

Sixpenny Civilization

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The life of the French painter, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), has been made into a film, a TV series, an opera and at least two novels. Something in that life must speak to modern man: the stockbroker who is putting bread on the table for a wife and five little children and throws it all away to become a revolutionary artist, spurning all of Western civilization on a distant island in the South Pacific. But does not Gauguin's restless end suggest that he may not have found the solution dreamt of there by so many souls?

One fictional presentation of Gauguin's life was written 16 years after his death by a well-known British writer of the first half of the 20th century, W. Somerset Maugham, who visited the South Pacific to gather at first hand material for "The Moon and Sixpence." This title for his short novel based on Gauguin sounds strange, but in fact it goes to the heart of the matter. In 1915 had appeared Maugham's masterpiece, "Of Human Bondage," a novel basically autobiographical. A critic had accused the book's hero of being "so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence (a small British silver-coloured coin of that time) at his feet." In other words, Maugham was so longing for some unattainable ideal that he was missing out on a lesser but practical happiness available at hand. Maugham retorted, "If you look on the ground for sixpence, you don't look up, and so miss the moon." In other words, there are higher things in life.

The use of this moon-sixpence contrast for his novel's title shows clearly what Maugham thought of Gauguin. The normal happiness of the middle-class stockbroker and family father is the sixpence. Throwing it all away to become an artist is the moon. Now let nobody think Maugham condones throwing away living and family. Maugham presents the artist Strickland, his

Gauguin, as being horrifically selfish, hard-hearted and cruel. Yet Maugham also presents him as being a genius who was basically right to pursue his artistic vocation, whatever the cost may have been in sixpenny happiness to the artist himself and to those around him.

In other words, says Maugham, most people's lives in today's Western civilization are sixpenny lives. But life itself is worth much more than sixpence. In the brief span that men are given to live on earth there is something so much more valuable, that in pursuit of it a man is basically right, if need be, to trample any number of sixpenny pieces into the mud.

In real life Gauguin died, at least posthumously, a famous and fulfilled artist, but humanly still restless and rebellious. Maugham has the measure of both the genius validated and the humanity frustrated. But has Maugham solved Gauguin's unsolved problem? How can genius and life be opposed to one another, and both be human? The problem looks as though it is widespread and deeply rooted. Is there a solution? See next week's "Eleison Comments."

Kyrie eleison.