CHAPTER II

THE EARLY PLAYS: THEMES
I  Introduction

In this chapter it is proposed to study the themes of Maugham's early plays with a view to discovering the pattern underlying them. A short chronological survey of the plays of this phase will be useful as an introduction to their thematic analysis.

The early phase of Maugham's dramatic writing spans fifteen years from 1893 to 1913. He wrote eleven plays in this period but preserved only six\(^1\) in the first volume of his Collected Plays. In the middle and last phases together the number of unpreserved plays is only four. This shows that Maugham considered his early dramatic writing comparatively immature.

A Man of Honour (1898-9)\(^2\) and The Explorer (1899)\(^3\) broadly share the same theme of idealism put into practice

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1  The preserved plays : (i) Lady Frederick (1903), (ii) Mrs. Dot (1904), (iii) Jack Straw (1905), (iv) Penelope (1908), (v) Smith (1909), (vi) The Land of Promise (1913). The unpreserved plays : (i) A Man of Honour (1898-9), (ii) The Explorer (1899), (iii) Loaves and Fishes (1903), (iv) The Tenth Man (1909), (v) Grace (Landed Gentry) (1910). The years mentioned here and elsewhere in the thesis are of writing. References to the preserved plays are invariably from The Collected Plays, in three volumes, Heinemann (London, 1961), the volumes corresponding to the early, middle and last plays.

2  Published, London, 1903. The story of this play was incorporated by Maugham into his novel The Merry-go-round (1904) keeping even the names of the characters intact.

3  Published, London, 1912. Novelized under the same title. The novel was published in 1907.
but treat it differently. In the former idealism is transformed into cynicism but in the latter it retains its righteous sway till the end. The next play, *Loaves and Fishes* (1903), marks a departure, and is called 'a satire' as against the earlier two 'plays'. *Loaves and Fishes* sheds the serious attitudes of the two earlier plays, and picks up their comic themes. Maugham's own account makes this clear:

"During the rehearsals of *A Man of Honour* I had discovered that some scenes of flirtatious badinage in the first act were amusing, and I decided that I could write a comedy. I made up my mind to write one now. I called it *Loaves and Fishes*."

*Loaves and Fishes* is woven round the airy theme of man's pursuit of woman. The other side of the same coin, woman's pursuit of man, is successfully treated in the next two plays, *Lady Frederick* (1903) and *Mrs. Dot* (1904).

*Jack Straw* (1905) marks the next step in Maugham's thematic evolution as a playwright. It deals with the theme of social snobbery, a contemporary reality.

*Penelope* (1908) continues the trend with the theme of man's infidelity in modern marriage, a tricky, topical problem. *Smith* (1909) follows with the even more vexing social problem of class-consciousness as its theme.

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The next two plays mark a relapse in Maugham's progress in the theatre. *The Tenth Man* (1909) is a hotchpotch of adultery, election politics and ethical propositions none of which subjects attains the dignity of a cohesive theme. *Grace (Landed Gentry)* (1910) does start with the theme of the duplicity of values applicable to the master and the servant, but never comes to grips with it, because till the end the master is unaware of the same malaise in his wife which he punishes in his servant. Finally, *The Land of Promise* (1913) continues the trend of *Smith* more effectively with its vital theme of Britons abroad.

The plan of this chapter is to consider the themes of these plays under two broad heads: (A) social themes and (B) moral themes.

II(A) Social Themes

Under this head it is proposed to discuss the themes having a bearing on man's activities as a social being. It covers the entire arena of man's social life and excludes only the predominantly contemplative aspects of human life.

The period covered by this chapter broadly coincides with the Edwardian age. It will be useful here to glance over the salient features of that age which was vastly different from the hectic war years and later periods.
Many of us, looking back, see the period before 1914 in the golden haze of a lost leisure, of a gracious and unhurried way of living.\(^5\)

In the Edwardian society high and low levels of living were an accepted fact, and the small rich minority gave social life most of its meaning and content ungrudgingly accepted by the silent majority.

The upper classes gave to the Edwardian years a brilliance and glitter which today we see only on the films. This was a life of frank privilege. Social status derived from the old landed aristocracy, which had freely intermarried and strengthened itself with the wealthy manufacturers of the nineteenth century, and now the purse-strings were loosened.\(^6\)

The upper middle classes that contributed most to the social culture of the age were also carefree. For them too it was a thoroughly comfortable time in which life ran smoothly and without physical effort. There was no scarcity of trained and skilful servants, nor did their services cost an undue proportion of one's income.\(^7\)

As for women,

Ladies were ladies in those days; they did not do things themselves, they told other people what to do and how to do it.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 12.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 13.
Such was the social scene of the age that provided Maugham with material for his early plays.

(a) Relationship between the sexes. The themes under this head cover a wide field and present a large variety. It is therefore necessary to arrange them in a proper sequence. The principle followed here and in Chapters IV and VI in arranging the sequence is that of progression from rather unsentimental aspects to those possessing emotional content. Thus, aspects of the man-woman contact like 'Woman's pursuit of man' and 'Woman, man's reformer', that invite ironic treatment, are taken up in the beginning; the various sides of matrimony, which partly involve feeling, follow; and the theme of love, which wholly implies the inner commitment of hearts, brings up the rear. This arrangement is set on the pattern of the outer to the inner, which is the natural direction of any progression.

In the social life of any community men and women intermingle as individuals and in groups of various denominations, and give rise to problems and developments which when significantly treated in art assume the form of themes. In this mixing up the foremost concourse is that between men and women as opposite but complementary sexes. In Maugham's plays this concourse is presented from various angles.

Woman's pursuit of man: In the early comedies Maugham gives the man-woman contact rather fanciful colours.
The first of these is woman's pursuit of man. The concept is merely mentioned in *The Explorer* but in *Lady Frederick* and *Mrs. Dot* it is developed into a theme. Both the plays are built round woman's efforts to steer clear of unfavoured suitors and hit the self-selected willing target.

The traditional theme of woman being sought by man was reversed by Bernard Shaw\(^9\) who considered her an embodiment of his 'life-force'. The woman of his conception chases man to fulfil her naturally ordained functions. A critic discovers this theme in *Mrs. Dot* and says,

\[\text{"Mrs. Dot is Maugham's } \underline{\text{Man and Superman}}, \]
\[\text{man's subjugation into marriage by woman's perseverance and stratagem."} \text{11}\]

In Maugham's plays this idea is certainly toyed with, but with none of Shaw's doctrinaire fervour. If one considers the matter seriously one may perhaps agree with Mrs. Callifer in Graham Greene's *The Potting Shed* who tells her son John,

\[\text{"Men either form us with their strength,}
\]
\[\text{or they form us with their weakness.}
\]
\[\text{They never let us be."} \text{12}\]

But in Maugham's comic vision the trend is reversed: Mrs. Dot and Lady Frederick form their men with their (the women's) strength.

\(^9\) p. 94.
\(^{10}\) in *Man and Superman*, 1905.
\(^{11}\) *Theatrical Companion*, p. 61.
A bye-product of this process is man's successful escape from woman's clutches. Devoid of Shaw's purpose, Maugham explores the fun of this bye-product in full through Blenkinsop in *Mrs. Dot* whose career is a veritable pile of episode upon episode of his dodging of chasing women. In his long account\(^{13}\) of his living from one pursuing female to another we can sense a sneaking parody of Shaw's thesis, which is argued out seriously in his preface but is transformed into farce in *Man and Superman* in the dramatist's effort to popularize it by injecting humour into it. The comic fantasy underlying Blenkinsop's career is also reminiscent of Millamant's delicate eluding of her pursuers in Congreve's *The Way of the World*.\(^{14}\)

The two centuries that separate Maugham from Congreve have seen the reversal of the 'man-pursues-woman' trend. In modern times Shaw dramatizes the philosophical and biological possibilities of man's pursuit by woman; Maugham traces the fantastic extensions of the same theme.

**Woman, man's reformer:** A concept of a similar kind is that of woman being man's reformer. In *Lady Frederick* and *Mrs. Dot* woman is cast in that role. In the mirthful world of these plays the victim of reformation must be a vicious man; for the worse the man the greater is the scope to reform him. This is indeed a traditional comic theme.

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13 p. 129.
In Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* Mabel Chiltern accordingly delights in Lord Goring's bad qualities. Blenkinsop in *Mrs. Dot* tells Freddie,

"If there's one thing a woman likes it's a really bad man. She'll start reforming you, and then there'll be no holding back."

Here we have partly the Pygmalion complex in the opposite direction. Shaw's Pygmalion transforms a plebeian flower-girl into a lady. Maugham's comic heroine is out to turn a dandy into a sober, dutiful husband, and wants the male to seem rather dull and stupid, a bit of a milksop.

Domineering women and docile men thus project this theme in *Lady Frederick* and *Mrs. Dot*.

**Matrimony**: Marriage is socially the most accepted and widely prevalent form of man-woman relationship. With this theme we step into the world of reality from that of ironic exaggeration. In consonance with the frolicsome conception of *Lady Frederick* and *Mrs. Dot* Maugham emphasizes in them only the businesslike aspects of marriage underlying the convenience of the affected partners rather than the inner commitment of love implied in marriage with which he deals in the later plays.

In these plays marriage is looked upon as an alliance and the famous diplomatic dictum about a nation having no

16 p. 144.
17 Ibid.
permanent allies but only permanent interests applies with equal validity to the engagements in these plays. The affairs of Lady Frederick and Lord Mereston (Lady Frederick) and Gerald and Nellie (Mrs. Dot) are easily terminated, both parties not much the worse for it. The cool discussion between Lady Frederick and Admiral Carlisle (p.15) over the proposed marriage of her brother to his daughter could well be mistaken for a clipping from the deliberations on a Stock Exchange. Captain Montgomerie wants Lady Frederick to be his wife as a status symbol. 18

Marrying for money is another aspect of matrimony in these plays. In Loaves and Fishes Mrs. Fitzgerald marries her husband 'not for his money', but 'with his money', 19 in Canon Spratte's sophisticated parlance. Remarks expressing such concern for money are common in Restoration comedies. 20 In Maugham's Mrs. Dot the only qualification Lady Sellenger desires in her son-in-law is affluence, as her changing preference from Gerald to Freddie and back to Gerald shows.

Conversational skill in married happiness: The emphasis on the role of diverting talk in marital happiness is an important ingredient of Maugham's treatment of matrimony in these two plays. This aspect of the theme of

18 p. 51.
19 p. 6.
20 Six Restoration Plays (Boston, 1956), pp. 399, 409.
matrimony can be traced by contrast to his own being a witty and racy writer on the one hand and a faltering speaker on the other. This theme is portrayed in the first part of the third act of Mrs. Dot where the horrid result of a tight-lipped pair left in seclusion is shown.

It is significant that Maugham exhausts perhaps all the possibilities of this theme, for later in Smith he displays the other side of the coin. Mary Smith's young suitor, she says,

> makes me laugh at the things he says,
> but gets so cross if I say chestnuts.

Such people look upon it as a personal affront if you've heard their jokes before.21

As in everything, therefore, there is a risk of overdoing in the skill of witty talk. Mediocre traders of wit are fond of repeating their jokes ad nauseam, leading the laughter themselves, and expecting to be followed loyally. For a listener not-so-mediocre this exercise in etiquette is bound to prove trying. This psychological facet of conversation in society in general and matrimony in particular is depicted in Smith.

The working woman's attitude to marriage: In the last three plays of this phase Maugham turns to the real problems of modern marriage. The first of these is the
working girl's attitude to marriage and is projected in Smith (1909). Smith has two proposals of marriage: one by Fletcher, her co-worker, and the other by Freeman, a gentleman by birth but labourer by choice. In her initial reluctance to accept Freeman a significant aspect of class-consciousness is indicated. Smith considers his proposal at the outset a purely inter-caste one for which she is not prepared. In his story "The Treasure" Maugham depicts a similar attitude in the maid whose world remains apart from her employer's despite their chance intercourse one night. Smith is initially in the same frame of mind. A remarkable aspect of any class-conscious society vis-a-vis marriage is implicit here: one of the hurdles in the emancipation of working women is their own instinctive belief that the classes are a built-in feature of the social fabric. They are frigid to the efforts of honest gentlemen to elevate them by marrying them.

The significance of Maugham's portrayal in Smith of the menial woman's responses in love and marriage is discerned when they are contrasted with the traditional ones. Traditionally menial workers appeared in the role of assistants to their masters and mistresses in love intrigues and consummated their own affairs as a side-

22  p. 184.
issue: Waitwell and Foible in Congreve's *The Way of the World* are such a pair. Their economic status was not considered relevant. The widest divergence they showed from their principals was to be eloquent after marriage as against the latter whose amours preceded wedlock. In Smith, however, we have a manual worker whose attitude to everything including marriage is coloured by her economic status and position in the class hierarchy.

**The working man's view of marriage:** The corresponding attitude to matrimony of the male manual worker is presented by Maugham in *The Land of Promise* (1913). Norah's unfulfilled desire for a lady's life is grafted in this play on her circumstantially necessitated marriage with a labourer who wants a wife to do as he bids. About the husband's responsibilities, too, he has charming old-world notions. He considers himself the head of his family, the custodian of its discipline and promises his wife a better financial deal. His full confidence in his worthiness is an offshoot of his attitude of male superiority. He is an emblem of Canon Spratte's advice to his son in *Loaves and Fishes*:

> "It's a foolish lover who prates his own unworthiness."  

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25 p. 272.
Taylor tells Norah,

"I always fancied the Englishwoman. They make the best wives when they've been licked into shape."\(^{27}\)

The entire third act of the play is filled with his efforts to 'lick' Norah into shape and hers to resist them. The theme of the working man's attitude to marriage has thus received elaborate treatment in this play.

**Adultery**: Another development concerning modern marriage is the husband's contacts with women leading to adultery. In *Penelope* Maugham presents this problem as well as its solution. Penelope's father, Golightly, diagnoses the psychological roots of the ailment which are two. The first is man's polygamous nature.\(^{28}\) The second is the experience that you can have too much of a good thing. Penelope's constant vicinity has the effect of exasperation on Dickie. The germ of this idea is found in *The Explorer* where Mrs. Crowley says,

"There's nothing so tedious as the constant lover."\(^{29}\)

As will be pointed out later (Chapter VIII) this theme appears in Maugham's fiction too.

The plausibility of this process is not restricted to husband and wife; among lovers too it is equally

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27 p. 272.
28 p. 81.
plausible. In Maugham's *The Circle* of the middle phase
Lady Kitty and Lord Porteous, partners in eloping, get
tired of each other. In *It's Never Too Late* Charles is
thrown back to his wife because

"that damned Dixon woman has become quite
unbearable...trying to run my entire life
for me."\(^{30}\)

"Spare the occasional curt eye and spoil the husband"
seems to be the doctrine of Golightly on the lines of the
proverb. There is even a severer school of thought in
this frivolous field which forbids wives from pampering
husbands even a little bit, for

a little overdose of sweetness...and life is
never the same again!\(^{31}\)

Golightly remarks that even uninterrupted happiness would
get on our nerves

if it clung to us like a poor relation.\(^{32}\)

Maugham sincerely believed in this concept as his note in
*A Writer's Notebook* shows:

Love will be stronger and last longer if
there are impediments to its gratification.\(^{33}\)

Judged by the standards in Oscar Wilde's farcical world
Penelope is indeed old-fashioned. Lady Plymdale\(^{34}\) in

\(^{30}\) Felicity Douglas's play in *Ring Up the Curtain*


\(^{32}\) p. 82.

\(^{33}\) p. 10.

\(^{34}\) *Plays, Prose, etc.*, p. 308.
Lady Windermere's Fan and Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest\textsuperscript{35} describe as scandalous the attention married couples paid to each other. The lady actually asks that her husband be taken away lest he grows too attentive.\textsuperscript{36} The difference between them and Penelope is obvious. Adultery is an essential part of Penelope's problem and is projected as a major theme in the play.

Penelope's predicament is only the beginning of this theme. The special treatment it receives in the play starts with Golightly's prescription to her of allowing Dickie to\textsuperscript{37} ahead with his affair with Ada Fergusson unhampered. She administers the medicine in neat doses. In St. John Hankin's The Cassilis Engagement (1907), too, Mrs. Cassilis achieves her object of preventing her son's marriage to a girl not desired by her by similarly throwing them constantly together. The process in Penelope is analogous, but is richer in emotional content and interesting episodes. On top of all, Dickie discovers at the end of the second act that Penelope and her parents have been aware of his adulterous relationship for two months but have not raised their little finger. His paradoxical claim,

"It appears to me I'm the only moral man here"\textsuperscript{37}, shows the success of the treatment prescribed by Golightly. Thus the theme of adultery is treated here

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 353.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 312.
\textsuperscript{37} p. 75.
from a healthy standpoint: not only are the effects of adultery on marital happiness projected, but a successful solution in the context of modern life is also elaborated. This aspect is the special characteristic of Maugham's treatment of this theme.

**Marriage of True Minds**: This feature of matrimony is projected in *The Land of Promise* as a result of the Norah-Taylor marriage. Instead of love ending in marriage it is marriage here emerging with the flying colours of love. The flowering of love in this marriage is strangely similar to that in a typical, arranged and successful Indian marriage. It has also a strong contemporary significance: with so many failing marriages around, it is refreshing to see this marriage of need secured by the bonds of love in the end. The two themes of matrimony and love are fused here, love being the product of the inevitable association and dependence, and the rubbing off thereby of mental corners. The struggling people in the unploughed fields of Manitoba find in the land the promise of material prosperity, and Norah and Taylor discover in their hastily contrived pairing the promise of lasting love and security. The faltering accents of their struggle are transformed in the end into an eloquent silence to the tune of the kiss Norah asks of her husband\(^{38}\) contrasted with the earlier one snatched forcibly by him\(^{39}\). The earlier is a violent

\[38\] p. 310.
\[39\] p. 285.
assault; the later a mutually ratified seal.

Maugham thus offers in Norah's marriage an object lesson in the twentieth century context of what Shakespeare calls a 'marriage of true minds'. In Smith Maugham depicts the horrid state of marriage in modern fashionable circles. His catholic vision, however, does not stop at what is; in The Land of Promise it extends to what can and should be in matrimony, and is therefore greater than the visions of Congreve, Goldsmith and Wilde. The theme of matrimony in these early plays here reaches the inner recesses of the minds of marital partners and sports as a crown the ideal "marriage of true minds".

Man-woman strife: The theme of man-woman strife requires special consideration because it is extensively presented in The Land of Promise. In that play Norah and Taylor, wife and husband, are at loggerheads during the third act. Very soon their denominations of wife and husband pale out, and their elemental confrontation as woman and man comes to the forefront. The traditional theme of the antagonism of the sexes here receives a modern twist. It is this twist that makes the play interesting even to people with memories of The Great Divide, The Taming of the Shrew, Ingomar, and other plays.

41 Theatrical Companion, p. 111.
Maugham makes woman the victor in defeat and shows man surrendering his wild muscle. The strife has its roots in the nature of the Norah-Taylor alliance: it is like a business partnership in which each expects a profit in return for an investment. To her query,

"Have you forgotten that I'm a woman?"

Taylor replies,

"No, I haven't. That's why I'm going to make you do as I tell you."

They are already man and woman and not husband and wife. This attitude of male dominance is curiously displayed in so recent a play as John Osborne's *Under Plain Cover*. Bodily violence is indicated in several modern plays.

In Felicity Douglas's *It's Never Too Late* Anne and John fight quite a sumptuous little bout. Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, otherwise a play full of innovations, contains an old-fashioned wife-thrasher in Berenger who slaps Daisy's face when accused by her of 'morbid weakness'. Maugham's treatment of the theme is more imaginative. *The Land of Promise* holds a promise of comedy, and the comic poise is throughout maintained. The *modus operandi* of light treatment of serious problematic themes is discovered in the

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42 p. 278.
In the times of King Arthur death at the hands of a resentful damsel might have been the perfect end of a chivalrous knightly career. Norah is naive enough to expect this in today's youth.

Primitive man found ready excuses to beat his mate. In modern times the man-beating-woman theme lends itself to humour. It is one of Maugham's favourite concepts that themes that were tragic in olden times can only be comic in the modern age. This is supported by social fact as...
recorded in The Long Week-end (London, 1940) where the authors state:

The poor girl of Victorian legend who was betrayed by a wicked squire, cast off by her parents, and forced to 'go away to London for to hide her sin and shame' was now a joking reference only.

Maugham treats the man-woman strife in a similar amusing perspective. In The Land of Promise woman is the thrasher, and keeps the comedy intact as well as enriches the drama in the play. Her efforts are like trying to pierce a slippery, tough wall by the head.

Although the man here refuses to hit the woman, he does show his strength passively by refusing to be bullied or coaxed or provoked into violence. His attitude remains the same age-old typical one of male dominance. He tells her,

"You've got to do what I want because I can make you."

The attitude is the same; its physical manifestation is suited to comedy. Ultimately Norah gives up her belligerency and, as already outlined, the couple fall in love with each other, giving up their stance as man and woman and assuming the roles not only of husband and wife but also of lovers. Thus the theme of antagonism between man and

50 Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, on p. 108.
51 p. 285.
woman is significantly handled by Maugham giving the opposition between the sexes the new dimension of the outcome of love.

**Romance**: Romance is an important aspect of the relationship between the sexes. The word 'romance' is used here in the senses of 'marvellous experience' and 'picturesque falsehood', connected with the attraction between boy and girl. Romance is the outward manifestation of that attraction the inner one being love.

In *Loaves and Fishes* the theme of romance is marginally indicated. The romantic fashion of the pleading of his unworthiness by the suitor before his lady-love is not approved by the robust Canon. The other romantic idea in *Loaves and Fishes*, voiced by Mrs. Fitzgerald, is:

"When two young things are fond of one another, don't you think it's best to let them marry whatever the disadvantages?"  

In *Mrs. Dot* a similar concept is propounded and actually put into operation by Mrs. Dot in the case of Nellie and Freddie. In *Smith*, too, a similar idea is outlined by Freeman who descends upon London on the mission to marry in as short a period as six weeks. In *Mrs. Dot* the projected result is marriage; in *Smith* it is love. The difference serves to emphasize the superficial nature of

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53 p. 57.
54 p. 137.
55 p. 138.
the former play in which the outer formality is mentioned *vis-a-vis* the keen emotional content of the latter in which love and matrimony attain their conventional synonymy.

In *Lady Frederick* a glimpse of romance is offered in the pair of youthful lovers, Rose and Gerald. Gerald tells Rose about the lovers in the Park sitting on the benches hour after hour without saying a word, and concludes,

"Now I know they're only happy." 56

The romance in mere association is implicit here as a marvellous experience. Maugham's story "The Happy Couple" portrays similar romance. 57 Rose's effervescence exceeds Gerald's when she responds to his remark with the assurance,

"You're certainly my soldier, so I suppose I'm your nursery-maid." 58

Picturesque falsehood is easily detected in this statement.

In *Mrs. Dot* the lady doles out the symptoms of Gerald's love for her,

"I've seen your eyes light up when I came into the room...I've seen the pleasure it gave you to do me any trifling service." 59

This is romance in the form of marvellous experience.

56 p. 35.
58 p. 35.
59 p. 110.
Gerald on his part owes his romance to the 'absurd moon', but Nellie paradoxically considers him unromantic, is bored stiff in his company, and tells him,

"I don't think anyone but a lunatic would describe you as an ardent lover."  

Nellie's attitude is like that of Magdalen in Molière's *The Romantic Ladies* who tells Gorgibus,

"A lover, to be agreeable, must understand how to utter fine sentiments."

What is romance to Gerald is obviously the extremity of non-romance to Nellie. The triangle in the play thus shows the phenomenon of one's meat being another's poison in the arena of romance.

It is significant that Maugham suggests the ephemeral nature of romance even on the heels of its elaborate portrayal. Within an ace of proclaiming herself the 'nursery-maid' of her 'soldier', Rose comes to blows with Gerald. In the same play, *Lady Frederick*, antiromance is presented in the last act as a contrast to romantic values, and the skin-deep nature of romantic attachment is stressed.

The real limitations of romance can be shown by juxtaposing it with commonsense, its great detractor, and

60 p. 157.
62 *Lady Frederick*, p. 35.
Maugham does show them. His women pose as champions of commonsense although they are often given to romantic visions. Rose in *Lady Frederick* tells Gerald,

"When a man's in love he can write sonnets to the moon. When a woman's in love she can still cook his dinner and darn her own stocking." 63

A more emphatic confrontation of romance and commonsense is envisaged in *Smith* (1908). Smith is a cool-headed girl who despises Fletcher for his desire to have a taste of romance in poverty. In the Smith-Fletcher relationship the theme of commonsense as opposed to romance is brought out as in the Louka-Nicola relationship in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, with the difference that in Maugham Smith, the woman, is the possessor of commonsense, and in Shaw Nicola, the man, is. Finally, in *The Land of Promise* the contrast between Norah, the romantic visionary and Taylor, the down-to-earth pragmatic labourer is presented in the third act. Here again we are reminded of Raina and Bluntchli in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, the former having romantic ideas about war and the latter viewing it from the commonsense angle.

In this way, the theme of romance as also its limitations are depicted in these plays in their various possibilities.

63 p. 35.
Love: Love is the most abiding relationship between man and woman. Maugham's first plays from *A Man of Honour* (1897) to *Mrs. Dot* (1904) are designed as farces and the deep involvement of love has no place in them. In *Jack Straw* there is a typical case of love at first sight. Ethel's heart leaps up at Jack Straw, the waiter being snubbed by her mother. He in his turn is captivated by her beauty and sympathy. This small pocket of love is successfully grafted on this play of social satire.

In *Penelope* we have a stronger tie of love between husband and wife, though for the time being the husband has had a surfeit of love. The very basis of the play is Penelope's profound love for Dickie without which she has no business to win him back. The depth of her feeling is revealed from her remark in the first act,

"Papa, say you'll get Dickie back for me. I want him. I want him." 64

In *Smith* love is an important theme. The emotional rapport between Smith and Freeman proceeds along conventional lines. The well-known adage that the way to a man's heart lies through his stomach finds a ready demonstration in this affair. The girl's first impression on Freeman is of a healthy woman who can do 'good honest English cooking'. 65 This favourable impact does not fail to germinate the seeds

64  p. 23.
65  p. 182.
of love already sown in his heart by her darning his socks and looking after his linen (Act II). There is a traditional sweetness about the rise of love in Freeman's heart from the silent but devoted care bestowed by Smith on his comforts and interests. In this play love follows the course it more often follows in actual life rather than the love-at-first-sight pattern it generally follows in literature.

The theme of love is developed to a refreshing pitch in The Land of Promise. This development has already been traced under the theme of "Marriage of True Minds".

Thus, in the theme of love a wide range is covered in Maugham's early plays: from the love-at-first-sight in Jack Straw to the post-marriage emergence of love in The Land of Promise through the traditional rise of love in Smith.

(b) Other personal relationships

Men and women conduct themselves in society in various roles. Their relationships in which sex is the basic ingredient have been considered in the foregoing section. In this section it is proposed to examine the depiction in Maugham's early plays of such human relationships as are not based on sex, but are nevertheless predominantly personal.

The parent-child relationship: The first of these relationships is the parent-child one. In Lady Frederick
the clash of values between parent and child is summarily and lightly projected through Rose and her father. Rose and Gerald are an ultra-modern pair of lovers, and even prior to their marriage discuss the future of their would-be son. The time-honoured sequence in these matters - partly biological and partly socially accepted - is love, marriage, sex and parenthood. An error in it evokes sharp comment an old example of which is found in Molière's *The Romantic Ladies.* In *Lady Frederick* the lady, a modern woman herself, intervenes in the discussion of Rose and Gerald asking them,

"Aren't you a little previous?"

Rose's father, Admiral Carlisle, a still older man, bursts out,

"Did you ever hear such a conversation in your life between an unmarried couple?"

But in keeping with the comic pattern of the play Carlisle himself later enters the fray, and takes a more 'previous' stand, saying,

"And before you go any further I should like you to know that the very day Rose was born I determined that her son should go to Cambridge."^67

By converting the stern Admiral to the pattern of frivolity Maugham effects a sleek blend of the gap in values with the

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67 p. 332.
fun of the play. This theme is later elaborated by him in *The Breadwinner* (1930).

The mother-daughter pair in *Mrs. Dot* is not of much significance, but in *Jack Straw* the theme of parent-child relationship is meaningfully portrayed. The snobbish values of the mother are contrasted with the humanistic values of the daughter, and the main theme of social snobbery is supported by the depiction of the change in values from the older to the younger generation.

In *Penelope* the theme of parent-child relationship is presented in yet another perspective. The Golightlys are loving and helpful parents and are ever present in Penelope's predicament hovering protectively over her like a pair of benevolent eagles. They play a close second fiddle to her when she administers to Dickie the curative dose prescribed by them. Here, therefore, the contrast is not between values but between the parents being experienced and pragmatic and the daughter being a novice.

The sister-brother relationship: Having exhausted the comic possibilities of the parent-child relationship Maugham turns to the brother-sister relationship in *Smith* and *The Land of Promise*. In *Smith* the conflict is again between values, the aristocratic superficial values of Rose, the sister, clashing with the naturalistic and humanistic values of Freeman, the brother. The conflict assumes such terrible proportions that it symbolizes the breakdown of
blood-ties. Freeman has been a chip of the same block - the fashionable snobs - as Rose is, but has fallen out with her. The conflict between his humanism and her snobbish values comes to a head when she is driven to hoping,

"I shall never, never see you again!" 68

A sister could not be more antagonistic to a brother. The Rose-Freeman relationship is a symptom of the modern strains on family life.

The conflict in The Land of Promise is not so much between the brother and the sister as between the sister and the brother's wife. Norah comes down from her lady's ivory tower, but her brother's wife, Gertie Marsh, thinks she knows the bluff of being a lady and can call it when occasion demands. Her attitude to Norah is similar to the hostile and shy attitude of the women in Blackstable to Mrs. Encombe in Cakes and Ale, 69 with the difference that Gertie has overcome her shyness. The Norah-Gertie squabble is symbolic of the common domestic occurrence of the sister and the wife pulling the man in opposite directions and the wife winning in the tug-of-war.

In these non-sexual personal relationships Maugham paints the parent-child relationship with sympathy and admiration, but the sister-brother relationships are all sardonically depicted suggesting the disintegration of the family in modern times. One wonders if his own devotion to his mother was in the background of the former, and his

68 p. 173.
not having a sister or brother, much less an affectionate one, of the latter.

(c) Social Snobbery

Social snobbery is more substantially a social theme than the various human relationships discussed so far, in which there are individuals on both sides, and their relationships are social only insofar as they are members of a society. In snobbery the snobs and the society are the two sides, for the impression intended by the snobs is desired to be made on the society at large.

Maugham's early plays are markedly preoccupied with the theme of social snobbery. In his second play, The Explorer, the theme is briefly sketched in the attitude of the aristocratic Allerton family which is one of those that have

a natural conviction that they're the salt of the earth.70

In Loaves and Fishes also the theme is touched in passing with the flamboyant Canon as its spokesman. In a mock-prophetic strain he proclaims,

"Snobbishness has made us not only a great nation, but a Christian nation, for snobbishness is no more than a desire to improve our position, first in this world and then in the next."71

70 p. 16.
71 p. 161.
In *Lady Frederick* the passion for titles among the British rich is exposed in Captain Montgomerie. His ambition to acquire one makes him propose to Lady Frederick who is candid enough to enquire,

"Forgive my frankness, but—aren't you rather a snob?"

The Captain's reply is testy in its satire:

"My father married an English woman, and I have all the English virtues."  

In *Mrs. Dot*, too, Lady Sellenger wants her daughter to marry a titled young man. In *The Tenth Man* (1909) the marriage of George Winter and Lady Catherine is an exchange of her title for his money, like the one Montgomerie proposes to Lady Frederick and she rejects.

The first decade of our century saw the rise of the new moneyed classes to the helm of society. People who made money, like Montgomerie's father, were perhaps too busy making it to devote themselves to snobbery. But inheritors of their fortunes had too much leisure and too little idea of its real worth to help being snobs. This was a social reality as revealed from the following extract:

Although government still lay in the hands of the great aristocratic families up to 1906, the landed gentry had been hard hit by the decline in agriculture, and the last decades of Victoria's reign are marked by the 'arrival' of the commercial, suburban middle classes.  

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72 p. 50.
73 *Life Since 1900*, p. 31.
If Lady Frederick and Mrs. Dot reveal a glimpse of this contemporary situation, Jack Straw takes it up as its main theme. The sham and pomp of the *nouveau riche* begin here with changing their family name into a double barrel one: the Jenningses become the mouthful Parker-Jenningses. They share the fondness for aristocratic names with Davenport Barlow in *Penelope* and Sir George Gedney in J.B. Priestley's *They Came to a City*.74 Later in Maugham's short story "The Kite" Mrs. Sunbury analyses this aspect of affectation.75 Mrs. Parker-Jennings leads her family into an incessant and nervous longing to look and live up to their new prosperity and gain recognition in the aristocratic society which has, they feel, so far spurned them.

The pretensions of all the snobs in the play are laid bare by Maugham without reservation and in all their subtle variety. The established, titled, traditional aristocracy now driven into penury, represented by Lady Wanley, is out to teach here its little lesson to the modern untitled aristocracy, represented by Mrs. Parker-Jennings, basing its snobbish claims on wealth, and actual royalty, represented by Jack Straw, holds the reins of its plans. Jack Straw, the Archduke masquerading as a waiter, finally crushes not only the gross self-esteem of the Parker-Jenningses but the subtle affectation of Lady

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74 *Four Plays* (London, 1944), p. 156.
75 *Collected Short Stories*, Vol. 4, p. 143.
Wanley and Holland. The pseudo-pathetic wail of Mrs. Parker-Jennings unsuccessfully coaxing her son into action against Jack Straw is an intensely comic comment on the artificiality of social barriers:

"Oh, you fool, you fool! You've ad the education. You've been to Oxford, and we gave you four thousand a year. Didn't you learn enough to tell the difference between an archduke and a waiter?"76

The unsaid answer is that there is hardly any real difference. The so-called difference is the product of the snob's desire to show his superiority where there is none. This is emphasized by the two-fold nature of the aristocratic error: mistaking a waiter for an archduke and mistaking an archduke for a waiter. It is the clothes that make a man in the eye of the snob to whom the fundamental values of life remain a closed book. Occasionally, a Mrs. Parker-Jennings is forced to see the truth squarely. In the end she is sincerely sorry77 for her behaviour to the Vicar's wife. Thus Maugham projects here not only the disease of social snobbery but also its cure.

Some interesting side aspects of snobbery are also brought out in Jack Straw to give the theme a full treatment. Mrs. Parker-Jennings is anxious to learn the manners and conventions of the so-called upper strata of society.

76 p. 240.
77 p. 267.
She admonishes her husband who, relapsing momentarily into his former hand-to-mouth existence, grudges a guest a hearty morsel.\textsuperscript{78}

The genesis of this new class of society snobs - the wealthy snobs - is traced in detail in Maugham's comedy. The old aristocracy monopolized pomp and sham for centuries, for they owned a combination of money and titles. On the advent of the industrial age the titled gentry progressively lost their fortunes, and, except those like the Tantamounts in Aldous Huxley's \textit{Point Counter Point}, collapsed into common living; their vanity fair started crumbling. Maugham shows his awareness of this change in \textit{A Writer's Notebook}.\textsuperscript{79} This social phenomenon is touched upon in Lady Frederick who needs all her resources of wit to avoid paying her dressmaker,\textsuperscript{80} and in Gerald Halstane (Mrs. Dot) whose strained circumstances force him to give his servant notice.\textsuperscript{81} As will be shown in Chapter VIII, the theme of social snobbery is developed on parallel lines in some of Maugham's short stories.

In \textit{Smith} the theme of snobbery is treated on two levels. The first level short of causing actual harm is indicated in

\textsuperscript{78} p. 205. \\
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{London}, 1964, p. 264. \\
\textsuperscript{80} p. 41f. \\
\textsuperscript{81} p. 100.
the odious group which takes great pleasure in gossip. On the second level the affected attitude rends a brother from a sister and makes a mother play bridge staying away from a dying child. The two sets of values are incompatible. The best arrangement they can have short of violence is complete severance and is suggested in Freeman's bitter parting insinuation to Rose:

"I'm only a stranger to you. We speak a different language, you and I."  

The snobs and the non-snobs are thus depicted here in vehement opposition, and finally the former disappear in disgrace, but do not undergo a change as they do in Jack Straw. The theme of snobbery thus assumes a serious and bitter tone in Smith.

In Grace (Landed Gentry) a different area of snobbery is covered; the affected claims of the rural landlords are briefly demonstrated in the behaviour of Claude Insoley.

Finally, in The Land of Promise the theme of snobbery is projected in Norah's attitudes. As in Jack Straw, the snob in Norah undergoes a complete transformation and comes to love the same primitive land and people whom she despised under the influence of her former snobbish outlook.

Thus the theme of snobbery is treated in several plays in the early phase in many shades, from innocent snobbery

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82 p. 121.
83 p. 171.
84 p. 173.
to deadly and wicked snobbery. Snobbery is a major theme in Maugham on which he wrote with real feeling the background of which reaches in his childhood and has been traced in Chapter one.  

(d) Socio-economic Issues: the condition of servants

In the picture of the contemporary British life found in Maugham's plays the employee-employer relations occupy an important place in Smith. In Lady Frederick and Mrs. Dot there is a short sketch of the modern revolution in the domestic servant-master relationship. The impeccable Thompson in Lady Frederick is a distant descendant of Jeremy in Congreve's Love for Love. He is a witty and trustworthy guardian of his master's dignity, and reminds us of the butlers, especially Jeeves, in P.G. Wodehouse. As his master puts it, Thompson has adequately learnt

the very difficult fact of keeping his eyes open and shut at one and the same time.  

This pair typifies the relationship between a rich and generous master and a contented and clever servant.

The opposite picture is painted in Mrs. Dot where Charles, the servant, is not paid regularly and is overbearing, and Gerald, the master, has to eat the humble pie. Servants are traditional outfits of aristocratic households, but their stagnant resources are now unable to support them.

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85 pp. 33-34.
86 p. 6.
Charles's comment,

"I don't know what these tradespeople are coming to when they expect gentlemen to pay their bills,"

is at once amusing, sympathetic and well-informed. A diverting species of servants of the gentry with a rich past, a gloomy present, and a gloomier future is portrayed here. The reversal of former values in the field of servant-master relationship is properly depicted in these plays.

In Jack Straw and Penelope this theme is absent, but in Smith it is the central theme as in J.M. Barrie's The Admirable Crichton: in both plays the servant lends the play her or his name. There is a sustained contrast in Smith between the values and way of life of the working classes and their aristocratic masters. Rose does not approve of her brother, Freeman, hobnobbing with Smith and her sense of outraged dignity finds vehement expression,

"How can you expect me to keep a servant you've been making love to? It's too disgraceful. Every tenant in the flats knows by now."

The confrontation of the servant and master castes can thus result in the parting of ways and leave a trail of bitterness. The worst fate of servants in aristocratic rural households is however depicted in Grace.

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87 p. 97.
88 p. 204.
The contemporary picture of working-class life...shows a life devoted to unremitting work throughout its adult years.\textsuperscript{89}

The old feudal justice is administered in an English village and the servants are at the mercy of their overlords. Here the theme is presented in the darkest colours.

In \textit{The Land of Promise} the theme of unemployment\textsuperscript{90} is introduced to support the main theme of taming virgin lands. Not getting a penny from the late employer, Norah is helpless because of the economic depression and the changing social pattern due to which it's not easy to get posts as lady's companion.\textsuperscript{91}

It is because of this socio-economic situation that Norah goes out to Manitoba and the play takes its shape.

Thus this theme is lightly treated in the first two plays but in a serious vein in the last plays of the early phase where it is integrated in the complex thematic pattern.

\textbf{(e) Socio-economic issues : Britons abroad}

In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth British colonialism was one of the most remarkable features of the global social and political scene. British writers naturally found in the behaviour of Britons abroad a rich source of material. A widely travelled and observant

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Life Since 1900}, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{90} The word 'unemployed' first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1882. \textit{Life Since 1900}, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{91} p. 251.
writer, Maugham analysed the life of Englishmen in alien lands and dramatized his experiences in three plays, one of which, The Land of Promise, belongs to the early phase and the other two, Caesar's Wife and East of Suez, to the last.

The theme was handled by Maugham half-hearted in The Explorer. The typical British explorer, Alec Mackenzie, does speak in a representative capacity when he says,

"It's only we who live away from England who really love it." 92

But the accent in this play is on the idealism and heroism of the explorer rather than the problems of the British settler abroad. The theme of Britons abroad therefore receives but brief notice in it.

In The Land of Promise "Britons abroad" is the central theme. Here the problems faced by the British settlers in a virgin land are highlighted. Life is different and difficult in iridescent Manitoba with no bathroom but

a river a mile and a 'alf from here. 93

The farming demands a lot of hard work and depends on several natural causes, a poisonous weed being one of them. Mrs. Sharp wishes she

had never come to this country.

Her thoughts wander away naturally to the brunt of the adversity borne by the women, the men getting the credit.

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92 p. 141.
93 p. 241.
The chastened Norah of the fourth act soothes her and mediates on behalf of the men.  

Even more than these material aspects, the mental and spiritual aspects lend the strenuous endeavour of inhabiting a joyless foreign country a beautiful glow of nobility. The unrelenting effort is its own reward. Norah, who has found her lover in her husband, is an eminently worthy spokesman of this thrilling romance. Like Lawson in Maugham's short story "The Pool", who 

by mere contact with these creatures of a more primitive nature felt a greater freedom,

Norah experiences a sense of exhilaration in the raw country. The dry prairie has now annexed all her affection:

"There's a beauty and romance in it which fill my heart with longing."

So prosaic and yet so noble! Norah does not want to go back to the petty, narrow life of London.

The theme of explorers in alien lands attains an austere charm here. Their efforts are characterized by a creative joy, by the delight of research and by the sense of participation in a great cause. Maugham has given the theme all the grandeur it is capable of.

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94 p. 301.
96 p. 308.
(f) **Politics**

Politics is not one of Maugham's favourite themes. In the few places in his drama where politics is introduced it is done in a light vein as a peg to hang his satire.

Among the early plays there is some politics in *The Tenth Man*, both the husband and the lover of the heroine being candidates in a parliamentary election. This is the only play in which Maugham gives high politics considerable room with the Prime Minister strolling the stage to request Catherine not to declare she is divorcing George and ruin his chances in the election. But the theme is not assimilated in the main idea of the play and is just a stray topic. Politics as a theme thus has no significant place in the plays of Maugham's early phase.

(g) **War**

The theme of war which is one of the most important ones in the last phase of Maugham's dramatic writing is totally absent in this early phase which ends in 1913, the year immediately preceding the first world war. The timing of, and Maugham's light vision in, this phase do not warrant the depiction of this theme at this stage.

II(B) **Moral themes**

(a) **Religion** - In conformity with Maugham's youthful and playful vision of this phase religion is not philosophically treated in it, but is projected as a contemporary issue. In *Loaves and Fishes* a Canon is introduced as a worldly-wise pleasure-seeker, but he remains a character;
religion as a theme does not make headway in that play.

In *Jack Straw* religion occupies an interesting position. The clergy in this play are robust enough to sustain the boisterous nature of the play. It is but a faithful reflection of the modernization of the church in the twentieth century. The Rev. Lewis Abbott is described as quite a modern nice sort of saint, who plays cricket and does not wear a hair shirt. The change is so complete that the epithet 'unchristian' does not seem incongruous. The clergy do not parade their austerity and penance. The church as a profession, in terms of ideals and practice, has fallen in line with such professions as the law and medicine. It has its own restricted code like every other profession, but it does not exert an all-pervading influence as it did in old days. This inner shrinking of status has its corresponding outer side. The distinctive make-up of an officer of the church has tended to disappear, and he willingly shares the pains and pleasures, the hobbies and foibles, of the common gentry. The impact of modern life on the clergy is thus a significant aspect of the thematic plan of *Jack Straw*.

97 p. 197.
98 p. 205.
(b) Ethical Values - The theme of ethical values is as foreign to this early comic phase as religion. Yet, in his first plays Maugham does handle moral thought without success. In A Man of Honour he presents the theme of rejection of idealism owing to its failure to deliver the goods. Basil Kent's initial sense of honour withers away through the play and finally he decides to take life by both hands and enjoy it.

The lesson he learns from life is:

"It's because I tried to do my duty and act like a gentleman and a man of honour that all this misery has come about." 

The otherwise conventionally treated sentimental theme is thus twisted in the end, and the twist is towards cynicism, a disbelief in the efficacy and desirability of virtue, a rejection of idealism as a noble policy and a denial of such values as honour and duty. The play is thus significant as Maugham's only dramatic writing which ends on a cynical note. The title veils a sneer of which we become aware only at the end of the play which is so sudden that it is disquieting and out of character. Even as an emphatic denial of goodness the play does not give satisfaction.

The theme of the next play, The Explorer, is similar,
but the cynicism has been shed. Here the hero is a stern explorer tenaciously devoted to the task undertaken, and ends up with a reaffirmed faith in his mission. The title is thus an honest description of his nature and exudes no irony as does the title of the earlier play. Alec's idealism takes the form of hard work, patriotism, and a stern sense of justice. The theme of idealism put relentlessly into practice is consistently portrayed in the play but its drab severity and lack of wit make it forbidding.

Later, in Grace Maugham again grapples with the theme of ethical values. The two scales of values applied by the rural aristocracy to their poor dependants and themselves are introduced in this play, but as the choice between the two is never forced on the landlord, the theme remains abortive. The play really contains a germ of the theme of The Sacred Flame (the last phase), but Maugham is in no mood in 1910 to probe deep. Thus, his attempts in this phase to project contemplative themes are all feeble.

III CONCLUSION

It will be appropriate to conclude this chapter by taking stock of Maugham's successes and failures in this early phase from the standpoint of its themes. Among the

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100 "His frugal meal of biscuits and tinned meat taken late in the day is his first food in the day." (Act II).
101 p. 141. He offers erring George the option of glory in fighting as atonement or death as punishment, one of which is sure to result from his expedition (the end of Act II).
themes of this phase the social themes far outweigh the moral themes, and among the former the relationships between man and woman as the two sexes are predominant. The portrayals of woman as man's pursuer and woman as man's reformer represent the reversal of traditional processes and are depicted solely with the object of entertaining people.

Matrimony is naturally dealt with extensively in these plays. In the early plays only its non-sentimental aspects are portrayed, whereas in the last three plays the emotional problems in modern marriage - including the husband's adulterous tendency - are examined and their solutions suggested. The theme of matrimony attains serene beauty in the depiction of an ideal marriage in the last play, The Land of Promise. The age-old antagonism between man and woman and its dissolution are formulated into a theme in the last play. Romance and love - the purely emotional aspects of the man-woman relationship - are also handled in the last three plays.

Among the non-sexual human relationships those between parents and children and sisters and brothers are projected in the modern context in these plays. Among the other social themes snobbery, the condition of servants and the problems of Britons abroad are the prominent ones.

Moral themes are rather insignificant in these plays. Religion is depicted in its restricted aspect of the habits
of modern clergy. Ethical values are treated as themes in the first two plays and later in two unpreserved plays.

The nature of the themes handled in these plays is thus predominantly social. Themes that readily lend themselves to mirth are Maugham's primary choice in these plays, except in Smith and The Land of Promise in which he takes up themes of social import that look forward to the social themes of the middle phase. Whereas Maugham succeeds in his treatment of all his social themes in this phase, all the plays dealing with moral themes fail, and have not been (rightly enough) preserved. Maugham takes up the moral themes in the third phase when his vision has undergone the necessary evolution.

The thematic pattern in these plays undergoes a change from the simple to the complex. While in the early plays only one central theme is developed, in Smith and The Land of Promise a number of major themes are fused together yielding a variegated thematic design. In Smith the manual female worker's attitude to love and marriage is merged with the clash between the sister's snobbish and the brother's humanistic values. In The Land of Promise the problems of the British settlers abroad are blended with the city-bred heroine's emotional adjustment in the rustic land, holding a geographical as well as emotional promise.

To conclude, this early phase registers an evolution from the comic themes of the early preserved successes to
the realistic social themes of the last preserved triumphs. Serious themes comprising abstract philosophy are out of tune with Maugham's vision in this phase, and are naturally absent from the early plays.