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The short stories of W.S. Maugham

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Abstract

William Somerset Maugham enjoys a prominent place among the great short-story writers of the Twentieth Century. One of his admirers described him "as the greatest" short-story writer. He became famous as short story writer with the 'Trembling of a Leaf' after which he published more than ten collections. He followed a particular plan when he arranged his short stories in four volumes. He grouped the stories according to their locale. The short stories having a particular country or region as their background are all grouped together.

Keywords: Short-story writers, Maugham, world war, novels

Introduction

There are thirty stories in the first volume. The first story of 'Rain' of this volume is the celebrated tale of prudish missionary and a prostitute. The first Volume among other stories also contains 'The Three Fat Women of Antibes' which is a brilliantly ironic story of self denial and gross greed.

The Second Volume contains stories in Malays, America and England. They include 'A Vessel of Wrath'; the famous tale of a drunken laid about a devout missionary and 'The Man with the Sear', a poignant story of honour and passion.

The Third Volume comprises of the famous series of stories about Ashenden, a British Secret Service Agent in First World War. Based in Geneva, Ashenden travels all over Europe on mission concerning such characters as the traitors, passionate Giulia Lazzeri and the extraordinary men known as the 'hairless Mexican'.

In the Volume Fourth, which according to Maugham was his final volume, he placed the rest of his stories, the scene of which was set in Malaya and South-East Asia. They were written long before the Second World War and the reader should know that the sort of life which they dealt no longer existed. When he first visited those counties, the lives that white men and their wives led there, differed but little from what they had been twenty five years before these stories were written. They got home leave once in five years and had to suffer agony of living away from their families and fellow citizens of White Race and did not get world news for a long time. These stories are brilliantly evocative of the last days of British Empire. Most of stories of this volume are tragic once.

W.S. Maugham wrote stories about the people, who had some singularity of character which suggested to him that they might be capable of behaving in such a way as to give him an idea that he could make use of or about people who by some accident or another accident of temperament. Accident of environment, had been involved in unusual contingencies, but he repeated, they were exceptions.

In 'A Writer's Notebook', Maugham himself had explained how he had come to write a few of his famous stories. 'Rain' his most popular story had come to be written thus. In 1916, Maugham had been cruising in the Pacific, visiting the South-Sea islands. The ship had touched Pago-Pago. "It is terribly hot and rainy. From out of a blue sky you will see heavy grey clouds come floating over the mouth of the harbour, and then rain falls in torrents" in this note is the suggestion for the title. "And among the passengers there was a missionary with his wife and a Miss Thompson. Maugham had made notes on all these three and from these notes he wrote his Rain."

The other stories in 'The Trembling of a Leaf' had been likewise suggested to him by the men and their situations in the South-Sea islands. while he was enjoying himself there. 'Before the party' another fine story of Maugham had been developed from the notes on a

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couple he had met while he was in Singapore. A King stories and the stories in 'The Casuerina Tree' are born out of his travel experiences in the East. His story 'The Point of Honour' might have been based on his note on an Italian in New York, who suspects his wife of incest with his nephew and kills the nephew first and then his wife, because her false confession in the court was as great burden on his honour as if she had been".

The story 'The Mother' might have been developed from this note: "They were father and son.....The father idolized his trim, smart, handsome boy and was horrified when he fell in love with a Burmese girl, but not just in love.....The older man got the idea that the girl had cast a spell over the boy....One day she was drowned.....everyone believed that the father was responsible. The boy was broken hearted. He went all to pieces, and the passionate affection that he had for his father turned to a deadly hatred". Substitute 'mother' in the place of 'Father', and there is the story of 'The Mother' in its broad outlines. There is attack on possessive love in this story. The hatred developed as a consequence of the possessive love creates a sort of disturbance or uneasiness in the minds of readers. They desire a change in the present situations that possessive love is the cause of disaster and one should not have such love. This change if brought in one's life is bound to benefit in one's life. This is true universally and for all times.

Besides his travel experiences, Maugham's service in the Intelligence Department during the Great War has given him some material for a few of his short stories. If Ashenden is to be considered as a collection of short stories, all the stories in that book are based on experience as a British Agent in the Intelligence Department during the Great War. Apart from these experiences, there are some other experiences of Maugham that must be remembered here as they have given birth to quite a number of short stories. While staying in Europe Maugham happened to know one society of poets, painters, musicians, authors and other artist whom he met either at the great luncheons arranged by fashionable ladies of artistic leanings to which he had been invited, or at the cafes, restaurants and lodges in France, Germany, Italy and also the United States. Their lives interested him and their personalities sometimes fascinated him. Some of his stories are the fruits of his observations of these characters and their lives.

An excellent example of short story of this source 'The Colonel's Lady' is based on this note: "They were talking about V.P. whom they'd all known. She published a volume of passionate love poems, obviously not addressed to her husband. It made laugh to think she'd carried on a long affair under his nose and they'd have given anything to know what he felt when at last he read them." No doubt the readers laugh at the Colonel's visit to his concubine and at the same time the publication of his love poem by his wife. This is a satire on the undignified characters of the colonel and his wife and also on their masks, by which they cover their inner selves.

The stories of Maugham work in realistic fiction. Through the character-narrator in 'A Man with A Conscience' Maugham speaks: "I am by way of being a realist, and in the stories I write I seek verisimilitude. I eschew the bizarre as scrupulously as I avoid the whimsical." There realism is so great that it induces in the readers of the stories a feeling that Maugham is just narrating, whatever has been observed by him. This is why perhaps; the stories have the virtue of

appearing to have taken place, thus gaining in extreme verisimilitude, a virtue that any writer can rightly be proud of. This is Maugham's one of the achievements. His stories are compositions in which imagination has been exercised. It is important to remember that Maugham has also stated that he had a very powerful imagination and that he told a great many stories because he had a strong inventive capacity. The story 'Sanatorium' is based on Maugham's personal experience and the character, Ashenden, is a very flattering self-portrait of him. He draws the details of the story very largely from his experiences in a sanatorium in the North of Scotland where he spent a couple of years to gain health.

Maugham's gift for satire is evident in all his creative work, both in the form of drama and of fiction. As a playwright, Maugham antagonized himself thoroughly in the eyes of smugly complacent English theatre-goers; in 'Loaves and Fishes', which is Maugham's second play (later novelized as 'The Bishop's Apron'). Maugham holds to ridicule the hypocrisy and venality of the clergymen; in 'Far Services Rendered' which is Maugham's last but one play Maugham attacks the romantic patriotism and thoughtless glorification of war; and even 'Sheppy' with which Maugham rounded off his career as dramatist is full of trenchant satire.

The stories of Maugham are mostly melodramatic, and also exhibit in the professional virtue of making his stories palatable. 'Rain' is replete with melodrama. 'The Letter' and 'Before the Party' his highly praised stories from the point of view of technical perfection, centre round the melodramatic incidents. 'Footprints in the jungle' is a detective story. Maugham endeavoured with great success to make his stories convincing and even compelling. This can be considered his special achievement and that is perhaps one of the reasons for the success of the stories with public.

There is a great variety of themes in Maugham's short fiction. Even the casual reader will not fail to notice that not less than half a dozen themes recur and become prominent- and these are Love, Lust, Marriage, Life besides many other themes of secondary importance and a few humorous ones are exercised short stories of Maugham. Many stories of Maugham can be called Love stories. He started his career as a writer with a novel (Liza of Lambeth) based on the promiscuous love of a young girl for a middle aged family man and he followed it up in a series of novels and short stories. Love is always a major theme in Maugham's love stories. In his collection of about one hundred stories, the purely love stories are less than a dozen.

Another theme that seems to have a personal appeal to the readers is the theme of Lust. Sexual irregularities is the basis of quite a number of his stories, even when it is not the main theme, he has not hesitated in weaving a thread of irregular sexual relation into the web of the story. Lust is attacked in such stories.

A problem of life that greatly interested Maugham was marriage. Though he remained in single blessedness until middle age, he continuously attacked the institution of marriage since his youth. Before the age of 20, he set down in his notebook: "She's unmarried. She told me that in her opinion marriage was bound to be a failure if a woman could only have one husband at a time." In Mrs. Craddock, Maugham has chosen the conjugal infelicity of Bertha and Edward for his theme, but the interest of the book centres round the character of Miss Lay, whom Maugham created as his mouthpiece to speak of his own opinions on marriage.

Maugham has more than half a dozen stories founded on dreams, hallucinations, magic and witchcraft, besides a full length novel 'The Magician'. 'The dream' suggests its story by its very title. A Russian's wife dreams that her husband has tried to kill her by throwing her from their flat. She dreams of it again and again until the dream comes to reality. There remain a few stories on sundry incidents or subjects. 'The Verger' is the most outstanding of these stories. Mr. Foreman in this story is an illiterate who cannot sign himself. So he is removed from his job as verger of St. Peters. As a tobacconist he amasses wealth. The bank manager who comes to know to his fortune compliments him thus: "What would you be if you had been able to read and write?" On hearing these words, Mr. Foreman says, "I'd be verger of St. Peter's", which gives a dramatic finish to the story.

Maugham, by the choice of his short stories as well as his novels has rendered his novels and stories greatness, giving them a broad human touch. Consequently, his stories are appealing. He carefully eschewed everything that might have a limited appeal or sectarian value or topical interest only.

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