CHAPTER I

MAUGHAM'S DRAMATIC WORK: THE BACKGROUND
I. The Purpose and Pattern of the Present Inquiry

The purpose of the present inquiry is to evaluate William Somerset Maugham's contribution to British drama. As his dramatic work has not been judged in sufficient detail, it is hoped this study will go a long way towards fulfilling a genuine need. Maugham achieved fame in diverse forms such as the novel, the short story and drama. Yet, a glance at some of the well-known histories of English Literature and those of British drama shows that his dramatic work has not received its due share of critical attention. R.A. Cordell's complaint that he has not been so much attacked by the critics as ignored remains, by and large, true today. In the Pelican Guide to English Literature not a single play has been included in the list of Maugham's major works. Gazamian observes in the voluminous History of English Literature that Maugham's plays are not unworthy of being studied along with those of Shaw, but, actually, this and another brief one are his only references to Maugham as a dramatist. A.C. Ward and

4 p. 1344.
5 p. 1417.
Edward Albert do deal with Maugham's plays at some length, but emphasize only his comedies of manners. As for histories of drama, J.W. Marriott says in his Modern Drama,

"Mr. Maugham's greatest work has been done in the vein of serious comedy."

In the three-page discussion of Maugham in Allardyce Nicoll's British Drama none of Maugham's later plays like The Sacred Flame and Sheppey has been mentioned. In his recent English Drama: A Modern Viewpoint, too, Nicoll sticks to his restricted view of Maugham as a 'very nearly' successful writer of a modern comedy of manners with overt social implications.

On the other hand, G. Wilson Knight in his The Golden Labyrinth discusses Maugham's serious plays but omits the early comedies.

Coming to books on Maugham, Laurence Brander, in his 'Guide' to Maugham's entire writing, stresses Maugham's artificial comedy in the writing of which he was remarkably gifted.

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notwithstanding his brief, factual account of all Maugham's dramatic work in one chapter. M.K. Naik's *W. Somerset Maugham* examines the whole of Maugham's work, but, by its very nature, has no room for an exclusive and detailed study of his plays. There has thus been no book dealing exclusively with Maugham's dramatic work as a whole. In this study it is therefore proposed to examine all Maugham's available plays as the creative work of one mind, with a view to making an attempt to bridge the gap in the critical assessment of one of the most versatile and widely read writers of our century.

Maugham's first two full-length plays, *A Man of Honour* (1898-99) and *The Explorer* (1899), a play immediately novelized under the same title, followed close on the heels of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897). Thus, he started his literary career simultaneously with fiction and drama. By 1898 he had penned two one-act plays, one of them in German. The second phase of his early playwriting commenced in 1903 and lasted till 1905, and the third spanned the years 1908-1910. His first success,


however, came as late as 1907, about nine years after he had started writing plays. Nevertheless, the extent and acceleration of his shooting into the limelight more than compensated for the delay, for his stage hits beginning with Lady Frederick (written 1903, produced 1907) induced a cartoon in Punch showing Shakespeare himself biting his nails in front of the hoardings advertising the simultaneous performance of four Maugham plays. Maugham's industry of about a decade was now bearing fruit.

Maugham wrote plays, he says,

"because it seemed less difficult to set down on paper the things people said than to construct a narrative." He refers to Dr. Johnson's remark in the same vein in support of his contention. Maugham was a born storyteller, and as dialogue....is the swiftest way of telling a story, he chose the drama form. The second reason for his choice was a practical one. As the protagonist in his story "The Human Element" says,

"the intelligentsia....prefer to go to the theatre on the nod and to get a book from the library."

17 L. Brander; op.cit., p. 45.
Maugham's triumphs on the stage were so spectacular that he meant then never to write another book, but to devote myself for the rest of my life to the drama. 19

It must, however, be remembered that although he wrote his early plays for money, he knew that you earn most money when you write merely to please yourself. 20

Despite his career-oriented and success-inspired love of the theatre in the second decade, Maugham's plays in the late twenties (The Sacred Flame, 1928) and early thirties (For Services Rendered, 1932, Sheppey, 1933) were products of the inner compulsion of a creative artist. His contemplative plays lying pigeon-holed in my fancy all ready to be written, for they would continue to pester me till I wrote them, 21

represent a labour of love. Indeed, he resolutely resisted the temptation to model For Services Rendered on a pattern

19 The Partial View, p. 70.
21 Theatrical Companion, p. 215.
When we contrast this with the deft design that had gone into his penning *Lady Frederick* (1903), we realize how the commercial playwright blossomed into the artist with a restless urge to express himself. Even when he was regaling the public with his early comedies, Maugham knew that the drama could only regain its proper place in the literary life of the time: and be of serious import to intelligent men if it dealt with a sincere spirit with life.

Here, then, is in a nutshell the *raison d'etre* of Maugham's dramatic work. He wished to write gay comedies and earn money and fame; he also aimed at writing plays grappling with the living reality in the war-torn British society. These two propositions marked the two phases of his dramatic inspiration. He made his debut with the one and bowed himself out with the other.

Maugham's goodbye to the theatre in 1933 was complete.

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22 Ibid., p. 241.
23 "I came to the conclusion that my best chance was to write a comedy with a big part for an actress, who might induce a manager to give the play a trial. I asked myself what sort of part would be likely to appeal to a leading lady, and having made up my mind on this point, wrote Lady Frederick." Theatrical Companion, p. 56.
24 The Collected Plays, I, viii.
and calculated. The two reasons he gave for it do him credit as a man and as an artist. The first was the practical one that he

would go while the going was good.  

In literary history there are instances of writers eclipsed by similar writers of the younger generation. When Byron became popular as a narrative poet Scott slid into the background. With Noel Coward's ascendency on the British stage Maugham's popularity diminished, and he discreetly withdrew. The second reason was his aim at perfection which he felt he could not achieve in drama.  

Both reasons indicate the shedding of the earlier mercenary outlook from his dramatic inspiration.

Maugham's contribution to English literature is remarkable for its variety. "He has entertained more people .... in more literary kinds than any other English prose writer of this century." His mental apparatus was by nature tuned to versatility. He took things for granted so quickly that I cease to see anything unusual in my new surroundings.

26 The Partial View, p. 91.
27 Ibid., p. 94.
28 Brander, op.cit., p. 4.
29 The Gentleman in the Parlour, p. 13.
As in life, so in literature. He was at home in the novel, the short story, drama and the essay. His was not a case like Graham Greene's who wrote plays because he needed a rest from novels, and found himself writing with a new excitement. Maugham appears to have considered his plays a more likely vehicle to literary immortality than his novels, for in the 'slender baggage' he hoped to leave for a lasting fame he mentions 'two or three plays and a dozen short stories', but no novel. The plays indeed differ fundamentally from his other writings; the range of their themes and their treatment is much larger than that of the novels and the short stories. There is nothing in the novels and the stories to match the sustained and total frolic in Mrs. Dot, Jack Straw and Home and Beauty. A Wodehouse novel is nearer these plays in their hilarious abandon than any of Maugham's own novels or stories. At the other extreme, no novel or story of his is as entirely bitter and gloomy as For Services Rendered, none as wholly reflective and philosophical as The Unknown, and none again perhaps as imaginative as Sheppey. Between these two ends are the various social themes, often comically treated (Penelope), but sometimes seriously dealt with (Smith, The Land of Promise). And these by no means exhaust the variety. Maugham's drama

thus projects more facets of his literary personality than any other medium he used. The plays therefore offer a fruitful area for exploration as a wide spectrum of one creative mind.

Out of his thirty full-length plays Maugham himself preserved eighteen which constitute the three volumes of his Collected Plays, each broadly coinciding with one phase of his literary career. Obviously, he included only such plays as he thought have some intrinsic merit. As Karl G. Pfeiffer points out, the public reception of a play had little to do with its inclusion in the collected edition. "The Letter, one of the most popular Maugham plays, was excluded, and three flops made the grade." Nor can the exclusion of The Letter be ascribed to its being adapted from a short story, for The Unknown, adapted from a novel, The Hero, has been included.

The sequence of the plays in the collected edition is not strictly chronological; Caesar's Wife (1918), The Unknown (1920) and East of Suez (1922) have been put in Volume III, but The Constant Wife (1926) and The Breadwinner (1930) precede them in Volume II. This shows that although chronology was his obvious criterion in arranging the order of the plays, the grouping together of like-

32 These are listed in the Bibliography.

spirited ones had a priority. The mellow mood of 
The Unknown is foreign to the middle phase and belongs 
to the last, whereas the bubbling satire of The Bread-
winner suits the middle phase. The order which then 
seemed appropriate is more so today, for at this distance 
in time small chronological deviations are even less 
significant. The present study therefore follows the 
author's own order of the plays and proposes to analyse 
them in the three groups he has formulated.

II. Maugham's View of Prose Drama

Before embarking upon a study of Maugham's plays it 
will be necessary and proper to examine what he thought 
of drama in general and the contemporary British theatre 
in particular. This examination will show what he set 
for himself as the objective in his drama, and will there­
fore provide a useful basis to judge his achievement.

Maugham's reflections on drama are mostly in the 
nature of sporadic remarks on the type of drama he wrote 
rather than systematic thoughts on chosen topics. In many 
of them his reaction to the reception of his early comedies 
vis-a-vis the prevalent types finds expression. They are 
contained in his prefaces to the three volumes of The 
Collected Plays, and some of them are again incorporated 
in The Summing Up. These reflections can be classified 
under four broad heads: nature, purpose, subject-matter
As for the nature of drama, Maugham differentiates between 'the arts' and 'the drama', and concludes the comparison with the oracular declaration:

The appeal of the arts is to the few.
But the drama cannot do with that.  

Here he considers drama a composite product in which the dramatist, the scenes, the audience, the acting and other factors have each a share. It is finally the audience that makes or mars the fate of a play, and as

the audience is on a lower level of civilization than the persons of which it is composed,... the theatre is a generation behind the culture of the age.

Maugham thus viewed drama as a complex art in which the artist's freedom to follow his aesthetic dictates is heavily fettered by the demands of the audience and other factors. That is why he felt he could not attain perfection in drama. Not only did he consider drama wanting as a medium of artistic expression, but he also felt that the British theatre of his day was poor.

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34 The Collected Plays, II, x.
35 Ibid., p. xi.
36 Ibid., p. xviii.
37 Ibid., p. xiv.
If in this view Maugham concerns himself with drama as a whole, the scope of most of his other remarks is restricted to prose drama. He calls prose drama one of the lesser arts, like woodcarving or dancing.  

He also terms it an 'ephemeral art', and propounds the theory that it responds to a particular state in civilization, (and) is likely to perish with a change in that state.

Maugham qualifies his pronouncements on the nature of drama with the statement that great plays are part of literature, but only by courtesy part of the theatre.

Thus, in Maugham's conception, the impermanence of drama as an art, of which he speaks, pertains to the stage and not to literature.

In the matter of the purpose of drama Maugham concentrates on that of comedy. He is different from many another writer of comedy in disowning an educative, a corrective, purpose, avowed by a long line of comic

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38 Ibid., p. xviii.
39 The Collected Plays, I, xviii.
40 The Collected Plays, III, xx.
41 The Collected Plays, I, xx.
dramatists. Ben Jonson (1573-1637) claims that comedy is accommodated to the correction of manners. Moliere (1622-1673) brings out the supposed psychological background of this corrective process when he remarks, "one may have no objection to being wicked, but one hates to be ridiculous."\(^4\)

In his *Le Misanthrope*, however, Philintes avers that Alcestes's distemper is "as good as a comedy", and warns him,

"It is an extremity of folly to busy ourselves in correcting the world."\(^5\)

Yet, Moliere's aim in that play and others was perhaps to instruct people by composing a 'critique of mankind' (Ibid., p. 344). Vanbrugh (1666-1726) went a step further when in his *Short Vindication* he stated,

"The business of comedy is to show people what they should do by representing on the stage doing what they should not."\(^6\)

Congreve (1670-1729) aimed in *The Double-Dealer* at painting the vices and follies of humankind.\(^7\)

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43 Ibid.
and told his patrons, especially the ladies, that they could no more expect to be amused by a comedy than to be tickled by a surgeon, while he's letting 'em blood.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet, the speaker of the prologue to his masterpiece, \textit{The Way of the World}, declares,

"To please, this time, has been his sole pretence,
He'll not instruct, lest it should give offence."\textsuperscript{48}

Thus, intermittently the comic dramatist becomes aware that the corrective cannot be thrust down an unwilling throat, and that most of the spectators are not inclined to be instructed by him. Bergson considers even laughter "above all a corrective".\textsuperscript{49} Shaw covers the pill of thought with a thick coating of wit, but the reader may eat the sugar and spit the pill; he apparently does not wish to go to 'hell' with the dramatist - the 'hell' scene is generally dropped while reading as well as staging \textit{Man and Superman}. In the preface to \textit{St. Joan} Shaw asserts that the question of Joan's burning is a burning question still, otherwise he would not waste my reader's time and my own on it for five minutes.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 341.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The Orient Edition} (Bombay, 1970), p. 42.
In contrast to this, Maugham declares unequivocally that comedy

is not a work of edification, though it should be a work of art, and if it castigates the follies of the moment that is by the way and only in so far as this no doubt laudable process occasions laughter. The object is the entertainment of the audience, not their improvement. 51

Here, for once, intent claims practice as a legitimate and fond child. Unfortunately such bold declarations coupled with his commercial success brought Maugham what he called notoriety. As his admirer Glenway Wescott says, he should have been warned of the riskiness of oversimplification and understatement in an age of advertisement. 52

What Maugham meant was that a play trying to teach without trying to please will not be good drama; it will be a sermon in dialogue. Even a serious play cannot take to edification exclusively. In support of his contention that drama is not even a good vehicle for propaganda, 53 Maugham cites the example of Galsworthy's Justice which he wrote.

51 The Collected Plays, II, ix.
53 The Collected Plays, II, xvii.
to show the evils of the prison system, ... but what he actually showed was the efficiency with which society eliminates the unfit.  

Further, the moral stature of the characters in a play does not by itself promote the chances of its enthusiastic reception on the stage. Art, says Maugham, is indifferent to morals; no excellence of motive will enable you to write a good play or paint a good picture.

An indecent scene fails not because of ethical reasons, but because indecency is repulsive, and whatever repels cannot please. This attitude holds the key to Maugham's own comedies which keep to the narrow path of hilarity without swerving into crudeness on the one hand and preaching on the other.

On the subject-matter of drama Maugham's thinking is conditioned by his adverse reaction to the advent in England of the Ibsenian drama of ideas. He maintains that the root ideas of poetry are love, death and the destiny of man. It is not any sort of dramatist who can find anything to say about them that has not been said a thousand times already; the great truths are too important to be new.

54 Ibid., p. xvi.
55 Ibid., I, xviii.
56 The Partial View, p. 78.
His conclusion that to project ideas through drama is to waste the possibilities of the medium follows from his premise that ideas are seldom new.

It is on the craft of playwriting that Maugham has many valuable ideas and suggestions to offer. He probably speaks for most comic dramatists when he complains that comedy has been greatly hampered by the demand for verisimilitude. He has also a grudge against the audience for it demands much stronger motives than are demanded in actual life.

Both these grievances arose out of the unfavourable criticism of Maugham's farces, mainly Home and Beauty. In a farce propriety as it is understood in normal life is the first casualty. In a farce verisimilitude and reasonable motives for action are out of place - indeed a farce is often based on their negation. The validity of Maugham's complaints is therefore restricted to the context of farce. In good non-farcical comedies, like several by Shaw and Maugham's own Penelope and The Land of Promise, verisimilitude or probability and reasonably motivated action are essential. As a matter of fact, in The Summing Up Maugham goes to the extent of demanding from a comedy

57 The Collected Plays, II, xvi.
58 The Collected Plays, III, xii.
59 The Collected Plays, II, xii.
"more than ever, a willing suspension of disbelief", which leaves no room for the question, 'Do such things happen?' This demand appears to contradict Maugham's complaint of the expectation of verisimilitude. On sorting out the two remarks and the two broad types of comedy, the realistic and the fantastic, we can assign verisimilitude to the former and a suspension of disbelief to the latter, the examples in Maugham being *Penselope* and *Home and Beauty* respectively.

Maugham also brings out the difference between pure comedy and farce - the former appealing to the mind and the latter to the belly of the collective audience. He stoutly upholds the right of farce to be included in comedy:

The aim of comedy is not to represent life, but amusingly to comment on it. There is no valid reason why farce should not enter into it.... Comedy, depending as it does on wit, appeals only to the intellect; that is not enough; farce appeals to the belly.\(^6^1\)

As he points out,

great masters of comedy like Shakespeare, Molière and Shaw have never jibed at farce.\(^6^2\)

Maugham himself introduces farce in such a high comedy as *The Circle* in the scene in which Lord Porteous's false

\(^{60}\) *The Partial View*, p. 85.

\(^{61}\) *The Collected Plays*, III, xxiii.

\(^{62}\) *The Partial View*, p. 85.
teeth drop out in the midst of a serious speech. Although Maugham's assertion that it has been found in practice that it is impossible to hold the attention of an audience through three acts of pure comedy\(^\text{63}\) is an exaggeration (for there are excellent popular non-farcical comedies like *The Land of Promise* and *Our Betters* by Maugham himself, apart from those by Shakespeare, Moliere and Shaw, that have held the stage), his unabashed endorsement of farce is sound and unexceptionable.

As for constructing the plot of a play, Maugham counsels against too much and too rigid a planning beforehand. The school of writing which asks the dramatist to chalk out the minutest detail before putting pen to paper, so as not to leave anything to chance, does not have his approval. To him it seems better to keep your general idea in your head, with your chief scenes fluid, as they must be before they are set down in black and white, and trust to the natural development by which, if you have the dramatic instinct, one scene leads to the next.\(^\text{64}\)

Several of his plays like *Jack Straw* and *The Circle* testify to Maugham's adherence to this precept as the analysis in the chapters to follow will bring out.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 85.

\(^{64}\) *The Collected Plays*, III, ix.
An accomplished story-teller and no great innovator in technique, Maugham is a stickler for a well-knit plot. In "The Human Element" he endorses Aristotle's hoary maxim in the following words,

"I like a story to have a beginning, a middle and an end. I have a weakness for a point. I think atmosphere is all very well, but atmosphere without anything else is like a frame without a picture."\(^{65}\)

Maugham is thus a conservative writer setting much store by the plot. He accepted existing forms like the comedy of manners, and presented his themes through them. But, as will be shown later, though he did not excel in technical innovation, his handling of old forms was superb.

So far as the comic dramatist's attitude to his characters is concerned, Maugham declares that

the first person the author of comedy must consider from the standpoint of comedy is himself.\(^{66}\)

It is interesting that this view is attributed by him to Congreve who made the point indirectly when he told Voltaire that he could not discuss his plays, because he (Congreve) was a gentleman rather than a dramatist. Congreve meant that he had put a lot of himself in his plays, and modesty demanded that he should not discuss

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\(^{66}\) The Partial View, p. 72.
himself. Humour presupposes in its author the ability to laugh at himself, and Maugham was modest and detached enough to possess it.

The expectation on the reader's part of consistency in the behaviour of characters is touched upon by Maugham from a fresh angle. The protagonist in his story "A Friend in Need" remarks,

"Why novels and plays are so often untrue to life is because their authors, perhaps of necessity, make their characters all of a piece. They cannot afford to make them self-contradictory, for then they become incomprehensible, and yet self-contradictory is what most of us are." 67

In life as in literature contradiction jars on our minds. In life we find it an existing fact not yielding an explanation, and we are forced to leave it at that. In literature there seems no excuse for it, for the writer has full freedom to shape his creations. Indeed, literature is looked upon as a slice of life shorn of its contradictions, and moulded into a pattern, and one of its solaces is the escape it provides from the often formless oddity of life. Characters are therefore expected to behave consistently in literature.

This is more true of drama than of other creative forms,

for the average spectator is much less prepared to strain himself enough to discover a pattern, where apparently none or a dim one exists, than the average reader is. That is why Maugham says that the playwright must be constantly in touch with contemporary life. As one advances in years one is apt to lose contact with the changing spirit of the age. Maugham says,

"Playwriting is a young man's job. A play demands actuality. Though its theme may be of permanent value, it seems essential to dress it in the mode of the moment." 68

Another important point Maugham makes in characterization is closely matched by his own practice. He says,

"The astute dramatist presents his subject as early as possible, and if for theatrical effectiveness he does not introduce his principal characters till later, the conversation of the persons on the stage at the curtain concentrates the attention of the audience on them so that the delay in their appearance increases the expectation." 69

A classic instance of this type of entry is that of Millamant in Congreve's The Way of the World. In many of Maugham's plays this technique is used to good effect. Lady Frederick, Jack Straw, Penelope and Lady Kitty are some of his creations whose charm is enhanced by their delayed appearance preceded by discussions about them in absentia.

68 The Collected Plays, III,xix.
69 The Partial View, p. 73.
Maugham has a great deal to say on dialogue in comedy. Discussing the comedy of manners he points out that it is drama not of action, but of conversation. Dialogue is therefore an important component of it, as it is indeed of all drama, for even strong actions enter the focus of dramatic meaning only by means of the words that precede and follow them. Emulating Dr. Johnson's cliché about brevity being the soul of wit, Maugham calls good dialogue

a sort of spoken shorthand.\footnote{Ibid., p. 75.}

The dramatist, he says,

must cut and cut till he has arrived at the maximum concentration.\footnote{Ibid.}

Maugham naturally disapproves of the naturalistic trend in the dramatic dialogue of his day. He views with horror the dialogue

that exactly copied the average talk, with its hesitations, mumblings and repetitions, of average people.\footnote{The Collected Plays, III, xi.}

His objection to such dialogue corresponds to his grievance about the demand for verisimilitude in the action of drama. A theory which demands in dramatic dialogue a reproduction of the speech of ordinary men would be analogous to
Wordsworth's doctrine of the language of poetry. It can be similarly demolished by Coleridge's well-known argument. Maugham opposes the use of commonplace dialogue in drama on comparable lines. Ordinary conversation is no doubt simple, but it is

out of all relation with life but that of the cocktail bar.\(^74\)

Maugham considered its use in drama "a pity" also for another and weightier reason that it

prevents any reference on the stage to the great subjects of human life and the most profound thoughts of human beings.\(^75\)

For, the ordinary language of ordinary people presupposes ordinary, often childish, topics of conversation. When he was criticized for being 'literary', Maugham predicted that the pendulum would swing in his direction, and

the playwright will revert to a dialogue that 'is deliberately and significantly formal'.\(^76\)

Brander pertinently remarks in this connection:

It is almost as if he foresaw the plays of T.S. Eliot and his very different treatment of conversation at a cocktail party.\(^77\)

\(^74\) The Collected Plays, III, xii.
\(^75\) Ibid., II, xiii. The critic of The Times concurred with him when he said that most plays of the twenties were devoid of anything like thought. Theatrical Companion, p.162.
\(^77\) Ibid.
Let us now assess the strength and weakness of Maugham's views on drama just outlined. As for the nature of drama, there appears to be some plausibility in his observation that prose drama corresponds to a certain state in civilization, and will disappear with that state. The epic, the long verse romance, and the long verse allegory were in vogue till the sixteenth century when the novel was not; the short story again is a recent growth. These trends indicate that literary types are perhaps related to 'states of civilization' as Maugham calls them.

The importance of the audience and other non-literary factors in drama that Maugham points out is unexceptionable, but his singling out prose drama for the epithet 'ephemeral' is rather misleading. His distinction between drama as literature and drama as theatre is valid, but his contention that great plays are 'ephemeral' as theatre and 'permanent' as literature does not sound convincing. From the frequent successful revivals of Shakespeare, Congreve, Wilde, and others one would be led to think that great plays are as lasting on the stage as they are as literature. Over a sufficiently long period great plays retain their appeal both as literature and as theatre, whereas others fade out. Further, this is applicable not only to drama but also to other departments of creative writing. In fact, Maugham himself points out that in poetry \footnote{The Collected Plays, II, xviii.} and
in fiction literary fashions go on changing. If a play popular today is destined to fall into oblivion tomorrow, so is a novel. This fate awaits all but the greatest works; the difference is in degree, not in kind.

It is in his succinct enunciation of the purpose of comedy that Maugham's clarity of mind is seen at an advantage. His staunch plea for entertainment as the purpose of comedy agrees with his own comedies as with most others, but not with the pleading of many stalwarts of comedy. Maugham's mental power lies in viewing clearly what comic dramatists create despite what many of them preach.

On the other hand, what Maugham says apropos of ideas in drama is easily the weakest link in his reflections on drama. His argument that most ideas are hoary and dramatizing them is to waste the possibilities of the medium postulates an unnecessarily rigid and unrelated view of the matter. The issue is not whether an idea is entirely new; it is whether it has been dramatized successfully and effectively. Even though most thoughts are age-old, their presentation may differ with different writers. Besides, Maugham's conclusion is not only erroneous, but contrary to facts. Shaw popularized the drama of ideas in England,

79 Ibid., III, xxi.
and though in some of his plays the thought-content and
the wit pull in diverse directions, in many others like
Arms and the Man and St. Joan they coalesce in a magnifi-
cent manner. On top of that, Maugham himself penned
several plays of ideas, like The Unknown and The Sacred
Flame, and pending their detailed study it can safely be
said that they succeed enough not to be dubbed a waste of
the medium of drama.

Happily, Maugham presently explains that he is not
opposed to the projection of ideas in the theatre, and that
he merely wishes to suggest that for effective dramatiza-
tion ideas must be translated in terms of emotion. This
is sound counsel, and in most plays (like those mentioned
above) in which ideas are successfully put forth it is
followed. This would mean that if ideas translate into
emotions are propagated in a play, there is no longer a
waste of the possibilities of drama. If Maugham was
shortly going to say how ideas should be dramatized, he
need not have counselled earlier against the very presence
of ideas in drama, nor need he have said that

the disadvantages of ideas in the theatre
is that if they are acceptable, they are
accepted and so kill the play that helped

to diffuse them, 80

because this process takes place only in the case of un-

80 The Partial View, p. 79.
successfully dramatized ideas. It may again be stressed here that the plays mentioned above do diffuse acceptable and accepted ideas, and yet remain very much alive. Thus, although at its best Maugham's stand on the place of ideas in drama is balanced, occasionally, in the wake of his fervent championship of entertainment as the object of comedy, it leans towards fanatic opposition to the drama of ideas.

In the area of the craft of playwriting Maugham's hints are gems of sound advice. Many of them are no doubt traditional, but Maugham's pithy recapitulation puts them in sharp outline, and his long experience and success endow them with an authentic aura and practical value. His remarks on the importance of a well-knit plot, on the entry of main characters only after the audience is filled with eager anticipation, and on the shifts in stage dialogue reveal his keen insight into dramatic technique.

All in all, but for a few inconsistencies and within the obvious limits of stray comment rather than exhaustive argument, Maugham's view of prose drama is rich in mature pronouncements, and is a pointer to his own dramatic methods.

III The Impact of Maugham's Life and Personality on His Drama

Maugham's life and personality have an intimate relationship with his writings, including his plays. He maintains that
all the characters that we create are but copies of ourselves,

and declares that Alroy Kear in Cakes and Ale has a great deal of myself. For I have a grim capacity for seeing my own absurdity, and I find in myself much to excite my ridicule. 81

Once he remarked that no writer could draw a convincing character solely from observation; he had to have some of that character in himself if he were to make him live for the reader. 82

Maugham thus moulded many of his characters from aspects of himself. Yet, he was not on the defensive when they were criticized. After blowing life into his creations he remained detached like a plant that has shed its blossoms, and looked upon them and the reactions they provoked with an amused, non-aligned eye. Writers like D.H. Lawrence create literary persons with so religious a passion that they defend them vociferously as they would themselves. Criticism of such subjective characters is looked upon by them as a personal challenge, and controversies on such scores are often endless. Maugham's post-creation habit was different, and its effect curious. He felt embarrassed to hear so much of himself written by himself because it had for me an intimacy that I shrank from sharing with all and sundry. 83

82 Somerset Maugham, A Candid Portrait, p. 20.
83 The Partial View, p. 63.
He practised the process outlined in his preface to Cakes and Ale:

> When a character is set down on paper it belongs to the writer no more. He forgets it.  

In his plays he likewise put a lot of himself even in the lighter ones. Shy as he was, he felt an irresistible urge to get the load of memories off his chest - the same urge that Tennessee Williams felt in writing Sweet Bird of Youth (1959). This urge coupled with the inherent fact of the artist's creations being his own images in a direct or remote manner point to the stirring backdrop of Maugham's physical and intellectual personality to his plays.

So far as Maugham's physical life is concerned his deformity of stammer is echoed in the damaged limbs of some of his heroes both in the plays and in a novel like Of Human Bondage. It is interesting that he himself maintains that such an impress is natural and to be expected. He has no doubt that Dostoevsky would not have written the sort of books he did if he had not been an epileptic.

The enormity of Maugham's own agony caused by his vocal defect is sensed in the incident he related to Robin Maugham. The boy Willie could not utter the word 'Whitstable' while

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84 p. 2.
87 Somerset and All the Maughams (New York, 1966), p. 133.
standing in a queue for third class tickets and suffered untold humiliation. His nephew Ormond was a cripple, and Robin tells us that Maugham

had indeed been moved by the sight of young crippled Ormond, and he had been touched by Beldy's devotion to him.\(^{38}\) Beldy being Ormond's mother. Here, to be sure, is the source of the invalid son-mother pairs in *The Sacred Flame* and *For Services Rendered*. The treatment of physical deformity in these plays is significant— in its guarded silence on the part of the sufferer and others about his actual suffering. It is just there and is not conspicuously paraded as Laura's in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945).\(^{39}\) An account of the deep distress caused to Maugham in his early years is found in *Of Human Bondage*. Maurice in *The Sacred Flame* and Sydney in *For Services Rendered* are Maugham himself to the extent of the physical deficiency, but they are the mature Maugham who has learnt to live with his defect; only an undercurrent of fellow-feeling runs in the two plays in the tender portraits of the wounded heroes.

Maugham's extensive travels and sojourns in the exotic East, Middle East and West were sumptuous sources to him of themes and characters. In his study of Maugham M.K.Naik

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 179.

has traced the links between his travels and his writings. Several of his plays are based on his experiences in foreign countries. In East of Suez he draws upon his Chinese experiences and delves into the problem of the meeting of the 'twain'. The Letter also projects his Chinese and Far Eastern experiences. In The Land of Promise his observation and understanding of the life in Manitoba are revealed. In Caesar's Wife he depicts a British diplomat in Egyptian surroundings. In The Explorer the idealistic British explorer in Zanzibar is presented. In all these plays the foreign atmospheres and characters are portrayed with a sure and authentic touch. The real life which he shared in those parts influenced Maugham's pen in these plays.

As for Maugham's intellectual and emotional life, some significant aspects deserve mention here. The first of these is his instinct for acute observation. He not only enjoyed observing people and situations closely, but made systematic efforts to document his observations and utilize them shrewdly in his writings. This faculty of his was naturally at its keenest in his frequent travels to which reference has just been made. It is this faculty that supplied him with most of his basic material for writing.

Secondly, Maugham had a strong sense of the actual. His society comedies and farces carry an air of conviction.

because they are full of contemporary actuality. His sense of the actual is discerned as much in what he wrote as in his ceasing to write - a decision he took in conformity with his precept (outlined earlier, p. 22) that a dramatist should have contact with actuality to be able to write well.

Thirdly, Maugham was endowed with a lively sense of the ridiculous. He considered men bundles of contradictions and this attitude enabled him to pinpoint accurately and vividly the vulnerable corners of human behaviour. In most of his comedies, particularly Our Betters, The Circle and The Breadwinner, this gift of his has been utilized to good effect.

Of all the manifestations of the ridiculous the one to which he turns time and again is social snobbery. In his consistent denunciation of it a subjective strain is clearly seen. His contempt for royalty is revealed in his partly sarcastic and partly jocular remark to Robin:

"As you know, King Edward the Second was a notorious pervert, and I wouldn't like my blameless reputation to be sullied. Didn't the Maughams have any reputable ancestors?" 91

This was his reaction to the suggestion that the monarch was an ancestor of his. Further, he considered his uncle 'a crack'n snob', for he 'toadied to the local squire',

91 Somerset and all the Maughams, p. 19.
and 'never allowed' little Willie 'even to speak to the local tradesman'. This contempt for sham and vanity finds dramatic expression in his rendering of snobbish conduct chiefly in *Loaves and Fishes*, *Jack Straw*, *Penelope*, *Smith*, *Our Betters* and *For Services Rendered*, as it does in the unforgettable portrait of the snob (Elliott Templeton) in *The Razor's Edge*.

Many a time in his life Maugham expressed his craving for the meaning of life. In *A Writer's Notebook* he informs us, "Though the turn of my mind is concrete and my intelligence moves inactively among abstractions, I have a passion for metaphysics." His *The Summing Up* and *Points of View* confirm both these admissions. He was equipped with a clever and analytical mind that could project a clear and multisided picture of a problem, but he perhaps could not soar into original and subtle thought. In the field of the abstract he was a keen and willing student, but no master, eager and competent at the receiving end, not at the giving.

Perhaps the most fervent note in his metaphysical enquiry was struck in the following extract:

What is the meaning of life? ..... In desperation, I cried out: I can't understand it. I don't know, I don't know.

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92 Ibid., p. 132.
It was this yearning that resulted into his graphic account in his essay "The Saint" (Points of View, London, 1958) of his visit to Ramana Maharshi in 1936, his novel The Razor's Edge, his philosophical plays The Unknown and Sheppey and ethical play The Sacred Flame, and coloured a few others like For Services Rendered.

A man's married life forms an integral part of his emotional life. Maugham's love-life was not rich. He avers that

the keenest pleasure to which the body is susceptible is that of sexual congress,

but instantly admits,

"A native fastidiousness has prevented me from indulging as much in this particular delight as I might have." 95

According to Robin, Maugham's marriage was bound to have failed - because even before he married Syrie, Willie had met the young American named Gerald Haxton. 96

Maugham expresses his admiration for the Siamese for they don't regard homosexuality as anything abnormal. 97

Robin tells us that on the story of David and Jonathan Maugham put an interpretation of homosexual love and remarked,

96 Somerset and All the Maugham, p. 212.
97 Ibid., p. 217.
"It's a quite fascinating story. Think what a play it would make!"

This remark was made decades after he had taken his leave of the theatre, and the 'play' remained 'unmade'. What is significant is his creation of devoted wives like Penelope (in Penelope) and Violet (in Caesar's Wife) and his engaging portraits of sincere love in plays like A Man of Honour, The Explorer, Lady Frederick, Smith and The Land of Promise - creations which cannot perhaps be traced directly to his personal experiences. Of course, literature is not autobiography; nevertheless, it is clear that so far as love, sex and marriage are concerned Maugham was capable of depicting in his plays much that he perhaps did not actually go through, and on the contrary, much that he did experience did not find expression in his plays, and, for that matter, in any of his writings.

IV Other Influences on Maugham's Art

Maugham was a conscientious artist. In order to improve his writing he made strenuous efforts to profit by the examples of past masters. A brief review of these influences forms the subject of this section.

As he tells us in The Summing Up, in his formative years Maugham jumped from writer to writer to find examples worthy of emulation. His object was to acquire simplicity and naturalness which

98 Ibid., p. 206.
are the truest marks of distinction. 99

In his early struggles he read Walter Pater, but soon turned to Swift to whom a little later he preferred Dryden whose prose, in Maugham's words,

has a springtime gaiety, a conversational ease, a blithe spontaneity that are enchanting. 100

He was also influenced by Voltaire, whom he called the best writer of prose that our modern world has seen, 101 and Maupassant; by the latter to such an extent that he was called the English Maupassant in the field of the short story. 102 He admired Burke for his 'shape and coherence', and finally his greatest eulogy was reserved for Hazlitt whom he read on his river voyage in Burma. He says, he could not forgive myself that I had lived so long without reading him. 103

His one remark on Hazlitt brings out his worth eloquently:

If art is nature seen through the medium of a personality, Hazlitt is a great artist. 104

It is not surprising that Maugham found a kindred soul in Hazlitt. The dry but rhythmic, unsentimental but sensitive,

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100 Ibid., p. 198.
101 Ibid., p. 201.
104 Ibid.
and lucid grace is common to the prose of the two. Maugham's dislike of Lamb is also significant. Lamb's emotion suggests to him too often the facile lachrymosity of the alcoholic.105

On the whole, Maugham's prose broadly belongs to the tradition of Dryden, Swift, Burke, Hazlitt and Newman (the last named by him along with Hazlitt), although each one of these has peculiar qualities of his own. Maugham's dramatic dialogue was doubtless supplemented by the simplicity and lucidity that he assiduously cultivated in his own prose.

Among dramatists, Maugham was greatly impressed by Congreve and Wilde. He speaks of the former with approbation in The Summing Up (p. 71), and follows his lead in his own comedies of manners. Wilde was among the first authors to influence him, and in his early comedies he emulates Wilde's witty, epigrammatic style. Among modern playwrights he admired Chekov in whom he found a spirit vastly to my liking.106

This is surprising, for the works of the two are vastly different in tone and technique.

On the whole, Maugham's plays do not show traces of a profound impact of any single writer. He has affinities

105 Ibid., p. 7.
106 A Writer's Notebook, p. 119f.
with many, but is a disciple to none. His plays are related directly and authentically to his own personality.

V. Summing Up

In this chapter, to begin with, an account of the circumstances leading to Maugham's choice of a dramatic career and his final good-bye to it has been given. The greater range and variety of his work in drama as against that in fiction has been pointed out, and the need for the present enquiry has been established.

In the second section Maugham's views on prose drama have been summarized in significant detail, and their strength and weakness emphasized. About the nature of drama Maugham says that it is an ephemeral art, but, as shown earlier, the epithet 'ephemeral' can be applied to all but great art, not only to drama. His corollary that it is not possible to achieve perfection in drama - that of which the dramatist is capable - remains his personal feeling, not corroborated in the history of British drama.

Regarding the purpose of comedy Maugham makes the important point that it is entertainment, not improvement, of the audience. His staunch advocacy of farce stems from this view. In respect of the subject-matter of drama he enjoins that ideas should be dressed in emotions in order to be introduced successfully in drama. In dramatic technique he stresses some vital aspects such as the need
for verisimilitude in serious drama and for its absence in farce, the desirability of a well-constructed plot and the need for a proper selection of formal and informal language in dialogue.

In the third section the impact of Maugham's life and personality on his drama has been traced. This is important, because Maugham admits having put a lot of himself in his writings. All his wounded heroes obviously owe their origin to his own deformity of stammer. His mental traits, such as his faculty of keen observation, his acute sense of the ridiculous, his intense awareness of actuality, his strong dislike of snobbery and his passion for metaphysics, are all mirrored in his plays.

In the last section the influence of other writers on Maugham has been discussed. In his prose style he acknowledges the impact on his work of Dryden, Swift, Burke, Hazlitt and Newman, which his own prose and dramatic dialogue bear out. Among dramatists, true to expectation, Congreve and Wilde in particular influenced him, as he himself says.

The background of Maugham's drama has thus been sketched in this chapter. In the following chapters a study of his plays in the three groups he himself made will be undertaken, and the conclusion of the whole enquiry stated in the final chapter. The subject of the next chapter is the themes of Maugham's early plays.