

W.S. MAUGHAM IN LITERARY CRITICISM

T.D. Kirillova

The article deals with the author's Ph.D. study of Maugham's novels on creative personalities. The section particularizes that its supervisor, a famous scientist A.A. Anixt, has played the title role in this research. In addition, innumerable estimations on Maugham's fictitious literary heritage are explored and appraised.

Key words: W.S. Maugham, decadence, kunstlerroman, realism, literary criticism.

My Ph. D. thesis dealt with "The Creative Personality in S. Maugham's Novels – "The Moon and Sixpence", "Cakes and Ale" and "Theatre". A famous scientist, Professor, D. S. Alexander Anikst (1910-1988), supervised it. His profound literary multilingual research, Shakespeare studies and brilliantly enlightening lectures at the Moscow Literary University are acknowledged, highly estimated by the scientific community both in Russia and abroad even now. The gentleman, a well-known high brow intellectual, was prejudicially blamed and officially punished for his "cosmopolitan" views by the soviet state. To him, his bright intellect and cherished memory, I owe all my unassertive attempts at literary criticism.

When such a known expert 'took' a person from Belarus, it meant you had to elaborate somewhat decent and new. First of all, in 1982 there was no thesis on W.S. Maugham's creations, as he was still a forbidden (1946 verdict on his plays) author in the USSR. Secondly, a language graduate knew nothing of foreign literature and had to study everything from Homer to Modernism along with Literature Theory at MSU. No Minsk Ph.D. passed exams mattered for a defense in front of the scientific jury in the capital.

As no internet existed, no plagiarizing or copying seemed lightly obtainable, all available texts happened to be in a couple of capital libraries. At the same time, I feel no envy for current postgraduate students: due to net, information abundance, it is improbable not to present borrowed views on the researched subject or someone's opinions without quotation marks as 'fresh', exceptional or scientifically novel. For instance, only one of literary critics T. J. Basset listed 361 sources in his "William Somerset Maugham: an Annotated Bibliography of Criticism" (2000), dated from 1967 to 1997[1]. Besides, my own preferences in reading lie with Modernism and Postmodernism, and these artists have scolded my researched author for his blunt "primitive" realism in style, with which they abundantly experiment even today.

Naturally, my thesis' first chapter was dedicated to Maugham's philosophic views (born Jan. 25, 1874, Paris, France – died Dec. 16, 1965, Nice), along with his enthusiasm for the ideas of the Nobel Prize winner Nietzsche (1900 –1944), Schopenhauer (1788 –1859) and Bergson (1859 – 1941), who also possessed the same

award. It is palpable, because the attentiveness is dire even today due to their influence on literary domain and cannot be overestimated. The philosophers, famed on the 19-20 century eve for their Decadence views on the exclusivity of creative efforts, are quite modern and innovative. They tackled artists as super humans and adorned creative personalities with special qualities, never possessed by ordinary people. A. Bergson generated a famous Intuition Theory, was known for perfect exercises in Style; F. Nietzsche was the Esthetic Immorality notion creator. A. Schopenhauer proclaimed Art Contemplation Laws. These Decadent traits characterize Maugham's literary endowment as the English novelist, playwright, and short-story writer; though they illustrate his artistic outlook only to some extent, as he has every so often been brand-named for his shrewd and contemptuous understanding of the human nature ills by contemporaries and the 21st century readers.

Maugham's skillful proficiency in *Kunstlerroman* tradition application is obvious. Invented by German Romantics in the beginning of the 19th century, this issue dominates the first chapter analysis. It portrays the Artist's growth to maturity, the critics commonly accept the *Kunstlerroman* as a popular literary genre. The perfect example of is James Joyce 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young man' (1916).

This literary form, in my opinion, has originated from German Romanticism. Such novels end on a note of arrogant commonplace life rejection and the artist's growth to maturity, in which the writer charts the course of an artist undergoing an evolution from nascent stirrings to full artistic voice. As we have already mentioned, the *kunstlerroman* traces its origins to the German Romantic tradition of the eighteenth – nineteenth century, when artists began to rebel against the confining rationalist structures, borne by the Enlightenment era. They were drawn to the freedom of Romanticism artistic expression. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the literary world's most influential thinkers, considered writing the means of personal contemplation. His 'Wilhelm Meisters Apprenticeship' (1795-1796) describes how the disillusioned title character becomes an artist and a playwright.

Summarizing, it should be mentioned, that the movement founded by the German Romantics spread to the 19th century English language fiction, to novelists and poets like Dickens and Lord Tennyson. The *kunstlerroman* generally reflects the moral battle of writers for their personal subjective objectivity. This motive is certainly connected with 'Ivory Towers, Sacred Forms' and 'Divided Selves'. The genre characterizes the formation of the artist, almost as much as the art he strives to create. In essence, the *kunsterroman* is often a therapeutic exercise in self-exploration for a writer. Maugham utilized this genre frequently and successfully within his long lifetime.

The thesis second chapter researches Maugham's 'The Moon and Sixpence', (1919) [2], an account of an unconventional artistic life, suggested by

post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin (1848- 1903), who himself implies complete flight from reality, full engrossment in Art and, certainly becomes a Nietzsche Hero for his story narrator. Commercially successful, but often discharged by the literary elite, the prominent British author nevertheless always maintained a balanced view of his own limitations. In “The Moon and Sixpence”, there is a scene, in which Dirk Stroeve, a painter and a storyteller, visits an art dealer, and inquires on the work of Charles Strickland, whose paintings he has persuaded the dealer to take on.

It is quite understandable, that according to the plot composition Stroeve is himself a mediocre painter of unashamedly commercial landscapes and peasant scenes, but unrepentant about his originality lack. ‘I don’t pretend to be a great painter,’ he says early on, ‘but I have something. I sell.’ Yet he distinguishes the Strickland’s work as genius. “Remember Monet, who could not get anyone to buy his pictures for a hundred francs. What are they worth now?” The dealer queries such logic. “There were a hundred as good painters as Monet, who couldn’t sell their pictures at that time and their pictures, are worth nothing still. How can one tell? Is merit enough to bring success?” Stroeve is infuriated. ‘How, then, will you recognize merit?’ He asks. ‘There is only one way – by success,’ the dealer replies. ‘Think of all the great artists of the past—Raphael, Michael Angelo, Ingres, Delacroix – they were all successful.’ [3, p. 86]

From Maugham’s point of view, Strickland’s zest for painting resembles an uncontrollable passion that has chosen him. ‘I wonder if I could write on a desert island, with the certainty that no eyes but mine would ever see what I had written,’ the narrator asks a rhetorical question, as he would never understand a person he, living in a cheap hotel, alone: and artists has his an explanation, ‘You blasted fool,’ he answers. ‘I tell you I’ve got to paint. I can’t help myself.’ [3, p. 121] Strickland is the embodiment of unadulterated artistic desire, which is unmotivated and pure. Literary criticism has always had many reservations, because the character of Strickland might be too sketchily drawn, but the author tells a crystal kunstlerroman story: how a mediocre stock broker at first turns into a rough-talking, utterly amoral brute and then miraculously into a genius. Nevertheless, by the end, the narrator, gazing upon one of Strickland’s late paintings, becomes transformed. He still cannot say what moves him about the picture, but he knows that it is great; its greatness is what changes him. Art is somewhat unidentified, enchanting, and mysterious. It is obvious to us, that even brilliant Maugham would never dare to determine its quintessence.

The third chapter analyzes two of Maugham’s novels – ‘Cakes and Ale’ (1930) [4] and ‘Theatre’ (1937) [5] in which the artists are unequivocally mediocre and therefore in full accord with reality. Both characters, painted as caricatures of definite people, undeniably represent the authors’ transformed in years attitude to creative temperaments. Mr. Driffield bears an outright resemblance either to Tomas Hardy or

to Hugh Walpole. The literary critics, having no idea of genuine art's meaning, look like vultures flock. The God allots no talent to them. The same concerns Mrs. Julia Lambert, a theatrical idol superstar of her generation. Hypocrisy is their major trait. Society also enjoys two-facedness in all conducts and manners, provided appearances were saved. The author satirizes literary circles of his time, the first wife Rosie; lively, active, a bit amoral is that skeleton in the cupboard, which should be hidden from snobbish rampant society at all costs. The man of letters precisely contrasts both wives, the divorced and existing hypocritical one.

It is common knowledge, that 'Cakes and ale, or the Skeleton in the Cupboard' is a characteristic Maugham's novel, where everything happens through bitter social satire. It is a masterfully structured tale, told in retrospect; it definitely accentuates his principle human morals relativity and prejudices. Its title comes from Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night' (1623), in which Sir Toby Belch, reprimands hypocritical Malvolio with the statement: 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no cakes and ale?' Sir Toby's question applies to anyone, who would silhouette the surroundings around themselves to appropriate narrow conduct code, in which joy and earthy pleasures are forgotten and forbidden. The novel offers a response to Sir Toby's question; Maugham, who sees these elements of life as vitally important, properly approves of a young man's joy and carnal passion. Those, who sublimate human nature along with pleasures for respectability and conformity to arbitrary social conduct, are not living at all. Initially, young petty snob Ashenden, Maugham's narrator, embraces the strictures of class-obsessed Victorian Britain, the country, doomed to observe class distinctions. The social satire in the novel centers on the contemporary literary society of the late 1920th, which is often shallow, self-serving, pretentious and subservient to fashion contemporary trends.

The same might concern Julia Lambert, the star of 'Theatre'. God has provided her with artistic talent. However, He completely forgot to grant her a human soul, adorned her a great many weaknesses and various sins. Possessing hard-heartedness, she is a ruthless mother, an ordinary talk to her son turns into meager performance as if she were playing Shakespeare's mothers as Julia uses direct quotations. Lust and adultery are the least of her misdoings. Of course, she is envious of her young colleagues and ready for treacherous steps. The hypocritical society, surrounding her, is the theatre, in which all people are never sincere actors, who all play roles. Thus, Maugham's icy irony turns into bitter satire.

His literary opponent Salina Hastings mentioned in her new biography "The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham" [8] a well-known fact, that the author was for much of his life "the most famous writer in the world". It is true that on one occasion he had four productions running simultaneously in London's West End. His novels were best sellers in both England and America, and have been adapted for films and

TV more than ninety times. Maugham's critical acclaim had been always more uneven than commercial success. The critic provides many examples of many negative reviews on Maugham's books and personal qualities. For instance, Dreiser advocated "Of Human Bondage," though the English critics, particularly the Bloomsbury literary élite, were largely blasé about Maugham. He paid them back in his fiction by invariably portraying critics, bitterly and hilariously, as opportunistic Philistines. J. Conrad wrote snidely of Maugham's first novel that the author "just looks on – and that is just what the overall reader prefers.' When he was praised, it was for his technical skill rather than for his psychological depth. "I do not know of any living writer who seems to have his work so much under control,' Evelyn Waugh once wrote. In a devastating piece on Maugham for this magazine in 1946, Edmund Wilson said, 'I have never been able to convince myself that he was anything but second-rate.' [8, pp. 345–347]

It is understandable, that such criticism seems to have carried a particular sting for Maugham, perhaps because it coincided precisely with his own self-deprecating assessments. In his autobiography, 'The Summing Up,' [6] published in 1938, when he was sixty-four, he explained, 'I discovered my limitations and it seemed to me that the only sensible thing was to aim at what excellence I could whiten them.' These limitations, as he saw them, included 'small power of imagination,' 'no lyrical quality,' and 'little gift of metaphor': 'I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought with pains I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed.' [6, p. 87].

Nevertheless, Maugham was right that his gift lay not in a striking style or in sweeping ambition, but in the raw powers of observation and the glittering precision that he brought to his moral dramas. 'It seemed to me that I could see a great many things that other people missed,' he once stated, with his characteristic self-irony. [7, p.132] The poverty and shattering conditions in London slums, the eccentric characters, populating remote colonial outposts of the South Pacific, the treacherously hypocritical upper class, all populate his books. It is common knowledge, that Maugham set their stories sometimes virtually unaltered, narrating in personal singularly unemotional style. Must a true artist be a visionary in the manner of Charles Strickland, an originator constantly in the process of "making it new", or "making it real," however unfashionable, sometimes just as worthwhile"[5, p. 522]. In 'The Summing Up' (1938) [7] and 'A Writer's Notebook' (1949) [8] Maugham explains 'his philosophy of life as a resigned atheism and certain skepticism about the extent of man's innate goodness and intelligence; it is this that gives his work its astringent cynicism' [8, p. 72]

Furthermore, Maugham was both self-aware and canny enough to exploit the artistic conundrum of his reliance on the old technique. This question is central in 'The

Moon and Sixpence,' the novel that immediately followed 'Of Human Bondage.' [2] (Maugham drew the title from a reviewer's complaint that Philip Carey 'was so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence at his feet.') The nameless narrator is a writer who accepts his own style as behind the times. He compares himself to the once famous poet George Crabbe, who, following Alexander Pope, wrote 'moral stories in rhymed couplets.' Time went on, and 'the poets sang new songs,' but Crabbe continued in the same style. Now, the narrator says, a generation of new writers has arisen, and 'I am on the shelf. I will continue to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. But I should be thrice a fool if I did it for eight, but my own entertainment.' [2, p. 48].

From the start, Maugham approached writing as a profession, earning a living being his first priority. He had no illusions about his early work: a letter to his agent accompanying three short stories called one of them 'bad enough to suit anything.' He turned to playwriting, because it was lucrative, and because, as he later claimed, he found it easier 'to set down on paper the things people said than to construct a narrative.' Maugham is again selling his talent short: it was not every writer who could sit down and dash off a top-rate comedy within a month. 'His acute intelligence enabled him to gauge what his audiences wanted,' Hastings writes, and 'his expert craftsman's hand delivered it.' [7] And what the audiences wanted was the kind of witty, urbane society drama for which he became famous. However, after a remarkable run of eight hit plays – he eventually wrote more than two dozen – the novel pulled him back. Maugham began writing 'Of Human Bondage' in 1911; it was published in 1915. The ease, with which he had found success as a playwright, perhaps instilled in him the mistrust of purification facility that became a recurrent preoccupation in his novels.

His ego-character Philip has traded one form of bondage for another. After running through most of his savings supporting Mildred, he loses the rest of the stock exchange and has to give up his medical studies. Too proud to ask his friends for money, he pawns his clothes and is reduced to sleeping outdoors. 'He had heard people speak contemptuously of money: he wondered if they had ever tried to do without it,' he muses later. Once he has hit bottom, he has the revelation he has been longing for since he stopped believing in God: that life has no meaning other than what one makes of it. Now, at last, he feels free: 'Happiness mattered as little as pain. They came in, both of them, as all the other details of his life came in, to the elaboration of the design.' [8, p. 218]

'The importance of man to govern or restrain the emotions I call bondage, for a man who is under their control is not his own master,' Spinoza wrote in the section of his 'Ethics' from which Maugham drew the novel's title. Instead, a man like this is 'mastered by fortune, in whose power he is, so that he is often forced to follow the

worse, although he sees the better before him.' Philip is finally able to choose 'the better,' with his engagement to Sally, the wholesome daughter of a friend. However, he continues to distinguish between the 'affection' he feels for her and his 'love' for Mildred. In addition, the book's ending is deliberately unromantic. 'I'm so happy,' he tells Sally after she accepts his proposal. 'I want my lunch,' she replies. [10, p. 112]

A famous Spanish artist El Greco (1541- 1614), born Greek who had devised a new technique in painting to express the soul yearnings, one of Maugham characters describes him in the same way and this character appears in all major novels. Part of the fascination might recount to hearsays on El Greco's homosexuality. Definitely, the painter embodied precisely the artistic quality that Maugham felt lacking. 'Of Human Bondage' is a genuinely fictional and mightily moving novel, but it has far more in common, formally speaking, with a work of the previous generation like 'Jude the Obscure' than it does with the experimentalism and modernism of Virginia Woolf's 'The Voyage Out' or Maddox Ford's 'The Good Soldier,' both published the same year. [9, pp. 18–20]

By this time, Maugham had begun the habit of globetrotting that he was to continue into old age, and the final chapters of 'The Moon and Sixpence' draw heavily on his voyage to Tahiti, where he actually discovered a painting by Gauguin in a remote hut (and brought it home with him). Hastings notes, 'As a writer of fiction, Maugham was a realist: his imagination needed actual people and events to work on, and these his travels amply furnished.' Of course, this is not exactly the method of most "realists," who are usually more bothered about impersonating the everyday life than telling alternative stories. Maugham often failed the names of his characters. When his novel 'Cakes and Ale' appeared, in 1930, all of literary London recognized the protagonist of Alroy Kear – 'I could think of no one among my contemporaries who had achieved so considerable a position on so little talent,' the novel's narrator says – as a stand-in for Hugh Walpole, an acquaintance of Maugham's. The writer had to send a letter of apology to furious Walpole. Alroy Kear 'is made up of a dozen people and the greater part of him is myself,' Maugham wrote. 'There is more of me in him than of any writer I know.' [7, p. 129]

Of course, his fellow writers envied Maugham's popularity his somewhat clear, naturally written, forthright storytelling at which Maugham excelled. Today's best-selling authors are fond of realistic novels to prove that popularity never obstructs creative art. We believe that it is necessary to diagnose there was more to him than mere popularity. Four of Maugham's novels – 'Of Human Bondage,' 'Cakes and Ale,' 'The Moon and Sixpence,' and 'The Razor's Edge' – are classic. Furthermore, they are poles apart from each other His short stories are artistic masterpieces of composition, plot, style and ideas, drawn from Maugham's chilly, detached personality, his painful shyness, deep insecurity beneath cynic-

ism. 'My lack of imagination obliged me to set down quite straightforwardly what I had seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears.' – stated the writer. [8, p. 67]

The characters' hypocrisies help Maugham to bare society's fabrications and skeletons in the cupboard. The author, coming from upper-class nobility, exposes the fraudulences of his class and official religion. If so much of Maugham's fiction comes across today as brittle, arch, world-weary and heartless, it may be precisely because he devoted more energy to maintaining his own double standards. He tried to have it both ways, and as his stories so amply demonstrate, those who try to have it both ways rarely come to a happy end. Even today, Maugham is well read and popular with our contemporaries who adore interesting reading, and with those who appreciate good English novels as the source of artistic pleasure.

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