

**Somerset Maugham:  
Emulating Maupassant's Pursuit of the Truth**

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**Abstract**

Guy de Maupassant is remembered as the father of the modern short story form who depicted human lives in disillusioned terms. William Somerset Maugham adopts him as a model in the field of short story writing right from his youth and operates with a precisely realized setting, an un-blurred delineation of character and a linear narrative as per the tradition of French naturalist fiction. He even aims at emulating the French artist's pursuit of the truth besides his writing techniques. Maugham's skill in handling characters, settings, plots and clinical attitude in most of his short stories are always inspired by his master. He has even learnt from the French exponent the art of acute and sardonic genius for exposing the bitter reality of human relationships. Both of them are known to tell their stories in a clear and economical style with a cynical undertone. After going through some select stories discussed in the paper, one can surely say that the craft learnt from his master has made Maugham an unsurpassed storyteller.

Maupassant is a great French exponent of the short story form. He is remembered as a master of the modern short story form who depicted human lives as well as social forces in pessimistic terms. His stories are characterized by economy of style, efficient and effortless outcomes. Out of a collection of three hundred short stories, many are set during the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s, describing the futility of war and the innocent civilians who, caught up in events beyond their control, are permanently changed by their experiences. According to Maugham, Maupassant is the greatest artist in the kind of story that he could write. In addition, Maugham's opinion on the form of short story is "I like best the sort of story I can write myself. This is the sort of story that many people have written well, but none more brilliantly than Maupassant." Therefore, he adopts the French exponent as a model in his youth and operates with a precisely realized setting, a fair, un-blurred delineation of character and a linear narrative as per the tradition of French naturalist fiction. He even aims at emulating his master's pursuit of the truth besides his writing techniques.

However, in turning the lives of ordinary people into stories, the two writers appear to be working on quite dissimilar materials. First of all, Britain after the First World War, during the last years of the Empire was a very different place from France during and after the France-Prussian war. The main area in which Maugham moves away from the French model lies in his treatment of the Englishman as a colonial administrator. On the other hand, the leading members of the French society were not nearly as involved in the running and commercial exploitation of colonial territory as was the British during Maugham's years as a writer of short stories.

Further in France, there is not only the intellectual difference between the intellectual section of public and the popular section of public, but also a great demand is shown on the writers. Writers over there are held in high esteem and arouse intense interest. Maugham as a short story writer has often drawn attention to this, for France is a recurring preoccupation with him. The setting of many of his stories are in France, his dialogue is often in French which is usually translated, phrase to phrase so that his less educated readers may not feel excluded. He confesses to French influence on his work and acknowledges certain French writers, Maupassant in particular, as the master from whom he has learnt much of his trade. It can be well conveyed in his own words: "It was France that educated me, France that taught me to value beauty, distinction, wit and good sense, France that taught me to write."

Maugham has given to many English and American readers not perhaps by temperament or education disposed to pursue such an enquiry direct, some knowledge and appreciation of French manners and ways of thought. The French in turn have honoured Maugham and in much the same way as they honour their own successful writers,

Both Maupassant and Maugham have stories to tell at different lengths, try to be objective and keep themselves entirely out of their work. Both of them agree that a writer must be privileged to select materials according to his plan and even to distort facts to his advantage. Most of their stories are too well constructed, dramatic and have surprise endings. They do a lot with only a little bit of space. Their control over timing and pacing is incredible. One common style used by both of them is to write lots of really short paragraphs as this helps to keep the story moving at a clip. In-fact both of them avoid psychological description by keeping themselves limited to placing before readers' eyes personages and events. Their stories are dramatic, and they think that a story teller does not directly copy life as he arranges it in order to receive interest, excite and surprise. They feel that a story teller does not aim at a mere transcription of life. In-fact Maugham praises Maupassant for his astonishing capacity for creating living people. Maugham rather goes on to exploit one character more than Maupassant does by using "I" who tells the story.

Actually, this convention is very old, and its object is to achieve credibility. It is more credible when someone says he heard and saw a thing himself than he describes what happened to someone else. Maugham never forgets to appreciate Maupassant's skill in describing the surroundings of his stories. Maugham later tries to develop in description, learns to work within his limitations and finds his own kind of mastery as he doesn't narrate or describe but he speaks. It is

interesting that these two writers, differing so widely in their accomplishments and experiences from each other, come to hold nearly the same view that life is insignificant and that men are base, and wrote stories that have many similarities between them.

In addition to all these, there is a dispassionate and systematic habit of observation found in the stories of Maugham. This clinical attitude found in most of the short stories of Maugham is certainly temperamental, inherent in the man and further nourished by his admiration for the 'objective' school of French literature and especially for Maupassant, who was himself a literary disciple. Clinical attitude is closely related to these religious and philosophic opinions which Maugham has expounded from time to time with some explicitness. This outlook is developed by that habit, commonly and conveniently called cosmopolitan. To be accepted cosmopolitan, one needs to travel widely across large capital cities and be on intimate terms with the most influential communities. His frequent and extensive travels to India, Burma, Siam, Malaya, China, The South Seas, Russia and America have nourished his writings. A cosmopolitan society supplies the background for much of his fictions, but he is equally at ease with the outpost life of British and French colonies. His admiration for French culture and Eastern travel has affected him to a certain degree and depth.

In the story "The Fall of Edward Barnard" Maugham uses his favourite technique learnt from Maupassant of telling his story in a particular frame. He casts a South Sea story within a particular Chicago frame work. The story begins in a recognizable setting and then recedes into the 'marvellous' and 'unknown'. This gives the author two things as his 'marvellous' and 'unknown' acquire an exotic aura now therefore, more easily believed. Secondly the readers' sense of wonder is enhanced with the help of technique learnt from his master. It is all about a confrontation between what is called the civilized world and the primitive world. The long story is all about a well-to-do young Chicagoan, Edward, who goes out to the South Pacific for two years, in order to rise within a trading company, come home laden with dollars and prospects to marry his preppy bride-to-be, Isabelle.

In Tahiti, he has the opportunity of a life time to have a very introspective reflection about the meaning of his life. He rather falls in with a reprobate uncle of his bride, who has fled from his murky past to Tahiti, and instead of becoming a mercantilist, he finds his soul, as well as a beautiful local girl there. He continues to delay his return and postpone the promise he had made to his bride Isabelle, 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. Therefore, after an unsuccessful beginning in his initial working life, he chooses a simple life of beauty, truth and goodness. His 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?" The fall of Edward Barnard is really his choice of a higher value in life than Chicagoan materialism could offer. It is an example of the 'return to nature' theme which Maugham enjoys so often as a kind of in natural reaction against his normal sophistication.

One of Maugham's best short stories, "Rain" is a quiet act of homage to his avowed master Maupassant. Before writing this story, Maugham had actually set off with a friend on a series of travels to Eastern Asia, the Pacific Islands and Mexico. The story was inspired by a missionary and a prostitute travelling along with the fellow passengers on a trip to Pago Pago. It is full of clinical attitude learnt from his French master. It all happens in 1916, around a group of passengers travelling from Honolulu to Apia. An epidemic of measles breaks out and they are forced to stay for a couple of weeks in Pago Pago in American Samoa. Mr. Davidson is a stern new evangelical Puritan with an unbending sense of duty and an unyielding horror of what he believes to be sin. Even his wife is in possession of a mind akin to his own. Dr. McPhail on the other hand is a Scottish doctor, he together with his wife are travelling to the South Seas to recover from war wounds. The McPhails are weak but tolerant people, and one of no fixed convictions.

The reader comes across one more character named Sadie Thompson, a prostitute fleeing from the law in Honolulu. She is brash, vulgar and entirely sensual. These disparate characters due to unforeseen circumstances are forced into a community, living in a boarding house in Pago Pago. Unsurprisingly Sadie sets up shop immediately, complete with loud music, with parties and of course with gentlemen visitors. Davidson believes it is his duty not only to suppress vice wherever it may manifest itself but also to save Sadie Thomson's soul. Then an epic struggle between them ensues. Davidson enlists the aid of the governor of the island, who knows that the missionaries are well connected in Washington. Just as it appears that Davidson has won, he found on the bench with his throat cut. Sadie Thomson has succeeded in seducing him and he has killed himself with feelings of moral failure and frustration. Maugham doesn't go to sentimentalize Sadie Thompson and on the contrary, when Davidson has killed himself, the storyteller allows her to cruelly flaunt herself in front of his window, laughs and spits. She savours her triumph and at once resumes the only way of life she knew. It is a real tragedy and Maugham is inviting his readers to feel genuine compassion for a character that he has set up to dislike and whom he dislikes himself. It is an uncharitable story told unsparingly about the whole missionary profession. Maugham attacks missionary values, and in effect applauds those who live for the pleasures of this life.

Similarly, Maupassant gets a nod in the third story of Maugham, "Mr Know-All", in dealing with the aspect of creating lively people. Here the narrator finds himself sharing a cabin with an unctuous, conceited Levantine, Mr. Max Kelada, who is a native of one of the British colonies. His name even suggests that he is of middle-eastern origin. The story takes place in international waters on an ocean-going liner sailing from San Francisco to Yokohama on the Pacific Ocean. As he first enters the cabin, he sees Kelada's luggage and toilet things that have already been unpacked. The man's name and the sight of his things arouse a strong repulsion in the narrator since he is prejudiced against all non-Britons. On meeting Kelada, the narrator's sense of hatred gets even stronger due to their cultural difference. He then begins to detest his gestures as well. Consequently, the description of Kelada by the narrator at the beginning is negative and biased. In addition, he is a person who seems to know everything and involved in everything, not sensing that he is disliked by everybody. He remains chatty throughout and talks as if he is superior to everybody else. The passengers even mock at him and call him Mr. Know - All directly on his face.

There is another dogmatic person on the ship, Mr. Ramsay, an American Consular Serviceman stationed in Kobe, Japan. He is on his way to Kobe after having picked up his pretty little wife, who had stayed on her own in New York for a whole year. She looks very modest, perfect and adorable. Her clothes are simple although they achieved an effect of quiet distinction. On one particular evening, the conversation drifts to the subject of pearls. As Mrs. Ramsay has worn a string of pearls at that moment, Kelada talks regarding the genuineness of those pearls and guesses they would probably cost many thousands of dollars. He even gets ready to bet a hundred dollars on it. Ramsay, on the other hand, is sure that his wife has bought it for eighteen dollars from a department store. As Mr. Know - All takes out a magnifying glass from his pocket to check the quality of pearls, he notices a desperate appeal in Mrs. Ramsay's eyes. He then immediately realizes that Mrs. Ramsay would have got the pearls from her lover. He guesses the actual story behind the necklace and understands that to be adultery. Since he doesn't want to destroy Mrs. Ramsay's marriage, so prefers to ruin his reputation instead. He tells everybody that he is wrong in checking the quality of the string and says that it is an excellent imitation. He gives Ramsay a hundred dollars and the story spreads all over the ship and all mock at him. Later, while the narrator and Mr. Know - All are in their cabin, an envelope is pushed under the door. It contains a hundred-dollar bill from Mrs. Ramsay. It is then that the narrator knows the reality and learns to value the dark-skinned Levantine. He is rather amazed at Kelada's generosity and magnanimity. He tells a lie at the cost of a hundred dollar and his pride to save a lady from embarrassment. The irony of the story lies in the fact that the list of his "negative" traits presented in the beginning of the story shows an orderly, neat and tidy gentleman at the end. Although he makes a nuisance of himself at the beginning, displays supreme virtue of compassion in a situation that demands ultimate sacrifice and self-control.

The fourth story of Maugham, "A String of Beads" is an inspiration taken from the prolific French writer. It is a satire on the middle-class people and an imitation of one of his master's famous short stories, "The Necklace", with a twist. The main character Miss Robinson is a governess of Sophie Livingstone. She is a well-mannered and well-liked governess in a wealthy household. One night, she is invited to dine with the family and a few of their distinguished guests. One of these guests, Miss Lyngate, is particularly very proud of her own string of pearls. Shockingly, Count Borselli, an expert on jewellery, also present during the occasion, seems to be more impressed with Miss Robinson's string of beads than with Miss Lyngate's precious pearls. He insists that the pearls worn by the governess are real and precious. He also expresses his doubts regarding the affordability on the part of a governess for something so expensive. The guests on the other hand feel that it could have happened mistakenly. The governess actually happens to wear a pearl necklace worth fifty thousand pounds by mistake. She wears it thinking it to be worth fifty shillings. Her own string gets interchanged with a string of real pearls when she had taken it to re-fix the clasp a little earlier. Initially Sophie, the owner, is satirical and critical in her approach towards Miss Robinson but her honesty pays off towards the end of the story in the form of a gift cheque worth three hundred pounds by her owner. The reader also towards the end comes to know that the mistake turns out to be a fortunate one for Miss Robinson. The same amount actually enables the middle-class girl to go to Deauville and later on settle in Paris as a smart and rich lady.

After going through all the above stories, it can be aptly said that Maugham's skill in handling characters, settings, plots, and clinical attitude are inspired by his master. He has motivated Maugham to tell his stories in an economical style with a resigned undertone. He has also learnt from the French exponent the art of acute and sardonic genius for exposing the bitter reality of human relationships. The craft learnt from Maupassant has made him a consummate storyteller.

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