

Portraits of Egoism in Classic Cinema III: Nietzschean Portrayals

Gary James Jason
California State University, Fullerton

1. Conceptual Review

In the first of the trio of reviews,¹ we distinguished varieties of egoism from each other. “Psychological egoism” is the view that all people (or animals) act solely to maximize their self-interest. “Default egoism” is the view that while occasionally people can act in an ultimately other-regarding fashion (usually toward family and friends), they mainly act to maximize their self-interest.

In the second of the trio,² we defined the psychological traits of egotism and cynicism, and the personality disorders of narcissism and psychopathology. I won’t rehearse the definitions of these concepts again, as they are not important in this review.

What is important to recall here is the crucial point that egoistic theories presuppose a view of what is ultimately desirable (or non-morally good). Any philosophy holding that what is morally right (or rational) to do for any person is what maximizes the best results for that person, needs to tell us what “good results” means. A great nineteenth-century philosopher who advances egoism, Friedrich Nietzsche, maintains a striking view about this. Nietzsche believes that power in some sense—perhaps creative power—is the most important ultimately desirable thing. The Nietzschean egoist seeks to exercise his or her will to power. I shall examine how filmmakers have dealt with this view by analyzing the films *Compulsion* and *The Moon and Sixpence*.³

¹ Gary James Jason, “Portraits of Egoism in Classic Cinema I: Sympathetic Portrayals,” *Reason Papers* 36, no. 1 (July 2014), pp. 107-21.

² Gary James Jason, “Portraits of Egoism in Classic Cinema II: Negative Portrayals,” *Reason Papers* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 119-36.

³ *Compulsion*, directed by Richard Fleischer (Twentieth Century Fox, 1959); *The Moon and Sixpence*, directed by Albert Lewin (United Artists, 1942).

2. The Nietzschean Egoist in Film

I will not attempt to summarize fully Nietzsche's complex ethical egoist philosophy.⁴ Suffice it to say that his egoist theory is significantly different from others, in several ways.

First, while Nietzsche holds that we are all egoistic (i.e., he was a psychological egoist), he believes that people are quite different in their natures, and his sort of egoism thus varies by person type. He believes that the most important division is between the base, ordinary people—the lowest people, the herd, or “under-men”—and the superior ones, the “over-men” or “supermen.” He rejects Christian and Kantian ethics as the disguised egoism of the weak under-men (i.e., herd morality). The over-men require a different egoism, involving the instinctive need to dominate (i.e., the will to power).

Second, unlike the consequentialist British philosophers, Nietzsche rejects hedonism. He holds that the over-men, who seek power, are willing to endure suffering so as to achieve great results (or highest excellence). It is not that suffering (as opposed to pleasure) is ultimately desirable, but that it is necessary for the achievement of excellence.

Nietzsche is not fully clear on what the supermen are exactly. Are they the profoundly creative or the physically beautiful or strong (as in conquering, heroic warriors)? While he typically calls these people the supermen, must they be men, or could women be supermen? How does his egoistic philosophy deal with women?

The pair of films under review here are two “takes” on or interpretations of Nietzsche's brand of egoism, specifically, his notion of the “Overman” or “Superman” (*Übermensch*). As some commentators on Nietzsche note, “Interpreting the Overman as a superhero or a superhuman being would be wrong. This misinterpretation was developed by those who have linked Nietzsche's thought to Nazi propaganda. Their misrepresentation was caused partly by the ambiguity of this concept.”⁵ After all, passages from Nietzsche, such as the following, are anything but clear and well-defined:

I teach you the superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man? All beings hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and ye want to be the ebb of that great tide, and would rather go back to the beast than surpass man?⁶

⁴ The clearest brief exposition of it I have found is in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; see the entry for “Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy,” accessed online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>.

⁵ See *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Friedrich Nietzsche,” accessed online at: http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Friedrich_Nietzsche.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (2008), Prologue, sec. 3, accessed online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>.

Quotations such as the above, together with Nietzsche's skeptical writings regarding standard Judeo-Christian ethics, have led to the view among some of his readers that superior, powerful individuals can and should transcend agapism (i.e., the ethics of compassion and love). This transcendence strives for a different ethical perspective—an egoism based on happiness, an ethics of power or (perhaps) intellectual creativity.

a. *Compulsion*

The first of our films that explores a view of Nietzschean egoism is *Compulsion*. This movie is one of at least three that are based upon the real-life Leopold and Loeb murder case of 1924, which resulted in what is often called "the trial of the century." (The second film based upon this case is Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 *Rope*. The third film is Tom Kalin's 1992 *Swoon*. I think that *Compulsion* is the superior film, hence it is the object of my focus.)

Let's start with a brief review of the actual case.⁷ Richard Loeb was a rich, handsome, and brilliant scion of a corporate executive. He was the youngest student ever to graduate from the University of Michigan (at age 17), and was going to enter the University of Chicago law school. His close friend and lover Nathan Leopold was also very bright, with a reported IQ of 210, and the product of a wealthy family. At age 19, Leopold had graduated college and was attending the University of Chicago law school. In college, Leopold had studied philosophy, with a special focus on Nietzsche (whom he apparently could read in the original German).

Together, they started committing various minor crimes. Loeb fancied himself as being a criminal mastermind, and Leopold apparently viewed him as a Nietzschean superman. They planned the ultimate perfect crime: a killing so well-crafted that they would never be caught. Their superior intellects would be demonstrated as they rose above the limited Judeo-Christian moral system that venerates the *hoi polloi* ("the many").

On May 21, 1924, Leopold and Loeb rented a car under a pseudonym, kidnapped fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks (a neighbor and Loeb's distant relative), and killed him with a chisel. Franks was apparently just a target of opportunity. On a stolen typewriter, they typed a ransom note demanding \$10,000 and sent it to Franks's parents, with orders that the bag containing the money be thrown from a moving train, where the supermen

⁷ For reviews of the case, see Jennifer Rosenberg, "Leopold and Loeb," accessed online at: <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1920s/qt/Leopold-Loeb.htm>; Douglas O. Linder, "The Leopold and Loeb Trial: A Brief Account," accessed online at: <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/Accountoftrial.html>; PBS, "People & Events: The Leopold and Loeb Trial," accessed online at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/peopleevents/e_leopoldloeb.html; and "Leopold and Loeb," accessed online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopold_and_Loeb.

could retrieve it later. They dumped Franks's body in a culvert and showered it with acid to make identification more difficult.

Far from being the perfect crime, however, the two genius-supermen made a number of mistakes. First, they didn't hide the body very well, so it was discovered the same night. Second, near the culvert, Leopold dropped his glasses, which the supposedly intellectually inferior, slave-morality-driven cops were able to tie to him because of its very rare spring mechanism. Upon questioning, the men gave the alibi that on the day in question they were out driving around (picking up girls). The alibi broke down when the cops found a note Leopold had written to Loeb, indicating they were sexual partners, and when Leopold's chauffeur testified that he had been working on the car all that day. Very quickly—only ten days after the crime itself—the supermen wound up confessing the crime to the under-cops.

Loeb's uncle hired Clarence Darrow, the leading defense attorney of his time, to defend the young men. Darrow was deeply opposed to the death penalty, and managed to get the court to spare them that penalty. He did this by pleading them guilty, thus guaranteeing that they would face a judge—rather than an outraged jury—for sentencing. He then pitched a psychological defense, arguing in a classic speech that the defendants were pre-determined to do what they did by their genetics and a bad upbringing, and that their study of Nietzsche was a major causal factor. Crucial to Darrow's success was the ruling by the judge that even though the young men were not pleading insanity, Darrow could introduce psychiatric testimony.

The judge sentenced them to life plus ninety-nine years, and recommended against them ever getting parole. About twelve years into his sentence, Loeb was murdered by a fellow prisoner, allegedly because Loeb made a sexual advance on the other man (who was later acquitted of the crime). Leopold was paroled after thirty-three years in prison, and wound up working for a hospital in Puerto Rico. He died at age sixty-six.

Compulsion is based on a Broadway play, produced by Darryl F. Zanuck and admirably directed by Richard Fleisher. The story line of both parallels more or less closely much of the real case.⁸

The main characters in the film are two extremely rich and intelligent young men attending the University of Chicago law school, named Judd Steiner and Artie Strauss. Judd—the Leopold character—is skillfully portrayed by Dean Stockwell. Artie—the Loeb character—is notably played by Bradford Dillman. The other two main characters are Jonathan Wilk—the Clarence Darrow figure—who is played perfectly by Orson Welles. Welles got top billing, even though his character in this film does not appear until midway through the film. The other eminent actor in the film is E. G.

⁸ For more detailed synopses, see the Turner Classic Movies entry, accessed online at: <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/71354/Compulsion/>; and the University of Missouri-Kansas Law School entry, accessed online at: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/LEO_COMP.htm.

Marshall, who masterfully plays District Attorney Horn. Stockwell, Dillman, and Welles each won a Best Actor award at Cannes for this movie.

The film shows Artie as a vicious bully, who dominates the shy, effeminate, and submissive Judd. Both appear arrogant, though Judd in the end turns out to be weak. Artie and Judd have few friends, believing themselves to be superior to all others. They decide to commit the perfect crime, stealing the typewriter from their frat house to type a ransom note, and go out to celebrate their upcoming caper. In driving home, they narrowly miss hitting a drunk, who shouts at them, infuriating Artie, who then orders Judd to run down the man. Foreshadowing Judd's later "weakness" (i.e., his ingrained aversion to hurting the innocent), he swerves at the last minute, which allows the man to escape injury.

The following day, we see the arrogant Artie argue with one of his professors about justice, pushing the Nietzschean (or what he takes as the Nietzschean) view that the superman can define his own concept of justice, free from feelings of compassion or other "ordinary" emotions. As chance has it, one of the students in the class is Sid Brooks (played by a young Martin Milner). Brooks, who is not rich, works as a reporter on the side.

Sid is assigned to cover the news of a boy who apparently drowned in the local park. But when the coroner concludes that the boy was in fact killed by a blunt instrument, it occurs to Sid that this boy matches the description of a recently kidnapped boy (Paulie Kessler), and conveys this information to the reporter assigned to the kidnapping case, Tom Daly (Edward Binns). Sid learns that some eyeglasses were found near the body, and Paulie's uncle tells them that Paulie didn't wear glasses. Sid now realizes that the killer dropped those eyeglasses.

Later, Sid goes to a club to join his girlfriend, Ruth Evans (Diane Varsi). Artie and Judd are there, and when Sid reveals that the killer dropped his eyeglasses, Judd checks and discovers to his dismay that *his* are missing. Later, after bickering about who is to blame, Artie and Judd devise an alibi. They will, if questioned, say that Judd lost his eyeglasses while bird watching in the park much earlier, but that on the day of the murder they were out cruising for girls in Judd's car.

The following day, Lt. Johnson (Robert Simon) and other police are talking to potential witnesses at Paulie's school. Artie can't resist volunteering to help (he was a student at the school when he was younger). Lt. Johnson asks whether Artie remembers any of the old teachers who were strange, and Artie feeds him negative information about several of them and starts phoning in phony "tips" to lead the police astray.

Meanwhile, the shy Judd has invited Ruth out to a bird-watching excursion. Artie, who has been questioning Sid about the latest discoveries in the case, learns that the police have identified the typewriter upon which the young men had typed the ransom note. Artie immediately goes over to Judd's house and bitterly criticizes him for not destroying the typewriter. Finding out that Judd will be taking out Ruth, he argues that, in order to experience all that human life can offer, Judd should rape her.

Judd tries to do this when he and Ruth are in the park, after he gives an incoherent speech about the beauty that is part of evil. However, Ruth—far from begging for mercy or weeping in fear—bravely responds to his aggression with a show of pity. This makes Judd cry in shame.

Right after this, the police pick up Judd and take him to District Attorney Horn for questioning. Horn tells Judd that the eyeglasses found at the murder scene have been identified as his (because of their rare hinge mechanism). Under relentless interrogation, Judd finally recants his bird-watching alibi. Horn then has Artie called in for questioning. Artie cleverly claims at first that on the night of the murder, he was alone at the movies, but then retracts that and admits that he was with Judd. This ploy tricks Horn into buying the alibi.

Just before Horn releases them, Judd's chauffer blurts out that he was repairing Judd's car all day on the day of the murder, which destroys their alibi of cruising for girls. Horn then tricks the weaker Judd into confessing, which in turn makes Artie so furious that he fingers Judd. The two young men—having completely implicated each other—are arrested.

The young men's families at this point hire the famous defense attorney Jonathan Wilk (the Clarence Darrow figure). Wilk pleads his clients guilty, and has psychiatrists testify that Judd is paranoid and Artie is schizophrenic. Wilk also calls Ruth as a witness, and she expresses compassion for Judd.

Wilk then gives a long, impassioned closing speech to the judge, which at upwards of fifteen minutes is "the longest true monologue in film history."⁹ To get the flavor of the speech, consider one excerpt. At one point, Wilk intones:

I think anybody who knows me knows how sorry I am for little Paulie Kessler, knows that I'm not saying it simply to talk. Artie and Judd enticed him into a car and when he struggled, they hit him over the head and killed him. They did that. They poured acid on him to destroy his identity and put the naked body in a ditch. And if killing these boys would bring [Paulie] back to life, I'd say let them go [let them be executed]. And I think their parents would say so, too. Neither they nor I would want them released. They must be isolated from society. I'm asking this court to shut them into a prison for life. And the cry for more goes back to the hyena, goes back to the beasts of the jungle. There's no part of man [in it].

This court is told to give them the same mercy that they gave their victim. Your Honor, if our state is not kinder, more human, more considerate, more intelligent than the mad act of these

⁹ See *AMC Filmsite's* entry for *Compulsion*, accessed online at: <http://www.filmsite.org/bestspeeches18.html>; the text of the entire monologue is provided at this site.

two sick boys, then I'm sorry I've lived so long. I know that any mother might be the mother of little Paulie Kessler, who left home and went to school and never came back. But I know that any mother might be the mother of Artie Strauss, Judd Steiner. Maybe in some ways these parents are more responsible than their children. I guess the truth is that all parents can be criticized. And these might have done better, if they hadn't had so much money. I do not know.

Ironically, the notorious religious skeptic Wilk appeals in the end to Judeo-Christian compassion so as to save the Nietzschean supermen.

Wilk succeeds in getting them spared the death penalty, although Artie remains unrepentant. As the young men leave the courtroom, Wilk remarks to a skeptical Judd that in the years to come when he is in prison, he will ask himself whether it was the hand of God that dropped those eyeglasses at the scene.

The film reflects the actual case rather closely, with some artistic license—such as showing us Artie arguing about Nietzschean justice with his professor. This is unlikely, since Artie is the Loeb figure, while it was Leopold who was the devotee of Nietzsche. Additionally, the remark that perhaps God caused the eyeglasses to fall at the crime scene was not made by Darrow, but by the prosecutor in the case. Even more noteworthy, while the film ends with the young men going to jail with no possibility of parole, in fact one was eventually paroled and went on to enjoy freedom for many years and the other never got paroled only because he was murdered in prison.

Nathan Leopold actually read the book upon which the film was based (published in 1956, by Meyer Levin) while still in prison, and said that the book made him “physically sick,” ashamed, and depressed. He said he felt “exposed stark-naked” and took issue with the notion that the murder was a kind of sex act.¹⁰ The film was released into theaters the year after he was released from prison. In the ultimate irony, Leopold sued the film's producers to block its distribution, on grounds of defamation and invasion of privacy. (The suit was eventually dismissed, of course.) This suggests that the film was uncomfortably close to the truth—if so, Leopold's suit was an unintended complement to the film's power.

In sum, the actual Leopold and Loeb case, together with the movies made about it, served to give many ordinary Americans a view of Nietzsche's egoist philosophy that was very negative. A student of that philosophy may turn into a self-styled superman who is a smug, arrogant psychopath, killing just to show off. In reality, the murderous boys misunderstood Nietzsche's views on the over-man morality. Yes, he rejects Christian morality as being herd morality, and venerates the over-man together with his striving for creative success. The over-man is thus going to deal with others

¹⁰ See “In Nathan Leopold's Own Words,” accessed online at: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/leoploeb/LEO_LEOW.HTM.

instrumentally, because “he is consumed by his work, his responsibilities, his projects.”¹¹ But of course Nietzsche did not thereby advocate killing simply in order to display superiority, though it is an open question whether the over-man’s “instrumental use” of others could ever take the form of actual murder. In any case, the next film under review captures more accurately the notion of the over-man using others instrumentally.

b. *The Moon and Sixpence*

The second film I will discuss seems to offer a different and more subtle take on the concept of the overman. It is the excellent film *The Moon and Sixpence*. The film was produced by David L. Loew, with screenplay and direction by Albert Lewin. Lewin’s screenplay was based on the eponymous 1916 book by W. Somerset Maugham, who was an extremely popular and prolific British writer.

The film, as outstanding as it is, got very little critical acclaim at the time—it earned only one Academy Award nomination (for Best Music Score). I suspect that this is due to the fact that the film was released during the toughest part of World War II, and the lead character is an egoist, which was out of tune with the “we’re in this together” war spirit of the time.

The story is based very loosely on the life of the French artist Paul Gauguin, founder of the Primitivism school of art. One of the two main protagonists in the film is Geoffrey Wolfe, the fictional counterpart of Maugham (played with urbane sophistication by Herbert Marshall). The other is the character meant to be the fictional counterpart of Gauguin, Charles Strickland (acted impeccably by George Sanders).

Wolfe is a writer who is introduced to the Strickland family, by invitation of Mrs. Strickland (played well by Molly Lamont). As a good writer is wont to do, Wolfe observes the people at the Stricklands’ dinner party. He notes that Strickland seemed ill at ease and essentially detached from the guests. Talking with the man, he seems absolutely drab—an only moderately successful stock broker with little conversational skills.

Not long afterward, Wolfe is surprised when Mrs. Strickland asks for his help. She tells him that her husband has abandoned her, his family, and his career to move to Paris with some woman. Mrs. Strickland asks Wolfe to go to Paris to tell her husband that she will not grant him a divorce, and she wants to reconcile with him. Wolfe agrees to go.

When Wolfe gets to Paris and meets with Strickland, however, he is surprised in several ways. To begin with, Strickland is by no means a dull, quiet man, but a forceful, intelligent, and acerbic one. Moreover, Strickland didn’t run off with a woman; indeed, he laughs uproariously at the idea. No, he left his family and came to Paris—to *paint!* He is living in abject poverty as a struggling artist, though he seems quite indifferent to his surroundings.

Strickland turns out to be a thoroughgoing egoist. He is completely without guilt, shame, or remorse about leaving his family. He tells Wolfe that

¹¹ See “Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Philosophy.”

he has not the slightest inclination to return home, that his children will be fine, and his wife can just file for divorce. Strickland slyly suggests that she will, because while a woman can forgive a man leaving her for another woman, she can't forgive him for leaving her for his work. The only self-justification he offers is a simple one: he just *has* to paint. Wolfe is clearly appalled, but intrigued, by this new Strickland.

Two quick asides are worth making here. First, Maugham in his novel takes a more observational than judgmental position regarding the characters. But Wolfe, while he certainly has an issue with Strickland's moral worldview, is nonetheless intrigued by it. This fascination is what drives Wolfe to follow Strickland's career to the end.

Second, there is a subtext of strange misogyny on the part of Strickland. When he goes to see a woman, he "takes his whip," to use Nietzsche's phrase. This misogyny informs Strickland's relations with the female characters throughout the film, and it seems clearly to be Maugham's take on some of Nietzsche's writings. Specifically, the full quotation is: "Thou goest to women? Do not forget thy whip!"¹²

The passage, taken on its face, is flatly demeaning toward women. In the passage, Zarathustra recounts meeting an elderly woman, who tells him that he has talked *to* women (presumably, about under-man and super-man), but not *about* them. He replies that women are riddles with only one solution—pregnancy. To women, he says, men exist as tools to enable women to have children. To men, he avers, women exist as "dangerous playthings." Men should be trained for war, and women as recreation for men. Women should dream of giving birth to the super-man. The old woman then tells Zarathustra that he is right about women, and she offers him a "little truth"—the quotation about the whip—which again on its face seems to indicate that women either want or need to be dominated.

Whether this reading of Nietzsche's passage reflects accurately his perspective is open to dispute. However, it certainly seems to describe accurately Strickland's attitude toward them, as the film further reveals.

Returning to the film, after a period of a few years, Wolfe is back in Paris. He is visiting an interesting character, Dirk Stroeve (intriguingly portrayed by Steven Geray). Stroeve is Wolfe's friend, a modestly successful if essentially untalented painter, but one who can recognize genius in other painters. He is also, I would suggest, a kind of exaggerated portrayal—almost a parody—of a meek, forgiving Christian man of compassion. The movie shows him to be a virtual doormat, completely dominated by Strickland. Wolfe asks Stroeve whether he has ever heard of Strickland, and Stroeve immediately describes Strickland as a genius, even though, unlike Stroeve, Strickland sells nothing and ekes out a living doing menial labor. Stroeve's wife Blanche (nicely acted by a rather dour Doris Dudley) expresses visceral

¹² Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Discourses," sec. 18.

hatred of Strickland. We immediately wonder why, since she hardly knows the man.

Over Christmas, Stroeve and Wolfe visit Strickland, and find him near death from some unidentified disease (which we suppose is brought on by overwork and poverty), and Stroeve—eager to comfort the afflicted and resurrect the near-dead—manages to convince Blanche to allow him into their home (by striking a rather low blow, as we discover later). Stroeve asks her rhetorically if she hasn't been rescued by a forgiving person. She gives in with evident trepidation.

Strickland more than recovers: he comes to dominate, by exuding his will to power, rather like a feral feline exuding pheromones. After just a few weeks, he is so well recovered—with Blanche's surprisingly solicitous support—that he takes over Stroeve's home, even kicking the artist out of his own studio. Stroeve at this point tells Strickland to leave, but to Stroeve's shock, Blanche announces that she is leaving with Strickland. Stroeve is devastated.

We now realize why Blanche at first expressed loathing for Strickland, then resisted giving him shelter, but then started devotedly taking care of him, finally leaving with him when he was well. She knew from the moment she met Strickland that she was profoundly sexually attracted to him, and didn't want him around precisely because she knew that she would be seduced by him. When Stroeve manipulated her into letting Strickland move in, she found the temptation irresistible. She couldn't resist going with the strong, dominant, ruthless, and handsome genius, over the weak, submissive, overly compassionate, and silly-looking mediocrity. To this outrage, Stroeve at first responds by trying to choke Strickland, who easily wards him off. After a brief period of time, Stroeve turns his other cheek: he tells his wife that he cannot bear to see her live like this, so he will leave, turning the apartment over to his unfaithful wife and treacherous friend.

Wolfe runs into Blanche and Strickland at a restaurant, and they seem like an ordinary couple, but he later hears that Blanche has committed suicide after she was dumped by Strickland. Filled with outrage, Wolfe visits Strickland at his small studio. Strickland first shows him some of his pictures, to which Wolfe (narrating to us) thinks, "The paintings had power, and they gave me an emotion I could not analyze."

Wolfe then engages Strickland in a fascinating dialogue:

Wolfe: I sense a prodigious effort in your work. You're like a tormented spirit trying to free itself.

Strickland: You're a dreadful sentimentalist.

Wolfe: I don't know a great deal about painting—I confess I was interested in seeing your pictures mainly because I thought they might give me a clue to your character.

Strickland: You must write really bad novels—I must read one sometime.

When Wolfe then rebukes him for first “taking” Blanche and then leaving her, Strickland tells Wolfe that he has no remorse. Strickland adds that Stroeve (an “absurd little man”) enjoys doing things for others and that Blanche—despite outward appearances—was never happy with Stroeve. Stroeve had “rescued” her after she tried to commit suicide. She did this because she had been fired as a maid for a wealthy family when she had an affair with one of the sons. Strickland acerbically adds, “A woman can forgive a man for the harm he does her, but never for the sacrifices he makes on her behalf.”

After noting that he never wanted Blanche to come along with him—he took her only because he was mildly physically interested in her, and needed a model to study the female form—Strickland makes more provocative claims about the matter. First, “Love is a disease, it’s weakness. I can’t overcome my desire, but it interferes with my work.” And, Strickland adds, “Women have small minds. They want to possess men.”

These comments clearly upset Wolfe, which leads to a revealing exchange:

Wolfe: You’re inhuman . . .

Strickland: Can you honestly say that you care whether Blanche Stroeve is alive or dead?

(Tellingly, Wolfe is silent).

Strickland: You haven’t the courage of your convictions. Life has no value. Blanche didn’t commit suicide because I left her but because she was a foolish and unbalanced woman.

However, Wolfe remains unconvinced by this. He says to this overman who seeks to rise “above” the herd morality, “Do you think it possible for any man to disregard others completely? When you are ill and tired and old, you’ll come crawling back to the herd looking for sympathy!” Strickland tells Wolfe that he is going to find an island where the sun is hot and the colors strong. Wolfe then leaves.

Strickland is also briefly visited by Stroeve. He gives Stroeve the nude he did of Blanche, saying that it is of no use anymore—Strickland has learned all he needed to from her (and it) of the female form. Stroeve, ever the follower of slave morality, forgives Strickland and even invites him to his father’s house, to live simply and humbly—his father being just (what else?) a carpenter.

Years pass again, and Wolfe is on a visit to Tahiti. All of the scenes in Tahiti, by the way, are done in tinted black and white, giving this part of the film a bright, golden glow—much different from the stark black-and-white appearance of London and Paris.

Wolfe asks an old friend, Captain Nichols (Eric Blore) about Strickland. Nichols introduces Wolfe to Nichol’s friend Tiare Johnson (Florence Bates). Wolfe learns that in the years after leaving Paris, Strickland met (through Tiare) a beautiful native girl named Ata (Elena Verdugo). We find out through flashbacks that he married the girl (after warning her that he

will beat her, to which she replies that she would regard it as a sign of love). They lived happily for some time on her property, where he painted all he wanted, but then Strickland becomes ill. The local doctor, Dr. Coutras (Albert Basserman), is summoned; he sees at once that Strickland has leprosy and bluntly informs him of the diagnosis.

Two years later, Coutras is summoned once again by Ata, and he finds their house in disrepair, with Strickland—who had been blind for the last year—now dead. Covering his nose with a handkerchief (because of the sickening sweet odor that lepers with advanced disease give off), he is dazzled. We see (now in Technicolor) that Strickland created a masterpiece—paintings on all of the walls that represent the human condition, from early innocence to later corruption. Coutras and Ata bury Strickland, whereupon Ata burns the house to the ground, carrying out Strickland's last wish.

The film ends with Wolfe observing, "Strickland created a masterpiece; and then, in pride and contempt, he destroyed it. But in his last great paintings, he achieved what he wanted. His destiny was fulfilled. His life was complete."

This film gives us a picture of the overman as an artist totally focused on his creative work. He hurts others not because (like Artie Strauss) he desires to, but because he needs to create, and in his view human love of any sort—filial, fraternal, or erotic—just impedes that creative process. He will use others, and not deny or disguise what he is doing, while he exercises his genius. However, he is certainly no sybarite, that is, he is not a hedonist seeking pleasure. He is willing to endure real hardship and privation to carry out his work. Strickland's genius becomes manifest to Wolfe (and us) only slowly, but we finally see that it is profound.

In the end, however, we can conclude that Wolfe/Maugham judges the artist Strickland negatively. This is implicit in the very title of the film, for it comes from a Cockney expression describing a man being so focused on the heavens that he steps over something important at his feet. The suggestion is that Strickland was so focused on creating great art that he ignored the human relationships which are of ultimate worth. We see this point explicitly in the closing frame of the movie, which displays the message:

Such was Strickland. He trod roughshod over his obligation as husband and father, over the rights and sensibilities of those who befriended him.

Neither the skill of his brush nor the beauty of his canvas could hide the ugliness of his life, an ugliness that finally destroyed him.

I doubt that Nietzsche would see things this way.

3. Final Thoughts

I hope that, in this series of reviews, I have provided some persuasive reasons to indicate that a historically important and often dismissed ethical

perspective, namely, egoism, informs a great many films—far more than I have discussed.

We have seen that the egoist perspective gets a reasonably neutral examination in some films, especially in World War II prisoner-of-war films where the characters are seen as trying to survive in a harsh environment. We also reviewed two films wherein the egoist characters are viewed as morally bad or even profoundly evil. And we have examined a couple of films that reflect more of a Nietzschean perspective, one clearly negative with the other more ambivalent.

I have touched only the surface of this rich area of cinematic art. Other types of films depict egoist characters as central forces that call out for exploration. These include movies about either powerful or evil business figures as well as gangster films, which I hope to explore in the future.

