

A Religious Mind behind S. Maugham's Urbane and Cynical Façade?

Â

In at least one edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica the articles on Somerset Maugham and Guy de Maupassant appear on the same page, which in some ways is a strangely pertinent coincidence. Both authors are acknowledged masters in the writing of "short stories". However, whereas less than one full column of print is devoted to Somerset Maugham, over two pages are accorded to the great French author. While column space may not pose an infallible guide as to the true importance of a matter under discussion, it is surely a pretty reliable measure of the esteem a writer enjoys in the minds of those representing informed academic opinion. Though Somerset Maugham is ubiquitously recognized as a rattling good storyteller, an excellent raconteur, he is rarely, if ever, placed in the top category among writers of short fiction, as are Guy de Maupassant, Hemingway or Mark Twain. Indeed, Maugham himself admitted to deserving no more than the position of somewhere near the top of second-league writers of fiction. One should not always take a writer's modesty at face value, especially in the case of Maugham, that master of disguise and adept conjuror in the art of drawing red herrings across the reader's path. One has in any case to be cautious when quoting authors on the subject of their own works.

The short story, being a very recent literary genre in historical terms, does not lend itself to assessments reached according to the categories and criteria of high brow literary criticism developed for the more established genres. As one critic, James Cochrane, once put it, the short story is an essentially "democratic" form of literature with which formal criticism cannot readily get to grips.

Certainly there is no universally applicable mould or minimal outline to be discerned in the domain of the short story. The scope of Maugham's works shows that clearly enough. His purview embraces the straight anecdote, elements of the detective story, elements reminiscent of Poe's tales of mystery and the imagination, social satire and penetrating examinations of people's motivations and moral character, some of which seem to be no less searching than those of J.B. Priestley or T.S. Eliot. It is dangerous, therefore, to make general judgements on Maugham on the basis of any one particular story. The overt moral of one story is contradicted by the overt moral of another. This possibility I consider later when comparing "Rain" with "The Vessel of Wrath".

Let us begin a closer study of individual stories with "The Verger". This story is basically an ironic anecdote with an exquisitely drawn characterization of an illiterate, somewhat obstinate, but uncannily astute verger getting on for retirement. After his dismissal from his post of verger occasioned by his refusing to learn how to read and write, he begins a career as a tobacconist, which subsequently proves so successful that he becomes a very wealthy man. As far as it goes, the story represents a superb achievement. I stress: as far as it goes. Here it is the scope of the writer's task rather than the skill of the author in achieving that task that denies the artist an opportunity to prove his greatness, or so one might argue.

Maugham is also at least partly to blame, if 'blame' is the word, for the widely held impression of him as a writer presenting an atheistic and cynical point of view. A defender of conventional morality might well come away with the idea that stories like "A Round Dozen" or "Virtue" convey a cynic's attitude to life. In the first case a notorious bigamist with a glib but cogent plausibility his life of deceit and financial exploitation, arguing as he does that his previous wives had gained from him that thrill in life they had always been craving for; his plea continues: far from giving him the five-year jail sentence he had in fact received, the establishment should have awarded him a medal for services rendered to womankind. In the latter case a woman's refusal to have a secret affair with her young admirer apparently leads to the intense misery and early death of her husband. The I-narrator points to what he sees as true cynicism when his female interlocutor, having defended the claims conventional morality on marital relations, remarks that at least the life

of the deceased husband was insured. The same speaker muses on the strange role that trivial circumstances and coincidences play in the course of human fate with their power to dramatically change the course of people's lives. It was he, after all, who had in the first place introduced the young Morton to the couple whose marriage he would so decisively and so tragically affect.

Does then the implicit message of Maugham's stories point to a pragmatic, almost amoral, view of the nature of human interaction? The assumption that in Maugham's universe the actions of men and women are predetermined by outward circumstances ostensibly finds compelling corroboration in "The Force of Circumstance", a story telling of Guy, a colonial administrator in Malaya, who decides it is time to become respectably married to an Englishwoman despite the embarrassing fact that, like many others in his position, he has fathered children on a local woman in an irregular, albeit widely condoned, form of liaison. Doris, his prospective bride, comes to Malaya in preparation for the planned marriage but by various unfortunate incidents is made aware of Guy's past relationship. She does not summarily rule out marriage to Guy, but agrees to staying on in Malaya for a further six-month probation period in order, just possibly, to come to terms with the reality of Guy's past behaviour. Guy, evincing every outward indication of heartrending contrition, pleads for clemency in view of the well nigh irresistible temptations of the flesh that must inevitably beset any virile and young male servant of his nation isolated in one of the farflung outposts of the Empire. At last, Doris reluctantly declines to marry Guy, for while his having one child out of wedlock might have been overlooked as the result of a momentary weakness, his fathering of three children most certainly could not. Once Doris has left him, his emotional desolation is soon mercifully relieved when one of his children turns up and asks whether his former mistress might return to his residence and, if so, when. Guy's unhesitant answer supplies the story with its punch-line "Tonight". The point might be construed as a wry commentary on, even exposure of, the hypocrisies that inhere within widely accepted social mores.

In view of the breakdown of a moral consensus regarding sexual relationships in the western world Maugham's apparently supercilious commentary on human behaviour assumes a more striking profile in stories concerning issues that should normally elicit an unequivocal condemnation, such an issue being murder. Yet, even in the murder story "Footprints in the Jungle", the narrator, who - need it be said? - should not be confused with the author himself, shows little readiness to condemn a particularly callous and heinous act of murder, especially so, when one considers that the victim has been the murderer's longtime benefactor. A police inspector in the British colony of Malaya, tells how it came about that an adulterous pair quite literally gets away with murder. Bronson has pity on an acquaintance whose luck has run out, and provides this unfortunate man with a place to stay in his own home for as long as it takes him to recover from heavy financial losses. Cartright and Bronson's wife become lovers and their relationship will soon be known to the infertile Bronson once his wife's state of pregnancy is plain for all eyes to see. Bronson's dead body is found lying on a lonely path leading through the jungle. Though the inspector finds sufficient circumstantial evidence to assure himself who Bronson's murderer is, he lacks the conclusive objective evidence needed to clinch an arrest. In his final comments he comes close to condoning the killing of Bronson as a kind of mercy killing and suggests that Cartright and his lover are basically quite ordinary and decent people whose evil action results more from the pressing exigencies of life than from their essential character. In the narrator's own words: "It's not what people do that matters, it's what they are". This dichotomy between being and doing, so seen, defies human scrutiny, hence the inspector's final assertion that he shouldn't like to have the job which God will face on Judgement Day. How strange a statement, when one considers that belief in God implies an acceptance of good and evil as objective realities. Is the narrator's stance to all appearances so amoral and Machievellian in tone for reasons that have to do with achieving dramatic irony and narrative effect, thus offering no reflection of the author's personal philosophy? Were this not the case, all of Maugham's stories evince a similar insensitivity to the effects of evil. The next story we consider, however, does convey a deep appreciation of the power of evil.

In "Flotsam and Jetsam", as in "Footprints in the Jungle", the main protagonist "gets away with murder". Otherwise the stories share little affinity. The jaunty and flippant tone that pervades "Footprints in the Jungle" is totally absent in this sombre story that combines the motif of brutal murder with that of mental and spiritual bondage. The grim facts associated with the murder and mental desolation emerge relatively late in the course of events that unfold with the telling of the story, which is introduced by a brief but telling description of the dismal domestic scenario to be found at the home of Norman Grange, a rubberplanter, and his wife. It is immediately evident that Grange ignores and distains his wife, who for her part accepts her husband's lack of regard with passivity and apathy. The monotony of their dreary life is interrupted by an emergency occasioned by a stranger by the name of Skelton. This man lies gravely ill from malaria on a boat approaching the Grange's house and must be taken in order for him to survive and recuperate. An association linking the image of a river with thoughts of sickness and death evokes the mythical world of Acheron and the Styx. Here

it is apt to recall the story's title, which points to a metaphor sustained throughout the story, that of abandoned refuse floating on water. Mrs Grange's life, it transpires from what she divulges to Skelton, is a bleak one. She had got stranded in Borneo when an actress in a theatre group on tour in the Far East. When her company ran out of funds, she lacked the strength and will to return to Europe. She married Grange for want of any other way of maintaining herself financially. Her loveless marriage and the worsening affliction of highly embarrassing nervous tick causing grotesque facial contortions have turned her into a pathetic and doomed prisoner, or so it seemed until her brief affair with Jack Carr, a Briton passing through their isolated area, promised to revive her self-esteem and sense of purpose. Her hopes were cruelly dashed when Grange crossed a nearby river in a boat, enhancing the already sinister association of rivers in the reader's mind, and shot Carr dead. The local District Officer could not disprove Grange's explanation of the tragic event as the result of an accident. The last scene described in the story portrays Mrs Carr powering her face and daubing her nose in front of her dressing-table mirror so as to take on the aspect of a red-nose comedian in a music-hall. She ends the story with the words: "To hell with life!" Skelton leaves the Granges before anything nasty should happen to him.

We might conclude from "Flotsam and Jetsam" that Maugham entertains a dark vision of life in a world of doomed souls trapped by circumstance and moral atrophy. A diametrically opposed picture of the world, however, emerges from reading "The Vessel of Wrath", a story set in the Dutch East Indies in a region supervised by the urbane and worldly-wise commissioner, Mynheer Evert Gruyter. This is also the missionary field of a devoted Baptist clergyman, the Reverend Owen Jones.

In this story symbolism and imagery based on references to rivers and water undergo a positive inversion in an enchanting story in which Miss Jones, the missionary's sister, becomes enamoured, at first unconsciously, with a notable ruffian and public sinner by the name of Ginger Ted. As with the great majority of villains, most readers expect him to play out the stereotypical role of the bad guy. It seems that Miss Jones does just this when circumstances force her to spend a night on a lonely island in the company of Ginger Ted. The experience induces in her feelings of dread in anticipation of falling a victim to rape. It later transpires, to Miss Jones's inner disappointment, that the very thought of molesting her never even occurred to Ginger Ted. A further surprise is in store, for Ginger Ted finally converts to Christianity under Miss Jones's influence and marries her. Waters and rivers acquire in this story an association with divine Providence. If this story tells how sublimated sexuality can contribute to truly remarkable a most unexpected reformation, the story "Rain" reveals the destructive and undesirable effects of repressed sexuality in the case of a pious but overzealous, missionary whose deep concern for the spiritual well-being of a prostitute degenerates into overpowering lust.

While biographical evidence shows that Maugham did not adhere to the official tenets of any Christian church, he implicitly underscores basic Christian principles. Has he subconsciously imbibed such principles or has his craft as a narrator of fiction put him in God's position, so to speak, for on the face of things, it is surprising to find an atheist who, despite his occasional tendency to adopt a flippant and blasphemous posture, voices a deep concern with the nature of good and evil, lauds the virtues of Christian love and makes a pointed reference to Judgement Day. It is certainly arguable that any gifted author intuitively grasps the workings of God's mind, as in his or her own universe, the author orchestrates events to suit a preordained plan, or at least in conformity with the workings of that author's subconscious mind. To this extent a work of narrative fiction is allegorical, for within the author's imagined universe, logically unconnected events work together to achieve a consciously or unconsciously preordained sequence of events. A good author manages to conceal this by allowing coincidences to fall within plausible limits.

Beyond any normal affinity between the author and God as generally conceived, there is a more specific reason for contending that Maugham was deeply interested in such non-rational supposed or real influences as telepathy, synchronicity, i.e. the objective coordination of apparently coincidental events by an unknown power (in monotheistic terms, God), and premonitions that prove true. Let us consider stories by Maugham in which such concerns come to the fore.

Å In "Lord Moundrago", the person named in the story's title consults a doctor in response to a very strange personal situation. He at first hesitantly admits to being locked into an antagonist relationship involving himself, a Tory lord and cabinet member, and Griffiths, a Welsh Labour MP from a humble working class family background. This antagonism culminates in a scene in which Moundrago publicly humiliates Griffiths with such devastating effect that the Welshman becomes a broken man. Griffiths eerily takes revenge on the lord by invading his dreams and robbing him of his peace of mind. Events in Lord Moundrago's dreams apparently produce inexplicable changes in the physical world to the extent of causing Griffiths a severe injury. The factor of synchronicity plays an increasing role in the unfolding of events and culminates in the simultaneous deaths of Moundrago and his opponent. The spooky events might be seen as a foil to a political satire exposing the British class system, though Maugham's treatment of Moundrago's character has serious undertones, recalling Mephistophiles and those possessed by Satanic pride. As a matter of interest, the gravity assigned to Moundrago's humiliation of Griffiths is in keeping with a rabbinical teaching that such an the public humiliation of a fellow human being is one of the greatest sins.

The feeling that Maugham evinced a concern with metaphysical question finds corroboration in 'The Taipan.' Here, a British expatriot charged with diplomatic and administrative duties in Shanghai, referred in the story as 'the Taipan', nurtures a smug sense of superiority over the local Chinese and anyone in the European community who falls on hard times, even to the extent of one needing a place in the cemetery reserved for Europeans, a matter that directly concerned him in his official capacity of overseer of the European community. He prides himself on surviving such an unfortunate person. However, his smug self-congratulation is unsettled during a nightly stroll through the European cemetery by the sight of two 'coolies' digging a grave. Being singularly well informed on forthcoming burials in this cemetery, he is greatly puzzled, for to his knowledge no one has been scheduled for burial in the coming days. A terrible sense of premonition leads him to contemplate the possibility that the newly dug grave was meant for him, as indeed it was. Elsewhere, Maugham shows a similar concern with the secret failures of those who camouflage some baseness in their character as a virtue or parade moral cowardice as prudence and judicious circumspection, notably in 'Door of Opportunity'.

'The Bum' is not exactly a story of mystery and the imagination in Poe's sense but it is surprising when seen as the product of an atheist's mind. The bum, a beggar the speaker encounters in Vera Cruz Mexico, arouses a sense of half-recognition in the speaker's mind. He and the speaker have met before, but when? The beggar, having red hair and a pale complexion, is evidently not a native of Mexico but could well be of English or Anglo-American extraction. He never speaks or shows a reaction to the rejection and contempt he so often receives or even to acts of generosity that come his way. It is only when a policeman gives him a whip lash that the speaker remembers him as a young would-be writer whom he had met in Rome twenty years before. Obviously his ambitions had come to nought with catastrophic mental as well as financial results. We find the tragedy of the failed or mediocre artist elsewhere in Maugham, in Michael in 'The Alien Corn'. Is the bum an epitome of the universal humiliated sufferer, indeed Christ as the court of Pilate? Evidence for this contention is revealed not by the obvious kind of pointers but by the cumulative effects of the merest suggestions inhering in the place name, Vera Cruz, i.e. 'True Cross', in the red colour of the beggar's hair (traditionally attributed to Jesus, David, Ulysses and other charismatic figures), in his muteness in the face of provocation as with Jesus before Pilate, in the lash of the whip which releases the speaker's memory, in the fact that the final meeting place of speaker and beggar is the portal of a church and in the story's concluding mention of 'three days'. One might almost incline to view that Maugham, far from being a cynical atheist, was more likely a closet believer.

Å