



Resonance with real flesh and blood characters: A study on select short stories of Somerset Maugham

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Abstract: *The present article is about character focused short stories of William Somerset Maugham. His characters are usually integral and everything that they do is necessary. In-fact he spends tremendous amount of effort in building up the characters and gives priority over the plots in his stories. Among his huge collection of short stories, the select stories attempt to convey that every single character of his stories is so well drawn that each story becomes a treasure. He becomes one of those rare authors who can make his characters leap off the page and become living and breathing creatures. He will always be remembered for creating very memorable characters.*

It is never easy to analyze a well-written short story, often because there is very little unfolded. This is true for William Somerset Maugham's short stories, for his are often autobiographical and abundant of nuances. He is one of the world's great consummate storytellers who told stories because he had been blessed with a narrative quality for refined story-telling. His technique in most of his short stories, the speaker goes on talking in great lengths to quickly secure reader's interest in him. He then prepares the reader to listen to his tale. Most of his short stories are characterized by a clear, unadorned style, cosmopolitan settings and a shrewd understanding of human nature. They are character focused, all integral and everything that the characters do is necessary. In-fact at tremendous amount of effort spent by him in building up the characters takes priority over the plot. As one turns the pages of his short stories, automatically enters a magical world of fabulous characters. One feels as if he is curled up listening to the delicious tales of an old, dear and rather wicked friend. One is also transported to the very place, the villa, the street, the bar, the forest, the smells and tastes are almost tangible. Among his huge collection of short stories, the following select stories attempt to convey that every single character of his stories is so well drawn that each story becomes a treasure.

"Rain" is one of his best-known short stories. It all happens in 1916, when a group of passengers along with a missionary and a prostitute travelling from Honolulu to Apia. An epidemic of measles breaks out suddenly and all the fellow passengers are forced to stay for a couple of weeks in Pago Pago in American Samoa. The missionary, Davidson, through his influence with the local governor, is able to find rooms for all the passengers in the establishment of Mr. Horn, a local trader. He is a stern New England evangelical Puritan with an unbending sense of duty and an unyielding horror of what he believes to be sin. His wife, Mrs. Davidson is also in possession of a mind akin to his own. Along with them the Macphails are temporarily detained from continuing their journey to Apia. Dr. Macphail is a Scottish doctor travelling to the South Seas to recover from war wounds. The doctor couple is weak but tolerant people with no fixed convictions. Both the couples soon find out that another of their shipmates, a second-class passenger named Sadie Thompson would be lodging there. She is brash, vulgar and entirely sensual. Sadie immediately sets up shop, complete with loud music, parties and of course gentlemen visitors. Davidson is particularly troubled by her lack of what he considers decent and moral behavior. He has a sudden revelation that Sadie, who boarded the ship at Honolulu, must be a denizen of Iwelei, that city's notorious red-light district, which has only recently been shut down through the efforts of Hawaiian missionaries. Further, she must be plying her trade and continuing a life of sin here in Pago-Pago, just below them in her room. Then the missionary believes it is duty not only to suppress vice wherever it may manifest itself but also to save Sadie's soul. An epic struggle between them ensues. Outward appearance seems to show that he is succeeding his cause to the extent that Sadie is so remorseful that she has accepted the need for her to be sentenced to prison. Just as it appears that Davidson has won, he is found on the bench with his throat cut. Sadie has succeeded in seducing him and he has killed himself with feelings of moral failure and frustration. Maugham does not go to sentimentalize Sadie. On the contrary, when the missionary has killed himself, the storyteller allows her to cruelly flaunt herself in front of his window, laugh and spit. She savors her triumph and at once resumes the only way of life she knew, from which Davidson had tried to dissuade her. It is a real tragedy and an uncharitable story told unsparingly

about the whole missionary profession. The story shows one that Maugham has the ability to make the reader see what is not written.

“Home” is another example of Maugham’s mastery storytelling. The story begins with a farmhouse lying among the Somersetshire hills. The family is traditional in maintaining that ever since the house was built, “from father to son they had been born and died in it.” The main character, Captain George Meadows, appears in the second half of the story and is introduced in a rather awkward situation quite favorably by the narrator. He had deserted home to live “an exile’s life” in China, and for more than fifty years, nobody ever heard of him. Captain Meadows came back in a rather weak condition, toothless, old, penniless, crippled with rheumatism and longing for home where he was born and grew up. On arriving, the Captain faced the person that he left for a sailor’s life, Emily Green. She was once courted by him but chose to marry his elder brother, Tom Meadows. Captain Meadows actually did not have an easy life. Even though he was brave and adventuresome, in the mind his family, he was wild, indecisive, lacked stability and not a man of high stature. He was for many years overseas and had done everything but “to make a fortune.” This actually made him a less desirable man to Emily Green, who sought stability and firmness, a shoulder she could rely on. By his return, Captain Meadows seemed like a burden to his family and his many experiences became meaningless. The strong man could now barely walk with his own two feet. Nonetheless, the story ends with a solemn note with the death of Captain Meadows. The narrator has “respect and admiration” for a man who valued his family’s tradition and made his final decision in his adventurous life. The reader starts empathizing with the character and begins to lament for what happened to him.

The title of the next story “The Luncheon” is rather ironical, means a "light snack", but actually in the story a light snack turns out to be a heavy and expensive meal. It is set in Paris and portrays hypocrisy and external show of the middle class. A struggling young author, living in Paris on eighty francs a month, twenty years back, gets a letter from a lady fan, expressing that she was interested to have a chat with him. She even manages to get herself invited to luncheon with the author at Foyot’s, one of the most expensive restaurants at which the French senators eat. One observes that the narrator is the mouthpiece of the author. On the lady’s suggestion he is flattered and says “Foyot’s was so far beyond my means that I had never even thought of going there, I was flattered, and I was too young to have learned to say ‘no’ to a woman”. Then the entire action takes place in the costly restaurant. The narrator has a keen eye for the minute details of life which further combined with his writing style captures and keeps one’s attention. One can get a clear idea about the lady from what the narrator tells about her “She was not so young as I expected and in appearance imposing rather than attractive. She was, in fact, a woman of forty (a charming age, but not one that excites a sudden and devastating passion at first sight), and she gave me the impression of having more teeth, white and large and even, than were necessary for any practical purpose. She was talkative, but since she seemed inclined to talk about me I was prepared to be an attentive listener.” The woman is smart, experienced, selfish, cold, without any feeling except to fulfill her desires. Her tone never changes while she cheats the host and orders the most expensive dishes, and the repetition of same phrases proves it “I never eat anything for luncheon”, and “I never eat more than one thing”. At the beginning of the story one notices his willingness to please her, but as the time passes his utterances become shorter, his tone becomes more subdued “my heart sank a little, I turned a little pale, panic seized me.” He becomes less generous, as he is more worried about how much he will have to pay. The tension gets to its highest point in the climax when the bill comes. The lady finally leaves him penniless for the rest of the month. The author at the end of the story takes revenge on the lady in a humorous way by seeing her growing very fat. It is a satire on the dominating young lady, who is like a parasite sucking the good-will and the benefits of the good-intentioned people. His dialogues in the story are the sorts one might hear in society. One starts empathizing with the young author as one continues to read the story and finally feels relieved with author’s humorous way of taking revenge on the lady.

“The Force of Circumstances” is a story of almost unavoidable circumstances and it deals with the emotions a woman. It is about the miserable feelings of a newly-wed English lady when she finds out that her husband has had children from a native woman in the village and seems to have neglected to tell her about the whole incident. At the beginning of the story the native Malay mistress through whom Guy, the hero of the story has had three children, goes on to blackmail him when he brings there his newly-wed wife, Doris. All the circumstances turn out to be so unbearable for Guy that he eventually can’t pay high enough or enough. Reader starts feeling miserable for innocent Doris, who had no knowledge regarding her deceitful husband. The following situations finally force Guy break down in front of Doris one final day by confessing her the truth. The reader feels dejected when she lives apart and then finally leaves him. Towards the end the reader’s heart melts when she says, “Don’t you think it was a little unfair to me to bring me out here in the circumstances?” The ending evokes feelings and emotions in the reader to understand and sympathize with Doris.

“Foot prints in the Jungle” is one among his group of superb and memorable stories dealing with the lives of Western, mostly British colonists in the far East. It is typically concerned with the emotional toll exacted on the colonists by their isolation. The story is set in Malaya, fictionally called Tarah Merah. The lines, “There is no place in the world that has as much charm as Tarah Merah. It lies on the sea and the sandy shore and fringed with casuarinas.” surely capture one’s imagination even if one doesn’t have any idea regarding casuarinas trees. The story begins with Theo Cartwright couple, aging and charming planters, who motor into the club so that their

daughter can play tennis and they can enjoy a few hands of bridge. Then the reader is carried back to the murder story of Mr. Bronson, who happens to be the first husband of Mrs. Cartwright. Actually Theo Cartwright and the wife of Mr. Bronson fall in love and she happens to get pregnant by him. Then they cruelly murder Bronson in the Jungle and in course of time get married. Immediately after that the reader is returned to the placidity of their present lives. One tends to read the story with interest as it happens to be a detective and murder story. The Theo Cartwright couple in the story comes to life and the atmosphere appears real within suitable environment.

The next story "The Fall of Edward Barnard" describes his favourite technique of telling a South Sea story in a particular Chicago frame. It is a confrontation between what is called the civilized world and the primitive world. It begins in the recognizable setting of Chicago and recedes into the marvelous and the unknown beauty of Tahiti. The hero of the story, Edward is sent from Chicago for two years and it is only when he has had the opportunity of a life time to have a very introspective reflection about the meaning of his life. On completing his tenure, he delays his return and postpones the promise he had made to his bride Isabelle. It happens because coming face to face with the simple and natural beauty of Tahiti, makes him wonder at the uselessness of life, lived in the hustle and bustle of the cities, and the constant striving one has to make for survival. After an unsuccessful beginning in working, he preferred a simple life of beauty, truth and goodness. In the story the author's marvelous and unknown world acquires an exotic aura which is more easily believed by the reader. Edward's thoughts reach the universal when he starts asking himself the question, "Why do we come into the world for to hurry to an office and work hours after hours?" Finally the fall of Edward Barnard is really his choice of a higher value in life than Chicagoan materialism could offer. It is an early example of the "return to nature" theme which Maugham enjoys so often as a kind of on natural reaction against his normal sophistication.

Maugham's most of the stories can be best recipes against oblivion and "The Colonel's Lady" is one of the best stories. There can be few better demonstrations of the art of the short story than a comparison of the variety of characters, scenes and situations which make the finished pieces of work written forty years later. The best thing in this outstanding piece of craftsmanship is the character of the Colonel's wife. The setting of the story is done in countryside, twenty miles away from Sheffield, near London. It has the theme of jealousy shown by the husband, George Peregrine towards his wife Evie as he is unable to bear the success of his wife writing a book of poetry called "When Pyramids Decay". Evie publishes her poetry without her husband's knowledge. He can't understand her or why everyone loves her writing. It can also be called a comedy with overtones of sadness as Colonel is a comic character but sympathetic at the same time. Towards the end of the story the reader might not understand the husband, but might understand his wife's need to express her creativity in her own way, about that part of a life the husband is not aware of. The reader empathizes with Evie, begins to love her and genuinely care for her. Maugham can be considered a master of short stories who could convey the theme of jealousy with a startling reality. This story is definitely one of Maugham's finest tributes to womankind.

"The Mother" on the other hand is the first of Maugham's Spanish stories. It is a tragic story set in Seville of Spain. It is about the terrible love of a mother, La Cachirra towards her son Currito. Her overprotective love towards her son made her kill her lover Pepe Santi because he was beating her son and go to the prison for seven years. Currito was all she had in the entire world. She adored him with a fiery and jealous passion that demanded in return impossible devotion from the son's side. As she wished to be all in all to him, she couldn't later in life tolerate her son's love getting divided between her and Currito's lover Rosalia. Towards the end of the story the mother even went up to the extent of killing Rosalia as her son thought of marrying her. The story still evokes feelings and emotions in the reader to understand La Cachirra, the possessive mother.

"The Kite" is a psychological story of great proportions. The basis of it is the old story of possessive parents and the son whose wife never has a chance to detach him from them. In the story, the protagonist, Herbert like any normal child starts to fly kites with his parents in his childhood. As the child grows up, after marriage even he continues his hobby, although Betty, his wife considers this childish. Now when Herbert wants to buy a new kite, Betty packs his bag, he as usual returns to his parents' house and Betty smashes the kite. After filing for divorce due to their unhappy marital relationship, towards the end of the story, the magistrate orders Herbert to pay Betty alimony, twenty-five shillings a week, but surprisingly he doesn't obey the order and chooses the prison. His feelings are better understood when the author says, "It may be that in some queer way he identifies himself with the kite flying so free and so high above him, and it's as if it were an escape from the monotony of life. It may be that in some dim, confused way it represents an ideal of freedom and adventure, and you know, when man once gets bitten with virus of the ideal not all the King's doctors and to the entire King's surgeons can rid him of it." Above all it is a story of stifling suburban inhibitions, petty jealousies and mean thoughts found in real life. One can see the patience of Maugham for all the little brush strokes that highlight the pathetic pettiness of this picture in the story.

Finally "The Ant and the Grasshopper" conveys Maugham's belief that there is a true harmony in the contradictions of mankind. He feels that the normal is in reality the abnormal. It is a satirical story where he has juxtaposed two brothers, the unscrupulous and carefree Tom and the hard working and respectable George. George right from the beginning always has a gut feeling that Tom would end up in the gutter. However in reality Tom marries a rich woman, who dies very soon and leaves him a fortune. The story is full of the basest and yet more

interesting of the human vices that still evoke day to day feelings and emotions in the reader to understand Tom and George.

All the above stories convey that Maugham's gift for creating lively gallery of character sketches is wonderfully varied. He usually brings his characters vividly to life and their humanity is more convincing for the author's merciless exposure of their flaws and failures. He observed men much as lepidopterists collect butterflies and pinned them to his page as the lepidopterist pins butterflies to his board. He is one of those rare authors who can make his characters leap off the page and become living and breathing creatures. One of the reasons for this could be the love, affection, insight and sympathy that he felt being repressed in everyday life as an orphan were channeled into the creation of wonderful characters in his stories. Some characters even give the impression that he has written the stories with his heart's blood. But most of his characters display an aloofly cynical attitude towards human life. They are usually recognizable and one gets a feeling that his dialogues in "The Luncheon", "Rain", "The Kite" and "The Colonel's Lady" are the sorts one might hear in society. Most of his stories have focused characters, at times incredibly witty and amusing, at times melancholy and near heart breaking. One begins to empathize with them, love them, hate them, lament for them and genuinely care about what happened to them. Overall Maugham can be considered a master of short stories who could convey relationships, greed, ambition, jealousy, hatred and other kinds of feelings with a startling reality. His teasing combination of passion and tenderness, coldness and cynicism was stamped on his life and work to make him immortal. Even if one is not a fan of the short story form, feels that his writing is an exception as the ending of his stories makes one complete. He will always be remembered for creating very memorable characters.

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