Summary Article: Maugham, W. Somerset


W. Somerset Maugham is perhaps best known as an accomplished writer of short stories in which craft outweighs formal innovation, yet, in one of the longest literary careers of any British writer, he was most notable for his endless capacity for self-reinvention. Commencing as a late Victorian writer of realist fiction concerning class and gender, Maugham also dabbled in the gothic and adventure romance. As an Edwardian he became one of the most popular playwrights of his generation. Growing weary of the limits imposed by conventional dramatic forms, he returned to fiction, publishing his greatest novel, Of Human Bondage (1915). His experiences during World War I and after took his writing in two further directions. Through his Ashenden short stories, relying on personal experience as an intelligence agent, he pioneered espionage fiction. Travels in the South Pacific and later East and Southeast Asia resulted in the exotic fiction for which he is best known. Yet we should also not forget that much of Maugham's fictional production in his later career is concerned with domestic issues, reflecting particularly on the world of Anglophone literary production and authorial celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Maugham's greatest fictional work is surely himself. Through thin fictionalization, autobiographical self-representation, destruction of documents, and outright disinformation, Maugham created himself as perhaps the quintessential cosmopolitan English man of letters, an image that has slowly been picked apart by scholars and biographers after his death in 1965.

Maugham's early childhood was unhappy. He was born in France of British parents in 1874, and orphaned at the age of 10. Sent to England to be cared for by an emotionally remote vicar uncle, Maugham found himself initially ridiculed by schoolmates because of his French accent. As a young man, he left England, audited classes at the University of Heidelberg, and then returned to study medicine in London. His most successful early fiction draws on autobiographical experience. Maugham's first novel, Liza of Lambeth (1897), is set in the slums of south London near St. Thomas' Hospital, the institution where he trained. Following the generic conventions of contemporary working-class fiction, the novel describes a young woman's affair with a married man, her pregnancy, miscarriage, and ultimate death through resultant septicemia. Mrs. Craddock, published in 1902, is set in rural Kent where Maugham spent his teenage years: in contrast to the misogyny of some of his later fiction, the novel is a sympathetic portrayal of a young middle-class woman, Bertha Leys, trapped in a marriage to a man who is not her intellectual equal. Maugham's habit of drawing on autobiographical sources is apparent even in non-realist works. The Magician (1908) is a novel in which a young woman is enslaved and killed by an occultist in diabolic attempts to create new forms of life. The novel draws on elements of gothic and science fiction in contemporary works by Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, and Bram Stoker. Its early scenes, however, are set in the bohemian milieu in early twentieth-century Paris, where Maugham resided from 1905 onward: the characters meet at a restaurant called the Chien Noir (Black Dog), which in reality was a meeting place on the Rue d'Odessa called the Chat Blanc (White Cat).
Maugham's success as a playwright in the early years of the twentieth century meant that his interest in fiction diminished. It revived in 1915 with the publication of *Of Human Bondage*, an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* based on a manuscript written some 15 years previously. The novel's protagonist, Philip Carey, resembles Maugham in many ways: he is an orphan raised by a clergyman uncle, who attends school at Tercanbury (a Hardyesque reversal of Canterbury, where Maugham attended the King's School), resides in Heidelberg and Paris, and studies medicine. Yet Maugham's attempt to re-script his own life to fit the narrative mode of the *Bildungsroman* is unconvincing. Philip gives up dreams of adventure and an exploitative and ultimately humiliating relationship with the working-class Mildred Rogers for middle-class domesticity, a career as a doctor, and marriage to the wholesome Sally Altheny. The novel's rushed comedic ending, however, cannot undo the fact that its disturbing power centers on Philip's relationship with Mildred. Mildred's androgyny, like that of Proust's Albertine Simonet, enables a coded representation of a homosexual relationship. Maugham married and had a daughter, but most of his emotional and sexual life was invested in relationships with men. In 1914, he met the American Gerald Haxton, and their turbulent relationship was to persist for three decades until Gerald's death in 1944.

It was with Gerald, indeed, that Maugham first traveled to the South Pacific in 1916, and Tahiti became the setting of part of the author's next novel, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919). The novel adapts the story of the French artist Paul Gauguin into that of Charles Strickland, an English stockbroker who rejects bourgeois respectability to become a painter in Paris and then departs to achieve artistic apotheosis and death in Tahiti, Maugham substituting the French painter's syphilis with Strickland's more socially acceptable leprosy. Its conclusion reverses that in *Of Human Bondage*, substituting Strickland's ultimate sacrifice in the name of artistic truth for Philip's choice of social conformity. Yet Maugham introduced a key element in *The Moon and Sixpence*: a complex, ironizing narrational strategy. The novel is not told by or focalized through Strickland; rather, it is recounted to its readers by a naive narrator whom we are encouraged to identify with Maugham himself. The narrator pursues Strickland, interrogating him, reconstructing his life retrospectively like “a biologist who from a single bone must reconstruct not only the appearance of an extinct animal, but its habits” (1919: 40). Such narrative strategies, involving a complex series of identifications and disavowals between protagonist, narrator, and author, are central to much of Maugham's later writing.

From the beginning of the 1920s until the middle of the 1930s, Maugham wrote a series of short stories, novels, and travelogues set in the South Pacific and Southeast and East Asia, which constitute his most important work. The South Pacific short story collection *The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921) was followed by two volumes on China: the travelogue *On a Chinese Screen* (1922), and the Hong Kong-centered novel *The Painted Veil* (1925). Maugham would also complete a further travelogue about a trip across mainland Southeast Asia, *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930b). His reputation as a writer about Asia, however, is ultimately founded on his writings on the Malayan Archipelago (present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore) in the short story collections *The Casuarina Tree* (1926) and *Ah King* (1933), and the novel *The Narrow Corner* (1932). Popular reception in Britain now views Maugham nostalgically as the chronicler of a vanished colonial order, yet this misunderstands the context of what he called his “exotic fiction.” Unlike Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, or E. M. Forster, Maugham did not engage in public debate concerning the merits of imperialism: his narratives do not exhibit Kipling's jingoism, Conrad's tortured simultaneous attraction to colonial adventure and horror at the realities of colonial governance, or Forster's acerbic critique of colonial inequalities. Maugham knew little of the countries he visited, and his accounts of them often rely on Orientalist literary traditions.
attributing little agency to non-European characters who are stereotypically presented. Yet in presenting a domestic colonialism with its attendant hypocrisies, Maugham did not so much celebrate empire as document its internal contradictions. In a manner similar to contemporaries working in psychology and ethnography, Maugham uses non-European societies as a foil to show the artificiality of what passed for colonial civilization: some of the force of this critique no doubt comes from the fact that his own sexuality was disavowed by discourses of respectable sexuality that underpinned the European civilizing mission.

Like *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham's Malayan fiction often exhibits complex narrational strategies. On one level, the texts often strive to contain transgression. Maugham makes much use of the framed narrative common to much colonial fiction. In a short story such as “Footprints in the Jungle,” one man listens to another give an account of a social scandal now sealed in the past: it is dug up, analyzed dispassionately, and, at the conclusion of the narrative, safely reinterred. At times, the fiction is also overmoralized. The ending of *The Painted Veil*, for example, in which the vagrant Kitty Fane learns the meaning of self-sacrifice in devotion to charitable work in plague-stricken China, is trite. Even in his more successful stories, indeed, Maugham follows colonial stereotypes in making European women the scapegoats for the hypocrisies of colonialism: a prime example of this is “The Letter.” Yet at times, as with *The Moon and Sixpence*, a series of filiations and identifications between framing and embedded narratives result in a play of meaning that the text strives to but cannot quite contain. At its most successful Maugham's short fiction and non-fiction moves toward modernism, leaving a reader with a disturbing sense of incompleteness through uncertain denouements. The Malayan stories, indeed, were to prove influential on contemporaries whose politics or cultural contexts were very different from Maugham's: the socialist and anti-imperialist George Orwell, or the exemplar of Shanghai modernist cosmopolitanism, Eileen Chang.

Maugham’s other fiction written from the 1920s to the late 1940s exhibits considerable variety in subject matter. *Cakes and Ale* (1930a) is set in London and the Kent of Maugham's youth. While critics and biographers have often seen the novel as a partial roman-a-clef containing fictionalized representations of novelists Hugh Walpole and Thomas Hardy, its central concerns are the manufacture of artistic celebrity and also the invention of biographical narratives that conceal as much as they reveal: both topics were dear to Maugham's heart. *The Razor's Edge* (1944), Maugham's most popular novel, returns to the theme of the decadence of Western civilization through the experiences of the young American Larry Darrell, who finds enlightenment in India. Both texts continue Maugham's habit of using complex narrative strategies, and elements of autobiography: the narrator of *The Razor's Edge*, for instance, is explicitly identified as Maugham himself.

Maugham was to continue writing until the 1960s, and his death in 1965 prompted a flurry of biographical studies and critical attention. His status as a popular writer who, in his own words, had a manufactured rather than natural talent, “incapable of those great, sustained flights that carry the author on broad pinions into a celestial sphere” (Maugham, 1938: 81), has led in the last few decades to relative critical neglect. Nevertheless, biographies and film adaptations of Maugham's works have proliferated, and his sales remain strong. Much scholarly work on Maugham has, however, been formalist in nature, and few major book-length critical studies have been published since 1990. Maugham’s elaborate performative identity, and the openness of his texts to queer and postcolonial reading strategies, however, suggest that re-evaluation may not be far away.

SEE ALSO: Colonial Fiction (BIF); Edwardian Fiction (BIF); Queer/Alternative Sexualities in Fiction (BIF);
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