threatens to commit suicide, and Crabbe agrees that it is a good plan. A few days later, Strickland reappears and announces that he has a commission, a portrait.

Chapters 19-23 Analysis

Dirk's paintings serve as a metaphor for his life. Just as he imagines a sweet beauty in the lives of Italian peasants, so he lives the simple, happy life of a poor artist, joyously in love with the woman that he finds more beautiful than any in the world. Their placid life is filled with scenes of domestic contentment. Many would laugh at Dirk's simple life, just as most people laugh at his paintings, but for those who appreciate such things, Dirk is a very lucky man.

Dirk knows that he will never be a great artist. His soul is not tortured; he just likes to make pretty pictures. When he is telling Crabbe about the nature of Strickland's talent, he describes beauty as a wild, unexpected thing, saying that "Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul" (Chapter 19, p. 109). Dirk goes on to say that not everyone is able to see beauty in front of them, that to recognize true beauty requires understanding the experience of the artist. Blanche interjects that this does not make sense, since she thought his paintings were lovely the first time she saw them. This cuts him to the quick, because the implication is both that Blanche is incapable of understanding real beauty, and also that the popular paintings he makes are nothing special, nothing to pierce the heart.

Chapters 24-29

Chapters 24-29 Summary

Christmas arrives, and Dirk decides that he wants to invite all his friends over to celebrate. He has not seen Strickland in several weeks, after a quarrel, and he asks Crabbe to go with him to invite Strickland. They do not find him in any of the usual places, but they hear that he is very sick. Unfortunately, no one knows where Strickland lives, but Crabbe does some detective work, and they finally find him in a filthy little attic room. Strickland is obviously seriously ill, and they worry that if they leave him alone, he will die. His room contains nothing other than painting supplies, and they know that he has not eaten in days. After giving Strickland some food and medicine, Crabbe and Dirk go back to Dirk's apartment.

Dirk explains the situation to Blanche, who emphatically says that she does not want Strickland to come stay there. Dirk begs her, appealing to her conscience and citing how Strickland will probably die without their care. Finally, Blanche agrees to let him come there, but first she tells Dirk that she knows that some ruin will come of it. Not only does she dislike Strickland for his treatment of her husband, but she is also afraid of him for reasons she cannot explain. However, once she has agreed to let Strickland stay there, she is a completely competent nurse. She explains to Crabbe that she used to work in a hospital. When Crabbe and Dirk go to get Strickland, he tries to fight them off, but is too weak to resist, and they drag him to Dirk's place. Strickland is not a cooperative patient. He resents it whenever anyone inquires as to his progress, and it takes all of Dirk's skill to convince him to take his medicine. Dirk shows himself to be a devoted friend, expending great effort to lift Strickland's spirits, and spending his meager money on delicacies to tempt Strickland to eat. Crabbe notices that Blanche and Strickland never speak, and sometimes a strange, alarmed look will cross her face when she looks at Strickland.

One day, Crabbe runs into Dirk at the Louvre. Dirk is clearly very upset, and Crabbe asks what is going on. Dirk answers that Strickland is now well enough to paint again, and he is painting in Dirk's studio. Dirk has imagined the fun of painting side by side with Strickland, but is disappointed to learn that Strickland can only paint by himself. In fact, Strickland has thrown Dirk out of his own studio, locking the door behind him. Blanche has gone out to the market, and Dirk does not even know if she will be able to get into the apartment when she gets home. Crabbe offers to go throw Strickland out of Dirk's studio, but Dirk says that he will take care of it.

A couple of weeks later, Dirk shows up at Crabbe's apartment, having an emotional breakdown. He tells Crabbe that he has finally told Strickland that it is time to leave, to go back to his own disgusting attic studio. Immediately Strickland gathers his things up, and then Blanche tells Dirk that she is going with Strickland. She has fallen in love with Strickland in the two months he has been there, and wants to follow him. Dirk is understandably shocked, and begs her to stay. He tells her that no man has ever loved

a woman more fully than he has, and that she does not understand how penniless she is going to be. Blanche is uninterested in his tears and pleas, and says that she does not mind if she has to live like a pauper. She will find some way to support herself if she has to. Dirk points out that Strickland will never love her and then attacks Strickland. Despite his thinness, Strickland easily overpowers Dirk, and Dirk ends up in a heap on the floor, looking like a fool. Dirk abandons all dignity, and tells Blanche that he can never allow her to go live in such a nasty place. Instead, he leaves his apartment for Blanche and Strickland, and goes over to Crabbe's house.

Crabbe does what he can to comfort Dirk, listening all night long to repetitions of what he should have said. Dirk feels that he must stay nearby, so that when Blanche tires of Strickland, she can easily send for him. He is sure that one of these days, she will realize that she really still loves Dirk. Crabbe lets Dirk have his own bed.

Chapters 24-29 Analysis

Before Strickland ever comes to Dirk's apartment, Blanche foreshadows that Strickland's arrival will somehow destroy their marital happiness. At this point, she does not yet understand the nature of her feelings for Strickland, since at first, her dislike for him grows every day. She does not guess the way that Strickland will come between her and her husband. Before this, Blanche has made it clear that she wishes her husband would have nothing to do with Strickland, so it is especially surprising when she chooses a life of passion and poverty, over the warm, fuzzy, placid existence she has had with Dirk. In a similar way, Crabbe predicts a ruinous end for Strickland. Crabbe sees Strickland as being possessed by some vibrant, animalistic spirit, and it seems too primitive of a force for him to survive it.

Chapters 30-35

Chapters 30-35 Summary

Crabbe lies awake, trying to figure out what Blanche is thinking. He imagines that she feels both attracted and repelled by Strickland's sensuous, animal nature. It seems strange, since she is always so placid and calm. Crabbe wonders if perhaps she has just gotten bored with Dirk, and has gone for Strickland just for a change. He knows that this reveals something unexpected in Blanche's nature. She seems so pedestrian and ordinary, happy with her stable home life. Yet she is willing to risk living penniless in a slum to be with Strickland. Crabbe is certain that Strickland is not in love with Blanche, because Strickland does not seem capable of love.

Dirk, desperate to see and talk to Blanche, waits along her regular shopping route, and then walks along talking to her, when she comes along to do her shopping. He reassures her of his love and begs her to come back, insisting that all will be forgiven. Exasperated, she slaps him hard in the face. From that day on, Dirk often waits across the street for her to pass by on her way to market, but she never acknowledges him in any way. Crabbe suggests that Dirk go back to Holland, where his family lives, to cheer him up. Dirk insists that he cannot go anywhere, because Blanche will need him close by if something bad happens. He is sure that something terrible is going to happen soon. Crabbe feels guilty, because Dirk is such a comical figure, that even when his heart is breaking, Crabbe can hardly keep from laughing at him.

Several weeks later, Crabbe runs into Strickland and Blanche on the street together. Strickland asks where Crabbe has been, since Crabbe has been avoiding all the usual places where he might hang out with Strickland. Crabbe is surprised to see that Blanche looks exactly the same. Her manner is just as calm as ever, and she is wearing the same clothes she always does. Strickland suggests that he and Crabbe play a game of chess, so they go into a cafe. During the game, Crabbe scrutinizes Blanche to see if there is any hint of what she is thinking, or of the effect the recent events have had upon her. Crabbe has to report back to Dirk that he could gather nothing from seeing Blanche. Dirk asks Crabbe to write a letter to Blanche for him. Although Dirk has written her many times, he knows that she throws his letters away without opening them. He thinks that she might read a letter from Crabbe, so he dictates to Crabbe what to write. He just says again that he is available if she ever needs any help.

One hot morning, Dirk bursts into Crabbe's apartment, and tells him that Blanche has killed herself. A few moments later he relents and says that she tried to kill herself, and is now at the hospital. Apparently Blanche and Strickland have had an argument, and she has taken some poison. The doctors do not know how much she took, but she seems to be stabilizing. The first couple of times that Dirk drags Crabbe with him to visit her at the hospital, the nurses tell them that Blanche is too ill to see them, and that she does not want visitors. One of the times, when they ask the nurse if perhaps just Crabbe can see her, they hear a low voice crying, "No. No. No" (Chapter 35, p. 193). When they

ask whose voice it is, the nurse tells them that Blanche has burned her vocal cords with the poison. She will speak to no one, and is too weak to use a handkerchief, but she just cries all day. The doctor acts as though there is nothing strange about a woman trying to kill herself after a quarrel with her lover. Crabbe tries to imagine what cruel treatment Strickland has given Blanche, that she is mired in such sadness.

Chapters 30-35 Analysis

Dirk, with the precognition of true love, predicts some dire occurrence, foreshadowing that Blanche will have some catastrophe, now that she has thrown away their marriage. Dirk foreshadows it so much that it annoys Crabbe, who is tired of thinking of gloom and doom. He feels like Blanche deserves anything bad that she gets, and he knows that she can always come back to her life with Dirk, and all will be forgiven. Crabbe's nonchalant attitude is echoed by the doctor, after Blanche tries to kill herself. The doctor is not surprised by the case; it is just another hysterical woman, trying to win back her lover in desperation. Even though the doctor leads Crabbe and Dirk to believe that Blanche will recover soon, Dirk still continues to worry. Although others laugh at the surety of his love for Blanche, he understands that she is suffering to her soul, and he knows she is going to die. Such empathy is contrasted with the complete indifference of Strickland.

Chapters 36-41

Chapters 36-41 Summary

For the next two days, Dirk visits the hospital multiple times per day, but Blanche will never see him. He learns, eventually, from the doctors, that the poison has done internal damage, and she is going to die very soon. When she has slipped into unconsciousness, Dirk is finally allowed to go in and sit with her. He is saddened by the burns on her face and neck from the poison. Blanche quietly dies, leaving Dirk crushed. Crabbe goes with him to her funeral, and then Dirk says that he wants to go by his apartment. Later, Dirk comes to see Crabbe and tells him that he found a picture in the apartment that Strickland left behind. It is a nude portrait of Blanche, and when Dirk first sees it he is enraged and almost destroys it. Then he is overcome by the beauty of the painting, and feels that Strickland has made a major breakthrough. He cannot destroy it, because the picture is a true work of art.

Dirk goes to see Strickland. He has decided to go back to Holland after all, and he invites Strickland to go with him to his parents' old house. Dirk thinks that Strickland must also be grieving for Blanche. Strickland answers that he has better things to do, and Dirk goes to Holland, having sold most of his belongings. One day, Crabbe runs into Strickland on the street, and Strickland follows him to his apartment. Crabbe asks Strickland if he feels any remorse about Blanche, or any guilt toward Dirk. Strickland answers that he does not at all think that he is to blame. He reveals that before Blanche and Dirk married, she was the governess for a royal family. When the family's son got her pregnant, the family turned her out on the street, and she tried to kill herself. Dirk found her and married her, and took care of her when the baby was born dead. Strickland says that Blanche was never actually happy with Dirk, and that she killed herself because she was a suicidal person. Strickland does, however, admit that he wanted her sexually, and initiated the affair between them. Since he is done with the painting she was modeling for, he has no more use for her, and he is surprised that she did not just go back to Dirk.

Chapters 36-41 Analysis

Crabbe struggles with guilt over his feelings about Blanche, Strickland, and Dirk. He feels guilty that he is always tempted to laugh at Dirk, even when Dirk is going through a tragedy. He also feels bad about the fact that he is relieved when he does not have to keep hovering at Blanche's hospital door. Crabbe wants to play the role of a responsible friend, but he does not really care about Blanche, and resents the way she has treated Dirk. It is hard for Crabbe to know how to feel about Blanche's suicide, because he has so many times been annoyed by Dirk's indulgence toward her. Crabbe feels guilty about Strickland, because he can not help admiring some of Strickland's villainous qualities. Although Strickland hardly seems human in some of his motivations, ignoring standards of morality and virtue, there is a ring of truth to many of his callous statements. Though

he sometimes behaves rather monstrously, he is true to himself, and does not allow society's rules to hold him back.

When Dirk first sees Strickland's portrait of Blanche, he is overwhelmed by the beauty of it. Crabbe talks about how, for most people, the idea of beauty is thrown around so casually, that the word loses all real meaning. Dirk is one of the few people who reserves his praise for instances of true beauty, and when he encounters it, it is like he is seeing God. Dirk is momentarily transported out of his grief, by his awe at the work of art in front of him. The painting is so powerful that he instantly forgives Strickland, and invites him to move into Dirk's childhood home with him. Although Strickland thinks that Dirk is a sap for feeling so strongly about Strickland's work, and for offering to take Strickland with him, Strickland does not see that Dirk takes something very valuable from their interaction, simply from the chance to be around such artistic greatness.

Chapters 42-46

Chapters 42-46 Summary

Strickland invites Crabbe up to his apartment, to see his paintings. Crabbe looks forward to it, since Strickland never lets anyone else see his work. Strickland tells him where to stand and to be quiet and then sets painting after painting on the easel. He leaves each one on the easel for a few minutes, and Crabbe can see that in six years, Strickland has made about thirty paintings. Crabbe is disappointed, because he has been expecting something really special. Instead, he finds Strickland's style clumsy and awkward, and he does not like the paintings. He does, however, sense something powerful struggling to come out. Crabbe suggests that perhaps painting is not the way to express the ideas and feelings that Strickland is trying to convey. Crabbe does not even once consider buying one of the paintings. Crabbe tells Strickland that he thinks that the reason Strickland gave in to Blanche is that, in his constant struggle to free his spirit, he had a moment of weakness. He thinks that once Strickland observed Blanche's connection with his weakness, he wanted nothing to do with her. Strickland laughs at him. A few days later Strickland goes to Marseilles, and Crabbe tells the reader that they are never again to meet.

Crabbe wishes that he could write a more compelling story about Strickland, which would be much better reading, and move the reader. He would like to represent Mrs. Strickland as a nag, driving her husband to paint out his frustration. He would like to portray an older artist taking Strickland under his wing, and then show the moving moments of discovery as Strickland agonizingly makes progress in painting. Unfortunately, most of Strickland's story is unknown, while that which is known is dull and uninspiring. Strickland had a normal enough childhood, and became a stockbroker by his own choice. He never had any notorious connection with art, and no one knows how he paints, because he is very secretive about it. Crabbe imagines the unhappy love affair from Blanche's point of view. He knows that she must have been miserable, but imagines that she took satisfaction in destroying Dirk, since he had saved her at her most pitiful. Crabbe thinks that women have practically no importance to Strickland, and that he can devote himself to either sex, love, and all the details of life, or to painting, and he would rather paint. Strickland does not see it as any hardship to live like a beggar, as long as he can paint. Crabbe notes that Strickland's views on various artists are not unusual, and do not reveal anything interesting about his character, nor the nature of his artistic style.

When, fifteen years later, Crabbe finds himself in Tahiti, it is a few days before he remembers that Strickland spent years in Tahiti. This is where Strickland truly discovers his style, and most of his popular paintings are of Tahiti. By this point, Strickland has become a famous and respected artist. Instead of people saying how poorly drawn and clumsily painted his figures are, people notice his innovative, expressive style, using color and form to convey his passionate message. Strickland has died nine years

earlier, and Crabbe starts asking around, to see if anyone has any of Strickland's paintings.

Soon Crabbe meets Captain Nichols, a beachcomber who used to know Strickland. In fact, the man says that he was the one who got Strickland to come to Tahiti. Over a morning drink, he explains that he met Strickland in Marseilles. The two men become friends, but sometimes Captain Nichols has to cut his time short because his wife wants him. Although she is always silent, Mrs. Nichols is an imposing woman, and Captain Nichols is clearly afraid of her. Crabbe feels bad for him, thinking that some people just are not cut out to ever get married.

Chapters 42-46 Analysis

When Crabbe sees Strickland's paintings, he struggles to understand them. It is obvious that there is some powerful urge, trying hard to get out on to the canvas, but the massage stops short. The awkwardness of the drawing style distracts him from the intense emotion in the colors. He does not especially like the paintings, but there is something haunting and compelling about them. Looking at Strickland's pictures, Crabbe thinks, "Facts were nothing to him, for beneath the mass of irrelevant incidents he looked for something significant to himself" (Chapter 42, p. 235). Strickland is consumed by a need to create beauty, not just something pleasing to the eye, but something that sings to the spirit and frightens it. Just as the other people in his life are irrelevant to his purposes, so also Strickland is not concerned with the need to concretely represent objects in literally the way they look, but bends them to convey the message of his painting.

Chapters 47-52

Chapters 47-52 Summary

Captain Nichols describes to Crabbe how he met Strickland. In Marseilles, Nichols first sees Strickland at a homeless shelter, where both men are staying for the week. Later, Nichols runs into him again and takes him to a soup kitchen for breakfast. The two vagabonds get odd jobs when they can, but often go hungry, and when they are lucky they can spend the night in abandoned or parked vehicles. After several months they start staying at the home of Tough Bill, an old sailor who books sailors jobs on ships coming through, in exchange for their first paycheck. Tough Bill gives Strickland traveling papers so he can leave the country. Nichols describes the South Sea islands to Strickland, who decides that this is the route to the painting paradise he has been seeking. Unfortunately, the next few voyages to come through are bound in the opposite direction, so eventually Tough Bill throws them out. Later, Tough Bill asks Strickland for the traveling papers, and Strickland laughs at him.

A few nights later, Strickland is in a dive bar when Tough Bill shows up looking for a fight. When he sees Strickland, he spits in Strickland's face, and a bar fight ensues. Once the police have cleared the bar out, Tough Bill is unconscious on the floor. He and Strickland are both wounded, and Tough Bill ends up in the hospital for a few days. Nichols worries for Strickland, saying that as soon as Tough Bill gets out of the hospital, he will kill Strickland, and Tough Bill's wife confirms this rumor. Fortunately, a ship going to Australia shows up needing a man, and Strickland immediately leaves. After Nichols tells this story with all its gritty details, Crabbe points out that Nichols is a notorious liar and that it is quite likely that this entire story is made up. Crabbe imagines that perhaps Nichols has never even been to Marseilles, but has only read a magazine article.

Crabbe comments that this is the point at which he had intended to end his book, but it just does not seem right. Instead, he goes around Tahiti, talking to the few people who knew Strickland. Very few people pay any notice to Strickland while he lives in Tahiti. One man who knows him is a man named Cohen, who employs Strickland as an overseer on his plantation. Cohen has a weakness for artists, so he hires Strickland even though Strickland is not a very attentive overseer. As soon as Strickland makes enough money to buy some canvases and paints, he disappears. A year later, Strickland returns with a painting of the plantation, which he gives to Cohen. Cohen thinks the painting is terrible, and puts it in his attic. A few years later, someone writes to Cohen, asking if he has any of Strickland's work. By this point, Strickland is considered a genius in Europe, and the painting is worth a fortune. Cohen thinks it is hilarious that the childish-looking painting turns out to be a masterpiece.

Crabbe lives at a hotel in Tahiti, and Tiare Johnson, the woman who runs the hotel, was also friends with Strickland. The fat Tahitian woman loves making dinner for any strays who can not pay for their food, and she is generous with any needy guests who do not have rent. She reminisces with Crabbe about her life. Tiare tells Crabbe of how, when

she is fifteen, her father discovers that she has a lover, and beats her savagely before making her marry the English captain she has been caught with. Then she recalls seeing Strickland for the first time, and making him stay for dinner because he is so thin. When Strickland arrives in Tahiti, all he has is a paint box and a bundle of canvases. The first time he sees Tahiti, he feels that he has come home, as though this is the place his soul has longed for all his life.

Crabbe tells Tiare about a man he knew many years ago named Abraham. Abraham is a very promising young medical student, with a wonderful position promised to him, as soon as he gets home from his tour of the Mediterranean. When the ship docks for a few hours in Alexandria, Abraham decides that he never wants to live anywhere else, and he tells the ship to leave him there. Ten years later, Crabbe happens to run into Abraham, who is still living in Egypt. Abraham works as a doctor and makes just enough money to survive. Abraham tells Crabbe that he is very happy with his life, and he has never regretted his decision to move there. One day, years later, Crabbe bumps into another old friend, the medical student who got the job vacated by Abraham. The doctor, Alec, tells Crabbe how lucky he is that Abraham abandoned the job. He feels bad for Abraham, living in poverty in a foreign land, and figures that Abraham just does not have the character to handle the job. Crabbe thinks about how happy Abraham is, and wonders about how happy Alec is.

Tiare tells Crabbe that she was the one who introduced Strickland to his wife. Crabbe points out that Strickland already has a wife, but Tiare says that she is in England, far away. When Tiare sees the forlorn, lost look on Strickland as he wanders the town on his visits, she decides that he needs to settle down, with a wife to take care of him. There is a girl named Ata living at Tiare's hotel who cleans the rooms; she is a cousin of Tiare's. Tiare tells Strickland that Ata has property nearby, and a house, and Strickland needs someone to care for him. Since the island girls commonly sleep with sailors in exchange for money, Tiare points out to Strickland that Ata has only been with ships' captains and officers, not like the other, promiscuous girls. Ata is a nice, respectful girl of seventeen, and since her family is dead, Ata is happy at the chance to marry a white man. She understands that, like all the white men who come and marry the Tihitian girls, he has a wife somewhere, and they will not be having an official ceremony.

Strickland asks Ata what she thinks, and she giggles. He tells her that he will beat her, and Ata asks him how else she would know that he loves her. Tiare suggests to Strickland that if he is not sure what he wants to do, he can try living with Ata at the hotel for a month, and if he still likes it, he can marry her. After a month, Tiare cooks up a huge wedding feast, and they dance in the drawing room. Strickland's next three years are very happy. He and Ata live in a two-room hut containing only the mats they sleep on. They live mostly off the produce of the land and Strickland bathes in a stream on the property. When Ata has a baby, an old woman comes to stay with them to help her out with it, and then the woman's granddaughter joins them, before a ragamuffin also shows up, and the group of six people lives together in a happy, carefree way.

Chapters 47-52 Analysis

Crabbe muses that some men seem to be born in the wrong place. No matter how long they live in a certain place, it does not seem special to them, like home. One day, such men discover another land, which seems like the home for their soul. When they discover this place, these men usually decide on a moment's notice to stay for the rest of their lives. They settle among strangers, with no resources, but they do not mind because it seems to them that they are surrounded by friends and family. He tells of a friends he has had with this experience, and imagines that Strickland is the same way.

Crabbe mentions, when describing the conversation of a sailor, that the swearing was actually much more impressive, but he wants this book to be read by families. This takes the reader out of the story, but in a way makes the events of the book more concrete as though they take place in exactly the same world in which the book will be published and read. Crabbe also questions the credibility of his source, Captain Nichols. Just as Crabbe has wished that Strickland lived a more romantic life, or at least a less private one, so Nichols provides him with the exciting, moving story of a starving artist finally making it to his paradise. Crabbe understands that such a lovely story is, most likely, just a story.

When Tiare is telling stories to Crabbe, she often includes episodes of men beating the women in their family, until they are black and blue all up and down. The Tahitian women consider this proof that a man is a man. Instead of being angry when a man hurts a woman, Tiare tells of how badly her second husband treats her, never beating her at all, even when she sleeps with the officers of every docking ship. She is so disgusted that he will not raise a hand to her, that she divorces him. It is interesting how the social rules, which can be so important and oppressive in Europe, seem to be switched in Tahiti. Women and girls are allowed to freely choose their sexual partners, and if they want to take money for sex, that is no scandal. In this more liberated atmosphere, however, they appreciate a certain primitive roughness, and the women consider beatings to be an acceptable part of interacting with men. This is like the opposite of Victorian England, where women are treated more like delicate, valuable property that must be carefully guarded and protected. Certainly women are not seen as being able to fend for themselves or choose their own life path, without the threat of ending in ruin. Yet in such moralistic cultures, it is usually considered the height of brutality to hurt a woman, especially to the point of leaving visible bruises. It raises the question of who is more liberated, the English women, or the women of Tahiti?

Chapters 53-58

Chapters 53-58 Summary

Tiare suggests that Crabbe go see Captain Brunot, an old Frenchman who used to play chess with Strickland. Brunot recalls going to see Strickland at his secluded hut, and observing his simple way of life. Strickland lives like a native in an area that looks like the garden of Eden. While Brunot is visiting Strickland, he asks Strickland how he likes living in Tahiti, married to Ata, who now has two babies. Strickland answers that Ata leaves him alone so he can paint, and that he will never leave Tahiti. Brunot is the first to see Strickland's paintings and like them enough to buy several. He sees something wonderful in them, and now that Strickland is famous, he plans to someday have them be his daughter's dowry. Reminiscing with Crabbe, Brunot says that he and Strickland are alike, because they both feel an irresistible urge to create beauty. Where Strickland uses paint, Brunot has used an island, clearing and planting it until he has a wonderful place to live.

Crabbe goes to see Dr. Coutras, who attended Strickland before his death. One day, a little girl with some money in her hand comes to fetch Dr. Coutras, saying that the white man is ill. Dr. Coutras follows her many miles through the jungle to get to Ata's hut, and Ata meets them on the path. She tells the doctor that her husband is very sick, but he does not know the doctor is coming. He thinks that he is all right, and continues painting. Dr. Coutras goes inside, and as soon as he sees Strickland's face, he knows that Strickland has advanced leprosy. When the doctor tells him this, Strickland prepares to go off alone into the mountains, but Ata begs him not to leave her. She says he should take her with him and that if he leaves she will hang herself, and he finally agrees to stay.

Soon the other natives leave the hut, leaving Strickland and Ata alone with the two babies. As time goes by, everyone finds out about Strickland's leprosy, and Ata is soon stigmatized just as badly as her husband. No one will talk to her and they throw rocks at her and tell her that they will burn down her house if she uses their streams. Dr. Coutras visits the hut again, but Ata tells him that Strickland does not want to see him. The doctor is surprised to hear that Strickland is still painting, and Ata says that he is painting the walls of the tiny, two-room house. The doctor asks where the second baby is, and Ata tells him that the child is dead. A while later, Ata sends for Dr. Coutras, saying that Strickland is dying. When Dr. Coutras arrives, he finds Strickland already dead, his tortured corpse in a terrible condition from the advanced stages of leprosy.

Dr. Coutras is taken aback by the riot of floor-to-ceiling paintings of jungles and nude men and women. He sees the work of genius, and the work excites something wonderful and terrifying inside of him. He is confused by the fact that Strickland's eyes have long been destroyed by his disease, and Ata confirms that Strickland was blind for a year before he died, painting with his imagination. After they bury Strickland, Ata burns down the hut, as Strickland wished. She ends up going back to civilization with her son,

who becomes a sailor. After telling the story, Dr. Coutras shows Crabbe a painting of some fruit that Strickland did. Crabbe sees some tantalizing, living magic in the colors of the fruit. Crabbe eventually returns to London, and he goes to see Mrs. Strickland, so he can tell her of her husband's last years. Mrs. Strickland acts as though things were always happy between her and her husband, and happily remarks how pretty and decorative are the prints of his paintings, which she has hanging on the wall.

Chapters 53-58 Analysis

When Strickland intends to go off by himself as a leper, Ata begs him not to leave her, saying, "Whither thou goest I will go, too" (Chapter 55, p. 317). This is a quote from the Bible, from the book of Ruth. It was originally spoken by a woman to her mother-in-law, but regardless of the relationship, it calls to mind the beautiful power of deep, confident loyalty. After all the women who have used the same tricks to try to keep Strickland, Ata finally succeeds where others failed. Strickland comments that women are all the same, and that of course one of them was going to get him in the end, and decides to stay with her. It is not clear whether Strickland has finally been worn down by life, so that he finally gives in to the force which keeps coming after him, or if Ata is different because she just lets him be who he needs to be. Strickland clearly sees that Ata will be giving up a lot to stay with him, since he suggests that she can go back to the city and find another white man to marry. What began as a marriage of convenience grows into a strong, passionate love.

Mrs. Strickland provides quite a contrast from Ata. Mrs. Strickland is terribly concerned with looking and seeming respectable and nice. She does not even know that she has a picture of Ata in her parlor. Years ago, when Charles left her, she could not understand why, since she wanted to surround herself with writers and artists. She thinks that she would be a very understanding, supportive wife to an artist. Yet Mrs. Strickland clearly does not understand her husband's work. Where others see wild, pulsating sensuality, and the dark side of life, Mrs. Strickland only thinks that the paintings go well with her decorating scheme.

Characters

Charles Strickland

When Crabbe meets Charles Strickland, Strickland seems like a dull, commonplace, sturdy man. He is a London stockbroker, and not good at socializing. When Strickland decides to leave it all behind and become a painter in Paris, everyone is shocked, since this seems to come out of the blue. Everyone who sees Strickland's early work laughs at it, saying that he has no talent, but he does not feel that he has a choice as to whether to paint. Strickland sees value in the act of painting itself, not in the finished product. Although he is willing to give up anything to paint, as soon as he has finished a painting, he has no use for it. He also has no use for the opinion of others. Whenever he is ridiculed for his unorthodox actions, Strickland expresses surprise that anyone would think he would care. Strickland does not mind living in poverty, and when he finally is surrounded by the island paradise he has longed for, he can settle down and paint from his heart. Like Beethoven composing a symphony while deaf, Strickland continues painting long after he has gone blind. Even though he can not see the masterpiece inside his hut, Strickland can see it with his mind's eye, and he knows that in his final chance, he has at last communicated the beauty and wonder of his spirit, and he can die happy.

George Crabbe

The narrator never makes it obvious, but he hints that he is George Crabbe, an English writer. Crabbe acts in a way to show that he pays tribute to the rules of society, but his desires show a dark side. When Mrs. Strickland asks Crabbe to go to Paris for her, he agrees, although he does not want to. Out of obligation he goes to find Strickland, the same obligation which supports Dirk in dark times. Crabbe feels guilty that he only helps Dirk because he feels he has to, and not out of genuine love. Crabbe can never resist joining the crowd in laughing at Dirk, even during tragedy. Strickland claims that the reason Crabbe helps him out sometimes, is that they see the same sort of evil in one another. Just as Crabbe is repulsed by Strickland's lack of pity, he admires the way Strickland does not put up with pretense for the sake of sparing the feelings of others. Just as Strickland is reticent to tell his life story to others, so Crabbe also reveals surprisingly little about himself. He says that he is a writer, and that he has a little money, but he is always a side character in the story. Although Crabbe is telling the story, he mostly tells stories that revolve around other people, rarely touching Crabbe.

Mrs. Strickland

Mrs. Strickland is Charles Strickland's wife in London, and she cannot understand why he leaves her to become a painter. Years later, she pretends that things were always good between them, and she imagines that she can appreciate his art.

Dirk Stroeve

Dirk is a hack painter, painting sentimental scenes of peasants frolicking. He is a friend of Crabbe's, and he is the only one in Paris to see any merit in Strickland's paintings.

Blanche Stroeve

Blanche is Dirk's wife, and she leaves him for Strickland. After Strickland no longer needs her for a model, Blanche kills herself.

Captain Nichols

Captain Nichols is an old beachcomber who suggests to Strickland that he go to Tahiti. They spend time being homeless together, but later Crabbe suspects that Captain Nichols never even met Strickland.

Tiare Johnson

Tiare runs the Hotel de la Fleur, the hotel where Crabbe stays when he is in Tahiti. She introduces Strickland to his Tahitian wife.

Ata

Ata is a young Tahitian girl who agrees to be common-law married to Strickland. She stays by his side even when he has leprosy.

Captain Brunot

Captain Brunot is the only person in Tahiti who likes Strickland's paintings. He buys some, and years later they turn out to be worth a fortune.

Dr. Coutras

Dr. Coutras is fetched by a little girl to attend Strickland, and he discovers that Strickland has leprosy. He is one of the only people to ever see Strickland's masterpiece painting, before it is destroyed.

Abraham

Abraham is a promising medical student who is friends with Crabbe. One day, he abandons all his prospects to move to Alexandria, where he lives a happy, simple life.

Objects/Places

London

When Crabbe meets the Stricklands, they are living in London, in a nice apartment.

Paris

Charles Strickland goes to Paris to study painting and stays there for six years.

Rome

Crabbe meets Dirk Stroeve in Rome, where Dirk paints Italian peasants against the beautiful scenery. Later, Dirk continues painting Rome, even after moving to Paris.

Tahiti

All his life, Strickland has longed to live in a quiet island paradise, so he settles in Tahiti when he can finally get a ship to take him there.

Papeete

Papeete is a small village in Tahiti, where Strickland meets Ata. It is the nearest village to Ata's house.

Ata's Hut

Ata and Strickland live in a tiny, two-room hut in the jungle, along with several others. When Strickland is dying, he paints the entire hut with his masterpiece.

Marseilles

After leaving Paris, Strickland goes to Marseilles for a while. That is where he meets Captain Nichols, who suggests that he go to Tahiti.

The Louvre

Crabbe can often find Dirk in the Louvre, wandering among the beautiful paintings he loves. The Louvre is a famous art museum in Paris.

Strickland's Studio

Strickland lives in a disgusting, filthy attic room in Paris, which functions as his studio. It contains nothing but a small bed, an easel, and painting supplies.

Dirk's Apartment

Dirk and Blanche live in a tiny apartment, with a bedroom and a studio for Dirk to paint in. Dirk allows Blanche to live there with Strickland.

Crabbe's Apartment

Crabbe lives in a little apartment in Paris, and he lets Dirk stay there when Blanche is in the hospital.

Themes

Forsaking all else for a cause

Various characters in the book decide that there is something that is worth giving up everything else. Strickland is the primary example of this idea. Strickland cares only about painting, and everything else is just a distraction. He does not mind living in dire poverty, with practically no food, as long as he can paint, and he cares nothing for relationships with other people, either. Because he is so single-minded, he seems cruel in his total lack of care for the feelings of those around him, and he also does not care what they think of his paintings. Even when he is dying, Strickland does not care, as long as he can keep painting. Captain Brunot feels the same way, but about creating his own island paradise, where he can grow old with his wife and be proud of his own work. He says of Strickland, "There are men whose desire for truth is so great that to attain it they will shatter the very foundation of their world" (Chapter 54, p. 307).

The women in the story also exhibit the quality of forsaking everything for a cause, but for them it is love. Blanche is willing to leave her comfortable apartment and husband to live in a disgusting attic, with no food or money, just to be with Strickland. When this fails to work, she throws her life away by taking poison. Ata's devotion is greater than Blanche's. When Strickland learns that he has leprosy, he plans to leave his family behind, and go off and die. Ata insists that she will kill herself if he leaves, and is willing to face the stigma of a leper in order to stay with him. After witnessing his masterpiece, she is willing to burn down the hut in order to comply with his wishes.

What is the nature of beauty?

Many of the characters want to find beauty in their lives, but they do not all agree on what beauty is. Mrs. Strickland thinks that she lives the beautiful life, with her nice-looking kids, and her artsy decor. Later, when Strickland's art has influenced decorating trends, she has two of her husband's prints on the wall of her parlor, and comments that they are so decorative. This shows that she does not understand anything of his style, since the beauty that he reveals is a terrifying, obscene thing. "It was the work of a man who had delved into the hidden depths of nature and had discovered secrets which were beautiful and fearful too. It was the work of a man who knew things which it is unholy for men to see" (Chapter 56, p. 325). This is the beauty that has always tortured Strickland to paint, and it strikes at the soul of someone who truly looks at it.

Dirk paints beautiful, meaningless pictures of joyful peasants in lovely Italian costumes, and his wife thinks the pictures are lovely. They are cute and heartwarming, and they sell very well. All other painters make fun of Dirk and say that his paintings are vulgar and low, only appropriate for chocolate-box packaging. Dirk himself believes that beauty is not something that can be easily perceived by just anyone. He feels that real beauty can only be understood if the art makes the viewer go through the same experience as

the artist. This hurts his wife's feelings, since the implication is that his art is not beauty, and that she is not capable of perceiving real beauty.

The simple life vs. respectability

Many of the people in Europe set a high value on being respectable, and living the kind of life that fits in certain approved parameters. Certain behaviors and lifestyles are appropriate to enjoy, but other lifestyles are downright scandalous. The respectable people pity those who abandon respectability, thinking that they are obviously miserable now. Strickland is one such character who is seen as miserable to anyone who looks at the outside circumstances of his life, since he has practically no possessions, and often no food, home, or money. In Tahiti, he finds happiness in the simple life, living at the easy pace of the island. This is similar to the case of Crabbe's friend Abraham. Abraham gives up a promising future, with a guaranteed high position in a hospital as the new doctor. Abraham realizes on a moment's notice that he will never be happy anywhere other than Alexandria, and he immediately turns his back on everything, in order to stay there. He also lives a simple life, with very little money and no prestige, but he is very happy. Alec, the man who gets the job Abraham left vacant, feels bad for Abraham. He knows he is very lucky to have gotten Abraham's position, but he knows that Abraham must be miserable in his pathetic little life, living primitively. This is like a metaphor for the contrast between Strickland's artistic style, and the art that came before him. Where others see only childish scrawling, Strickland sees the deep, primitive instinct from primordial times, pushing life forward in all its glory.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first-person viewpoint of the narrator. The narrator is a writer, and he knew Charles Strickland at the beginning of Strickland's painting career. Thus, the story only includes information that the narrator himself has access to, and he is an ordinary man, with no divine knowledge. The narrator is elusive about his own identity, revealing little about his own character, except through descriptions of his interactions with others. He hints that he is English writer George Crabbe, and notes that Crabbe has fallen into obscurity. Crabbe is often in the dark about what is going on, even when he is in the midst of the action. In addition, he does not even like Strickland, nor think he is a genius, so he does not try to find out more while Strickland is alive.

Several times, Crabbe interviews someone else connected with Strickland, and they take over the narration. Nevertheless, Crabbe always reminds the reader that he is the one transmitting the story. If the speaker is especially charismatic, Crabbe says that he is reporting it less colorfully. Sometimes, Crabbe himself says that his source is totally unreliable, implying that the imagination is as good as anything else for filling in the details of a confusing, obscure life. For instance, after Captain Nichols tells a long, detailed story about how Strickland comes to Tahiti, Crabbe implies that Nichols has never even met Strickland. The stories told by others have a more lyrical, fairy-tale quality to them, unlike the unhappy descriptions of Crabbe's interactions with Strickland. This goes along with the implication that they are myths.

Setting

There are three main settings for "The Moon and Sixpence." The book starts out in Tahiti, but then quickly follows Strickland's beginnings in England around the turn of the twentieth century. Strickland lives a middle-class, professional, respectable life in London, working as a stockbroker, and suffering through his wife's dinner parties. She is determined to cultivate writers all around her, so she will seem cultured, and she has high hopes for their two teenagers. This is what Strickland suddenly turns his back on when he leaves them behind and goes to Paris to paint. In Paris, he lives in abject poverty in a single attic room, eating practically nothing. Paris is a glittering, humming city, filled with beautiful museums and galleries, and with streets of cheap whores and drunken artists. Crabbe sees Paris as magical and wonderful, but Strickland sees none of that, being totally focused on his art.

The later portion of the book takes place in Tahiti, and it is the exact opposite of Europe, half a world away. Tahiti is the Garden of Eden that Strickland has always longed for, and in the quiet of the lush jungle, he can finally paint what his heart believes. Life is slow and lazy, and the people have the splendor of heaven and the fruits of the trees, instead of fine possessions and urban entertainments. In this jungle, Strickland

recognizes the wild, passionate drive within himself, which causes him to make art that strikes people's souls.

Language and Meaning

Most of the book is written in steady, ordinary prose, as the way the narrator speaks. There are many instances of French names and places, and sometimes the characters speak in French. If the reader does not understand French, this will be lost, but the French phrases help ground the story in Paris, and later, in Tahiti. The French sensibility seems to be the opposite of English values, so using French phrases provides a contrast from the scenes which take place in England. Crabbe always reminds the reader that he is relaying someone else's story, if he is reporting on an interview. He often points out that really the person talks differently than he has told it, and encourages the reader to imagine it being told in a certain voice. For instance, many times he remarks on how Strickland is a man of few words. Strickland is not good at making conversation or at expressing himself, so when he really wants to say something he uses a lot of frustrated pauses and gestures. Crabbe says that trying to directly transpose this would be unreadable, and this emphasizes how Strickland has a message inside of him that desperately wants to get out. Since words fail him, he must paint the idea out. Crabbe also points out to the reader that he wants this book to be read by families, so he has cut out most of the swearing in his interviews with sailors.

Structure

The book is divided into fifty-eight chapters. The chapters vary in length, from a single page to many pages. The story is told somewhat out of order. Crabbe reveals very early on that he thought of doing a book about Strickland because he went to Tahiti, where Strickland spent his last days. Then Crabbe backtracks to his early days in London, when he first met Strickland. In Chapter 8, Strickland breaks free of his dull, placid life, and leaves his wife. Chapter 17 takes place five years after those events, and in Paris. In Chapter 28, Strickland betrays Dirk, and in Chapter 42, Strickland finally lets Crabbe look at his paintings. After all the build-up, with references to how he will one day be considered a genius, the paintings are very disappointing.

In Chapter 43, Crabbe writes as though this ought to be the end of the book but he feels unsatisfied, so he decides to tack on some more. He spends a couple of chapters saying what he wishes he could write to make this a really good story. Chapters 45 through 51 follow Strickland's journey to Tahiti, and eventual marriage there. In Chapter 42, Strickland's family is utterly happy, but in Chapter 54 he learns of his fatal disease. In Chapter 56, Strickland finally achieves the zenith of his art and then dies. In Chapter 58, Crabbe goes back to England, and finds Mrs. Strickland pretending that her marriage has always been happy, and pretending that she appreciates her husband's art.

Quotes

The younger generation, conscious of strength and tumultuous, have done with knocking at the door; they have burst in and seated themselves in our seats. (Chapter 2, p. 14)

I do not believe that there was in that genteel Bohemia an intensive culture of chastity, but I do not remember so crude a promiscuity as seems to be practiced in the present day. (Chapter 3, p. 18)

The artist has this advantage over the rest of the world, that his friends offer not only their appearance and their character to his satire, but also their work. (Chapter 3, p. 19)

. . . impropriety is the soul of wit . . . (Chapter 4, p. 23)

"Why do nice women marry dull men?"
"Because intelligent men won't marry nice women." (Chapter 4, p. 25)

It is always distressing when outraged morality does not possess the strength of arm to administer direct chastisement on the sinner. (Chapter 8, p. 45)

I had not yet learnt how contradictory is human nature; I did not know how much pose there is in the sincere, how much baseness in the noble, nor how much goodness in the reprobate. (Chapter 11, p. 59)

There is in the streets of the poorer quarters of Paris a thronging vitality which excites the blood and prepares the soul for the unexpected. (Chapter 12, p. 64)

Only the poet or the saint can water an asphalt pavement in the confident anticipation that lilies will reward his labour. (Chapter 13, p. 74)

Looking back, I think now that he was blind to everything but to some disturbing vision in his soul. (Chapter 13, p. 75)

It is not difficult to be unconventional in the eyes of the world when your unconventionality is but the convention of your set. (Chapter 14, p. 80)

It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive. (Chapter 17, p. 97)

I received the impression of a life which was a bitter struggle against every sort of difficulty; but I realised that much which would have seemed horrible to most people did not in the least affect him. (Chapter 21, p. 117)

I had the feeling that he worked on a canvas with all the force of his violent personality, oblivious of everything in his effort to get what he saw with the mind's eye." (Chapter 21, p. 119)

"I don't think of the past. The only thing that matters is the everlasting present." (Chapter 21, p. 121)

Life isn't long enough for love and art. (Chapter 21, p. 122)

. . . I felt that he was at once too great and too small for love. (Chapter 30, p. 174)

Dirk Stroeve had a . . . real feeling for what was beautiful and the capacity to create only what was commonplace. . . (Chapter 31, p. 178)

. . . one of the falsest of proverbs is that you must lie on the bed that you have made. (Chapter 33, p. 184)

Women are constantly trying to commit suicide for love, but generally they take care not to succeed. (Chapter 34, p. 190)

I wondered what an abyss of cruelty she must have looked into that in horror she refused to live. (Chapter 35, p. 195)

Nature, sometimes so cruel, is sometimes merciful. (Chapter 36, p. 197)

He could no longer laugh with those who laughed at him. (Chapter 38, p. 202)

It is one of the defects of my character that I cannot altogether dislike anyone who makes me laugh. (Chapter 40, p. 217)

"A woman can forgive a man for the harm he does her," he said, "but she can never forgive him for the sacrifices he makes on her account." (Chapter 41, p. 223)

I know lust. That's normal and healthy. Love is a disease. (Chapter 41, p. 225)

I see you as the eternal pilgrim to some shrine that perhaps does not exist. (Chapter 42, p. 236)

In England and France, he was the square peg in the round hole, but here the holes were any sort of shape, and no sort of peg was quite amiss. (Chapter 54, p. 305)

"I shall beat you," he said, looking at her.
"How else should I know you loved me," she answered. (Chapter 51, p. 291)

It was a night so beautiful that your soul seemed hardly able to bear the prison of the body. (Chapter 53, p. 302)

Topics for Discussion

What are the attitudes of the different women in Strickland's life? What effect do these attitudes have?

Why does Crabbe reveal so little about himself in the story? He is a major player, yet he tells the story as though he has no influence in it. How would the story be different if Crabbe had no involvement?

Do you think it is symbolically appropriate that Strickland gets leprosy? What does this imply about his social connections?

Various characters disagree on the nature of beauty, and how to recognize genius. What do you think makes something beautiful? What makes someone a genius?

Why do you think Strickland changes so abruptly when he decides to become a painter? Why do you think he had chosen such an ordinary, domestic life before?

Compare and contrast the city of Paris with the jungles of Tahiti. Which place would you rather visit?

What is the significance of death in this story? Do you think it is appropriate that Ata burns down Strickland's masterpiece?

What is wrong with Dirk's painting style? Why do all the other painters laugh at him, even though he sells far more paintings than they do?

Strickland does not care at all about the opinions of others. Do you think it is important what others think? Why or why not?