

SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

Iroda Ismatullaeva Izatullaevna,

Asadbek Bakhtiyorov

Tashkent State Transport University

ABSTRACT

The given article discusses Somerset Maugham's contribution to English literature. The author discusses writer's the most popular novels and analyzes the plot and main heroes.

Key words: *novel, publication, reader, characterization, portrayal, prose.*

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается вклад Сомерсета Моэма в английскую литературу. Автор рассматривает наиболее популярные романы писателя, анализирует сюжет и главных героев.

Ключевые слова: *роман, публикация, читатель, характеристика, изображение, проза.*

INTRODUCTION

W. Somerset Maugham's twenty novels are exceptionally uneven; the first eight, though interesting, suggest the efforts of a young novelist to discover where his talent lies. From the publication of *Of Human Bondage* (1915) through *The Razor's Edge* (1944), he produced his most significant prose works. During this period, he was a world famous man of letters with a following of many thousands who would buy and read anything he wrote; however, a few novels that he produced, such as *Then and Now* and *Up at the Villa*, were not in his best vein.

The novels brought Maugham acclaim and recognition both from a general audience and from the intelligentsia. Among common readers, he was perhaps the most successful English novelist of the twentieth century, and, as Samuel Johnson pointed out, the common reader is not often wrong. Yet, it must be admitted that Maugham's detractors, such as Edmund Wilson, present valid criticism: One expects a serious artist to exert an important influence, either thematic or formal, upon his medium. The symphony was forever altered by Ludwig van Beethoven; no similar statement can be made about Maugham and the novel. He sought to tell a story with clarity and grace, to embody a set of attitudes and values, and to entertain his readers with insights into character and life.

Maugham's novels are written in a style highly idiomatic and fluent, revealing the qualities of simplicity, lucidity, and euphony which the author sought to attain.

Content to narrate an interesting story from his own unique angle of vision, he brought to the genre a gift for creating interesting characters who reflect life's ironies. In his later works, Maugham's narrative persona is a character interested in people, yet detached and somewhat clinical in his analysis of their actions and motives. The narrator demonstrates an unusual degree of tolerance for human peccadillos and incongruities and is reluctant to judge the actions of human beings. He writes primarily of adults in conflict with one another and with social mores. Frequently, his characters grow in tolerance and acceptance of human life, which is portrayed somewhat pessimistically. Maugham based his characters upon people whom he had known or whose lives he had somehow come to know; their actions are presented with consummate realism. They are motivated by their passions or emotions and by their attempts to control their destinies, not by an ideology or set of ideals. Though they may experience inner turmoil and conflict, they are seldom tormented by such emotions. Like their creator-narrator, the characters often have the ability to view themselves with clinical detachment and objectivity, to cast a cold eye on life.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

What I love about Somerset Maugham's characterization is that he luxuriates in taking time to explore his protagonists, building up a portrait with many layers, each created out of a separate encounter, or a second-hand account of a striking event. One of my favorite novels is *The Razor's Edge*, in which a young American, Larry Darrell, is so affected by his experiences in the war (although what happened to him is enigmatically reserved until almost the end of the narrative) that he breaks with the life that custom dictates he should lead and sets off across Europe in search of spiritual enlightenment. Although Darrell is the main protagonist, we as readers rarely accompany him on his spiritual odyssey. Instead we are invited to watch his progress through the eyes of those he leaves behind – the fiancée who loved him and who must struggle to keep true to her own cultural beliefs, and her uncle, one of Maugham's classic expatriate snobs whose generosity of spirit is matched only by the size of his character defects. It's a deceptively simple story in which Maugham brings together with incomparable ease a critique and a sympathetic portrayal of both the overwhelming need to fulfil oneself and the equally overwhelming need to abide by society's strict conventions. Interwoven through the narrative is a clash of cultures, both East against West, and the traditional against the modern. Maugham lived through a time of extreme social change and he documents it with a historian's accuracy, detailing his character's struggle to make sense of a new world, whilst

clinging resolutely to what they know of the old. It would be all too easy to reduce his protagonists to caricatures of themselves, but I think his craft lies in producing beautifully fleshed out, compassionately drawn, vulnerable, imperfect human beings.

I often think Maugham's gift lies in making us like people whom ordinarily we would cross the road to avoid, but it could probably be better described as a talent for appreciating the way that a life can be a work of art. For this reason, perhaps, Maugham was drawn to depicting artists in two of his most famous works: *Cakes and Ale* and *The Moon and Sixpence*. Ever alive to the brute force of the orthodox, Maugham's narrators are openly fascinated by men (Thomas Hardy and Paul Gauguin) who do not simply resist convention but have never even noticed it, so intense is their concentration on the inner world. But in both these cases, the narratives show how all that is pitifully and yet undeniably human in life – love, the desire for recognition, suffering, comfort, pity, charity, vanity, must pit itself against the artist in the man and demand his attention, one way or another. Ultimately I suppose I love Somerset Maugham's work because, like him, I find myself hugely curious about how people tick, and curious too as to how everyone conducts the tricky negotiations necessary to find space for their foibles and eccentricities within the strictly regulated business of living. Somerset Maugham's stories seem to say there is a great art to this, which we all practice every day, and the art in his work is to manage to depict this struggle with such graceful and sympathetic clarity.

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