



CHAPTER I

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

A. Maugham's Position in the Literary World

W. Somerset Maugham, a famous contemporary English writer, who wrote a number of novels, short stories, plays, and travel books based on his experiences in the South Seas, the Malay Archipelago and the Far East, was a controversial figure. He was labelled a "popular" writer and thus was not considered a literary man by many critics who called him "brutal," "flippant," "cynical," "competent," and "superficial."¹

But many other critics thought highly of him. Frank Swinnerton² in his essay "Somerset Maugham as a Writer" expressed the belief that Maugham was considered flippant because he concerned himself with "the follies of individuals" whereas other so-called "serious" writers such as Shaw, Galsworthy and Wells dealt with "society" and "faults in its structure."³ Swinnerton also thought that Maugham's love of lucidity prevented him from analysing his characters; he presented them in action instead. This "quality of detachment" he felt could not be understood by the young reader until much later.⁴

To defend Maugham against the accusation of being "superficial," Glenway Prescott⁵ in "Maugham and Fostering" said,

He is the most serious of men, seeking the general truth in all things, holding himself responsible for his every belief or disbelief, never fooling himself or others, thinking hard. It would be odd indeed if his production of books, even unpretentious stories, were as light-weight as the common estimation has it.⁶

In "The Gentlemen from Cap Ferrat," Klaus W. Jones⁷ admitted that Maugham was at times cynical but "it is hard for many to reconcile his so-called, 'brutality' with the kindly, charitable, humane man he actually is."⁸

St. John Ervine⁹ in "Maugham the Playwright" did not think that Maugham was "competent" but he called Maugham "a great craftsman" and "a born story-teller" and believed that Maugham's position in the English literary world was "secure and high."¹⁰ Glenway Wescott also agreed with Ervine. Wescott called Maugham the "dean of novelists writing in English at present [1959]"¹¹ who had increasing influence on younger writers. Wescott believed that Maugham's numerous masterpieces were better than those of many contemporary writers and therefore would survive.¹² "He is not a saint or a sage or a hero; only a true and greatly accomplished literary artist."¹³

Longevity played an important part in making Maugham a celebrity. Frank Swinnerton in "Somerset Maugham as a Writer" makes a point of the enormous fame and popularity Maugham gained by living such a long life.

His longevity, at which we all rejoice, has been a great help to Mr. Maugham's reputation. If he had been taken from us untimely we might even now be

lamenting the critical blindness of several generations; whereas the truth is that Mr. Maugham has passed into old age amid the cheers of youth and the happy envy of his contemporaries.¹⁴

This is ironical in view of what Maugham himself sarcastically wrote in Cakes and Ale (1930) about the old writer:

...what the critics wrote about Edward Driffield was eye-wash. His outstanding merit was not the realism that gave vigour to his work, nor the beauty that informed it, nor his graphic portraits of seafaring men, nor his poetic descriptions of salty marshes, of storm and calm and of nestling hamlets; it was his longevity.¹⁵

When the same thing happened to Maugham, he could not help expressing his surprise and said that if he had died at the age of sixty nobody would have been interested in him because he received the greatest honour after he had stopped writing anything outstanding. Characteristically, Maugham compared himself to a singer or an actor who could no longer sing or memorize his part.¹⁶

Be that as it may, Maugham's long life enabled him to produce a large number of works — novels, short stories, plays, travel books, and critical essays — all of which have helped to establish him as an eminent man of letters.

Usually, it is easier to understand a writer if one understands the man. This is perhaps truer in Maugham's case than in the case of many other writers, for Maugham's life and works are very closely interrelated. He himself said,

In one way and another I have used in my writings whatever has happened to me in the course of my life. Sometimes an experience I have had has served as a theme and I have invented a series of incidents to illustrate it.... Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other!

B. Biography

W. Somerset Maugham's Irish ancestors were wealthy farmers and officials in Westmoreland in England. His grandfather, Robert Armand Maugham, became a famous lawyer who published many books on law and was the proprietor and editor of the Legal Observer for over twenty-five years. He also helped to establish the Incorporated Law Society whose members, in appreciation, made a subscription of \$600 and offered him an ornate silver tea service as a testimonial when he retired in 1856, six years before he died. His son, Robert Armand Maugham, Junior, who was also a lawyer although not so famous, was a solicitor to the British Embassy in Paris. There, he married an extremely beautiful young lady, twenty years younger than he. She was the daughter of a military officer stationed in India. After her father's death, she and her mother settled in Paris where the mother supported herself and her daughter by writing sensational French novels and composing popular music.

William Somerset Maugham, born in Paris on January 25, 1874, was one of the six sons of Robert Armand Maugham. He probably inherited the love of travel, art, literature

and the exotic from his father who had visited Asia Minor and Africa and had a big library at his house on the Avenue d'Antin where he entertained celebrated French writers and politicians; among his close friends were Prosper Mérimée and Gustave Doré.

After long illness, William's mother died of tuberculosis of the lungs in 1882 when William was eight. William who had never learned his native tongue until then was taken out of the French school which he was attending and put in the charge of an English clergyman in the British Embassy. Young William had to read criminal news in the Standard for practice. Sometimes this frightened him completely, for he was only a little boy.

The fact that Maughan began to learn English at the age of eight and that he had no one to guide him made it more understandable when he later said that he could write dialogue with ease but he had to struggle hard to finish even a piece of description.¹⁸ It was because he was skilful in writing dialogue that he preferred to write drama.

In 1884, two years after his mother's death, his father died of cancer of the stomach. He was then sent to live with his father's brother, Henry Macdonald Maughan, the Vicar of Whitstable in Kent, England. The Vicar himself could never feel at ease with William, but the Vicar's devoted German wife was kind to this shy, unhappy and sickly

boy who had contracted tuberculosis from his mother.

Maughan depicted his uncle and aunt in both Cakes and Ale and Of Human Bondage.

At the age of thirteen, William entered a preparatory school at Canterbury, an annex to King's School, a school for boys of noble families. He was very unhappy at this school. In The Sunning Up, he wrote:

I had many disabilities. I was small; I had endurance but little physical strength; I stammered; I was shy; I had poor health. I had no facility for games, which play so great a part in the normal life of Englishmen; and I had, whether for any of these reasons or from nature I do not know, an instinctive shrinking from my fellow men that has made it difficult for me to enter into any familiarity with them.¹⁹

As he stammered badly, he was always bullied and tortured by both the boys and the masters.

When he finished the lower forms, he was ill with consumption and was sent to the South of France where he stayed until he recovered. Upon his return, he could not go on studying in the same school. Therefore, he persuaded his uncle to send him to Germany. He spent a year with a family in Heidelberg where he enjoyed both the beauty of the Rhine Valley and his freedom. It was in Heidelberg that he was first introduced to art, poetry and drama, and, as a result, made up his mind to become a writer. But he lacked knowledge of life. To get this he at first thought of becoming a lawyer like his paternal grandfather or a clergyman like his paternal uncle, but he knew that he could not succeed

because he stuttered. Finally, he decided to study medicine. Consequently, he entered St. Thomas's Medical School in 1892. But all the time that he was studying medicine he read as much English and European literature, history, philosophy and science as he could and made notes on ideas for novels, short stories, and plays. He was not a typical medical student. He did not take part in many social activities and made few friends at the hospital. Instead of staying with medical students, he shared a house with young writers, musicians and artists. He looked at his landlady, an admirable woman with "common sense and a Cockney humour"²⁰ from the point of view of a writer. Later he described her in his novel Cakes and Ale.

Maughan began to be more interested in his work when he became a clerk in the Out Patients' Department where he came into close contact with the miseries of the poor and with "life in the raw" as he called it. He later said that his medical training had taught him much about man's nature and that it was a useful experience for him as a writer.²¹ In fact, as a result of this experience, he wrote Life of Lambeth, his only novel of the slums, which was published in 1897. It was unexpectedly successful and it eventually resulted in his abandoning his medical career. In 1898, he graduated and became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal

College of Physicians, but he never practised medicine. Using the small fortune bequeathed to him by his uncle in 1897, he set out to do as he pleased.

The year of his graduation he published The Making of a Saint, his second — and only historical — novel. Unlike his first book, Liza of Lambeth, it was received with indifference. It was a romance with the setting of the Italian Renaissance and failed because of his inability to write romantic novels.

Maugham, then, desired to write plays but, as his first few plays had been rejected, he realized that he had better establish himself as a novelist first so that he could prepare for a playwrighting career. He, therefore, read a great deal and, to gather materials, visited France, Germany, Italy and Spain. He was so fascinated by Seville that he revisited it many times.

In 1899, Orientalisms, his first volume of short stories, appeared. Two of the stories took place in Spain.

The Hero, published in 1901, was the result of his revisit to Kent in 1900. It was a satire suggested by the Boer War. It did not make any impression on the public.

Mrs. Craddock, one of his best novels, was published in 1902. Although it was not a financial success, it was important because it called the attention of critics to Maugham.

His first play, A Man of Honour, was produced by the Stago Society in 1903. It was not a commercial success but it proved that a career as a dramatist was within reach. After its production, Maugham lived for a while in Montparnasse, Paris. He dined at the Chat Blanc on the rue d'Odesca with a group of artists and writers. They discussed art, literature, and other subjects until late at night as recorded in The Magician and Of Human Bondage.

With the help of Lawrence Housman, Maugham published an annual magazine, The Venture, containing selections by many famous contemporary writers but the magazine was doomed to failure, for only the 1903 and 1904 issues ever appeared.

The failure, in 1904, of his experimental novel, The Merry-go-Round, which was concerned with a limited number of characters, disappointed him very much.

In 1905 he published The Land of the Blessed Virgin, his first travel sketches. This was the result of his frequent visits to Spain. As it did not make money, Maugham had to publish a very short time later, in 1906, The Bishop's Apron, a novel adapted from his rejected comedy, Loaves and Fishes. It was a moderate success.

Presently, however, Maugham became a famous playwright. His plays, Lady Frederick (1907), Mrs. Dot (1908), Jack Straw (1908) and The Explorer (1908), proved successful productions. He had established himself as a dramatist

as he had desired. He felt relieved and made up his mind to devote his life to writing plays. His plays were popular in England, America and Europe but the critics did not give them favorable reviews. They thought Maugham's plays "cheap and trivial."²² Strangely enough, Maugham did not like going to see his own plays.

The fact is that, even in my lightest pieces, I had put in so much of myself that I was embarrassed to hear it disclosed to a crowd of people. Because they were words I had written myself they had for me an intimacy that I shrank from sharing with all and sundry.²³

Finding himself rich, Maugham bought a house in Mayfair and furnished it with old-fashioned furniture. He did not have to worry about money which he compared to "a sixth sense without which you could not make the most of the other five."²⁴

In 1908, Maugham published The Explorer, a novelization of the play, and The Magician, a horror story. Later he expressed his regret to have written such bad novels just to earn money.²⁵

In 1909, he wrote The Noble Spaniard, a short play; and two comedies, Penelope and Smith. They were commercially successful.

In 1910, there appeared two more plays, The Tenth Man and Landed Gentry.

In 1911, Loaves and Fishes, one of his best comedies which had been rejected, was produced but it failed because it was a satire on religion.

In 1914, The Land of Promise, a serious play, was successfully produced.

When the First World War broke out, Maugham became a dresser and later a driver in a Red Cross ambulance unit in France. Seeing men die like flies was a horrifying experience and in his novel, The Razor's Edge, he had his hero say, "The dead look so terribly dead when they're dead."²⁶

Subsequently, Maugham joined the Intelligence Department and worked as a secret agent in Geneva, Switzerland, for a year. During the war he wrote three plays: Caroline, Home and Beauty and Our Betters; and a novel, The Moon and Sixpence.

In 1915, he published his autobiographical novel, Of Human Bondage, which is considered by many critics a masterpiece. In the last chapter of the book, the hero Philip, decided to marry Sally who certainly was a perfect mate for him. This suggested that the author contemplated marriage. As a matter of fact in the following year he married Syrie Barnardo, the daughter of Dr. Thomas John Barnardo, a famous physician and philanthropist who established the Barnardo Homes for children. Syrie had previously divorced Sir Henry Wellcome, the founder of several research laboratories and museums. Maugham and Syrie had only one daughter named Liza. The marriage ended in divorce in 1929.

In 1916, Maugham visited the United States for the first time to see his play, Caroline, which was being produced in New York. Then, he also made a trip to the South Seas which had been in his imagination ever since he had read Robert Louis Stevenson's books. It was the first of his trips to far-off lands. The visit made a deep impression on him. He saw with his own eyes a new way of life different from anything he had ever seen before in Europe or America.

Later he was sent to Russia as a secret agent, but failed to carry out his appointed task. He returned to England in bad health, for his lungs were again affected and had to stay in a hospital in Wrodroch-on-Deo, Scotland, until he recovered. This gave him an opportunity to read, write and think at leisure. It was during this time that he wrote Hone and Beauty, a very amusing farce, which was produced in 1919. CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

In the same year that the war ended, Love in a Cottage, a comedy, was produced but it failed to attract an audience. In 1919 his plays, Caesar's Wife and Home and Beauty, were successfully produced, and The Moon and Sixpence, his novel based on Paul Gauguin's life and the author's experience in the South Seas, became a best seller. Then came two shocking and daring plays: The Unknown (1920) and The Circle (1921). The latter was considered a good

example of contemporary "high comedy."

During the 1920s Maugham visited the South Seas, Malaya, Burma, Thailand and China. He made use of any form of transport available, "from the donkey and bullock-cart to the tramp steamer and luxury liner." However, although he loved beauty in nature, he was more interested in the people he met than in the landscape. He filled his notebooks with daily observations which were later used as the materials for his works on the South Seas and the East.²⁷ In 1921 he published a collection of South Sea stories entitled The Trembling of a Leaf. Among these South Sea stories was "Rain" which had previously been written under the title "Miss Thompson." Because of its enormous success, Maugham began to write and publish many other short stories and travel sketches namely On a Chinese Screen (1922), sketches of various people and things he had seen during his tour in China; The Casuarina Tree (1926) in which was included "The Letter," a famous story drawn from real life and later made into a successful play; Ashenden (1927), stories based on the author's adventures as a secret agent in the Intelligence Department during the war; The First Person Singular (1931), stories with an English setting of which "Jane" and "The Creative Impulse" are the best; An King (1933), another book of stories about the East; and Coamopolitans (1936), a

collection of his magazine serials.

In 1923 Our Betters, one of his most famous plays, was produced but The Camel's Back, produced in 1924, was a failure. In 1927 his best comedy, The Constant Wife, was produced. Then, Maugham began to realize that his plays were becoming old-fashioned. Since he could not change his style of writing to conform to the new demands, he decided to give up the theatre. But he still had four more plays in mind and so released them in the order of what he considered their declining failure. Surprisingly though, The Sacred Flame (1929) became an unexpected success and the last three plays: The Breadwinner (1930), For Services Rendered (1932) and Shopboy (1933), were received with equal enthusiasm. The period of his playwriting thus came to a glorious end in 1933.

In 1925, Maugham published The Painted Veil which had previously appeared as a magazine serial. It was laid in Hong-Kong. Five years later Cakes and Ale, suggested by the life of Thomas Hardy who had just died, and The Gentleman in the Parlour, the best of his travel books, were published. The Narrow Corner, a novel with a South Sea setting, appeared in 1932. Don Fernando, a novel suggested by his visits to Spain, was published in 1935. In 1937 Theatre, a popular novel based on his experiences as a playwright, was published. In the following year

appeared The Sunning Up, his biographical book dealing with his reflections, thoughts, and philosophy of life.

When the Second World War broke out, Maugham served once again in the Intelligence Department in France. In 1940 Christmas Holiday, a novel based on his experiences in Paris, was published. Then, in the same year, he had to escape to London on one of the last boats carrying over five thousand refugees. During the journey, he told stories to many fascinated listeners. He, later, went to the United States under a special arrangement with the British Government and stayed there until 1946. During that time, he published four books: Up at the Villa (1941), a novel about an empire-builder; The Hour Before the Dawn (1942), a propaganda novel; The Razor's Edge (1944), a novel suggested by the author's experiences in the United States; and Then and Now (1946), based on the life of an Italian writer.

Also in 1940, after a successful operation to correct his stammer, he gained sufficient self-confidence to undertake public lectures and radio talks.

In 1947 Maugham set up a £17,000 trust fund to award yearly to an outstanding British writer under thirty-five, with at least one book published, the sum of £400 - 500 for the purposes of foreign travel. This showed his interest in young writers and his belief that travelling

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played an important part in a writer's development.

Maughan published a few more books including Catalina (1948), a religious satire with a Spanish setting, and A Writer's Notebook (1949), a collection of selected notes he had made since 1892.

From 1929 until his death on December 16, 1965, Maughan lived at St. Jean, Cap Ferrat in the South of France in Villa Mauresque, a beautiful and luxurious house which, for a long time, was decorated with masterpieces of many painters such as Monet, Renoir, Bogas, Rouault, Matisse, Utrillo, Sisley, Toulouse-Lautrec, Picasso, Graham Sutherland and an unusual picture by Gauguin. Later in his life he travelled a great deal. He visited Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and Italy in 1951; the Netherlands in 1952; and Greece, Turkey and Germany in 1954. He was greatly honoured wherever he went. He was made a Commander of the Legion of Honour and received honorary doctor's degrees in literature from both Oxford and Toulouse. But the highest honour of all was the Companion of Honour, conferred upon him by Queen Elizabeth II in 1954, when he was eighty years old.

For the sake of convenience, we will end the story of his life at this point.

C. Reasons for His Interest in the East and the South Sea Islands

As a writer Maugham was shrewd enough to realize that his works were successful when they were based on his own experience. He was, moreover, a very determined man with plans for his life as well as his profession. He thought that a novelist should use

...his experience of people and places, his apprehension of himself, his love and hate, his dearest thoughts, his passing fancies, to draw in one work after another a picture of life. It can never be more than a partial one, but if he is fortunate he will succeed in the end in doing something else; he will draw a complete picture of himself.²⁰

Since it was Maugham's own knowledge of life that he used in writing, he had to travel a great deal in order to gather materials for his books. He travelled to France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and America and used up all the materials he had collected during his trips in various novels, short stories and plays. In fact, Of Human Bondage contains every bit of the young author's experience, up to that time. As soon as he had written down the imagination that had filled his mind, he was not interested in the subject any more.

Near the end of Of Human Bondage, Maugham expressed his desire to get away in Philip's intention of applying for a job as a doctor on one of the cargo ships sailing to the East. Even though his pay would be low, he would

be able to enjoy his freedom and trips to the interior at each port of call. He longed for "tropical sunshine, and magic colour," and for "a teeming, mysterious, intense life."²⁹ But Philip sacrificed these desires to marriage.

Similarly Maugham who had now become a celebrated dramatist and thus had moved in high society for a long time, suddenly felt tired of the world around him. He wanted to get away, for a while, from the social activities he was taking part in, from the people he knew, from the secure and luxurious life he was leading, and, lastly, from his responsibilities.

...I hankered after a different mode of existence and new experiences. But I did not know where to turn for them. I thought of travelling. I was tired of the man I was, and it seemed to me that by a long journey to some far distant country I might renew myself.³⁰

The idea of renewing himself as a result of his travel is also expressed in The Gentleman in the Parlour in which he said that he liked travelling because he loved to go from place to place like a free man with no "ties, responsibilities and duties." Moreover, he enjoyed meeting new types of people who often proved vivid images for new books.

...I have a notion that by travel I can add to my personality and so change myself a little. I do not bring back from a journey quite the same self that I took.³¹

Maughan first visited the South Seas during World War I. He was then gathering materials for a biographical novel based on Paul Gauguin's life. Besides finding the "beauty and romance" which he expected to find there, he surprisingly "found a new self." He was not, however, very excited at seeing the beauty of the South Seas, for he had read about it in the works of Herman Melville and Pierre Loti. As a matter of fact, he was not much interested in the East itself, but what impressed him most was the Westerners, especially the Englishmen, he met there. They were all kinds of odd people whom Maughan grouped together into types.

Few of them had culture. They had learnt life in a different school from mine and had come to different conclusions. They led it on a different plane; I could not...go on thinking mine a higher one. It was different. Their lives too formed themselves to the discerning eye into a pattern that had order and finally coherence.³²

Seeing a new way of life different from the one he had known in England, Maughan became more tolerant. As a writer, he was interested in the people he met during his journeys in the South Seas and in the Far East. Although he found them strange, they were interesting in that their characters revealed incalculable human nature. He did not feel shocked to see "evil" in them, but was curious to find out their motivation for an action which

was "an outrage to law and order." In creating such vicious characters, he found a way of expressing part of himself which was suppressed by morality. He said in The Moon and Sixpence,

I expect that Shakespeare devised Iago with a gusto which he never knew when, weaving moonbeams with his fancy, he imagined Desdemona. It may be that in his rogues the writer gratifies instincts deep-rooted in him, which the manners and customs of a civilised world have forced back to the mysterious recesses of the subconscious.³³

In the problem of "good" and "evil", Maugham was happy to show the "good" side of a rogue as he had observed it. Since such goodness "was surrounded by the darkness of sin" it seemed to be more luminous than when it was found in virtuous people. Thus, he was "willing enough to shrug a tolerant shoulder at their wickedness." In the same way, he was tickled to find some faults in the virtuous. His observation, consequently, assured him that "good" and "evil" could not be judged by the conventional standards.³⁴ In civilised situations, men are more or less the same, and thus uninteresting. It was in more natural surroundings that they revealed their natural selves. When Maugham came into contact with these people for the first time in the ship going from Honolulu to Pago-Pago on his way to Samoa, he began to invent stories based on them.

...the new scenes amid which I found myself excited my imagination. It was a very different life from any I had known, and I met people who were entirely new to my experience. I had always had a romantic notion of the South Seas, I had read of those magic islands in the books of Herman Melville, Pierre Loti and Robert Louis Stevenson, but what I saw was very different from what I had read. It was not nearly so romantic, but it was wonderful all the same, and one story after another occurred to me and was duly jotted down in brief in the book in which from day to day I described the persons and places I saw.³⁵

Thus, Maughan's period of writing about the East and the South Seas began.



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