CHAPTER VII

THE LAST PLAYS: TECHNIQUE
The General Method

Maugham's technique in the plays of the third volume of his Collected Plays is the subject of this chapter. The themes in these plays involve serious thinking, and discussion rather than action often plays an important part in their technique. In these plays the two sides of the problems are clearly presented, and the superiority of the one to the other is shown through the experience of the characters and not by direct preaching. Proof through incident is the method used by Maugham's thinkers, not coercion through power. Ronny's staying in Egypt in Caesar's Wife, the falling of the suspicion of Maurice's murder on Stella in The Sacred Flame, the miracle of the administration of the communion to Colonel Wharton in The Unknown and Eva's losing her mental balance in For Services Rendered are examples of such incident.

Realism is the second aspect of the general method employed in these plays that share it with the earlier plays like The Land of Promise in the first phase and The Circle and The Breadwinner in the second. The problems in these plays like war, faith in God, and the East and the West are all real ones exercising the modern thinking mind and are analysed here in their stark reality as if in compliance with Othello's dying exhortation,

"Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice."

The third feature of the technique in these plays is the depiction of emotion on suitable occasions and in correct measure. *Caesar's Wife* is remarkable for the impact of restrained emotion it makes. The emotion is often expressed in a disciplined and controlled way, perhaps in pursuance of Arthur's remark to Violet,

"It's so easy to say too much; it's never unwise to say too little."^2

It is this sophisticated control that is mistaken by J.C. Trewin for stolidity.^3 But it is part of the technique entirely in consonance with Arthur's being a polished statesman and the atmosphere of diplomatic dignity the play evokes.

In *The Sacred Flame*, *The Unknown* and *For Services Rendered* emotional scenes are introduced appropriately to develop the themes. Mention may be made in this context of the pathetic love-scene between Stella and Maurice in *The Sacred Flame* (Act I), John's angry rupture with Sylvia in *The Unknown* (Act III) and the helpless, savage outbursts of Eva and Sydney in *For Services Rendered* (Act III). In *The Sacred Flame* the atmosphere of melancholy is steadily mounted to an exquisite pitch at the close of the play when a tender pity is felt not only for the dead son but also for his killer mother.

^Its emotional range is wide, falling short only of the emotion of exaltation,^4

^2 p. 64.  
^4 Ibid., p. 214.
but the tenderness

which is one of the most difficult sentiments
to manifest in the theatre\(^5\)

more than makes up the deficiency.

In *East of Suez* and *Sheppey*, however, the emotional content runs counter to the themes. In the former the frequent hysteria of Daisy and the feverish restlessness of Harry and George\(^6\) cloud the main issue of the meeting of the East and the West. In *Sheppey* Maugham errs in neglecting to depict the feelings of Sheppey's wife. The good and well-meaning wife ungrudgingly allows him to be declared mad by specialists. Maugham's object in isolating Sheppey is to show the isolation of goodness in the practical world, but a depiction of Mrs. Miller's repentance and agony on Sheppey's death would have brought forth the common man's mental suffocation at the spectacle which remains strangely unexpressed in the play as it is.

Loud farce is almost totally absent in these serious plays, but an undercurrent of subdued humour and forced gaiety amid pathos flows in the best of them. Arthur's frivolity in *Caesar's Wife*, Maurice's jolly temper in *The Sacred Flame*, John's little jokes at the expense of the Vicar and Dr. Macfarlane in *The Unknown* and Sydney's witty stance in *For Services Rendered* are all comical interludes.

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6 pp. 127, 139, 179, 200, etc.
in the best classical tradition and heighten the gravity (Caesar's Wife) and pathos (the other plays) of the situations.

Thus, the general method of realism punctuated by sentiment and humour is employed in these plays effectively with the exception of East of Suez and Sheppey, in which the imbalance of the emotional aspect robs the themes of complete conviction.

2 Structure

Like Maugham's early and middle plays the plots of these plays, with the exception of The Unknown, are packed with action, one incident leading to another, the entire action, by and large, progressing smoothly. Although the dramatist is, on the whole, traditional in plot-construction in this phase, as in the two previous phases, he does introduce some new elements. In Caesar's Wife and East of Suez he attempts the technique of the costume-play, the latter being a play of exotic Chinese locations. For the purpose of spectacle Maugham abandons in it the usual scheme of three acts and divides it into seven scenes, the first of which is just a graphic representation of a Chinese market street. Other notable innovations in these plays, the evaluation of which will presently follow, are the use of symbols like chess in For Services Rendered, the fantasy of Death in Sheppey and the novel setting of the barber-shop in the first act of Sheppey. Thus Maugham's art of plot-
construction in this phase shows a combination of tradition and experiment, of 'an easy commerce of the old and the new'.

Let us now examine the structure of each play in this phase. The French origin of Caesar's Wife casts a shadow of 'Frenchness' over most aspects of the play including its plot. The second act brings out the dramatic irony in the situation - Violet's hesitating blurting out to her husband of her love for Ronny of which the husband (Arthur) has all along been aware. Such a situation is one that the French novelists described so well. 7

Caesar's Wife is the one play that gives credence to the view that Maugham's work .... has greater affinity with the ethos of French rather than English literature. 8

This play is one of those in which Maugham does issue the correct prescription. 9

Every important occasion is steadily built up in an engaging environment withholding vital moments till the appropriate pitch of anxiety is attained. A typical example of this kind of dexterous management is found in the first act when Christina comes to ask Arthur something, but her actual request is delayed by a pageful of natural small talk involving Arthur, Anne and herself and revealing several angles of their personalities. The delay is thus adequately

8 M.K. Naik: W. Somerset Maugham (Norman, 1966), p. 27.
9 Theatrical Companion, p. 1
compensated by the glimpses of the mental habits of the three characters. Curiously enough, the possible complaint of the impatient reader against such delay is voiced in Arthur's taunt to Christina,

"You're very long in coming to the point."\(^{10}\)

Violet's discovery of her love for Arthur, the pivot of the theme, is also encased in a suitably delicate, soothing and romantic atmosphere in the third act. Music and dance provide the episode with a succulent fulness, a delicious grandeur, as they do in Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet*. The contrast between the modern European and the ancient Egyptian notes is suggestive of the difference between the passing and the perennial.\(^{11}\) Egypt thus suits *Caesar's Wife* not only as a contemporary arena of political intrigue but also as the homeground of an ancient civilization epitomizing perennially valid values in human relations.

The only jarring element in the plot of *Caesar's Wife* is the conventional psychological device\(^{12}\) of Ronny's rescuing Arthur from an attempt on his life. The purposes of this incident are to provide a concrete switch to the current of Violet's love for Arthur, and to endow Ronny with matching goodness. Both the objects are extraneous to the

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10 p. 25.
11 p. 94.
12 Maugham has been a prey to such a device also in *The Land of Promise*, vide Ch. III, p. 107 above.
theme, and the expedient device appears crude in a play so full of mature suggestivity.

*East of Suez* shares the Chinese atmosphere in Maugham with the novel *The Painted Veil* and several short stories and travel books. China and the Far East, in which he widely travelled, figure in Maugham's writings in two ways: in the vein of realistic reporting and on the problematic plane of the meeting of the 'twain'. The stage would seem an effective forum on which what is described elsewhere can be made audio-visually impressive. Maugham takes this opportunity in *East of Suez* which, he says, 'purports to be a play of spectacle'.

The plot of this play is a strange medley of incidents. Most of them are arresting as events, but only a few contribute to the progress of the theme. The fray engineered by the Chinese for killing Harry indicates the Chinese mentality of being treacherous to their own supporters. But in the last three scenes the theme is relegated to a secondary position, the conventional triangle of Daisy, George and Harry stealing a march over the conflict between the East and the West. The torture of the three in the vicissitudes of an unobliging fate constitutes the drama of the play which remains out of the focus of the theme, which comprises Lee Tai, Sylvia and the Amah. In spite of some gripping

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14 p. 157.
scenes, therefore, *East of Suez* does not satisfy as a dramatic representation of its serious theme.

The *Sacred Flame* is perhaps Maugham's most remarkable play, and one of the most remarkable modern plays, so far as the interaction of plot and theme is concerned. The theme of the superiority of absolute moral attitudes to legal and conventional ones is illustrated in the play with the central event of mercy-killing contrasted with murder. To put the theme in bold relief it is necessary to distinguish clearly between the two types of killing. The playwright realizes this and manages the plot deftly along these lines. The first act marks the victim out as one who would welcome death. The second act considers the possibility of his murder, and in that process exhibits society's rigid attitude to the killing of a helpless invalid and to the cases of 'forbidden' love of Wayland for Maurice and of Stella and Colin for each other. The third act discloses that the death is a sad but much-needed escape through mercy-killing. The revelation by Mrs. Tabret of herself being the killer is gradually brought about as a climax of accelerated suspense. But suspense here is not an end in itself. The knowledge of the killer's identity is the medium to show how drastically the moral view of an action depends on the motive and the character of its author.

15 p. 317.
It is a genuine, not a false, dramatic suspense, and is completely independent of our knowledge of fact. Maugham's technique of treating a mystery as a means of projecting a theme is at work in Jack Straw in comedy and in The Sacred Flame in serious drama.

The Sacred Flame has to be read more than once to get its full quality, because the early judgements of some characters on others have overtones of irony that can only be appreciated when the whole story is known.

The Unknown is the one play in which Maugham swerves from his usual practice of dressing a theme in a well-knit plot; it has more argument than action, and the maladjustment makes it deficient in drama, although a successful sermon. The author acknowledged this in the Preface to Vol. III of his Collected Plays. A few stirring events in the play like John's behaviour in the church and the Annie Black episode are only reported as the backdrop to John's opinions. Others like Mrs. Littlewood's steaming tirade against God and John's rupture with Sylvia in Act III do mark the advance of the theme, but are contained by the argument and do not exist apart as actions. The

16 Theatrical Companion, p. 214.
18 P. xvii.
19 p. 15.
20 p. 35.
21 p. 53.
successful miracle of Colonel Wharton's dying peacefully and the unsuccessful one of John's registering no impact of his partaking of the Communion share the same fate although they are essential concomitants of the theme of religion. It is not, therefore, in its links with the theme that the plot of *The Unknown* is weak; it is in its lack of action that it fails so far as it does. The play tends towards the ancient form of 'dialogues' of which Maugham gives an example in the Preface to the second volume of his *Collected Plays*\(^{22}\) to show that interesting argument and good drama are different things.

In *For Services Rendered* the plot is meticulously constructed to suit the theme. The symbolic use of chess (referred to above) with which Eva entertains her war-hero brother Sydney is a masterpiece of dramatic craft. Chess is the medium through which scheming fate aims her arrows at Eva, as seen in the second act when Sydney advises her to protect her bishop and later admonishes her,

"You won't look ahead."\(^{23}\)

This innocent remark is a touching piece of irony, a jab in Eva's sick interior seething with unrequited sacrifice.

Eva's unsuccessful pursuit of Collie, Collie's suicide, Lois's elopement with an elderly frequenter of the family are all symptomatic of the ravages of war. The last scene

\(^{22}\) p. xvii.

\(^{23}\) p. 125.
in which raving Eva sings 'God save the King' is stinging in the extreme.

No lacquer here; no varnish; merely the truth in the home of a country solicitor....It is one of Maugham's deadliest theatrical strokes; a poisoned dart. 24

Maugham constructed the play with a determination to highlight the ghastly consequences of war. He tells us, "During the rehearsals of this piece I amused myself by devising the way in which it might have been written to achieve popularity." 25 He resisted the temptation and provided through the plot the right frame for the theme.

In Sheppey Maugham employs the technique of shifting the location and atmosphere after the first act which he successfully used in The Land of Promise in the early phase. The first act of Sheppey takes place in a barber shop, a novel venue for Maugham's dramatic muse accustomed to drawing rooms or, at the most, open spaces. The second and third acts happen in Sheppey's living room. In conformity with the belief that it is the humble that tend to love God, Maugham makes his idealistic emulator of Christ a sparse barber of modest means living in common, unfashionable quarters.

The conflict in Sheppey is between pragmatism and

idealism. When in the second act we are confronted with Sheppey's launching his drive to practise the teaching of the Gospels, we are anxious to see how the dramatist reconciles it with the world of Florrie and others. Maugham just does not attempt a reconciliation; he rounds the tale off realistically. In real life what fate does a Jesus meet? Extinction. Sheppey meets that fate. Maugham shows Sheppey's irreconcilability with the world around him and stops there. Further, his Sheppey just slips away from the world not ready for him, unlike Socrates, Christ and Joan who were victimized by the world not ready for them. That is why Sheppey is considered a sardonic comedy by its creator: it depicts a situation which can be superficially contemplated in a comic, joyous way because it does not involve violence; yet it strikes one as sardonic when one realizes its tragic possibilities. The play is neither totally fantastic and funny like Home and Beauty nor fully tragic and bleak like For Services Rendered.

The final scene in which Sheppey quietly passes away in his easy-chair stands for the silent exit of noble ideals from the double-dealing world. Maugham's calculations about the scene went awry as he admits in the Preface to Vol. III of his Collected Plays. In fact, in using symbolism of this type Maugham went against his image familiar

26 p. xvii.
to the audience and also against his own instinct. He states his opposition to symbolism in fiction as follows,

"What is a symbol? You say one thing and you mean another. Why the hell shouldn't you say it right out?" 27

The confusion of the critics and the people caused by the symbolism in Sheppey is an interesting case of poetic justice. Actually, the symbolic death of Sheppey neatly illustrates the impossibility of translating lofty intention into practical action in this hypocritical world. The flaw is in the lack of emotional warmth in the depiction of Sheppey's death leading to a dry, amused reaction, and nothing better. Sheppey's death remains on the plane of idle consideration; it does not stir the inner chord of sensitivity. Thus, though the play is otherwise well constructed, the last scene fails to put the theme across powerfully owing to its naive and pale symbolism lacking animation.

3 Characterization

The characters in these last plays are generally mellow and function suitably as mouthpieces of the serious themes. The pattern of characters in this phase is radically different from that in the first two phases. There are in this phase young female introverts, sober mothers, balanced thinkers, war victims and villains, as against the pleasure-seekers, the self-centred fighters for sexual and economic

freedom and such other extroverts of the early and middle plays.

The Modern Woman: The modern woman appears in these plays in various moods. Violet in Caesar's Wife is the conscientious young married woman torn between her young lover and her elderly husband. Violet's inner struggle stretches all the way from her sudden discomfiture in the first scene on learning of Ronny's proposed departure to her final passionate appeal to her husband,

"I want your love so badly." It is traced in its ups and downs with tender sympathy. The theme of the play, the discovery by the young woman of love for her husband, depends a lot on that woman, and the success of Violet as a character has assured the success of the theme.

If Caesar's Wife owes its success mainly to its characters, East of Suez owes its comparative failure to the individualistic development of its characters, particularly Daisy. The two pulls in her - her gratitude to Harry and love for George - collide headlong when one of the two is known to be involved in a murderous scuffle, and she does not know which. Daisy's gratitude to Harry is a feeble echo of the main purport of the play. Her struggle

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28 p. 19.
29 p. 98.
30 p. 155.
remains an individual's dilemma, and is not projected into the larger sphere of the basic issues involved. This projection could have been effected by making her strongly appreciative of Harry's sympathy for the Eurasian in spite of her love for George. Such a complex and three-dimensional Daisy would have been a superb sketch on the one hand and a pillar of strength to the theme on the other.

On the contrary, the other modern young woman in the play, Sylvia Knox, is a lifeless symbol introduced to illustrate the uncompromising Western sympathy for the Eurasian. She has no patience with the airs people gave themselves in the East. A Eurasian was just as good as anybody else. Sylvia is an admirable lady; only she does not belong to the play. She is strong in the theme whereas Daisy is powerful in her character-portrayal. The theme and the characters in East of Suez do not synchronize and the play largely fails to make an impact.

In The Sacred Flame there are two spirited young women, Stella and Nurse Wayland, who demarcate the stages in the shaping of the theme by accusing each other of immorality and of murdering Maurice. Within their limited grooves they come alive and play their parts effectively in evolving the theme.

31 p. 171.
Florrie in Sheppey is a self-centred girl, a representative of the 'mod' generation in The Breadwinner. She is insensitive to everything but her own enjoyment, and wishes her father to be declared mad so that she has all his money. She adequately represents the Mammon-worshipping mortals who surround and suffocate goodness represented by Sheppey.

The Modern Young Man: The modern young man is introduced side by side in these plays, but is less prominent. In Caesar's Wife Maugham decided to make all his characters good, and consequently Ronny is forced against his leisurely gait to run to save the life of Arthur, his rival in love. This imposed goodness is not necessary for the theme, and, on the side, spoils the spontaneous evolution of Ronny as a character.

Harry in East of Suez is by conviction a crusader for the Eurasian, falls in love with Daisy, a Eurasian, and marries her. With his penchant for the paradox that idealism often is, Maugham shows how Harry's sense of humour is the first casualty of his religious fervour for the Eurasian (p. 110). The strange amalgam of his doctrinaire urge with his generous nature and love for Daisy shapes the course of his life. But, later, all his sympathy for the half-caste does not win a smile from him for the Amah. The revelation of her being Daisy's mother at the end of Scene IV fills him with revulsion. His staunch pleading for
justice to the Eurasian would, therefore, seem more expe-
dient than principled, voluble rather than matched in
action. Like Daisy, therefore, Harry betrays the theme of
the play by allowing his individual feelings get the better
of his doctrinaire ardour. Besides, he is similar to Walter
Fane in *The Painted Veil* in his unlovability.\(^\text{32}\)

In *Sheppey* the male counterpart of Florrie is provided
in Ernie, who is a trifle more intellectual than the girl,
and believes in the adage voiced by Jim in Tennessee
Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*,

> "Think of yourself as superior in some way."\(^\text{33}\)

Cast in a supercilious mould, Ernie adequately performs the
function of advancing priggish, pseudo-intelligent objections,
inspired really by his self-interest, to Sheppey's plan of
living like Christ.

**The Mothers**: The group of elderly mothers is signi-
ficant in these plays. So far, Lady Kitty in *The Circle*
is perhaps the only woman who is extensively treated in the
role of a mother. In these last plays the mothers make a
momentous contribution to the depiction of the themes
Mrs. Tabret in *The Sacred Flame* naturally takes the cake among
these mothers. Her clear, unflinching vision, her kindness,
her firmness in doing what she considers her duty are among
her qualities delineated with skill, and are inseparable

\(^{32}\) London, 1949, p. 171.
from the theme of the play. Even more than Violet's in *Caesar's Wife* Mrs. Tabret's progress from scene to scene merges with the progress of the theme. Her crowning virtue is her sacrifice which leads to her apotheosis at the close of the play. Her simple remark, "I am so lonely now he is dead," puts a tender finger on her pathetic loss of the only world she has been having to live in. Maugham's distinction between a bad man who does good things and a good man who does bad things, appears to pale before Mrs. Tabret's towering personality which is epitomized best in what G. Wilson Knight calls her 'womanly heroism'.

Among the other mothers Mrs. Littlewood in *The Unknown* is a powerful character and leads Maugham's attack on priestly platitudes in the name of God. When Mrs. Wharton rebukes Mrs. Littlewood for revelling just after losing a son, the latter coolly replies,

"I suppose different people take things in different ways."

Here, then, is the essential catholicity that informs the attitude of Mrs. Littlewood and John.

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34 p. 317.
35 *Collected Short Stories*, 1, 68.
37 p. 39.
Vacuum created by the death of a dear one takes different courses in different environments. Mrs. Tancred in Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock mourns the violent death of her son, but her reaction, unlike Mrs. Littlewood's, does not reach the intellectual plane. Maugham's own Mrs. Craddock and Mrs. Hamlyn (in the story "P. and O.") lose their husbands, but do not react as Mrs. Littlewood does. She does not feel that life is important enough for me to give it a deliberate end. Her silence is the silence after the storms, the one of the war that has taken away her two sons, the other of the lame priestly advocacy of the divine hand in the war that has robbed her of her faith in God. The twin themes of war and religion are evoked in her sad, occasionally outspoken, personality.

The remaining elderly mothers, Mrs. Wharton (The Unknown), Mrs. Ardsley (For Services Rendered) and Mrs. Miller (Sheppee), represent the tradition-loving, inane majority whose affliction is limited sensibility and not insincerity. They watch their groaning dear relations, but do not comprehend what it is all about. They justify Lady Darlington's remark in Oscar Wilde's Lady Windermere's Fan, that good people do a great deal of harm in this world. Their inability

38 p. 78.
to gauge the unrest of John, Sydney and Sheppey respectively provides a vital angle to the themes of the plays.

The Thinkers: Perhaps the most important group of characters in these plays is of the mature thinkers who put the various themes across. They are the playwright's spokesmen in the respective plays. Mrs. Tabret, already discussed among the mothers, is in the front rank of these thinkers. Arthur in *Caesar's Wife* embodies the mature husband's love, caution, restraint and self-effacement. Not that he has no inner struggle to wage, but he wages it with great self-control buttressing his young wife's discovery of love for him - the fulcrum of the theme of the play. Unlike in *Morell* in Shaw's *Candida* the restraint in Arthur's behaviour is not so explicit, it is subtle and eerie. There is no direct confrontation between Ronny and him though they meet frequently. Arthur's suave handling of his stymie is in conformity with the theme of Britons abroad, for a British diplomat overseas must seem honest, straightforward and without reproach, and there's only one way in which we can avoid reproach and that is by being irreproachable.

The idea of the child being the cementing bond between wife and husband is used by Maugham to add a tender facet...
to Arthur's imposing personality, as Wilde does in the case of Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*. In both couples the husband is elderly and the wife young; the idea is, therefore, particularly appropriate. In *Caesar's Wife* it gives Arthur's portrait a homely delicacy and plausibility and infuses credibility into the theme.

In *The Unknown* John Wharton is the mature thinker, and is more than a match for the seasoned Vicar. John carries a wise head on his young shoulders. His bitter war-experience accelerates his advancement of head and heart to a degree that age fails to achieve in many. Maugham makes him the concentrated medium of all his thinking on God and religion. He has Mrs. Littlewood's catholicity, and his disenchantment with the parent-borne faith in God is so complete that he remains unmoved by the miracles faith works on his parents, although he is happy to see them consoled by their devotion. John is a success as a spirited spokesman of the theme of religion.

In the Vicar in *The Unknown* Maugham has compressed all that is obnoxious in the traditional thinking on religion. Like Seumas in O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* he finds 'a great comfort in religion', but that about exhausts his

41 p. 89.
credit side. He is as unimaginative as the Seventh-Day Adventist Maugham met in China was ignorant. In East of Suez missionaries are ridiculed, but there is no character to illustrate the unflattering remarks; the Vicar in The Unknown illustrates them. True to his observation of the missionaries in China, Maugham deliberately refrains from endowing him with all manner of virtues under the category of good breeding.

He thus insists on talking religion to an unwilling audience, enters the Wharton household unannounced through the window and overstays his welcome there, capping his lack of etiquette with the affected apology,

"These parsons, what a nuisance they make of themselves, don't they?"

In his fiction Maugham discusses the background of such behaviour.

Old Colonel Wharton is among the Vicar's loyal sheep and the repository of the miracles and the phenomenon of death in The Unknown. The psychological and humanistic aspects of these and other believing characters in the play are partly taken from the Italian priest whom Maugham met during his journey in the Far East. He says about the priest,

46 Ibid., p. 38f.
47 p. 17.
"It must be a terrifying moment for those whom faith has sustained all their lives, the moment when they must finally know whether their belief was true."\(^{49}\)

This process takes place in Colonel Wharton. After his feigning brave indifference to death for some time comes his pathetic confession,

"Evelyn - I don't want to die."\(^{50}\)

A moment of profound psychological reality, it is also a stage in the demonstration of the power of miracles, for later the Colonel is known to have died peacefully, thanks to the miracle of his partaking the Communion. We are, of course, free to consider the episode as something inexplicable as John does, or in the light Dick in The Explorer sees death,

"Funny thing death is, you know. When you think of it beforehand, it makes you squirm in your shoes, but when you've just got it face to face, it seems so obvious that you forget to be afraid."\(^{51}\)

Intellectual and emotional bankrupts as they are, the Vicar and the Colonel properly symbolize the losing side of the debate in the play, viz., the regimental aspects of religion.

Sheppey is the most unassuming of these thinkers, but not less coherent and self-confident for all his rural air.

\(^{49}\) The Gentleman in the Parlour, p. 65.

\(^{50}\) p. 34.

\(^{51}\) London, 1912, p. 43.
Although seemingly an ordinary man, he is extraordinary according to Maugham's precept:

If a man is extraordinary he will make extraordinariness out of a life as humdrum as that of a country curate.  

Sheppey is a barber like Otho in A.A. Milne's play, A Gentleman in Slippers, but has the potent seeds of the idealistic ardour that seems to overwhelm him later. Already a kind, honest, good-humoured wage-earner, he has in him the makings of a saint. The emotional links of his final uncompromising pursuit of the gospel of love are discovered in his showering of his affection on everyone around him in the first act.

The rigours of spiritual illumination are, however, missed in Sheppey's transformation. This absence robs him considerably of reality, and makes him a fantastic figure. The path of spiritual enlightenment is strewn with thorns, and a Sheppey attaining the pinnacle of selflessness without perceptibly stepping over them would indeed seem strange to the common man, for he does not, with Julia in Eliot's The Cocktail Party, know the process by which the human is Transhumanized. The actual process of the purification of the human soul through suffering seen in Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin is sought for in Sheppey.  

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52 The Gentleman in the Parlour, p. 119.  
54 M.K. Naik, op. cit., p. 96.
Sheppey does not have the tact which Maugham describes as the subterfuge the lax avail themselves of to avoid doing their duty.  

Like Alyosha Karamazov he is not very clever,. . . .ineffective in action. . . . He has the inhumanity of the divine.  

Along with Mrs. Tabret Sheppey perhaps symbolizes his search for the satisfying pattern of life (that) is the unifying and positive element in Maugham's philosophy.  

J.W. Marriott's view of Sheppey, that such a man does much to restore one's faith in humanity, is apt to be endorsed by readers of the play with varying degrees of emphasis. Like Galsworthy's 'Little Man', he is a sure-enough saint - only wants a halo to be transfigured.  

Even though he has not been adequately realized as a dramatic character, Sheppey does convey the spirit of the theme in an unambiguous manner.  

The War Victims: With war looming large as a major theme, the victims of war are an important group of characters in this phase. Among the males Maurice in The Sacred

57 The Maugham Enigma, p. 57.  
Flame and Sydney in *For Services Rendered* are wounded heroes, and Collie in *For Services Rendered* a fatal casualty, falling, not to a bullet, but to the callousness of society. Reference has already been made (Chapter I, p. 31 supra) to the autobiographical content in the two crippled soldiers. Himself a lifelong martyr to stammering, Maugham treats these physically deformed heroes with tender compassion.

John in *The Unknown*, already discussed among the thinkers, is a sort of mental casualty of war, his views drastically transformed by its dreary spectacle.

It is Sydney who speaks the author's mind on war without reservation. Maugham equips him with all the qualities required in an authentic crusader against war. Far from complaining about his blindness, he endeavours to laugh it away and console others distressed by it. One cannot attack a system cogently and forcefully until one goes beyond one's turbulent emotions caused by it. Maugham puts Sydney in such a state in the third act and makes him serve the theme not only by exhibiting the ravages of war on himself but by leading an attack on it.

The magnitude of the extent to which war eats into the vitals of youth is remarkably brought out in Sydney's helpless but calm surrender at the end of the play indicated by his resolve to collect stamps. Let young intellectuals shout themselves hoarse against war, when another comes,
the grist to the mill will not be wanting. This helpless realization, more than anything else, silences the voices against war. Jim's momentous forecast in Miller's *All My Sons*:

"Chris is a good son - he'll come back", is true of Sydney too. Sydney's plan to collect stamps is equivalent to Chris's 'coming back' and indicates the ultimate misery caused by war.

The female victims of war are depicted in the three Ardsley sisters in *For Services Rendered*. They symbolize the imbalance in society resulting from the drain on male lives in war. Reference has already been made to their diverse roles in projecting the ravages of war.62

**The War Villains**: The theme of war cannot be complete without the depiction of the villains who recognize in war a chance to multiply their profits: Leonard Ardsley, Howard and Wilfred play this role in *For Services Rendered*. Leonard is so complete a monster that his own offsprings are the main targets of his professional cunning and incisive tongue. In a fine bit of characterization, Maugham makes him enquire after the children of his own daughter, Ethel, like a breezy outsider. Believing they live on their country farm, he remarks,

62 Chapter VI, pp. 223 f. supra.
"Fine thing for them living on a farm like that. Grand thing a country life."

But this shot of courtesy has been fired in the dark, for, as Ethel tells him,

They've gone back to school now.

Nevertheless, Leonard is undaunted. Pat rolls he out another polite address,

"Of course, I remember. Best thing in the world...Happiest time in their lives."\footnote{63 p. 140 f.}

Just a chatty, well-spoken, distant friend of the family - that is the role Leonard assumes here to his own daughter.

If this is the war-villain in the bosom of the family, he is more ruthless in his business. The natty, calculated callousness revealed in Leonard's long dialogue with Collie reminds us of a butcher who feeds a lamb only to plunge his sharp knife into it. Eva's accusation against him,

"You hounded him to his death. You never gave him a chance",\footnote{64 p. 159.}

underlines his moral guilt.

Leonard Ardsley belongs to the type of the redoubtable demagogues who are ready with cunning schemes and coined slogans. The protest of woe of these vacuous phrase-builders is so loud and cleverly worded that it often rings convincing to the credulous. War or no war, Ardsleys are bound to thrive in every society; war only brings their
dissembling art into sharp outline.

It will thus be seen that the world of these serious plays is peopled by persons very different from those found in the earlier plays. Broadly speaking, these characters are adequate to project the various themes, although some of them are static and two-dimensional. The main characters in Caesar's Wife and The Sacred Flame and Sydney in For Services Rendered are, however, dynamic and three-dimensional, in the sense that they register changes in their attitudes even as the theme develops; they are Maugham's triumphs of characterization in this phase.

4 Language

The linguistic technique of these last plays is the subject of this section. In conformity with the serious and meditative tone of these plays the dialogue in them is more elaborate and formal. The Sacred Flame is perhaps the most notable play in this respect, for in it Maugham deliberately made his characters use not the words and expressions that they would have used in real life or the spur of the moment ..., but words and expressions they might have used if they had had time to set their thoughts in order.65

The language in these last plays has a formal grace composed of

65 The Collected Plays, III, x.
the overtones and reverberations which distinguish literature from ordinary reading matter.\textsuperscript{66}

Grave, reflective utterances raise the themes of these plays from the emotional to the contemplative level. Mrs. Tabret in The Sacred Flame, for instance, puts my own feelings away out of sight and mind.\textsuperscript{67}

In a more general revelation of the same attitude she says later,

"I always think we do best by people when we help them in the way they want to be helped rather than in the way we may think they should be helped."\textsuperscript{68}

These simple, unadorned statements of opinion are at once in character and promote the theme by changing our perspective of Maurice's death.

Similar instances also abound in The Unknown and For Services Rendered. Dr. Macfarlane in the former says,

"It looks as though there were little justice in the world, and chance seems to rule man and all his circumstances."\textsuperscript{69}

Mrs. Ardsley in For Services Rendered muses,

"To me life is like a party that was very nice to start with, but has become rather rowdy as time went on, and I'm not at all sorry to go home."\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{66} L. Brander, op.cit., p. 58.
\textsuperscript{67} p. 267.
\textsuperscript{68} p. 281.
\textsuperscript{69} p. 79.
\textsuperscript{70} p. 179.
The peculiar quality of such utterances is that they are as valid out of the context as they are meaningful in it. Through such gems of contemplation these plays reach out of their kernels to touch life.

Maugham's dramatic speeches are generally short, but in the plays of this phase he is obliged to introduce some long ones in justice to the themes. The speeches of Mrs. Tabret in *The Sacred Flame* (p. 314 ff), those of John, Mrs. Littlewood and Dr. Macfarlane in *The Unknown* (pp. 46, 53, 79) and those of Sydney and Ardsley in *For Services Rendered* (pp. 164, 165) are among the longish speeches. They are just long enough to make their point and do not acquire the rambling quality many of Shaw's speeches (those in scenes IV, V, VI in *St. Joan*, for instance) do. Herman Ould pertinently says in this context,

"Maugham is less given to long speeches than Shaw, but, when he writes long speeches their prose style is unimpeachable. They are not colloquial but dramatic."\(^{71}\)

The occasional flippant treatment of serious issues is an index of the complexity of the style of these plays. In *Caesar's Wife* Maugham gives this practice a psychological foundation when he makes Arthur ask Violet (gravely),

"Has it ever struck you that flippancy is often the best way of dealing with a serious situation?"\(^{72}\)

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71 The Art of the Play (London, 1948), p. 79.
72 p. 63.
It is this mood that induces Maurice to make jokes about his being an invalid (*The Sacred Flame*, pp. 228, 229). Their aptness is discerned even more clearly later when his mother refers to his nature as 'carefree' and 'happy' (p. 267). All these plays carry their little loads of frivolity that sometimes heightens the grimness of the situation by contrast and at others simply provides comic relief. Howard's speeches in the drunken state in *For Services Rendered* and Sydney's replies to them (p. 119), the jests that pass between Sheppey and Death (*Sheppey*, pp. 298, 299) are some of the examples of the first type. Examples of the second type are many. To Violet's remark in *Caesar's Wife* that her frock in the morning was a little too young, Arthur gallantly responds, saying, "Of course, you are older this afternoon, that's quite true."  

Several speeches of the doctors in *The Unknown*, *The Sacred Flame* and *For Services Rendered*, those of George Conway, Harold Knox and the Amah in *East of Suez* and of Sheppey  

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73 p. 32. Cf. Marchbanks's pregnant reply to Candida's query about his age in Shaw's *Candida*, "As old as the world now. This morning I was eighteen." *The Orient Edition* (Bombay, 1961), p. 80.  
74 E.g. his calling a military customer 'Commander-in-Chief' (*Sheppey*, p. 230).
are among those characterized by homely flippancy which reduces the tension of the serious issues.

Invalid men often have a larger gift of the gab than others and their response to visitors making conversation to them is a pathetic but interesting study. Maugham fully explores this aspect of dramatic dialogue in The Sacred Flame and For Services Rendered. Revealing his experience to Stella Maurice (in the former play) tells her, 

"Being an invalid has its compensations. Of course, people are very sympathetic, but you mustn't abuse their sympathy. They ask you how you are, but they don't really care a damn. ... Let them talk about themselves. That always interests them and they say, what an intelligent fellow he is."

A demonstration of this process is found in For Services Rendered (p. 97).

The characters in these plays pass through emotional crises and the function of the language in such scenes is to communicate the emotion adequately. In all these plays, except to some extent in Sheppey, the language discharges this responsibility admirably. In Sheppey the casual view taken by Mrs. Miller of her husband's being declared mad by specialists and of his death is a serious blemish, and the inadequacy of the language has a share in it. In

75 p. 244.
the remaining plays the language is powerful enough to convey the intensity of the emotion. Several devices are used for this purpose. One of them is the repetition of the same word. For instance, referring to war, Sydney cries,

"Bunk, bunk, bunk." 77

King Lear's well-known line,

"Never, never, never, never, never!" 77a

comes to the mind here. Examples of such devices can be multiplied.

This brief examination shows that on the whole Maugham's dialogue in these last plays is attuned to their themes and facilitates their projection in a smooth and graceful manner, except for the fact that it is not fully equal to conveying the depth of emotion in Sheppey.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, the technique of these last plays on the whole ensures effective projection of their themes. Realism is the general method in these plays, and sentiment and humour are also introduced in suitable contexts, with the exception of East of Suez and Sheppey in which too much sentiment and too little respectively obstruct the promotion of the themes.

77a Shakespeare: Complete Works

As for the structure of the plays, Maugham supplements his usual traditional moulds by gorgeous spectacle in *Caesar's Wife* and *East of Suez* and symbolism in *Sheppey*. Except in *The Unknown*, the plots of these plays provide impressive frames for their themes but for a few defects in *Caesar's Wife*, *East of Suez* and *Sheppey*. In *The Unknown* discussion largely takes the place of action, and, although vigorous and interesting as philosophy, it is a poor substitute for a well-knit plot.

The characters of this phase belong to different types from those of the earlier phases. *Sheppey* does not come fully alive, and Daisy and Harry in *East of Suez* are 'escaped' characters who grow larger than the theme warrants; but most of the remaining characters powerfully convey the thematic content of the plays. Some of them like Arthur, Violet, Mrs. Tabret, and Sydney are the triumphs of this phase.

Maugham's dramatic style in these plays is rather formal and elaborate in conformity with the element of contemplation in them. Elements like frivolity, reflective generalization and expression of intense emotion make it more complex than that of the previous phases.

The technique of these plays may now be considered in relation to their themes. *Caesar's Wife* is an almost wholly successful example of the complementary functioning of theme and technique but for the stock device of Ronny's
saving Arthur; The Sacred Flame and For Services Rendered are commendable triumphs of the perfect equilibrium of theme and technique. The critic of "The Times" characterized The Sacred Flame as the height of Maugham's peculiar powers as a dramatist. About For Services Rendered, J.C. Trewin said,

"Little could be more directly moving."  

He also described the play as "a cutting east wind of our stage."

In the remaining plays there is lop-sided development: East of Suez fails owing to the emphasis on the individuals that throws the theme out of focus; The Unknown is a little too discursive to sustain the dramatic fibre; Sheppey partly fails because of the hero's stopping short of ideological grandeur, attained by Mrs. Tabret in The Sacred Flame, ordained by the theme. Nevertheless, examined in its entirety, this phase establishes Maugham's claim as a major dramatist dealing with some of the modern man's serious problems.

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78 Theatrical Companion, p. 213.
79 Ibid., p. 2.