



**SOMERSET
MAUGHAM**

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1

William Somerset Maugham.

W. Somerset Maugham was educated to be a doctor, made his fortune as a dramatist, and will probably be remembered as a novelist. He was born in eighteen seventy-four in Paris, where his father, Robert Osmond Maugham, was a counselor at the English Embassy. A fairly prominent solicitor, his father was responsible for the foundation of the Incorporated Society of Solicitors in England. Maugham spent his early childhood in Paris. Between the ages of ten and thirteen he lived in England for the first time as a student in King's School at ~~Canterbury~~ ^{Canterbury}. Subsequently, he studied in Germany at the University of Heidelberg. He is reported also to have studied painting in Paris. He served in the Secret Service in the World War. Ashenden is based on this.

It was his family's wish that he should become a Doctor, so he returned to England, and spent several years at Saint Thomas's Hospital in London, graduating with the degrees of M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P., but he has never practiced.

II.

His days of Saint Thomas were responsible, however, for his first novel, Liza of Lambeth (1897). The hospital is on the edge of Lambeth, a slum district which many Londoners consider worse than the famous Limehouse section, to the young medical student the cases that came to his attention were more interesting pathologically and psychologically than medically. Liza of Lambeth, dealing with the life he witnessed in Lambeth was a failure; it was still the Victorian era, and those who read the book were shocked, saying that its author had gone out of his way to label slum districts.

The Making of a Saint (1898), and The Hero (1901) which followed did not arouse much attention. Mr. Maugham's early life's ambition was to write for the stage and in 1902 his first play - in one act - was produced at Berlin in Germany, Schiffbrüchig. That year another novel, Mrs. Craddock, appeared with much greater success than any of the preceding. A Man of Honour, a play, followed in 1903; and The Merry-go-round, a novel in 1904. Lady Frederick (1907) was his next play, his first real success.

England had become conscious of the ability of this young writer and was particularly willing to give audience to his plays.

III.

About Cakes and Ale by Somerset Maugham you will hear a good deal of gossip. Rumor has it that this satirical novel is pointed at two well-known figures in English letters, one dead, the other living. Those who believe it call the book "savage." Aside from a natural curiosity I don't think the charge matters a bit. Whatever the aim may have been, this book is masterful in its terseness, its irony, and its power of characterization.

Three writers are involved in a story which deals with the literary landscapes of London and Kent: the narrator, Ashenden, a playwright and novelist of a sardonic turn of mind; Priffield, a novelist, recently deceased, who before his death had become 'The Grand Old Man of English Letters'; and thirdly, Alroy Kear, writer and lecturer, who amiably and always with his eye on the main clause, has prostituted what little genius he possessed.

The woman in the case is Rosie Druffield's first wife, mistress at one time to the narrator, as warm-hearted and generous as Nell Gwynne.

There are all the elements you need to know; to tell more is to destroy the suspense of a narrative whose subtlety is most tempting to follow.

The story, which is absorbing in itself, impinges hard upon the world of letters. Its pungent criticisms of writers real and fanciful, its deft deflation of literary pomposity, its wise comparison of the golden '90's and to-day - like the cold spray of a needle shower these penetrating observations of Mr. Maugham make the reader sensitive and stimulated. We are so often gullible and pretentious about our books to-day that a little cold water of this sort may make us up.

Under Maugham's cool and sardonic touch the book becomes exhilarating. Rosie, Ted Druffield, Lord George, and Ashenden are people you feel and will remember; and if you will give yourself pause before shelving the volume

you will observe how neat has been the design, how sharply cut the phrases, and how sparse the reflections which have gone into its making.

In 1915 Maugham published one of the great ironic novels of the century, his magnum opus, Of Human Bondage, which is ~~fundamentally~~ ^{fundamentally} despite certain discrepancies of detail - for example the club foot of the hero, Philip Carey - the story of the first 30 years of his life, including the whole period of the medical training. Although the critical reception of the novel was not enthusiastic in either Great Britain or the United States at first, Of Human Bondage is generally recognized to-day as "a modern classic."

Some people perhaps thought the book to be a little too modern, but educated people realize the true value of the book.

Having seen the movie myself, I believe I appreciate it more than if I had just read it. The movie had a lot of good points and bad ones, but the good ones outweighed the

others.

IV.

I liked Somerset Maugham's works alot. They were new and different. I enjoyed very much the new type of classic.

It is rather odd, or so it seems to me, that he is able to portray his thoughts in such pretty passages. He has an opinion of his own, in that he writes things that some authors are a little afraid to write.

As this is the modern age I believe we need modern classics; and Somerset Maugham would be a good author for these classics.

V.

In The Moon and Sixpence Somerset Maugham used his life as a theme. The Moon and Sixpence (1919) had immediate success. Always an inveterate traveler but never an aimless wanderer, the author had gone to Tahiti, seeking to discover the secret of the spell of the South Seas over the white man. The novel is based on the life of the artist, Paul Gauguin and while in Tahiti Mr. Maugham lived in the

artist cottage. The book was suppressed on that island because of the too accurate portraiture of Savina, the famous landlady of the Tiare Hotel and uncrowned queen of Tahiti.

Out of Maugham's travels in the East have come many of his books; including The Trembling of a Leaf (1921), a collection of short stories which contains "Rain" (originally called "Miss Thompson") later dramatized with such sensational success; On a Chinese Screen (1922) sketches of natives and Europeans; East of Suez (1922), the tragic drama of an idealistic English boy in the toils of Chinese marriage; The Painted Veil ('25) a novel; The Gentleman in the Parlour ('30), the record of a journey from Rangoon to Haiphong.

None of Maugham's plays approaches Human Bondage in stature, but no dramatic since Oscar Wilde has had such successes in the London theatre. He has given to the stage his wit, his shameless cynicism, his masterly craftsmanship, if nothing else. The Circle ('21), Our Betters ('23), The Constant Wife ('27), and

The Letter ('27) are among the best of his twenty-five or more plays.

During the World War Maugham served in the Secret Service, Ashenden or The British Agent ('28) is based on his experiences of that time.

Mr. Maugham married Miss Lyric Barnardo, an authority on interior decorating, daughter of the late Dr. Barnardo. They have one child, a girl. Villa Mauresque, their home at Cap Ferret, is one of the show places of the French Riviera, at once tropical and British, with its luxuriant gardens and terraces, and its marble swimming pool surrounded by cypresses and olive trees, five hundred feet above the Mediterranean.

Maugham is a serious man, "with the restless eye, the rather weatherbeaten youthfulness of a world roamer." He is deliberately reticent - "a man who makes his exquisite manners a shield between himself and the world." Burton Rascoe describes him in detail as "of medium height, heavy set, with a large head curving like a tilted question mark from the top of his high, slightly

serrated forehead. His skin is a yellowish olive; his nose is long, straight, highbridged, and his nostrils curved upward. His mouth is wide, thin-lipped, severe in line, and he has a protruding cleft chin which he mostly thrusts out with his head back. His hair is dark.

He writes from copious notes. No incident of his frequent journeyings from country to country is too trivial for him to record in his notebooks, along with the plots for stories and scenarios for plays, which accumulate so rapidly that it is not unusual for him to have his work planned ten years in advance. He has no fancy esthetics. "I look upon readableness as the highest merit that a novel can have," he writes. He believes in simple writings in a balanced form. "A novel should have an inner harmony and there is no reason why the reader should be deprived of the delight which he may obtain from a beautiful proportion." He admires Swift and has a great love for the paintings of El Greco.

Bibliography.

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World Book

Book of Living Authors

Readers Digest

English Literature Book

of Human Bondage

What about books of his? Which ones did you read?

Eileen Berniece McKelvey.