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Introduction

What is a short story? A short story is a short work of fiction. Fiction, as you know, is prose writing about imagined events and characters. The short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed in only one or a few significant episodes or scenes. The form encourages economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of a complex plot; character is disclosed in action and dramatic encounter but is seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, though, a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a “complete” or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject.

The literature contains some of the world's best examples of the short story. Readers around the world enjoy the finely crafted stories of writers such as O. Henry, Jack London, Mark Twain, and Somerset Maugham.

William Somerset Maugham

William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris, France, January 25, 1874. Maugham was the fourth of six sons born in his family. There is not much recorded about his early childhood years, but at the time of his birth his father was a lawyer attached to British Embassy, his mother was a homemaker.

He did not want to become a lawyer like other men in his family, so he trained and qualified as a physician. His family assumed Maugham and his brothers would be lawyers. His elder brother, Viscount Maugham, did become a lawyer, enjoying a distinguished legal career and serving as Lord Chancellor from 1938 to 1939. Maugham's mother, Edith Mary, contracted tuberculosis, a condition for which her physician prescribed childbirth. She had Maugham several years after the last of his three elder brothers was born. By the time Maugham was three, his older brothers were all away at boarding school.

Edith's sixth and final son died on 25 January 1882, one day after his birth. It was Maugham's eighth birthday. Edith died of tuberculosis six days later on 31 January at the age of 41. The early death of his mother left Maugham traumatized. He kept his mother's

photograph at his bedside for the rest of his life. Two years after Edith's death, Maugham's father died in France of cancer. The boy was brought up by his uncle. His move was emotionally damaging, as Henry Maugham was cold and emotionally cruel.

The boy attended The King's School, Canterbury, which was also difficult for him. He was teased for his bad English (French had been his first language) and his short stature, which he inherited from his father. Maugham developed a stammer that stayed with him all his life. It was sporadic, being subject to his moods and circumstances. Miserable both at his uncle's vicarage and at school, the young Maugham developed a talent for making wounding remarks to those who displeased him. This ability is sometimes reflected in Maugham's literary characters.

At age 16, Maugham refused to continue at The King's School. His uncle allowed him to travel to Germany, where he studied literature, philosophy and German at Heidelberg University. During his year in Heidelberg, Maugham met and had a sexual affair with John Ellingham Brooks, an Englishman ten years his senior. He also wrote his first book there, a biography of Giacomo Meyerbeer, an opera composer. After Maugham's return to Britain, his uncle found him a position in an accountant's office. After a month Maugham gave it up and returned to Whitstable.

His uncle tried to find Maugham a new profession. Maugham's father and three older brothers were distinguished lawyers, but Maugham was not interested in this profession. He rejected a career in the Church because of his stutter. His uncle rejected the Civil Service, believing that it was no longer a career for gentlemen after a new law requiring applicants to pass an entrance examination. The local physician suggested the medical profession and Maugham's uncle agreed. Maugham had been writing steadily since he was 15, and wanted to be an author, but he did not tell his guardian. For the next five years, he studied medicine at St Thomas's Hospital Medical School in Lambeth.

Maugham was living in London, meeting people of a "low" sort whom he would never have met otherwise, and seeing them at a time of heightened anxiety and meaning in their lives. In maturity, he recalled the value of his experience as a medical student: "I saw how men died. I saw how they bore pain. I saw what hope looked like, fear and relief ..." Maugham kept his own lodgings, took pleasure in furnishing them, filled many notebooks with literary ideas, and continued writing nightly while at the same time studying for his medical degree. In 1897, he published his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, a tale of working-class adultery and its consequences. It drew its details from Maugham's experiences as a medical student doing midwifery work in Lambeth, a South London slum. Maugham wrote near the opening of the novel: "... it is impossible always to give

the exact unexpurgated words of Liza and the other personages of the story; the reader is therefore entreated with his thoughts to piece out the necessary imperfections of the dialogue."

Liza of Lambeth's first print run sold out in a matter of weeks. Maugham, who had qualified as a medic, dropped medicine and embarked on his 65-year career as a man of letters. He later said, "I took to it as a duck takes to water." The writer's life allowed Maugham to travel and to live in places such as Spain and Capri for the next decade, but his next ten works never came close to rivalling the success of Liza. This changed in 1907 with the success of his play *Lady Frederick*. By the next year, he had four plays running simultaneously in London, and *Punch* published a cartoon of Shakespeare biting his fingernails nervously as he looked at the billboards. Maugham's supernatural thriller, *The Magician* (1908), based its principal character on the well-known and somewhat disreputable Aleister Crowley. Crowley took some offence at the treatment of the protagonist, Oliver Haddo. He wrote a critique of the novel, charging Maugham with plagiarism, in a review published in *Vanity Fair*. Maugham survived the criticism without much damage to his reputation.

By 1914, Maugham was famous, with 10 plays produced and 10 novels published. Too old to enlist when the First World War broke out, he served in France as a member of the British Red Cross's so-called "Literary Ambulance Drivers", a group of some 24 well-known writers, including the Americans John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, and Ernest Hemingway.

During this time he met Frederick Gerald Haxton, a young San Franciscan, who became his companion and lover until Haxton's death in 1944. Throughout this period, Maugham continued to write. He proofread *Of Human Bondage* at a location near Dunkirk during a lull in his ambulance duties. *Of Human Bondage* (1915) initially was criticized in both England and the United States; the *New York World* described the romantic obsession of the protagonist Philip Carey as "the sentimental servitude of a poor fool".

The influential American novelist and critic Theodore Dreiser rescued the novel, referring to it as a work of genius and comparing it to a Beethoven symphony. His review gave the book a lift, and it has never been out of print since. Maugham indicates in his foreword that he derived the title from a passage in Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*: "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 ... so that he is often forced to follow the worse, although he see the better before him." *Of Human Bondage* is considered to have many autobiographical elements. Maugham gave Philip Carey a club foot (rather than his

stammer); the vicar of Blackstable appears derived from the vicar of Whitstable; and Carey is a medic. Maugham insisted the book was more invention than fact. The close relationship between fictional and non-fictional became Maugham's trademark. He wrote in 1938: "Fact and fiction are so intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other."

He served in the ambulance corps in the First World War before joining the Secret Intelligence Service and working in Switzerland and Russia. Later he travelled widely in South East Asia, China and the Pacific.

Maugham said that he remained agnostic to the questions concerning the existence of God. He considered that the misery and bitterness of the world suggested that God did not exist. He said that "the evidence adduced to prove the truth of one religion is of very much the same sort as that adduced to prove the truth of another." Maugham did not believe in God or an afterlife. He considered notions of future punishment or reward to be outrageous.

Maugham entered into a relationship with Syrie Wellcome, the wife of Henry Wellcome, an American-born English pharmaceutical magnate. They had a daughter named Mary Elizabeth (1915–1998). Henry Wellcome sued his wife for divorce, naming Maugham as co-respondent. In May 1917, following the decree absolute, Syrie Wellcome and Maugham were married. Syrie Maugham became a noted interior decorator who in the 1920s popularized "the all-white room". They changed their daughter's surname, originally registered as Wellcome and reflecting Syrie's marriage. She was familiarly called Liza and her surname was changed to Maugham. The marriage was unhappy, and the couple separated.

Maugham has been described both as bisexual and as homosexual. In addition to his 13-year marriage to Syrie Wellcome, he had affairs with other women in his youth. In later life Maugham was exclusively homosexual, and lived successively with two men.

Maugham later lived in the French Riviera with his partner Gerald Haxton until Haxton's death in 1944. He next lived with Alan Searle until his own death. Maugham lived a long life and passed away on 16 December in 1965 in Nice, France. He was 91.

William Somerset Maugham Short Stories

William Somerset Maugham is one of the best known English writers of the 20th century. He was not only a novelist, but also a one of the most successful dramatist and short-story writers. Somerset Maugham has written 24 plays, 19 novels and a large number of short stories.

Maugham's style is clear-cut and elegant. The attitude of the novelist to his character seems mostly to be cynically sarcastic. A play upon contrasts and contradictions lies at the basis of Maugham's sarcastic method in portraying his characters. Realistic portrayal of life, keen character observation, and interesting plots coupled with beautiful, expressive language, simple style, place Somerset Maugham on a level with the greatest English writers of the 20th century.

Love. The stories are all about love. War and peace, diplomacy and politics, all social issues and any interesting ideas about art and culture, are all banished from his stories. Love, passion, marriage, infidelity, murder and suicide are his subject.

Artfulness. A large part of the enjoyment is the ornate elaborateness of the initial settings within which the stories eventually come to be told. Sometimes the frame narrative about a planter or resident or a dinner party or a shipboard encounter is as subtle and enjoyable as the central tale.

Travel. What a lucky man Maugham was, to have travelled so widely and seen so much. Nowadays travel is a) expensive b) ruined by overpopulation and airplanes, package holidays and cars c) made difficult by dangerous political regimes or wars. But Maugham wandered at will through Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and China with perfect ease and security, and his stories transport you back to that simpler, less violent age.

Social history. Having now read all his short stories, I see how they provide a wealth of social history of two broad types: 1) the culture, lives, expectations and behaviour of white men in the colonies of the Far East and the Pacific and 2) the culture, language and behaviour of the English upper classes in England, from the Edwardian decade through into the 1920s and little into the 1930s. On both counts, Maugham's stories are a treasure trove of fascinating linguistic, cultural, behavioural and fashion history.

A Few Words About Short Stories

The Book-Bag (1932 - Malaya - 1st person narrator) This is an eerie, powerful and disturbing story, up there with Rain as one of his best. In Penang Maugham stays with the

British Resident who tells him a story about a chap they bumped into at the club earlier in the evening, Tim Hardy. His parents had been divorced and Tim and his sister Olive were brought up apart, she in Italy, he in Britain. Then the parents died and the adult siblings hooked up and came to stay in Malaysia, keeping themselves to themselves. Over a period of time Maugham's host, Featherstone (the man telling us the story) falls in love with Olivia but she is playfully stand-offish. Then Tim, her brother, is called back to England. After a few months he telegraphs from there to say he's met someone and fallen in love. Then another telegram to say he's got married.

Featherstone notices Olivia taking this nervously, but continues to woo her right up till the moment when Tim Hardy arrives back at Penang with his new blushing bride. Everyone welcomes them and Featherstone accompanies them all the way to the bungalow Tim had shared with his sister. He is outside when he hears a gunshot. Featherstone rushes in to find that the beautiful Olivia has shot herself, blowing half her face off. In shock Featherstone staggers back to his house and sits stunned, as darkness falls. He is startled by a knock at the door. It is Tim Hardy's new wife, in hysterics. She needs to leave, now, right away, she never wants to see Tim again, she is weeping, hysterical. Suddenly Featherstone realises the truth. Hardy and his sister were lovers. Olivia shot herself in rage and jealousy at Tim abandoning her for another woman. And this is the story Featherstone calmly tells the narrator, over gin at the club.

French Joe (1926 - Thursday Island, the Torres Straits - 1st person) The hermit they call French Joe fled to a remote South Sea island after the suppression of the Paris Commune of 1871, having been a commune-ist. This is a brief but intense, three-page description of French Joe's character and oddities.

German Harry (1924 - Trebucket, near Thursday Island, Torres Straits - 1st person) Another brief thumbnail sketch, this time of a grumpy old German who lives on a desert island, the conclusion being that isolation brings no enlightenment, but a return to savagery.

The Four Dutchmen (1928 - Singapore - 1st) The four fat, friendly Dutchmen who crew a lugger, are legendary throughout the South Seas for their bonhomie. Until the captain takes a native mistress and his insistence that she accompanies them on their voyages drives a wedge between him and the others. The captain finds the girl in bed with the chief engineer, shoots the latter dead, then goes up on the bridge and shoots himself.

The Back Of Beyond (1931 - Timbang Belud, Malaysia - 3rd person narrator) George Moon is the Resident in Timbang Belud, a fictitious town in the Federated Malay States (a

British colony). He is on the verge of retiring. One morning he is surprised to get a visit from Tom Saffary, with whom he has argued in the past. Both have heard of the death of the popular member of their ex-pat community, 'Knobby' Clarke, on board ship back to Britain. Now Saffary tells Moon the story behind it. In a sequence of very believable scenes and dialogues, Saffary describes how he realised that his wife, Violet, was having an affair with Clarke. The guilty couple had got as far as deciding to run away together, when suddenly Clarke's wife announced that she was pregnant. Unable to leave her, Knobby decides to do the decent thing and leave the scene of his affair, taking his wife back to Blighty for the birth. But overcome by misery at leaving his true love (Violet) he killed himself on the ship home. Which plunges Violet into such unhappiness that she reveals all to Saffary. Which explains why Saffary is now in Moon's office, helplessly crying his eyes out. Moon gives him what succour he can and the crying man eventually leaves. Then, adding a further level to the narrative, Moon reflects on his own marriage, and the wife he divorced years ago when he discovered that she was having an affair. Meeting her years later, he realized his mistake in giving up years of happiness, comfort and companionship for the momentary satisfaction of his pride disguised as honour. So this tale is a complex interplay of timelines, and of two highly emotional stories, handled with immaculate skill.

Episode (1946 -Brixton - 3rd) A story told to the narrator by his friend Ned Preston, a semi-invalid who has become an unpaid 'prison visitor'. At a typically Maughamesque upper-class party Ned tells the guests the story of a convict he's met in prison, Fred Manson. Fred was a postman in Brixton where he chatted up the ladies and, one day, a young woman called Gracie Carter. They walk out together. Her family are appalled because they have invested a lot of time and money getting her into teacher training school and don't want her consorting with a rough postman. But Gracie rejects them in favour of Fred who, alas, is shortly afterwards arrested and convicted for stealing money out of the letters he handles and sent to Wormwood Scrubs. It is here that Ned meets him, hears his story, and gets into the habit of visiting the Carter family to pass on Fred's messages. From this vantage point that Ned is able to paint such a convincing picture, giving not only Gracie's side of events but the opinions of her respectable working class parents, especially the mother. So for some months Fred and Gracie correspond and have occasional prison visits. She is devoted to him, waiting only for his release. Then only a month before the big date, Fred has quite a bad illness and takes a few weeks to recover. And when he does Ned is astonished to discover that he doesn't want to marry Gracie any more, he doesn't even want to see her. He is sick of her cloying possessiveness. He's had enough of her. When Ned passes this shocking news on to Gracie the latter says, 'Well, there's nothing for me to do but go and stick my head in a gas-oven.' Which is what

she does. The end. A grippingly detailed account of working class life with a stunningly abrupt ending.

The Kite (1946 – London – 1st) A second story sourced from the narrator's friend Ned, the prison visitor. Herbert Sunbury is brought up in a close-knit, if not cloying lower-class suburban family. He enjoys flying kites with his dad, really enjoys it, it is a passion and hobby every Saturday to go to the nearby park and fly one. He becomes attached to the rougher, more ambitious Betty Bevan, disapproved of by Herbert's parents, who seduces him into marrying her. But they are forced by poverty to live in a tiny apartment and soon her clinging possessiveness drives Herbert to distraction. All he wants is to spend Saturday afternoon with his dad flying their kite, but Betty tries to stop him and, in a climactic argument, makes it a point of honour: me or the kite. Herbert pushes her out of the way, and goes and spends a happy afternoon with his dad flying the kite. That night there's a bit of rummaging around in the bins and sheds at the back of the Sunburys' terraced house. In the morning Herbert discovers that Betty had been round and has smashed to pieces the new superkite which was his dad's new prize possession. At which point Herbert refuses to give Betty her support money or, when the furniture rental falls due, to pay it. With the result that he is summonsed before a magistrate who orders him to pay his wife her support. Still refusing, Herbert is sentenced to imprisonment. Which is where Ned meets the Man Who Is In Prison Because His Wife Smashed Up His Kite.

Mayhew (1923 – Capri – 1st) Mayhew was a big, brawny lawyer in Detroit when he heard of an old house for sale on Capri and, on a whim, decided to buy it. He realises he wants to escape the rat race, sells all his worldly possessions, buys an annuity i.e. an annual pension with the money, and retires to the house with its great view over the Bay of Naples. Here Mayhew becomes obsessed with the Roman emperor Tiberius (14-37) and decides to devote his life to researching and writing a history of the Second Century of the Roman Empire. He spends 15 years acquiring books, making vast volumes of notes, employing all his forensic skills. His once big, tough body wastes away. He becomes a shadow of himself. Finally he sits down to write this great magnum opus and drops dead.

Conclusion

To sum up, William Somerset Maugham, British playwright and novelist, was one of the most reputed and well-known writers of his era, and one of the highest-paid authors of his time. His work was popular for his simple style of writing, as well as his sharp and accurate understanding and judgment of human nature. His uniqueness inspired several

other writers.

I conclude that every reader should take a dip into Maugham. The subject matter is inspiring; the wisdom, often, profound. Maugham explores whether writing, alcohol, sex, art, or living in the moment is the key to a happy life. His stories teem with hypocrites, drunks, addicts, murderesses and spine-chilling passion.

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