

Somerset Maugham on Himself

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While doing volunteer duty at Basically Books, a used bookstore in Diamond Bar, I came across a copy of *A Traveller in Romance: Uncollected Writings 1901-1964* of W. Somerset Maugham [Edited by John Whitehead]. As I perused the contents it brought back memories of my initial reading of *Of Human Bondage* in about 1960. I was not satisfied with the novel and wrote to a close friend, Bill Rogers, then a student at Stanford, to offer him my viewpoint. His thoughtful response, even as a young man, gave me pause and resulted in my reading the book once again, this time with more understanding.

Although I have dipped into Maugham's most popular novels, I find him most fascinating as a short story writer and essayist. The two volume production, *The Complete Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham* (91 stories), published by Doubleday and Company retains a prominent place on my shelves even yet, but I have a special liking for the 61 stories in volume two, which takes Maugham to many exotic places in this world, many of the stories based on actual events in his life, but fictionalized for greater interest to the reader.

The essays that first attracted my attention in the newest purchase dealt with those that viewed aspects of his life at various stages, from relative youth (age 49) to his advanced age of ninety. Here were the viewpoints of a sophisticated man who told it as it is. It seems he was, overall, satisfied with his life especially after his youth, with the disliked studies at medical school behind him. His eventual success in writing, which came early, satisfied him as a lifelong pursuit.

The first essay, *On the Approach of Middle Age*, published in *Vanity Fair* in 1923, tells much of the age and of his involvement

with the society of the day. The following quotation sets the stage for Maugham and his subsequent essays on aging.

I think I have always been more conscious of my age than most men. It is generally supposed that the young live in the present, but I know that I lived only in the future. I was ever looking forward, generally to something I proposed to do in some place other than that in which I found myself; and no sooner was I there, doing what I had so much wanted, than it became of small account, for my fancy raced forward, and I busied myself with what next year would bring. I never enjoyed the daffodils of today, because I was always thinking of the roses of tomorrow. Sometimes I think that it is the unimaginative who get the most out of life, for to them alone the fleeting moment is all in all.

In the course of the short essay, Maugham relates a few incidents from his life as a youth – he was very serious as a young man (and perhaps also as he aged, as his subsequent essays show). He concludes his 1923 essay by saying:

So here are at least two good things that middle age gives you: the inestimable boon of freedom, and the precious gift of laughter. What makes youth unhappy is its desire to be like everybody else: what makes middle age tolerable is its reconciliation with oneself.

But frankness well becomes the man who is no longer young: I would sooner be a fool of twenty-five than a philosopher of fifty.

Now, jumping to 1939, I found Maugham's essay, *Sixty-Five*, where he looks back on his accomplishments in the world of the profession of authorship. In this essay, much is written about his writings and that of other famous writers, most given approbation, though some, particularly Henry James, do not escape his searing comments. Included here are a few short excerpts from the essay.

I am a person more inclined to look forward than to look back. I have settled with myself what books (not many) I propose to write in the future and have made my plans so that I may finish them while I can reasonably expect with the aid of common sense and the care of good doctors still to possess the powers, such as they are, which I have inherited from nature and developed by application. Then the pattern will be complete.

To produce a work of art has always been my purpose; it is not for me to say whether I have now and then achieved it. Just as happiness, they tell us, is attained not by aiming at it directly, but is a result that may accompany and reward efforts that seem to conduce to other ends, so I do not suppose anyone can create a work of art by setting out to do so; so far as the writer of fiction is concerned he develops to the best of his ability the subject that for the time engages his attention and it is a happy accident if when he has got all his could out of it he has fashioned a work of art.

People often speak of style as if it were something that you had by nature (if you were lucky) or acquired by labour, and once in possession of it used systematically. That may be very well for the historian or the essayist; I do not believe it does for the novelist. The novelist must adopt, if he can, a different style for every different novel he writes; and even within the limits of a single novel his style must vary according to whether he writing dialogue, reporting events or describing an environment. ... I have aimed at writing in such a way as to express with brevity and clearness what I wanted to say and to allow nothing in my language to come between the reader and my meaning. ... I have never ceased my effort to attain the simplicity, lucidity and euphony which were the qualities I aimed at; but now when I survey my achievement it is with a smile of misgiving; for I am well aware that the greatest novelists the world has ever known, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, wrote in a very slovenly fashion. I can only conclude that if you have vitality, invention, originality and the gift of creating living persons it does not really matter a row of pins how you write. All the same it is better to write well.

From age sixty-five, we jump another fifteen years to a radio broadcast made on January 28, 1954. The essay here is titled *Looking Back on Eighty Years*, and it is filled with pleasant remembrance of his youth and middle age. The essay starts off describing the world in which he was born and the changes and customs of things that were once there and are no more. I think if we think about it we can all realize the multitude of important changes that have taken place during our lifetimes. A major change that has taken place during my lifetime is that in war of the past, armed forces had the ability to destroy buildings, and even most of cities, as in Berlin, or in their entirety, as Hiroshima and Nagasaki can attest, but now we have the ability to destroy entire countries if

total power is unleashed. It is an uncomfortable and frightening thought.

For Maugham, in 1892, there were no airplanes, motor cars, movies, radio or telephones. I might add that there were no televisions, or computers, or iphones, or Nooks either – things we take very much for granted. Maugham, in this essay, describes how those with a bit of money lived in England - the food that was eaten at banquets and what we would describe as gorging. There were several courses – soups, fish, a white entrée, and then a brown entrée, followed by a roast of beef. Then a sorbet was offered to allow for a second wind so one could feast on the game in season and a choice of sweets, including more soup served with sherry and a variety of wines, including champagne. Could anyone move after such a repast? The only thing certain was these people were slowly killing themselves with a knife and fork.

As an up and coming author, Maugham was invited to week-end parties, where, as in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, he brought along his butler to assist him (Maugham had three servants at this point in his life – a cook, a housemaid, and a butler). The butler, incidentally, because Maugham as an author had no precedence, was placed at the bottom of the servant's table. He even approached Maugham and asked if Maugham could be made an M.P. The butler continued to be at the bottom of the table. It was a life of society rules and responsibilities, yet agreeable enough to attend these grand houses with grand parties.

Life was very pleasant in those days – for some. The poor lived in squalid, verminous slums, worked long hours for a pittance, and in their old age had little to look forward to but the workhouse. The fear of unemployment was always on their minds.

Maugham concludes his radio message by offering a positive interpretation of the English people as of January, 1954.

We have rid ourselves of many stupid prejudices. Relations between the sexes are more unconstrained. We are less formal in our dress and far more comfortable. We are less class-conscious. We are less prudish. We are less arrogant. In fact, I think we are nicer people than we were when I was young, and for all the hardships we have had to undergo, the scarcities, the restrictions, the regimentations, I think we, the great mass of the people, are better off than ever before. The outstanding characteristic of the English people is good humour, and that, however adverse circumstances are, we seem able to maintain. It is a great strength.

The Sunday Express printed up *On his Ninetieth Birthday* on January 26, 1964. It is a rather melancholy piece, offering the reader his final thoughts (he died almost two years later). Here are written a few of those thoughts of a man facing the end of a full life. In his essay written some ten years earlier, he made no mention of the travels he intended to make during his eighth decade. There is a casual mention of travel in this essay, and we find that, even though tiring and with thoughts that it might kill him, he wants to continue his travels, including a lengthy and arduous vacation to a favored spot, Angkor Wat, in Cambodia.

I have had such a full life – but I face what will come calmly. I still do not fear death; in fact, I look forward to death with no apprehension for I do not believe in a hereafter and so, if I have sinned in men's eyes and have not been punished, I have no fear of punitive treatment when I cease to remain on this planet.

I do not know whether God exists or not. None of the arguments that has been adduced to prove His existence carries conviction, and belief must rest, as Epicurus put it long ago, on immediate apprehension. That immediate apprehension I have never had.

I have done too much in my four score and ten years, too much for any man and now I am sick of this way of life. The weariness and sadness of old age makes it intolerable. I have been a hedonist always and now there are so few pleasures left to me. There isn't the pleasure even of work to fill my days. I can still eat a good meal and I enjoy my drink still. Every morning I have a stiff whisky at 11. But deafness is overtaking me and my stammer is still

persistent. My eyesight is no longer what it was and this, above all, perhaps, upsets me most. For it makes reading very hard. I am re-reading *Moby Dick* with difficulty. The other day I found a copy of *Madame Bovary* on a shelf and I took it down to read it again because it has been a favourite of mine for so many years.

I have no wish to write further. My head is empty now of thoughts, plots, and the makings of a story. I have long since written the words that were inside me and put aside my pen. And so, when my obituary notice at last appears in *The Times* and they say: 'What! I thought he died years ago', my ghost will gently chuckle.

Reading the four short essays has allowed me to know W. Somerset Maugham just a bit better. Would I have liked the man if there had been the opportunity to meet him in person? Probably not. From all accounts he was a very private gentleman, very conscious of a life-long stammer, and the concealing of his homosexuality. Still, it would have been quite an occasion to meet such an author, a writer whose value is not as recognized some 50 years after his death, as it was during his lifetime. Perhaps his value will return, perhaps not, but for those who have not read his travel narratives, particularly on Asia and the South Pacific, I can only think that they are overlooking a sweet treat. After writing the foregoing words I felt compelled to draw his travel stories from the shelf and relive once again his skills to present damned good and imaginative stories!

And I will also read other essays in this newly acquired volume. There are several essays with enticing titles, such as *On Selling my Collection of Impressionist and Modern Pictures*, *Modern English and American Literature*, *How Novelists Draw their Characters*, and *Reading under Bombing*. I'll read them all.

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