

## Somerset Maugham: Mirroring Human Life and Human Weaknesses

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Courtesy: Maugham photographed by [Carl Van Vechten](#) in 1934

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W.\\_Somerset\\_Maugham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._Somerset_Maugham)

### Abstract

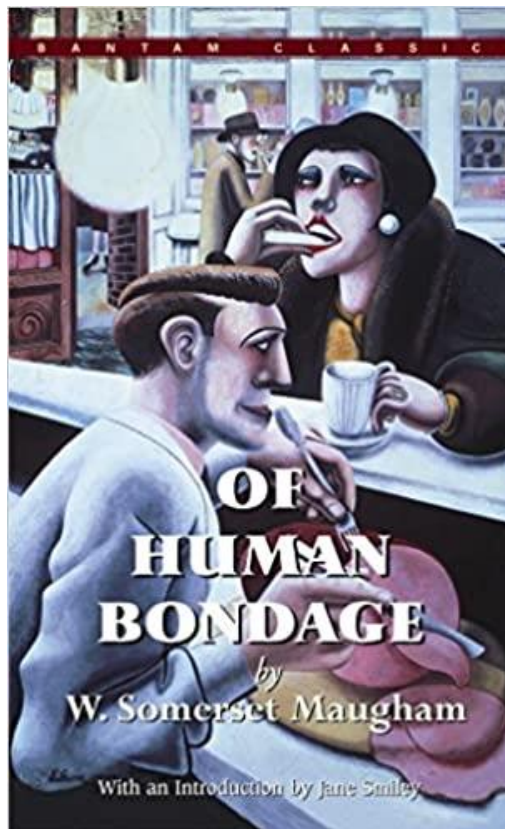
This paper tries to present Somerset Maugham neither as an idealist nor a moralist but a realist who mirrors ‘human life and human weaknesses’ to the core. This paper analyses how he excelled his contemporaries in his varied and picturesque narration of characters. Thus, this paper projects how Maugham by his elaborate narration, simple style, lucid and euphonic dialogues and ironic endings, displayed himself as a realist in mirroring life and human weakness.

**Keywords:** Somerset Maugham, Realistic, human values, sufferings, humanistic, narration, characterization.

It is generally understood and accepted that William Somerset Maugham is a popular playwright, a well-known short story writer and an entertaining novelist of the twentieth century. Due to the death of his mother in 1882 and father in 1884, he lived like an orphan. During his school days, he read and observed his fellow human beings and he suffered from the whips and scorns of the teaching faculty. Whatever the problems at school might be,

Maugham developed his power of observation ever since he entered the school. Such was his power of observation that he related his experience admirably. As Curtis puts it, “He soon discovered where his real power lay, in the accuracy of his insights. If I suggested wounds, he was capable of inflicting them. His tongue was sharp if not, sharper than anyone’s” (P 35).

Maugham learnt German, attended Kuno Fisher’s lectures at the University of Heidelberg, saw performances of Ibsen and listened to Wagner. As he was a voracious reader, his reading broadened and expanded as little drops of water that make a mighty ocean. He read Fielding, Meredith, Swinburne, Verlaine, Pater, Matthew Arnold, Dante and Fitzgerald’s *Omar Khayyam*. Maugham did suffer, despite of all his reading, loneliness to a great extent. This affected his personality considerably. Though he received his MD degree, he had no intention to practise. He wanted to be a writer and so he chose his career himself. He started to consider about man at the age of twenty-five and he wanted to find out solutions for his troubled personality which was affected with the problems of good and evil and the immortality of the soul. He was continuously babbled and bewildered with problems till the end of his life. His first successful novel is *Cakes and Ale*. His craftsmanship as a narrator began to improve then. *Of Human Bondage* seems to be his master-piece. His philosophical novel *The Razor’s Edge* attracted the attention of his readers by his skilful narrative technique. It was considered as a prelude to the narrator’s conversational style.



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*Of Human Bondage* is an autobiographical novel. In this novel, facts, emotions and feelings were Maugham's own. The characters have been analysed psychologically. The design of the novel is simple without any flash-backs. The orphan, Philip Cary, suffers from clubfoot as Maugham suffered from Stammer. Thus, the novel *Of Human Bondage* represents a tableau of human life which is a product of Maugham's personal experience. Maugham's knowledge of human psychology was found to be profound. Here in this novel, one can find an excellent example of his understanding of human life. Suffering from some personal problems Philip has shown how bitterness, humiliation, ridicule, loneliness, disillusionment and disappointment are necessary experiences for the maturity of man. Here is found his psychological problems Maugham's narrative technique highlights the merits and demerits of his principal characters. With the power of uniting his major characters and the minor characters by means of flashbacks, he made his narration quite interesting. The curiosity of the reader is aroused to read his novels, especially *Cakes and Ale* and *The Razor's Edge*.

*Cakes and Ale* is a comic novel based on the life of a famous novelist, Mr. Edward Driffield and his first wife Rosie, an ex-barmaid. The novel raised unholy storm on its publication. Many felt that Maugham had hinted Thomas Hardy, the Grand Old Master of Literature, through Edward Driffield and Alroy Kears was a derogatory picture of Hugh Walpole. Mr. Cardel considers *Cakes and Ale* as an autobiographical novel. The peculiar characteristic of the novel is comical. Almost all the characters of the novel are taken from the narrator's life. The novel is a symbol of mockery at the Georgian Literary Society. It begins in a sarcastic and informal manner. Curtis says that Maugham presents human relationship in the urban literary society. Maugham is of the opinion that *Cakes and Ale* is the range of sittings and periods it encompasses. It incorporates Victorian provincial life, Edwardian social and literary manners and the Georgian scene two decades later. Maugham's participation in World War II deserves mention here. He travelled throughout America. The war being over, Maugham returned to his Villa. He never wanted to retire from writing until unlike many other aging writers like E.M. Forster. *The Razor's Edge*, his last great novel, was widely read and appreciated by servicemen of war. The title of the novel *The Razor's Edge* was borrowed from *Katha Upanishad*. It says the sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass; thus the wise say the path of salvation is hard. It is a philosophic novel based on Indian mysticism. It represents Maugham's attitude towards life and his faith in renunciation. Larry is the hero of this novel. He comes to India and gets in touch with Indian Sadhus and philosophers and from whom he assimilates the lesson of renunciation.

As one of the prominent literary figures of the twentieth century, Maugham's contribution in the field of English literature has left behind him a rich legacy for the reading public. In 1950, he became a celebrity. "He was perhaps, as Martin Day observed in 1965, the most widely read English novelist of the twentieth century" (Burt 25). Being the favourites of the Edwardian conscience, Shaw and Wells had proclaimed the sins and follies of the Victorian England. While Galsworthy aimed at practical humanitarian aspect of life,

Bennett's concentration was on the working of times on society and human nature, Maugham showed his real interest towards the follies and pretensions of human life. While Shaw was a prophet, Maugham was a humanist. Maugham was not an innovator, moral or technical. However, "Where Shaw, Galsworthy and Wells concerned themselves with society, and directed attention to faults in its structure, Maugham's exceptionally keen eye was upon the follies of individuals" (Jonas 13).

As a prolific writer of fiction, Maugham has given a graphic picture and impressive portrayal of characters, Ashenden and Rosie in *Cakes and Ale* and Elliott, Larry and Isabel in *The Razor's Edge*. He has excelled his contemporaries in his wonderful, varied and picturesque narration on his various characters, minor or major. He has charmingly analysed the family attachment in the case of Isabel and Gray and detachment in the case of Drifffield and Rosie Drifffield. But Rosie is so much attached with George Kemp, her second husband (her ex-lover) and intimate companion throughout her life. *The Razor's Edge* is Maugham's last major work written in the first person singular and it is more personal than anything he had written since *The Narrow Corner*. He writes: "Maugham, of course, used the first person singular in *The Moon and Six Pence* and *Cakes and Ale* ..." (Calder 297).

One of the masters of English style, Maugham is critical, satirical and humorous by turns. But his style is uniformly excellent. The secret of his success lies in his narrative skill. He not only practices but also analyses the excellences of style. He has mirrored his attitudes such as tastes, and temperaments, passions and emotions, likes and dislikes, pathos and pleasures in his novels. Maugham sarcastically narrates the personal life of Elliott. His behavior is comic. Mrs. Bradley is convinced by his false statements about Larry's private life. But Isabel proves that Elliott is a fate and Larry is free from flaws. He is a link between Maugham and the other American characters. As a man of fifty, tall with good features, a colossal snob, he has a passion for social relationship. He is a hypocrite, a fake and a liar. He has got some virtues and many vices. He has settled down in France because to him, it is the only civilized country in the world. He is more interesting than other Characters. He is proud and very much impressed with Paris for its civilization and grandeur. He is arrogant to some people but hospitable on some occasions. Though he is unpopular, he is tolerated by everybody who attends his lunch on meetings.

Larry is a symbol of self-sacrifice unlike Isabel, his lady love. His is an embodiment of goodness unlike the other characters in *The Razor's Edge*. Human nature differs from individual to individual, place to place and time to time, it appears to be very complex and hazardous. It can be observed in the name of Isabel, Gray, Elliott, Sophie and Suzanne. There was much criticism about the plot construction of *The Razor's Edge*. But all the allegations are not true. Each character is narrated in an informal manner. Larry speaks about his fear and doubts and narrates his mystical experiences in India and Germany to Maugham. He expresses his contact with holy men and its impact in his life. He also states his mental tortures through his restlessness and confessions. Shri Ganesha and father Ensheim interpret

them. One can analyse and understand Larry by his sensitive interpretation of life and its misfortunes. However, he reaches ecstasy. It is understood that this personal experience differs from individual to individual. Maugham uses the technique of first person narrative. The narrator does not act as an omniscient person. He collects information from the other characters of the novel, especially from Larry's friends and others. He also elicits from his personal contact with the characters. In the beginning of the novel, *The Razor's Edge* the narrator appears as a middle aged English observed with rich experience about the west and the east.

Maugham introduces the principal characters through luncheons, dinners, social movements and travel experiences. Through the use of 'I' first person, the narrator exposes his view on his characters and their importance. To understand his technique, one has to analyse his various characters. Since the characters are drawn from his personal experiences, they are realistic, thereby revealing the concept of life. Maugham is not an original thinker. He is satisfied with the secondhand information. Human nature is portrayed in both the novels, *Cakes and Ale* and *The Razor's Edge*. If Joyce, Hemingway and Virginia Woolf were changing the face of literature, Maugham was creating an epoch in twentieth century literature. He followed the old narrative technique till the end of his writing career. The story of his novels is striking. Its dramatic and compact structure, subtle dialogues tense situations and portrayal of lively characters like Larry and Isabel in *The Razor's Edge* and Rosie in *Cakes and Ale* make it readable. These lively characters give charm and add beauty and sweetness. Both of these novels begin and end in a dramatic way. However, the end is ironical. The narrator has left the reader in an air of suspense in order to dream and make his own conclusion. Curtis remarks:

“Cakes and Ale annoyed the readers, especially two great novelists, one dead and other was still alive. Maugham was severely condemned. Besides, Rosie is identified as the second daughter of Henry Arthur, Jones, with whom Maugham had his great premarital affair” (P 141).

The theme of the novel *Cakes and Ale* is the life of Edward Driffield, who dies in his old age. His widow, the hospital nurse, knows something about Rosie, the first wife of Driffield. She entrusts to Alroy Kear, the popular novelist of the time, to write the biography of Driffield. Kear meets Ashendan who knows the Driffields (Driffield and his first wife) as a boy in Blacks table and a London Medical student. Three novelists are seen in the plot and there are two stories knitted through one plot. The theme of the novel *The Razor's Edge* is search for peace. Path of life is full of trials and tribulations. He wanders to get peace of mind. The title of the novel is derived from Kathopanishad. Kathopanishad compares the path of soul (spiritual life) to a razor's edge. Maugham's narrative technique is commendable. The plot helps the writer narrate the story aptly. He adopts two methods in his narration. He has chosen to write in the first person in both the novels *The Razor's Edge* and *Cakes and Ale*.

In a word, it may be said that Maugham's works reflect his personality at different angles of his personal life and narrative skill.

Maugham is a humorous writer whose wit and humour sparkle, startle and delight the readers. Wit of Maugham does subordinate his comic intentions. It is the instrument by which the narrator exposes the realistic nature of his characters. Maugham ridicules Isabel so as to mend or reform her attitude towards Larry and Sophie. As a good satirist, the narrator's aim is to focus his attention on the weaknesses, vices and follies of Isabel. His conversation with her is often wrapped in ridiculous words. His narration is satirical, and his satire aims at the amendment of Isabel's vices. His satire in *Cakes and Ale* and ironical end in both the novels, *Cakes and Ale* and *The Razor's Edge* attract readers all over the literary world. Maugham is a cynic. A cynic has the natural attitude to know about the price and value of his characters. Maugham is aware of the human nature and its relative activity in life.

Maugham could communicate his readers very easily. It is one of his greatest achievements. His technique of narration, characterization and style influenced writers. The reader recognizes his creations because his artistic imagination and humanitarian vision. Being mainly concerned with the reality of life, he is a keen observer of characters. In his novels, Maugham, the narrator is found presenting a pattern of life. No doubt, the characters remain artistically along with the novelist who goes on narrating different aspects of life. whatever the case may be, his novels are realistic and entertaining. According to Burt, "Maugham wrote of life as he observed and experienced it" (P 134).

To conclude, it may be stated that Maugham is a popular novelist representing the twentieth century British novelist. His narration is elaborate, style simple, lucid and euphonic, dialogues, numerous life egoistic and endings ironic. He was neither, an idealist nor a moralist, but a realist. Rosie's non-possessiveness, Ashenden's intimacy with Rosie, Driffield's non-interference policy in family life, Elliott's generosity and hospitality, Larry's superficiality and non-attachment, and Sophie's sexuality in helplessness are obviously expressed by Maugham in his novels. As a well-known novelist and a distinguished narrator, Maugham has mirrored life and human weakness.

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