

The Oriental Setting in Somerset Maugham's Short Stories

MARIA VEGA DE FEBLES

Since the beginning of history men have gathered around the campfire or in a group in the market place to listen to the telling of stories. The desire to listen to them appears to be as deeply rooted in the human animal as the sense of property.

W. Somerset Maugham

An author that has mastered the unique art of story telling is undoubtedly Somerset Maugham. The fact that his novels and short stories are widely read and many of them have been made films, is a reward for the years dedicated by the British writer to polish his style.

The East is the setting of many of his short stories. British heroes living there, stimulated by an environment so different from their own, enduring the hardships of a tropical climate, isolation and boredom, are moved to kill, cheat and hate. Human weakness is depicted in these stories in a remarkable way.

In some stories the setting, to which mood and atmosphere are intertwined, is the main character, as in *Rain*, one of Maugham's best works.

The stories included in *East and West* were written between 1919 and 1931. Maugham got his inspiration for most of them in a journey to the South Seas. Some characters were created from people he met; he used to write short paragraphs—like portraits—about persons that later were turned into his most famous heroes.

In the *World Over* he gathered short stories that appeared in magazines. Some of them were elaborated from notes taken while he was in China in 1920.

The Jungle:

The depths of the jungle with its infinite variety of plants and animals is the scene of violent crimes. In some love stories the plot develops toward the murder of the lover (*Flotsam and Jetsam*) or the murder of the husband (*Footprints in the Jungle*) or the murder of the passionate woman (*Neil Mac Adam*).

Loneliness in the predominant feeling among the British living in the jungle.

In *The Force of Circumstances*, Guy describes the lonely nights he used to spend in Sembulu:

I was tired of reading. I couldn't have been more of a prisoner if I'd been in jail. Night after night it was the same. I tried drinking three or four whiskies, but it's poor fun drinking alone, and it didn't cheer me up; it only made me feel rather rotten next day. I tried going to bed immediately after dinner, but I couldn't sleep. I used to lie in bed, getting hotter and hotter, and more wide awake, till I didn't know what to do with myself. By George, those nights were long. D'you know, I got so low, I was so sorry for myself that sometimes-it makes me laugh now when I think of it, but I was only nineteen and a half-sometimes I used to cry.¹

Loneliness is part of these people's lives. Even when they go to England on leave, the feeling of alination in unbearable.

1. *The Complete Stories of Somerset Maugham*. Doubleday Co. 1934, V. I, p. 254-55.

In *Virtue*, Morton, a Borneo District Officer, is lost among strangers while spending several weeks in London:

For months, for long months before it was due, these people planned their leave, and when they got off the ship they were in such spirits they could hardly contain themselves. London. Shops, clubs, theaters, and restaurants. London. They were going to have the time of their lives. London. It swallowed them. A strange, turbulent city, not hostile but indifferent, and they were lost in it. They had no friends. They had nothing in common with the acquaintances they made. They were more lonely than in the jungle.²

The City:

The mysterious and exotic Eastern city pictured by the Western man is not what Maugham chooses as a setting for his stories. The slums are the usual places where the heroes suffer and finally die.

In *A Casual Affair*, the one time popular and handsome Jack Almond, now a tortured man, seeks relief in drugs and dies a pauper in a horrible little room in a Chinese bazaar. The District Officer described how the body was found:

He was nothing but skin and bones. It looked to me as though he might very likely have died of starvation. I asked the man of the shop and the woman a number of questions. The policeman corroborated their statements. It appeared that the man coughed a great deal and brought up blood now and then, and his appearance suggested that he might very well have had T.B. The Chinaman said he'd been a confirmed opium swoker. It all seemed pretty obvious. Fortunately cases of that sort are rare, but they're not unheard of—the white man who goes under and gradually sinks to the last stage of degradation. It appeared that the Chinese woman had been fond of him. She'd kept him on her own miserable earnings for the last two years.³

2. *Ibid.*, p. 710.

3. *Ibid.*, V. II, p. 126.

In *the Taipan* a member of an English firm in China is terrified by the idea of dying for away from his country.

He felt a horror of the evinding multitudinous streets of the Chinese city, and there was something ghastly and terrible in the convoluted roofs of the temples with their devils grimacing and tortured. He loathed the smell that assaulted his nostrils. And the people. Those myriads of blue-clad coolies, and the beggars in their filthy rags, and the merchants and the magistrates, sleek, smiling and incrustable, in their long black gowns. They seemed to press upon him with menace. He hated the country. China. Why had he ever come? He was panic stricken now. He must get out. He would not stay another year, another month. What did he care about Shanghai? "Oh, my God,," he cried, "if I were only safely back in England."⁴

The Journey:

Some of Maugham's stories take place on a ship, apparently the ocean is the setting, but generally a flash back takes us to the East.

In *P & O* we have a touch of the supernatural. Mr. Gallagher, an Irish man is traveling from Malay to England. Retired at 45 he looks forward to a new life at home. Suddenly he feels very ill and everybody aboard gets concerned, not because of him, but because his illness may upset the plans for a costume Christmas party. The cause of his illness is a spell cast on him by a Malay woman who was his mistress for a long time. She assured him that if he left on the ship he would never see land again.

This story of witchcraft is parallel to another one. A distressed middle-aged woman separated from her husband, sets aside her pride and bitterness and forgives him. She learned through the suffering of Gallagher how useless jealousy and hate are.

In a desperate move to save Gallagher's life a strange ceremony was performed.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

The silence was uncanny. Mrs. Hamlyn with bare feet groped her way slowly along the deserted deck. It was so black that she could see nothing. She came to the end of the promenade deck and leaned against the rail. Suddenly she started and her attention was fixed, for on the lower deck she caught a fitful glow. She leaned forward cautiously. It was a little fire, and she saw only the glow because the naked backs of men, crouched round, hid the flame. At the edge of the circle she divined, rather than saw a stocky figure in pyjamas. The rest were natives, but this was a European. It must be Pryce and she guessed immediately that some dark ceremony of exorcism was in progress. Straining her ears she heard a low voice muttering a string of secret words. She began to tremble. She was aware that they were too intent upon their business to think that any one was watching them, but she dared not move. Suddenly, rending the sultry silence of the night like a piece of silk violently torn in two, came the crowing of a cock. Mrs. Hamlyn almost shrieked. Mr. Pryce was trying to save the life of his friend and master by a sacrifice to the strange gods of the East.⁵

Before finishing this article I would like to refer to Maugham's techniques: description, characterization and irony.

All the beauty of the Pacific Islands is described in some stories. In the Fall of Edward Barnard, nature in Tahiti at sunset is breathtaking; the author gives us a vivid description that is like a picture set before our eyes:

Below them coconut trees tumbled down steeply to the lagoon, and the lagoon in the evening light had the colour tender and varied, of a dove's breast. On a creek, at a little distance, were the clustered huts of a native village, and towards the reef was a canoe, sharply silhouetted, in which were a couple of natives fishing. Then, beyond, you saw the vast calmness of the Pacific and twenty miles away, airy and unsubstantial like the fabric of a poet's fancy, the unimaginable beauty of the island which is called Murea. It was all so lovely that Bateman stood abashed.⁶

5. *Ibid.*, V. I, p. 342-43.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 58-59.

Some characters are extremely well elaborated as Max Kelada in *Mr. Know All*, Darya in *Neil Mac Adam*, and Alban in *The Door of Opportunity*. *Mr. Know All* is a story about a pearl necklace that takes place in a ship going from San Francisco to the East. The main character, Max Kelada, is so true to the image of the "peacock" that when he yields his superiority and accepts defeat to keep a woman's secret, we feel a little bit disappointed. The author describes him:

"Clean—shaven and dark—skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large, lustrous and liquid eyes"...

He was a good mixer, and in three days knew everyone on board. He ran everything. He managed the sweeps, conducted the auction, collected money for prizes at the sports, got up quoit and golf matches, organised the concert and arranged the fancy dress ball. He was everywhere and always. He was certainly the best-hated man in the ship. We called him Mr. Know All, even to his face.⁷

The skillful use of irony characterizes Maugham's prose. Abruptly, at the end of some stories, we find a remark that makes us laugh. After the passionate events told before, laughter comes as a relief. The author wants to convey this idea to the readers: Life is a mixture of tragic and comical events, let's take life as it is.

7. *Ibid.*, V. II, p. 143-44.

BOOKS BY WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM

I. *Novels*

Catalina
Ashenden
Then and Now
The Razor's Edge
The Hour Before The Dawn
The Moon and Sixpence
Up at The Villa
Mrs. Craddock
Christmas Holiday
Cakes and Ale
Theatre
The Painted Veil
The Narrow Corner
Of Human Bondage
Liza of Lambeth

II. *Short Stories*

Encore
Trio
Quartet
Creatures of Circumstance
The Trembling of a Leaf
The Mixture as Before
Ah King
Cosmopolitans
The Casuarina Tree
First Person Singular
East and West
The World Over

III. *Essays*

France at War
Strictly Personal
The Summing Up
Books and You
A Writer's Notebook
The Maugham Reader

IV. *Travel*

On a Chinese Screen
Don Fernando
The Gentleman in the Parlour
The Land of the Blessed Virgin

V. *Plays*

For Services Rendered
A Man of Honour
The Breadwinner
Penelope
The Sacred Flame
Jack Straw
Sheppey
Lady Frederick
The Constant Wife
The Tent Man
The Circle
Landed Gentry
The Explorer

Plays

The Unknown Mrs. Dot Smith

Our Betters

The Land of Promise

Six Comedies