

“Somerset Maugham: a Conjuror of Short Stories”

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Abstract

Maugham can be aptly described as a consummate story teller. He told stories because he had been blessed with a narrative quality for refined story- telling and he had a gift for creating lively characters. The gallery of character sketches is wonderfully varied. The stories are told and the characters brought to life in prose that is unhurried, unstrained and unnoticeable. Besides his style has an informality, which makes for unimpeded reading. The diction used by him mostly informal. It can be aptly said that Maugham had reached the pinnacle of his art in the form of short stories. The expertly told tales with their twists and vividly drawn characters prove to be wonderfully entertaining. After going through the entire corpora of short stories produced by Maugham, one can say that he was a born short story writer, one of the most skilful and fertile ever to have practiced the art. He appeared to be able to conjure stories out of the thin air. His stories had a huge readership and they seemed to appeal to all classes of people. In most of his stories he appears less as a writer and more as a story teller.

The form of short story is a brief fictional prose narrative usually shorter than a novel dealing with only a few characters. It is therefore concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. It often encourages economy of setting and concise narrative. So the uniqueness of the form of short story lies in three related qualities, as it makes a single impression on the reader, it does so by concentrating on a crisis and it makes that crisis pivotal in a controlled plot. Therefore a good story has single theme which is well defined with a good plot. With a dramatic appeal, it is faithful to source. It needs to bear good

characterization that is appropriate for the listeners. Thus a good and well-presented story is usually successful in reaching its objective and remembered long after over others.

Likewise a good storytelling requires deep interaction between teller and hearer. The impact of an effective storytelling lies in reaching its listeners, holding the interest and crossing all age barriers. Adapting to the audiences is very important for effective storytelling, for the audience has a very important role to play. The storyteller needs to stimulate their senses so that they are able to use their imagination to feel, smell, touch, listen and visualize vivid pictures. Therefore it becomes very important that characters and setting of the story are as authentic as one knows real life people and places. Therefore it is the contact between the storyteller and listeners that make a story come to life. The art of storytelling also reflects the use of the story to paint word pictures, using the sound, rhythm and repetition of words. So it is necessary that the beginning of the story should set the stage, introduce the characters and at the same time keeping in mind not to alter the essential story line while adapting a story. At last it is essential that a storyteller should not lose the original flavor and essence of the story.

Somerset Maugham as a story writer learnt his craft from Maupassant and the same talent made him an unsurpassed story teller. He confesses to French influence on his work and acknowledges certain French writers, Maupassant in particular, as the master from whom he learnt much of his trade. Thus France is a recurring preoccupation with him especially in his writings. The setting of many of his stories are in France and his dialogues are in often in French, which is usually translated, phrase by phrase so that his less educated readers may not feel excluded. The French in turn have honored him the same way as they honor their own successful writers. While following the manner of Maupassant in handling plot, most of Maugham's stories have international surroundings and are told in clear and economical style with a cynical undertone. Another model was Chekhov, who taught him to rid his story of anything superfluous, to keep his description of nature brief, and to narrate the facts, leaving it to the reader to decide what should be done about them. Thus his informal style makes for unimpeded reading. The diction used by him is informal and in most of his stories he appears less as a writer and more as a talker. Maugham's stories are too universal in their themes of passion, jealousy, illusion, contempt and decay to remain forgotten for long. Besides, the expertly told tales with their twists and vividly drawn characters prove to be wonderfully entertaining.

In 1897 he left London for Capri in Italy, beginning a lifelong pattern of travel and storytelling that became the Maugham persona for millions of readers. Over the next 60 years, he

became one of the most successful writers of all time. In fact he can be considered one of the world's great storytellers. His sustained interest and attitude of mind towards medical profession certainly played its part in most of the stories. His world is rather too romantic in which his characters are too familiar. He is not pretentious in his writing which sets him apart from other short story writers. One can find professionalism pervading the manner in which Maugham adopts his stories. Often it seems the matter, the setting, themes and situations have been chosen with professional care to give the public what they want. Written in a meticulous structure, he writes the same old story in a raw and riveting way. While working as a doctor in the slums of London, he came into contact with less than reputable characters, some of which intrigued him. These initial experiences with colorful individuals seemed to be the origination for his interest in human nature. Through careful observation, Maugham's keen insight into human nature proves a most interesting topic choice. When possible, he leapt to explore those circumstances, hence his famed short stories compiled from his travels around the world. Maugham writes of his travels more than any other topic throughout his composition.

Because his writing gave him freedom to travel, Maugham was able to witness notoriously historical settings in his lifetime. Maugham states that his "short stories" are actually notes taken while traveling on particular instances and accounts of people that interested him. His intention was to revise his notes upon returning home, and to transform them into classical short stories with better narrative than originally found in his notes. When observing the notes, Maugham found they "had a vividness which I might easily lose if I tried to elaborate them." His notes stayed as they were and he took on the famed reputation for having a plain prose. Most transcribed in his short stories are these accounts of colonized areas in the Far East. India and Asia, colonized by Britain during the time of his travels, were lands filled with interesting people waiting for their story to be told. Through others' stories, he also wrote first-person narratives to make them interesting. And while each sole story was distinctive, two common threads united them all together: its capturer, Maugham, and foreign lands. Maugham was able to illustrate the setting of the early twentieth century in a way unlike any other author. In the writings, there is a dispassionate and systematic habit of observation shown by Maugham. The acquaintance which he had obtained through travel with a diversity of standards, manners and morals aptly served the clinical attitude of his writings. Over all most of his stories are polished gems. He thus manages to portray a complete, self-contained universe in each of the stories, with an economy of language that is astonishing.

Maugham's notable style was formed when he wrote for *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. He was required to integrate his stories into allotted space; therefore he had to write an interesting story with succinct language. This makes any writer more familiar with and ultimately superior in their craft. What the public got was a refined and pithy account of Maugham's scrupulous narratives. His "plain prose style", being bare in language, dated in setting, and having the common theme of human nature became a sure-tale sign of his work. Maugham's decision to keep his notes raw makes them a refreshing alternative to the embellished stories of his peers. His notes, or stories, resemble photographs in that they are snapshots of the setting. His style creates an unadulterated rapport with his readers. True entertainment lies within a story, and the means of telling it is merely taste. The purpose for some artists including Maugham's is to find the extraordinary in the everyday. Maugham goes on to explain that stories generally are seen as dull, to a writer, can be portrayed as intriguing. This is what makes a talented artist perfect for their work. They are able to observe minute details and make them apparent for those who cannot do this. It is not necessary for a story to contain the dramatic plot of all fictions, as Maugham has proven over the years.

The stories Maugham most liked to tell in his collections 'The Trembling of a Leaf' (1920), 'The Casuarina Tree' (1926), 'Ah King' (1933), 'Ashenden', 'First Person Singular' (1931), 'Cosmopolitan' (1936), 'The Mixture as Before' (1940), and 'Creature of Circumstance' (1947) were sparked by incidents that he had heard about or witnessed himself. According to him the stories that made up his collection 'Ashenden' (1928) were "on the whole a very truthful account of my experiences during the war when I was in the Secret Service." In his other collections, too, he depended on that confirmative grain of truth before he could let his imagination run. He felt "To know a thing actually happened gives it poignancy, touches a chord, which a piece of acknowledged fiction misses." Like many writers, he was not good at pure invention. In his most famous story, "Rain", Maugham did not even bother to change the name of the plump, pretty prostitute, Miss Thompson, whom he had met on the deck of a cruise ship from Honolulu. It is a tale of straight-laced missionary who became obsessed with reforming a prostitute. Before this Maugham, disguised as a reporter, worked for the British Intelligence in Russia during the Russian Revolution in 1917. His stuttering and poor health hindered his career in this field. He then set off with a friend on a series of travels to Eastern Asia, the Pacific Islands and Mexico. About "The Vessel of Wrath", he maintained: "all the people I have described in this story I met at one time or another." It has a comic theme and returns to Maugham's preoccupation with missionaries. It is a tale of love between a missionary and a drunken reprobate that has a most surprising ending. It deals with how humans draw foregone conclusions how people change for the better.

An entry in his notebook, describing a Resident in an outstation who took a bottle of whisky to bed every night, was the source of “Before the Party”. The story is set in Kent and goes out to Malaya for action. The frame goes back in time to Millicent’s courtship, marriage in Kent and finally closes the story in the present. A story he particularly liked, “The Alien Corn”, was based on a young man he knew who had made “a hash of his life”. It is one of his best stories and introduces one of his great snobs, Ferdy Rabenstein. Ferdy is a sophisticated cosmopolitan snob and in this story one gets a glimpse of a rich and cultivated Jewish family in the nineties. Wealth can be very wonderful and in Western society it is often at its best among Jews. Their ordinary behavior, the values they give to the arts, their whole approach to life is a study in the possibility of human perfection. The theory, which is not easy to put into a piece of creative-writing, has been worked out superbly by Maugham.

While “The Colonel’s Lady” incubated for many years on the back of an envelope, the story can be one of the best recipes against oblivion. It is based on a note he made in 1901, which appears in *A Writer’s Note Book*. There can be few better demonstrations of the art of the short story than a comparison of the variety of characters, scenes and situations which make the finished piece of work written forty years later. The best thing in this outstanding piece of craftsmanship is the character of the Colonel’s wife. The setting of the story is done in a country-side, twenty miles away from Sheffield, near London. The story has a theme of jealousy shown by the husband George Peregrine towards his wife Evie as he is unable to bear the success of his wife writing a book of poetry called ‘When Pyramids Decay’. Evie publishes her poetry without her husband’s knowledge. He can’t understand her or why everyone loves her writing. Towards the end of the story the reader might not understand the husband, but might understand his wife’s need to express her creativity in her own way, about that part of a life the husband is not aware of.

The anecdote that Maugham had heard when staying at the New York Ritz is well illustrated in the story “The Verger”, where he tells the story of the fall and rise of an illiterate church functionary, Albert Edward Forman, in a mere four pages. It is a very delightful story about the triumph of illiteracy over Establishment. It has narrative dimensions, element of surprise and satisfaction in the end. The story has a great range as the storyteller has drawn from all his travels and experiences to give his best. Three of his best stories “The Letter”, “Footprints in the Jungle”, “The Book-bag” were told to him straight. He came upon the incidents described in “The Letter” while on a visit to the Far East where he learned how Mrs Ethel Proudlock, wife of the acting head of the Victoria Institution in Kuala Lumpur, had shot dead on her veranda the manager of a tin-mine, not once but six times, after he tried to kiss her. According to Maugham, his feelings on the story were “I had nothing to do but make them

probable, coherent and dramatic.”The story is a sex story about a woman who shoots her lover out of jealousy. It is set in Singapore and a good deal appears to be made of it. Within this frame, the up-country story gradually appears. There is plenty of suspense in it and there is the usual figure in khaki shirt, khaki shorts and a battered jungle hat, the white man whose chief burden is his wife’s sex-life.

Maugham writes ordinarily, like a speaker in prose. He has a very few rivals regarding the authentic old-world pleasure he gave to the reader with the help of his words, characters, settings and scenes. Likewise, the story behind “Footprints in the Jungle” involving another murder, was given to him “word for word” one evening in a club in a town in Malaya. “I was shown two of the people concerned in it and, believe me, when I looked at them, knowing their story, I could hardly believe my eyes.” The rest, he maintained, were invented “by the accident of my happening upon persons here and there, who in themselves or from something I heard about them, suggested a theme that seemed suitable for a short story.”It is a memorable story and one among his group of superb stories dealing with the lives of British colonists in the Far East and typically concerned with the emotional toll exacted on the colonists by their isolation. The story is set in Malaya fictionally called Tarah Merah. At the beginning of the story even if one doesn’t have any idea regarding casuarinas trees, the following sentences will surely capture one’s imagination. The first two sentences of the story are, “There is no place in the world that has as much charm as Tarah Merah. It lies on the sea and the sandy shore and is fringed with casuarinas.”It begins with an ageing, charming Cartwright couple and planters themselves, who motor into the club so that their daughter can play tennis and they can enjoy a few hands of bridge. Then one is carried back to the murder story and returned to the placidity of their present lives. Actually Theo Cartwright and the wife of Mr.Bronson fall in love and she becomes pregnant by him. They then kill Bronson and in due course of time marry. The characters come to life and the atmosphere appears real within suitable environment. One reads the story with interest as it happens to be a detective and murder story.

The story of “The Book Bag” was told to him straight. It has a loquacious introduction which is again connected to the story. The narrator has a habit of carrying about with him on his Eastern travels, a big bag of books in order to be sure of having something to read when he is stranded. On this occasion his host jumps at the chance of something to read and chooses a book, life of Byron. That leads to the story, which is of incest. The characters, dialogues, details are expertly managed but the story is unpleasant. It is a little surprising that a man of the caliber of the narrator’s host should tell a casual guest a story like this against himself and his friends. Most of the short stories written by Maugham are not actually that short. Verbose

and detailed descriptions that precede the start of any action are characteristic of his style. First of all he introduces his personages, shows them in surroundings, in communication and then tells the whole story of their life. Only when Maugham is sure that one is acquainted with the personages then he goes into the details of the story. In the story “The Facts of Life” one is given a clear view not only of the main and acting character, but even of the narrator’s temper, habits and life story. It is one of his best stories, which has flawless fun in it. It has a London frame full of happiness and amusement. The boy in this story is going off to Monte Carlo to play tennis and the worried father gives him advice which the boy is unable to follow despite his good intentions. The father’s worries and hopes revolve around his son, goes on to play his role more than just a teller of son’s adventures. After one hears the advice of the father to his son regarding not to gamble, not to lend money to anyone and not to have anything to do with women, one starts to expect him to disobey it. As the story progresses, the boy makes enough money to buy himself a car and the father is still more worried about the conclusion his son may draw.

Maugham proves that even not very dynamic plots also can have a great influence on reader’s emotions and mind. The stories ‘The Outstation’ and ‘Mackintosh’ are on similar themes but are a great example of his power of characterization and story- telling. When two men of contrasting natures and incompatible temperament are put together in a situation of conflict from which there is no escape, then the only possible outcome is by one of them emerging victorious after the conquest of the other. And within each story he narrates episodes that force the reader to waver his sympathy from one character to the other. The plot is incidental and the closure of the story inconsequential. And Maugham makes the two stories end in utterly contrasting ways. It is rare to find any other writer who could have done this with such skill in the short story format. His characters have depth and shades of grey all over them. The reader’s sympathies waver from one to the other as they get drawn to the endearing characteristics of the men involved. ‘The Outstation’ is a simple tale of two men, who locked in bitter enmity, must nevertheless somehow get along in a remote British colonial outpost in post World War-1. Mr. Warburton is one of Maugham’s great snobs and his new assistant, Cooper is a crude bully. The incompatibility between both of them is built up by a series of incidents as time passes and finally the tragedy strikes. ‘Mackintosh’ on the other hand is a story that rests on his ability to sketch out the characters of the chief, Walter and his assistant, Mackintosh. Mackintosh feels a strange mix of envy, hatred and disrespect for his boss. Walter is a loudmouth, a sadist, ill-mannered, but not without a roguish charm and a skill for repartee. He rules over the natives with an iron hand, but he also looks out for them like a tiger does for his cubs. Maugham is simply marvelous in his creation of these two persons.

In the end Maugham can be aptly described as a consummate story teller. He told stories because he had been blessed with a narrative quality for refined story- telling and he had a gift for creating lively characters. The gallery of character sketches is wonderfully varied. Every one of the characters is recognizably real from the colonel's wife, Evie in 'The Colonel's Lady' to pretty prostitute, Miss Thompson, in 'Rain'. The stories are told and the characters brought to life in prose that is unhurried, unstrained and unnoticeable. Besides his style has an informality, which makes for unimpeded reading. The diction used by him mostly informal. It can be aptly said that Maugham had reached the pinnacle of his art in the form of short stories. The expertly told tales with their twists and vividly drawn characters prove to be wonderfully entertaining. After going through the entire corpora of short stories produced by Maugham, one can say that he was a born short story writer, one of the most skilful and fertile ever to have practiced the art. He appeared to be able to conjure stories out of the thin air. His stories had a huge readership and they seemed to appeal to all classes of people. In most of his stories he appears less as a writer and more as a story teller.

To Desmond MacCarthy, Maugham was "the English Maupassant"; to Cyril Connolly, who rated him the best short-story writer of the twentieth century, the Kipling of the Pacific. According to George Orwell one modern writer who has influenced him the most is Somerset Maugham, whom he admires immensely for his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills. About the form of a short story, he had definite ideas and he liked a story that fitted. Best of all he liked the sort of story he could write himself. It can be aptly said that he has reached the pinnacle of his art in the field of short stories. His contemporaries including D.H Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Henry James would have mastered in the field of writing, but none of them can lay claim to the territory of the post –colonial English Society as can Maugham. At the conclusion of his brief chapter on the stories of W. Somerset Maugham, reprinted in Archer's Book, Archie K. Loss says: "If he had written nothing else, his best short stories would guarantee him a place of note in English Literary history."

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