

Novel Club 2021 Of Human Bondage By W. Somerset Maugham 1874-1965

Biographical paper by Toby Siegel

"Perhaps not since David Copperfield, who was considered an obvious inspiration for Maugham, had an English writer mined his own life so explicitly or so ruthlessly." Thus begins the search for the facts and influences about William Somerset Maugham's life, and perhaps an answer to Why read Somerset Maugham? He was a prolific author of comedies, short stories, plays, and novels, his first novel "Liza of Lambeth", was written in 1897, and last, "Catalina" was written in 1948.

Somerset Maugham served in the ambulance corps with The British Red Cross during WWI and in 1916 was a member of the British Secret Intelligence Service and traveled extensively to Southeast Asia, Samoa, and India, incorporating his international experiences in short stories and novels. He was considered one of the most successful British writers of the Edwardian era, and wrote descriptions of background settings, interior descriptions of squalid as well as lush residences, landscapes and street scenes that invited the reader into his writing. At one time he was the most famous writer in the world. One biographer wrote that in 1934, when Ernest Hemingway was asked by a young writer what to read, the answer was, "Of Human Bondage". Maugham moved to Hollywood in 1920. Of the three movies that were made with that same title, the last one played in 1965, starring Kim Novak Laurence Harvey, and is considered the best of all.

He was referred to as Willie by friends such as Dorothy Parker, Charlie Chaplin, D.H. Lawrence and Winston Churchill. While living in Paris during the 1920's, his social life centered on enjoying the rich food, champagne, alcohol and music of the times. His marriage to his mistress, due to an unexpected pregnancy, lasted from 1917 until 1929 and was disastrous, due to his ambivalent, conflicted sexuality and her promiscuous lifestyle. Syrie Wellcome was a successful, manipulative, social climber, an interior designer referred to as, "The Princess of Pale", creating interiors for Palm Beach residents and international clients whose tastes she was able to change from dark and heavy Victorian colors and furnishings, to all-white walls and furniture she designed. The Maugham marriage, unhappy, unpredictable, unstable was accepted by his famous friends who were aware that Willie and his true love, an, "alcoholic charmer and a cad", named Gerald Haxton, traveled with a society of writers and artists who accepted them. Syrie attempted suicide several times and the marriage slowly and painfully dissolved. Maugham was nonetheless considered the father of her two children from her first marriage as well as their daughter, Liza, and a grandfather of six.

Throughout his long ninety-one years, bits and pieces of his life were incorporated into his writing. Spanning two centuries, he witnessed inventions of the telephone, microphones, the light bulb, and 170,000 miles of railway that were built in America and throughout the world. Science fiction was transformed into facts due to the Lunar Lander, weather satellites were launched, and industrial robots were employed, leading to the airline's popularity, and all were observed by Maugham. These cultural references were included in his writings when he deemed them appropriate, especially in his opinion pieces, short stories and essays. His language continued to be concise, direct, and very readable. A 1919 reviewer wrote, "The Moon and Sixpence" is "One of the finest pieces of romantic realism I have ever read." "The Razor's Edge" in 1944, "Rain",

"The Painted Veil", and "Cakes and Ale" achieved popularity as well. The ongoing themes in his writings were the suffering of the poor, disillusioned citizens who moved to Paris searching for meaning in life, rejection,

compassion, alcoholism, obsession, and a love affair with a status -seeking fiancée. Sounds familiar!

Maugham, as an older adult, admitted that the intertwined mixture of fact and fiction was difficult for him to separate. Sharing three quotes that give an inkling into more of the man's complex personality: 1. There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are. 2. The love that lasts the longest is the love that isn't returned. And, 3. It is one of the defects of my character that I cannot altogether dislike anyone who has made me laugh. Not profound but certainly inspiring comments for a writer whose characters often appear to be emotionally flat, devoid of feelings, self-centered, self-serving and lacking a sense of humor. "Of Human Bondage" was published in 1915, and considered autobiographical: an orphan raised by an unemotional uncle, overcomes a defect, has many detours in his adolescent life choices, is unlucky in love, and grows in spite of his problems.

Willie lived in France from 1926 to the time of his death in 1965. Due to the Nazi invasion in 1940, he was forced to leave his home on the French Riviera, although he was considered one of the wealthiest, most famous writers in the English speaking world. He became a "refugee" and moved to America and England. He cherished his freedom and independence, but critics often pointed out inconsistencies in his work. One humorous article was titled, "Which Foot-Left or Right?" and in 1990, Gore Vidal wrote in The New York Review of Books, an essay about Willie's autobiography, "Looking Back", stating, "the ancient Maugham mined his own monument, and blew it up." Ambiguities prevailed. In spite of his lifelong stutter he maintained friendships with Dorothy Parker, Charlie Chaplin, D.H. Lawrence, Winston Churchill, the Cole Porters, and his American publisher Nelson Doubleday. He was a bridge enthusiast, a tennis player, golfer and swimmer. It was noted that none of the people in his life could ever distract him once he began a new project.

Due to a single-minded dedication to his art he produced 189 published articles, 16 short stories, 25 plays, (the first in 1903, "A Man of Honor") and 20 novels, with the most read, our choice for tonight's discussion, "Of Human Bondage". His hope was to find serenity in old age, and despite his imperfections, find comfort in Nice. The calm that he desired was shattered by ongoing nightmares and anxieties. After Haxton died, in 1944, Alan Searle became Maugham's new companion with the approval of friends who saw Willie's mental decline. Searle became malicious and selfish and devised ways to prevent Liza from inheriting her father's large estate, causing lawsuits and much more painful gossip and cruel publicity. Yes, Willie knew and wrote about human misery, but misery is timeless, and his works are being reprinted again. The new publisher wrote, "His reading public is more loyal now, and thus Willie has achieved one of the most basic achievements in writing literature...to delight.