

OF HUMAN BONDAGE

By Somerset Maugham

As Toby's bio paper has indicated. Somerset Maugham for much of his life was one of the most famous writers in the world. He once had four plays running simultaneously in London's theatre district, and his novels were best sellers in England and in America.

But his acclaim from the critics was always uneven. Many English critics were not really interested in his work. Although the American author Theodore Dreiser championed his books, particularly Of Human Bondage, author Joseph Conrad wrote that Maugham was just an observer, "he just looks on, (which) apparently is what the general reader prefers." Edmund Wilson said, "I have never been able to convince myself that he was anything but second rate." Surprisingly, Maugham himself sometimes agreed with such comments. In his autobiography he explained: "I discovered my limitations early, and it seemed to me that the only sensible thing was to aim at what excellence I could within them."

But history has treated Maugham well. His novels are still reprinted and read, not unlike Dickens of the 19th century. Of his many books, tonight's novel, Of Human Bondage, was the one Maugham considered to be his masterpiece. At nearly 800 pages, it is also his longest novel. Critics at the time felt it would have benefited considerably by drastic editing, to perhaps one half its published length. But those comments assumed that Of Human Bondage was just another novel

But in reality it is more than a novel. Maugham took off several years to write this book at the height of his fame. It was the time in his life when he was a very successful and much in demand playwright. He gave up several years of what would have been financially very lucrative playwriting to devote all his

time to the book because, as he later wrote, "I knew by writing (this book) I could rid myself of a great number of unhappy recollections that never ceased to harrow me. And the writing did (just that)."

Maugham's comment tells us why Of Human Bondage, is as long as it is, and why it includes so much step-by-step detail of its protagonist's life. The novel was for the author not just a book – it was also a catharsis. Its purpose – to release Maugham from the great and disturbing impact on his psyche of his unhappy experiences while a child and a young man – was the reason he felt he had to write it.

And the author readily admits, that the book, particularly the first 600 plus pages, although not an autobiography, is certainly autobiographical. A short recap of the novel will make the parallels with the author's life very clear:

Philip Carey, the young protagonist, is an orphan with a club foot, growing up in Britain in the last decade of the 19th century. After his mother and father die, Philip goes to live with his aunt and his uncle, who is a vicar, in Blackstable in southeast England.

Philip is sent by his uncle to a local boarding school, to prepare him for going to Oxford University and then entering the clergy. His years at the school are unhappy ones. He is bullied and is ridiculed for his club foot. Although he does very well in his studies, he remains an introverted, lonely boy.

Philip is also in a social class where he is considered a gentleman, but he has very little money to play the part, another aspect of his life that separates him from nearly all the other students. Philip hates the boarding school life, and instead of continuing on to Oxford after he graduates, he convinces his uncle to let him study in Heidelberg for a year to learn German. Returning to England, he tries to apprentice as an accountant, but finds he has no talent for it and then goes to Paris to study art. Two years pass and he knows he also does not have the talent to be a real artist, so he returns to England and begins to study medicine, the profession of his deceased father. At this point in the novel, he meets Mildred, a waitress, becomes obsessed with her, and their chaotic relationship then becomes the major part of the book. Coarse, indifferent, shallow, and totally duplicitous, Mildred nevertheless becomes the

love of Philip's life, despite having a total lack of any feelings for him, or for that matter, having any gratitude for all he does for her.

Mildred has a child by another man; she has an affair with one of Philip's best friends; she continually deceives and lies to him, but he remains passionately and totally irrationally bound to her – one of the bondages of the book's title. Philip remains a shameless slave to his passion for her until he finally he discovers she has become a street walker, a prostitute, and his passion dies. He still tries to help her and her child, to the extent his meager funds allow, but he is no longer obsessed with her.

But life has more trials in store for Philip. He loses what little money he had in stock investments. He works in a shop at starvation wages. And it is only after his uncle dies and he receives a small bequest that he is able to finish his medical education.

The one good thing that happens to Philip at this stage in his young life is becoming the close friend of a hospital patient, Mr. Thorpe Athelny, who with his wife and large family, give Philip the unreserved acceptance and kindness he has been searching for all his life. He completes his medical training and learns to love Athelny's oldest daughter, Sally, a sweet, honest, down to earth young woman. She agrees to marry Philip, and as the novel ends Philip is looking forward to practicing medicine in a small seaside town and having a family.

Philip's story is almost a replica of Maugham's actual experience as a child and young man. His mother died when he was eight, his father a few years later. So at age ten Philip was to sent to live with his aunt and his uncle, a vicar. They put him in a boarding school, where the other boys bullied him for his small size and for his stammer, the presumed equivalent of Philip's club foot. Like Philip, he was very diligent and intelligent and rose to the top of his class.

Maugham also studied for a year in Heidelberg and spent time in Paris. Once back in London he went to medical school. He found himself fascinated by the patients he saw and by their stories and became determined to be a writer. He also had a long and unhappy love affair, presumed to be the

source of the Mildred of the novel. But we do not know if Mildred's alter ego was a man or a woman, although from Maugham's later life it was likely to have been a man. Mildred's character, in any event as captured by Maugham, is frighteningly real – too real, most critics believe – to be drawn entirely from a writer's imagination.

As I mentioned earlier I would agree with the critics who fault the novel for its excessive length, but repeat that this criticism must be tempered by the understanding that the book was written not just as a novel, but with the thoroughness appropriate to a catharsis exercise – and a catharsis requires completeness, if it is to lay at rest the inner demons created during our young and formative years – the years when Maugham struggled to find acceptance, love and recognition while feeling himself very much alone in the world.

Maugham borrowed the title of his book from Spinoza's book Ethics, where Spinoza wrote: "The impotence of man to govern or restrain the emotions I call bondage. For a man who is under their control is not his own master." Instead, Spinoza continues, "a man like this is mastered by fortune, in whose power he is, so that he is often forced to follow the worse, although he sees the better before him." And the novel can certainly be seen as a story of Spinoza's bondage description.

The most obvious bondage I already mentioned: it is Philip's unreasoned obsession with Mildred. This is a major part of the book and perhaps the book's most honest writing. Philip's obsession continues despite Mildred's constant actions proving again and again that she does not return his affection. It is almost embarrassing to read how a man can sink so low in the thralls of his passion – but yet – do not newspaper headlines periodically tell us this happens every day?

But Maugham's novel provides other types of human bondage as well:

- Foremost among those is religion. Philip eventually comes to regard Christianity as a bondage which must be cut away to obtain freedom in life. Religion is tied in his young mind to the dreary services in the Cathedral at Tercanbury, and to the long hours of boredom surrounded by the cold

stones of Blackstable church, where his uncle was vicar. Religion is meant to satisfy the natural human desire to find order and meaning in the universe, but Philip eventually comes to the understanding that there is no God, and that meaning in the universe can only come from the meaning that your personal actions give to your existence. He had freed himself from another bondage.

This is, of course, the same conclusion reached by the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his best-known book Thus Spoke Zarathustra, where he says that each individual must recognize honestly the nihilism of the present, but then also must have the courage to mold that present into his own meaningful life. Maugham was very well-read and was certainly familiar with Nietzsche's writings.

- And finally and perhaps most importantly there is the devastating bondage of a false and destructive self-image, an image of self-hatred. This can poison all your relations to others and totally distort your ability to make constructive decisions. It is a life altering bondage resulting in behavior, passions and convictions contrary to reason. This was certainly Philip's most destructive bondage, and one that persisted and controlled his behavior until the last part of the novel.

Maugham will never be considered a Hemingway or a Joyce. His style, or perhaps his lack of style, is too simple. His strength is good storytelling, as he himself readily admitted. Of Human Bondage, as autobiographical as it is, is a good example. It is well plotted; he is a master at setting the scene, each portion of the novel fits neatly into the next, and in the process he creates drama from everyday life. His great skill as a writer was his sheer power of observation of the human condition – and the precision with which he brings it to the written pages – for example the devastating conditions of the poor in the London slums, and the true-to-life eccentric characters and their stories that populate his novels and short stories.

As the essayist Joseph Epstein so aptly put it: "Maugham never ceased being fascinated by the investigation of that magnificent, comic, admirable,

outrageous, depressing, impressive, grim, gracious, grudging, great and elusive thing we call human nature”

For me, at least, this great strength of Maugham’s skill as a writer is well illustrated by the last third of the novel – once the story no longer needed to follow its autobiographical route. In contrast to the detailed step-by-step completeness and almost savage honesty used to describe Philip’s earlier life, post-Mildred Maugham’s natural storytelling talent is allowed to better emerge. Philip is able to shed his past bondages and looks with optimism on his future. He completes his medical studies and finds that his patients like him and, even more importantly, they recognize him as a caring and competent human being. Philip is no longer held in bondage to his past feelings of self-hatred, and in the process the author raises the most significant philosophical questions the novel has to offer – how best to live a satisfying life.

You could say, as some critics have, that this switch in mood is too much of a sentimental happy ending. I do not agree. I found it welcome, insightful, and even droll. I particularly enjoyed the tongue-in-cheek contrast in the very last lines of the novel where Sally agrees to marry Philip, and Philip says “I am so happy,” and Sally replies, “I want my lunch.”

As we know, Maugham himself was not as fortunate as his alter-ego, Philip, in excising his demons of bondage. The central love affair in his life was with a very handsome and very alcoholic young man named Gerald Haxton., who served as his general factotum and who specialized in making incredibly embarrassing public scenes. Yet, very Mildred/Philip-like, each man was bound to the other; Maugham from obsessive love, Haxton presumably because of the life style it allowed him to lead. But yet, neither man ever seemed to derive anything close to contentment from their bondage.

And also like Philip in most of the novel, Maugham was never quite comfortable in his own skin. He was unhappy about his short stature, his lack of good looks, and he never lost his frustration and the shyness rendered by his stammer. And perhaps key, he never stopped worrying about the world knowing that he was homosexual.

But, let me close by relating a comment made by Maugham to a friend just before his 90th birthday. He was then near the end of a long life where he had given the world endlessly amusing plays, and scores of entertaining novels and short stories. From the riches provided by his success, he had lavished generous hospitality to hundreds of friends over many decades, and he was respected and recognized world-wide for his talent.

Maugham told his friend that the greatest satisfaction and consolation of his long life were the letters he received every day from the young people around the world, thanking him for the enjoyment and insights of his books and stories. "They are still reading me" he told his friend with great satisfaction and pride. "They are still reading me."