CHAPTER IV

THE MIDDLE PLAYS: THEMES
I  A General Outline

The subject of this chapter is Maugham's middle plays which include six preserved and two unpreserved plays. Firmly established as a dramatist, he turns in this phase to social criticism through drama. As Maugham points out, this drama does not preach; sometimes it draws a moral, but with a shrug of the shoulders as if to invite you to lay no too great stress on it.

Having completed the last play of the first volume, The Land of Promise (1913), Maugham, now free from financial worries, found himself in an introspective mood and unburdened himself in his autobiographical magnum opus, Of Human Bondage, in 1915. Thereafter he reverted to his normal mood and made "a fresh start". His dramatic writing of the middle phase thus falls between the intense


2 Love in a Cottage (1917), The Camel's Back (1923), both unpublished (Theatrical Companion, pp. 146 and 195). For the chronology of this phase please refer to Ch. I, p. 9f. supra.


self-revelation of *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and the objective reflection on life in *The Painted Veil* (1925). Only two plays from the second volume of his *Collected Plays* fall chronologically out of this period: *The Constant Wife* (1926) and *The Breadwinner* (1930); but they also unmistakably belong in spirit to this phase.

If *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) represents Maugham's mood in the middle phase in fiction, *Our Betters* (1915) does so in drama and the similarity between Pearl's (*Our Betters*) code of the society-belle's exclusive morality and Strickland's (*The Moon and Sixpence*) creed of the artist's arrogant irresponsibility is instructive.

From the social angle these plays already anticipate the post-war years. In the period of the first World War the fighting forces and others had been sharply divided. But after the holocaust these two disparate Britains were slowly and confusedly to unite in the period that came to be called .... 'The Careless Twenties'.

It was a period of reaction against the imposed restraints of the war-years. It often spelled social laxity, and the general mood was similar to that of the Young Woman in Shaw's play *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* who declares,

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"It's not natural not to be happy.
I'd be ashamed not to be happy."6

In Our Betters Maugham attacks the decadent British aristocracy juxtaposing it with the American expatriates. The Unattainable and Home and Beauty are farces reminiscent of the early ones centred on woman's pursuit of the desired man. Love in a Cottage, unpreserved and unpublished, is the serious idealistic play of this phase which fails like The Explorer and Grace of the early phase. In The Circle Maugham comes to grips with the refusal of the human mind to learn from the lapses of the past generation. The Camel's Back is again a farce of impossible situations, unsuccessful, unpreserved and unpreserved. In The Constant Wife Maugham tries to isolate love, marriage and sex from one another. The Breadwinner, the last play of the second volume of The Collected Plays, is a man's Doll's House. A themewise critical assessment of these plays is the purpose of this chapter.

II(A) Social Themes

The period from 1915 to 1930 covered by Maugham's middle plays presents a vastly different social panorama. The Edwardian social hierarchy has now disappeared.

By the end of 1918 there were two distinct Britains: but not the two Britains of governing and governed classes, as in peace time, since the common fear of war had

temporarily relaxed and almost eliminated the old rigid class distinctions. ..... The two Britains were: The Fighting Forces ... and the Rest.?

In the post-war period the two groups united as pointed out in the last section. Several new factors like the American influence on British life, the freer and greater participation of women in public affairs, the spread of birth-control, the disappearance of the stigma on divorce, the independence and even the frequently rebellious attitude of children were among the prominent features of this period, and they are reflected in Maugham's middle plays.

(a) Relationship between the sexes

As in the early plays, man's relations with woman are a prolific source of themes in the middle plays also. The order of the various themes in this chapter will be the same as that in Chapter II. Thus, the farcical aspects are considered in the beginning, the themes concerning matrimony, the formal bond, follow, and love, the innermost feeling in the man-woman relationship, is taken up in the end.

The farcical areas explored in this phase in the relationship between the sexes are different from those in Lady Frederick (1903) or Mrs. Dot (1904). In the earlier

7 The Long Weekend, p. 14.
plays man's role is passive; in *The Unattainable* (1915) man and woman struggle for the upper hand and gain ascendancy by turns. The commanding posture of the coquette is beautifully counterbalanced by Dr. Cornish's turning the tables against Caroline in *The Unattainable*. There is a subtle rhythm implicit in this treatment of the theme of man-woman relationship. The climax of the man-woman confrontation is found in the third act when Caroline abruptly asks Cornish to marry her and the latter is equally firm in courteously declining her hand. Lying low for a while, Cornish gains an upper hand again by raising the false bogey of the return of Caroline's dead husband. Caroline's ascendancy over Robert is thus balanced with Cornish's control over Caroline, and the theme of man-woman relationship is endowed with a graceful rhythm. In the farcical treatment of this theme the belle is usually assigned supremacy. In *The Unattainable* Maugham departs from the beaten track and holds the scales even by giving the beau the upper hand on occasions.

In *The Unattainable* another peculiarity in man's attachment to woman is highlighted. Robert has waited for years for the death of Caroline's husband when he can marry her, and this waiting has perhaps diminished the ardour of his love. The man in Robert has come to think of woman as

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8 p. 203ff.
an a-sexual companion on a journey. His 'attaining' her, the 'unattainable', is delayed by his own desexualization, even after her husband's death is reported. He is naturally careful not to make this tendency explicit, but his idea to make a tour of the capitals of Europe by way of honey-
moon exposes it to ridicule. Curiously enough, Maugham wrote this play just after his own marriage the immediate effect of which seems to have been to stimulate his interest in travel. In fact, so varied and extensive was his itinerary during these years that it is difficult to see how he managed a proper honeymoon, not to speak of fatherhood.

In Robert Maugham has thus perhaps projected his own postmarriage tendencies. The Unattainable partly affords a flickering glimpse of an a-sexual man-woman relationship - a complete dissolution of sex from man's view of woman.

In the modern world the earlier taboos on sex have been eliminated, and in contemporary literature there is not only a marked preoccupation with sex, but it is projected from different new angles. The fanning of the dying embers of sex by the awareness of death in sixty-five year old Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

9 p. 144f.

is one of its extreme instances. The desexualization of Robert in The Unattainable points to the other extreme. It is significant that the desexualization of Robert does not cast a gloom on Caroline's heart. She takes it in her stride and cures him of it in the end when by a stratagem she again becomes the 'unattainable' on whom Robert's heart is initially set. The theme falls in line with the comic pattern of the play.

Marital happiness: In Maugham's early plays such superficial aspects of marital harmony as conversational ability are projected. In this phase more pertinent issues are handled. The Constant Wife (1926) is in part a manual of happy matrimony. Constance declares,

"It's not the seven deadly virtues that make a man a good husband, but the three hundred pleasing amiabilities."\(^{11}\)

One of those amiabilities is not to be too inquisitive about the whereabouts and activities of the spouse,\(^{12}\) a precept practised by Constance herself.\(^{13}\) Canon Spratte's advice to his daughter in Maugham's Loaves and Fishes (1903) is similar.\(^{14}\) In the Golightlys in Penelope (1908) an elderly couple conducting themselves in conformity with this precept has been sketched. What is marginally indicated

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11 p. 111.
12 p. 152.
13 p. 108.
in the early phase has been traced extensively in *The Constant Wife* (1926).

The Modern Wife's urge for economic freedom: In the post-war world working wives are common enough and the arguments for and against them are well-known. Even as late as 1937 the lobby against earning wives finds an exponent in June in St. John Ervine's play, *Robert's Wife*. Even as late as 1937 the lobby against earning wives finds an exponent in June in St. John Ervine's play, *Robert's Wife*. Maugham's treatment of the theme is not so hackneyed. His Constance in *The Constant Wife* considers the economic aspect of marriage from the well-to-do wife's standpoint. Why does an affluent girl marry at all? Constance's answer is: To a working girl marriage is vital; to a girl of means it is convenient. This line of thinking leads to the modern wife's craze for economic freedom. At the end of Act II Constance tells Bernard,

"I should despise myself entirely if I were unfaithful to John so long as I am entirely dependent on him."

The path of Constance's economic independence starts with John's flirting with Marie-Louise, but instead of paying him in his own coin by flirting with Bernard, Constance struggles first of all to extricate herself financially. The impact of her economic freedom on Constance's

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15 London, 1938, p. 15.

16 p. 162.
emotional life is exhilarating. She exclaims,

"Upon my soul it's the most enjoyable
sensation I can remember since I ate my
first strawberry ice."¹⁷

Constance's exercise in financial self-reliance is part of
the modern wife's intellectual campaign against the disloyal
husband. As T.C. Kemp says, The Constant Wife shows what
might happen if the basis of marriage were economic, if
equanimit in the home depended upon balance in the bank.¹⁸

Matrimony and money: In setting forth the close rela-
tionship between money and marriage these middle plays
pick up the thread in Maugham's early plays, particularly
Loaves and Fishes. Money often determines the questions,
whether to marry and whom to marry. Constance in The
Constant Wife describes marriage as an honourable and
lucrative calling and a pleasant profession, and, in fact,
in the post-war years

Most demobilized young women.........
turned to the obvious profession of
marriage.²⁰

In Our Betters most marital inclinations are dictated
by money. Fleming warns Bessie of the noble lord who

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¹⁷ P. 181.
¹⁸ Theatrical Companion, p. 13.
¹⁹ p. 161.
²⁰ The Long Weekend, p. 45.
"wants to marry you for your money", whereas she insists, making the familiar replacement of the preposition, that he wants to marry her "with my money". Pearl puts a neat finger on the eternal essence of all glittering social life when she tells Fleming,

"If one wants to be a success in London one must have either looks, wit, or a bank balance." 22

In Home and Beauty Victoria's decision to marry Leicester Paton, 'a wangler', 23 is clinched by his money. The quality of money-mindedness in twentieth-century England is sharply indicated in these plays.

**Flippant attitude to marriage** : One of the most striking features of Maugham's treatment of matrimony in this period is the flippant attitude to marriage displayed by the aristocratic idlers. In the early plays marriage is accepted as an essential institution, as a social norm. In Our Betters is laid bare the cynical attitude to marriage in modern fashionable social circles. What in Smith (the early phase) is limited to Rose infects most of the people in Our Betters. What occupies small personal corners in Penelope, Smith and The Constant Wife spreads itself in Our Betters into extensive social spaces. Penelope and

21 p. 11.
22 p. 12.
23 so called in the 'Characters' of the play.
Smith leave behind impressions of individuals; Our Betters leaves behind the taste of a group.

One of the significant ingredients of this cynical attitude to marriage is the high premium enjoyed by divorce. In Our Betters divorce is the fashion; all the ladies introduced to Fleming Harvey, the American visitor, are either divorced or separated, and the condition of separation is but the second best. A chance of marrying again is so fondly coveted that a wife merrily looks forward to her husband's death. Pseudo-romantic novels rule the hearts of society belles; Bessie apprehends that her young man may go
down to shoot big game in Africa.
It's what they do, you know, in novelettes.

The second significant ingredient is the conviction that

marriage is an affair of convenience rather than of sentiment.
The modern coquette in Our Betters admires the French for stumbling upon this truth long ago. A girl does not want to marry her lover, for

"If I married him I'd have no hold over him at all."

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24 p. 49.
25 p. 11.
26 p. 44.
27 p. 22.
The third is the casual separation of love and marriage which has far-reaching effects on matrimonial ethics. Pearl, the typical society lady in Our Betters, hardly remembers she has a husband. The following dialogue, viewed as a reflection of the contemporary situation, is harrowing in its blunt denial of the closest relation between man and woman:

Bessie: Does George know?
Pearl: Who is George?
Bessie: Don't be absurd, Pearl. George—your husband. 28

This light catechism veils a scathing attack on the disintegration of the family in the modern age. The emotional chasm separating George from his wife is symbolically gauged by Bessie a little later. No one is worried here over the miserable lot of the husband, himself the least of all. Others, except Bessie and Fleming, spare an amused sardonic glance; Bessie is surprised, and Fleming registers righteous wrath. These two voice the common man's serious concern for the growing trend. The end of the play shows the two attitudes side by side, and Bessie's departure for America is symptomatic of the final severance of the two.

In Home and Beauty two husbands of the same woman jovially palm her off to a third rich husband of her choice. In The Circle a divorced couple is thrown together merrily
hobnobbing, and the two men, the former husband and the lover, hit it off with gusto. All this is indeed a faithful rendering of the changed social conditions revealed in the following extract:

The remarkable change in the sexual code also showed itself in a different attitude to divorce. The American view was adopted: marriage was regarded as a social habit, rather than as a sacrament .... Noel Coward, in his autobiography, describes how at Ivor Novello's parties in 1921 'divorced couples hobnobbed with each other, and with each other's co-respondents.'

**Flirting and adultery:** The theme of adultery and dishonesty in general in marriage assumes greater prominence in the middle plays. A frivolous view of the marital tie naturally leads to adultery as soon as a chance comes its way: the one has the potential for the other. Cheating in marriage is but a step ahead of ridiculing the marriage bond. Pearl and the Duchess in *Our Betters*, Elizabeth in *The Circle*, Constance in *The Constant Wife* and Diana in *The Breadwinner* do 'turn bullies straight'. These flirts of Maugham's middle plays would say with Amanda in Jean Anouilh's *Time Remembered*,

"I have had flirtations, but I have never been in love."  

29 *The Long Weekend*, p. 109.  
Unlike Penelope in the early plays and Arthur in *Caesar's Wife* (in Volume III of *The Collected Plays*) the marital partners in these plays are not disturbed by the flirting of their spouses. Mrs. Culver in *The Constant Wife* formulates their rationale:

"With closed doors and no one listening to us, so long as a man is kind and civil to his wife, do you blame him very much if he strays occasionally from the narrow path of virtue?"

This view is reminiscent of Mirabell's pleading with Millamant towards the close of Congreve's *The Way of the World*:

"Well, Heaven grant I love you not too well, that's all my fear!"

which is again an echo of Othello's dreadful dying appeal:

"Then must you speak of one that lov'd not wisely but too well."

Both Mirabell and Mrs. Culver profess the tolerant, comic view of lapses in matrimonial morality and propriety, and the desirability of not demanding too strict a conduct. In comedy this view is viable, and it is based on as valid a philosophy, if not on a wiser one, as the other one which invites tragedy.

Adultery finds its way in many of these middle plays. At one extreme there is Pearl in *Our Betters* who has no

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31 p. 100.
scruples in selecting her clandestine bedfellow. Then there is charming Victoria in Home and Beauty who is convinced that real pleasure can be derived only from an extra-marital contact. The shame and secrecy of adultery are no longer heard of in the post-war world.

Traditionally a woman eloped secretly. Now Lady Kitty in The Circle tells her husband,

"If I had my time over again I should be unfaithful to you, but I should not leave you."

Here elopement adds zest to adultery. Lady Kitty elopes with her lover only to be bored with adultery and to sing hymns to marriage. Like outlaws, partners in adultery must cling to each other. Adultery is an escape from marriage, but there is no escape from adultery.

When married people don't get on they can separate, but if they're not married it's impossible. It's a tie only death can sever.

A formal bond can be broken, for its existence and breaking are both formally acceptable; an informal bond cannot be broken, for its breaking would destroy the very purpose of living of its parties. Lady Kitty also expatiates upon the

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32 p. 30.
33 p. 300.
34 p. 54.
35 p. 73.
miserable lot of the adulteress who can get no society but
loose women and vicious men.
The upshot of her unenviable love-life is that she has
never let Hughie see the aching heart
behind my smiling eyes. 36

Her partner in elopement, Hughie, after having his pound of
flesh by loving yet another girl, finally joins Kitty in
advising Elizabeth to stick to her husband, for
man is a gregarious animal. We're members
of a herd. If we break the herd's laws we
suffer for it. And we suffer damnably. 37

The extensive treatment of adultery and flirting in
The Circle is thus based on the truth emanating from experi-
ence and not on stale moral dogma. The age-old faith in the
tried social custom of marriage is revived in the play even
as Lady Kitty calls it "a blessed institution". 38 Morality
is here reinforced not through the channel of idealism but
through the medium of pragmatic wisdom. The treatment of
the theme therefore gains greatly in vitality and credi-
bility.

Nausea of marriage: Yet another aspect of matrimony
is presented in The Breadwinner in which Charles Battle, the
male Nora (of A Doll's House fame), discards home, family

36 p. 76.
37 p. 87.
38 p. 76.
and routine out of sheer nausea. He tells his wife,

"I've been a husband and a father long enough. I think one should always abandon an occupation when it has ceased to be a source of pleasure and profit." 39

This contention clothes a real mental malady resulting from the hectic modern life and is the theme of quite a few plays, such as Noel Coward's *Fallen Angels* (1925) and J.B. Priestley's *Mr. Kettle and Mrs. Moon* (1955).

**Love, sex, marriage: separation of values:** The climax of Maugham's analytical depiction of the thinking in the post-war West on love and marriage is the attempt at separating the values of love, marriage and sex. They start together as pleasant endeavours, but soon acquire the forbidding character of duty, marriage ruling the other two. The fear of pregnancy perhaps acted as a major deterrent to keep this odd mixture from breaking. Constance (*The Constant Wife*) spells out the modern exit of this impediment when she makes the spicy remark,

"We have long passed the Victorian era when asterisks were followed by a certain interval by a baby." 40

The real social phenomenon that sexual liberty was made easier by newer contraceptives 41

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39 p. 259.
40 p. 184.
41 *The Long Weekend*, p. 105.
is amply illustrated in the theatre. Naomi in Noel Coward's The Rat Trap, for instance, would not mind if she were illegitimate. The social change from preventing illegitimate children to accepting them is thus traced on the British stage of the twenties.

The trend of compartmentalization of love, sex and marriage is profusely illustrated in the contemporary British drama. The problem of pregnancy is only one aspect of it; its emotional nuances find outlets in several plays. In J.B. Priestley's Music at Night, Graham Greene's The Complaisant Lover and Noel Coward's Design for Living there are characters freely indulging in extramarital sex. What these dramatists touch in passing, Maugham expands into a full theme in The Constant Wife.

If children are one social aspect of the interplay of love, sex and marriage, prostitution is another. In the twenties there had been changes in the prostitute's profession. In certain cities during the war... the enthusiastic amateur had swept away all professional opposition.

This trend continued after the war and is reflected in the contemporary drama. In The Complaisant Lover Clive prefers Ann, an amateur, who has the cheek to tell him,

43 The Long Weekend, p. 107.
"Why go to Curzon Street when there's me?" 44

In Maugham's *The Breadwinner* when Patrick expresses his fear that owing to their father's abandoning them his sister Judy will just have to go to the streets, she asks him,

"Don't you know that since the war the amateurs have entirely driven the professionals out of business? No girl can make a decent living now by prostitution." 45

The essence of Maugham's treatment of the theme of the interaction of love, sex and marriage is the hint of the replacement of formal values by their informal parallels. In modern times the marriage-bond, a formal, socially accepted institution, becomes less substantial and rigid than the love-tie, an informal and largely personal emotional entity. As a further step, the latter loses its grip and yields to the raw physical sensation of sex. The collapse in the man-woman relationship of the socially sanctioned content of human behaviour and the unabashed parading of rebellious intention and conduct are treated by Maugham partly in *The Circle* and as the main theme *The Constant Wife*. At the end of *The Constant Wife* Constance's solution

44 Three Plays, p. 171.

45 p. 255. It is significant to note that a similar factual report in Spain four centuries ago has been noted by Maugham in *Don Fernando* (p. 163).
to the problem of her married life is put into operation, but we do not know whether she succeeds. The play thus offers an incomplete treatment of the problem and is not wholly satisfactory as a full delineation of its theme.

**Romance**: The depiction of the theme of romance in these middle plays is directly in line with that in the early plays. The eternal juxtaposition of romance and common sense occurs in *The Unattainable* where Robert and Rex, rivals in love, represent the two inclinations. At the beginning of the third act Dr. Cornish asks Caroline,

"Tell me which has won, romance or common-sense? Are you going to marry Robert Oldham or Rex Cunningham?"

Here the lady's choice is in favour of romance. In fact, Robert's romantic susceptibility is linked with Caroline's unattainability, and withers away on her becoming attainable due to her husband's death; it comes back when she again becomes unattainable through the false alarm of her husband's return (cf. pp. 132-33 supra). The romantic notion of the dullness of arriving as opposed to the thrill of travelling is operative here.

In *The Constant Wife*, too, romance is occasionally depicted. In such scenes the usual matter-of-fact tone of the play gives way to a line or two of poetic frenzy.

Martha, for instance, asks Bernard, who dotes on Constance,

"Have you any idea how your eyes change when they rest on her? When you speak her name it sounds as though you were kissing it." 46

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46 p. 126.
The same vein is more prominently discovered in Constance's complaint of missing romance in her fifteen-year-old marriage:

"I want to walk along country lanes holding hands and I want to be called by absurd pet names." 47

And this she cannot get from John, her ancient husband, although he continues to be her ideal of manly beauty. 48

Constance's grievance is thus the disappearance of romance which must be distinguished from nausea. From the above paradox emerges her attempt towards a reconciliation between romance and marriage. Her urge for the fleeting sensations of romance is fulfilled in Bernard's passion for her, and is finally recognised even by John who not only acquiesces in her short trip abroad with Bernard, but prevails on her to come back. Constance believes in the romance of the transitory; Maugham provides her romantic urge with an aesthetic philosophy which constitutes a moral theme and will be dealt with presently.

Love: While dilating on the formal and social aspects of the man-woman relationship in the context of modern life, Maugham often probes in these plays into the magic of love. Lady Kitty, a chastened adulteress, asserts that love is

47 p. 195.
48 Ibid.
the most wonderful thing in the world.49  

But an impassioned plea of love is reserved for Teddie, Elizabeth's young lover, who goes up to her and looks into her eyes, and tells her,

"But I wasn't offering you happiness...I don't offer you peace and quietness. I offer you unrest and anxiety. I don't offer you happiness. I offer you love."50

Such momentary sublimation of love is also found in The Breadwinner where to his wife's protest,

"But I love you, Charlie",

Charles replies,

"No, dear, that's not true. If you still had for me that hungry craving of the soul they call love, I think it's possible I shouldn't have the courage to leave you."

Everybody thus has a gauge to measure the vitality and depth of love. When Margery counters Charlie's argument, saying,

"Why, I don't believe we've even had a squabble for ten years,"

his rejoinder is,

"I wonder it didn't make you a little uneasy. Doesn't it strike you that two people must be profoundly indifferent to one another if they never find occasion to disagree?"51

49 The Circle, p. 53.
50 Ibid., p. 87.
51 p. 289.
The idea of the subjective content of love which may differ from lover to lover is suggested here.

Maugham shows keen insight into the ways of love when he harps on the theme of indifference being the tragedy of love.\(^5\) In contrast to this Shaw's Marchbanks calls 'shyness' the tragedy of love.\(^6\) To reconcile the two angles, shyness is the tragedy of unexpressed, unfulfilled love, and indifference is one of love after fruition.

(b) **Other Personal Relationships**

In this phase the shape of the themes under this head undergoes a change. In the early phase the parent-child and sister-brother relationships are depicted with an accent on the individuals involved. In this phase the accent is on groups, and the parent-child relationship assumes the form of that between successive generations. This is in conformity with Maugham's vision in the middle phase.

The mother-son relationship in *The Circle* is a pathetic aspect of the adulterous wife's return to her son's and former husband's house.\(^7\) In that play as well as in *The Breadwinner* the theme transcends individuals and develops larger proportion, viz., the presentation of the generation gap, one of the most absorbing social problems of the present era. In *The Circle* the younger wife,

\[^5\] *The Circle*, p. 78.
\[^7\] p. 45.
Elizabeth, is on the verge of committing the same blunder of eloping with her lover as her mother-in-law, Lady Kitty, committed in the past generation. The older woman is now chastened and warns the other placing before her all the hazards of such a turbulent course of action. When Elizabeth persists in her resolve, Lady Kitty cannot but exclaim in a resigned mood,

"It breaks my heart to think that you're going to make the same pitiful mistake that I made."\textsuperscript{55}

If only children could learn from the experiences of their elders! All the pathos in this exclamation is ingrained in this theme in \textit{The Circle}.

In \textit{The Breadwinner} the generation gap receives a more exhaustive treatment. Two pairs of children and parents rub shoulders with each other throughout the play and produce a variegated pattern of the child-parent relationship in the twenties which were a great time for children—never before had such attention been lavished on them nor parental control been so light.\textsuperscript{56}

The pre-war and post-war generations are contrasted in \textit{The Breadwinner} at different points. Diana and Timothy call their parents by their Christian names. Timothy tells his father,

\begin{tabular}{l}
\textsuperscript{55} p. 74. \\
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{The Long Weekend}, p. 209.
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"You do talk the most footling rot, Alfred."  

Patrick wants a new tailor as Daddy's is not smart enough for him. Boys and girls carry combs in their pockets and expect their parents to follow suit. The upshot of the children's attitude to the parents is their grievance,

"After all, I didn't ask to be brought into the world. He did it entirely for his own amusement...."

Patrick probably speaks for the post-war angry youth when he tells his seniors,

"You've made a mess of the world and you've taken away our power to put it right."  

The various reactions of the old to this angry outburst are traced on the British stage in such plays as H. Granville-Barker's The Voysey Inheritance (1905), and St. John Ervine's The Ship (1922) and Friends and Relations (1941). In The Breadwinner Charlie is on the side of the youth in their complaint of feeling cheated due to the war, but also frankly asks the youngsters,

"Has it never struck you that the middle-aged find the young tedious too?"

Maugham thus instils balance in the relations of the old with

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57 p. 225.
58 p. 205.
59 p. 208.
60 p. 242.
61 p. 243.
62 p. 251.
the young: both must adopt the attitude of give-and-take. It is because of this speciality that the critic of The Times (October 1, 1930) said about this play that

Maugham adroitly shows how The Father of Strindberg might have been written by him.63

It is in the field of sex that the post-war youth behave at their most perverse. In the twenties the taboos on the expression and practice of sex rapidly dwindled. Diana, a teenage girl in The Breadwinner, is sorry she is a virgin when

lots of girls of my age aren't.64

Those were the times when the idea of parents educating children on the 'facts of life' was being newly imbibed. In The Breadwinner Timothy makes fun of his father in that instructive posture and tells his buddies,

"What could I do? I couldn't very well say to him, Look here, Alfred, you're about three years too late with all this, there's not much you can tell me I don't know."65

Diana's daring gambit in The Breadwinner in proposing elopement to avuncular Charlie is symbolic of the modern febrile lust in the young. The theme is, however, the generation gap and Maugham is loyal to it; he shows elderly Charlie in the right mood for giving the girl a

63 Theatrical Companion, p. 219.
64 p. 280.
65 p. 209.
thorough spanking,\(^66\) though he does not actually administer it. Later, his sober influence envelops her mind, and she goes away, her normal teenage self.

Compared with that in later playwrights Maugham's treatment of modern teenage sex is restrained and sophisticated. Tennessee Williams, on the other hand, freely puts in the mouths of his characters vulgar expressions to make the portrayals realistic.\(^67\) Maugham's aim is to put the theme across and he does not go beyond suggesting the degree of sexual degradation in the modern youth and introduces the sane attitude of the middle-aged to make a comprehensive thematic design.

(c) Social ills and snobbery

Social snobbery as a theme is not so prominent in the middle phase because the times have changed and the first world war, the great leveller, has made the artificial class-structure a museum-piece. In The Circle there is a glimpse of the snobs who liked to patronise people with a handle to their names.\(^68\)

But as a theme snobbery is taken up only in Our Betters,

\(^66\) p. 283.

\(^67\) Penguin Plays (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 59. In Sweet Bird of Youth a girl writes with lipstick in the ladies room about old Boss that he 'is too old to cut the mustard'.

\(^68\) p. 76.
written in 1915, when the impressions of the pre-war Edwardian times still lingered. In this play a group of confirmed title-hungry snobs is shown in their habitat, the aristocratic upper-class drawing-room. They belong to two classes: women marrying for a trumpery title, and idle men sponging on the rich and living from party to party.

Absence of respect for traditional values and principles pervades the mental outlook of these snobs. They do not come to harm and their creed comes to stay. Pearl stands for it when she equates charm with unprincipledness in her remark about Tony,

"I think he's charming. He's the most unprincipled ruffian I ever met." 70

A kind of casual iconoclasm characterizes the mental outlook of these modern social snobs. Their ire is directed not against this class of people or that; it is directed against tradition and convention, not as an honest protest but as an excuse for their creed of pleasure. Tony Paxton and Thornton Clay belong to this category of snobs and have a kindred soul in Algy (in Smith of the early phase), the sponging lover. In his portrayal of social snobbery in Our Betters Maugham anticipates the turmoil comprising Hippi culture and the like in which several societies find themselves in

69 p. 44.
70 p. 13.
the sixties and seventies. The slice of the society pre-

sented by Maugham in Our Betters is like a pivotless wheel

spinning speedily which nobody can either give a direction

to or stop. Yet, the sound values projected through the

'good' set save the play from cynicism.71

(d) Socio-economic issues: the employment situation

As the twentieth century advances the professions and

business become infinitely more complex. In The Breadwinner

Maugham introduces the intricate processes in the Stock

Exchange to show how exhausting they are. One may catch

one's professional death of the sheer humdrumness of modern

business as Charlie does in the play.

The condition of domestic servants has undergone a

sea-change during the war-years. No longer are men and

women required to knock at the doors of employment agencies

as Norah does in The Land of Promise (1913) (p. 251). A

household servant is a precious person and her absence can

spark a row of considerable magnitude like the one in

Home and Beauty (1919) (p. 243 f.). The paucity of domestic

help is a postwar affliction of the rich and is a result

of the industrial revolution which, on the one hand,

mechanized several man-made operations, but, on the other,

opened innumerable prosperous avenues of employment. Not

only have cooks, maids and butlers become scarce, but they

p. 112. This point is elaborated later (pp. 161, 162
infra).
have grown extraordinarily wealthy. This is indeed salt rubbed into the wound of the traditionally opulent. On top of it, some haughty ladies have a special talent for repelling their hard-obtained servants. Victoria in *Home and Beauty* is a typical has-been-rich lady who cannot manage her menial staff, and cannot bear the fact mentioned to her. The difficulty of finding domestic servants and their complacence bordering on arrogance born of the newly found affluence are beautifully highlighted by the dialogue between Victoria and Mrs. Pogson (pp. 277-278). The servant can now use the garage as the master cannot afford a car. This theme is an integral part of the play because it is her agonizing consciousness of her poverty that drives Victoria into discarding her old husbands and acquiring a new rich one.

Another mark of the new employment situation is the flooding of offices by girls. Owing to the industrial march of nations the number of offices has increased and the softer jobs in them like typing and filing seem to be carved for the fair sex. The butterfly-pattern life they lead is easily the cynosure of other women. A girl like Elizabeth, married into a rich aristocratic household, longs for the flitting life of the office girl. On the contrary, the

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72 p. 243.
73 *The Circle*, p. 74.
hazards of the female white-collar workers are an open book. Maugham does not dwell upon the risk to physical safety; it is the mental stamina of the woman office-goer that interests him. Lady Kitty points out that a woman used to luxury cannot work, for

luxury saps a woman's nerve. And when she's known it once it becomes a necessity. 74

The travails of the domestic servant were a live problem in the first decade of this century, and Maugham appropriately makes them a major theme in *Smith* (1909) and *The Land of Promise* (1913). In the twenties and later the nature and gravity of the problem undergo a change, and the theme appears in a correspondingly reduced stature in the middle plays.

(e) Socio-economic issues: The British vis-a-vis the Americans

In the early plays Maugham offers a sustained treatment of the theme of Britons in alien lands in *The Explorer* (1899) and *The Land of Promise* (1913). In the middle plays the other side of the coin is presented in *Our betters* (1915) in which American expatriates storm the British aristocratic social life.

Britain's effectiveness seemed to be borne out in the next few years by her failure in the realms of sport to make any sort of showing against Americans ....... 75

74 Ibid.
75 *The Long Weekend*, p. 36 f.
Further, women in the United States were famous for enjoying far less social restraint than Englishwomen.\textsuperscript{76}

In all spheres there was an increasing awareness in Britain of the march stolen by America on her.

An early hint of this theme is discerned in Oscar Wilde's \textit{A Woman of No Importance} in which Hester Worsley launches a frontal attack on the British aristocracy:

"You rich people in England, you don't know how you are living. How could you know? You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the simple and the pure. Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice."
\textsuperscript{77}

Maugham's treatment of the theme is more complex and subtle. Personally, his opinion of Americans was mixed.\textsuperscript{78} Consistent with it he endows both sides of the Atlantic with humanistic as well as snobbish qualities. The depiction of the life of the pampered 'upper' class of British society is thus inextricably mixed up in \textit{Our Betters} with the problem of the genuine Americans as against those who are so much more English than the English.\textsuperscript{79}

If the British looked up to the Americans for their virgin

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 39.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Penguin Plays} (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 102.
\textsuperscript{78} Somerset Maugham, \textit{A Candid Portrait}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{79} p. 23.
prosperity, the latter, to set the score even, suffered from a lingering weakness for British titles and the aura surrounding British royalty and aristocracy. The second of these aspects is dramatized in the play by introducing an assortment of Americans into the British social fabric.

Maugham does not criticize either his countrymen or their cousins across the Atlantic; he playfully and dramatically suggests the crux of the problem of their social juxtaposition and points to the triviality of their differences. The theme of the play gathers strength at the expense of both, exploits the weaknesses of both, and thrives gaily on sundry titbits like verbal practices; it does not exhaust itself in bitter sarcasm. It remains virile throughout, keeps the comedy alive and averts its course towards melancholy.

The theme of Americans returning to England is a curious reversal of the seventeenth and eighteenth century theme of Londoners or Englishmen going abroad which frequently makes its appearance in the comedies of manners. It is natural that Maugham, the modern master of the genre,}

should deal with the reverse theme.

On the first performance of *Our Betters* in 1917 the *New York Times* critic remarked,

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\text{Maugham takes as his subject a group of our expatriates as they appear to an extraordinarily clear and serene English vision.}^{81}
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Desmond MacCarthy, writing six years later, refers in connection with this play to Maugham's clear-sighted, hard-edged cynicism, rare in English writers, and Latin, rather, in quality.\(^{82}\) If cynicism means finding faults in and leering at the good, Maugham cannot be accused of it in this play and most other plays. (A *Man of Honour*, 1898-99, is the only exception.) There are cynics in *Our Betters* but the play is not guilty of cynicism. To borrow M.K. Naik's phrase, 'positive values'\(^{83}\) are indicated in it through four characters, and Bessie is finally enabled to probe and discard the skin-deep glitter of vice.

R.A. Cordell's remark that *Our Betters* is as relentlessly moral as *Mrs. Warren's Profession*\(^{84}\) is nearer the mark. In Cordell's view, moreover, *Camille*, *Mid-Channel*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* and *Declasse*, in spite of tragic endings, are sodden with bathos and imply an indulgence with wrong-doing that makes them more immoral than *Our Betters*.

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81 Theatrical Companion, p. 117.
82 Ibid., p. 119. Cf. p. 155 supra and Ch. IX infra.
83 W. Somerset Maugham, p. 43.
A comparison of these plays shows that this remark is by and large justified. James Agate properly names Noel Coward, Frederick Lonsdale and Michael Arlen as the 'major imitators' of the Maugham of Our Betters; they 'shared his brilliance but not his mentality', which tilts the balance in Our Betters in favour of healthy values.

(f) Politics

As in the early plays, especially Lady Frederick (1903), politics gets a small niche in this phase, too, as a butt for stray satirical remarks. For instance, in Home and Beauty (1919) Paton, the affluent lover of Victoria, tells her,

"For the last four years I've been too busy winning the war to bother about governing the nation."^86

And that is why he has not gone into Parliament. When she presses him to tell her if he would go into the House of Commons or Lords, he replies with aplomb,

"Ah, you mustn't ask me to betray the confidence of the Prime Minister."^87

In The Circle Lord Porteous misses prime ministership because of his elopement, but he has not much coveted it. His illicit partner, Lady Kitty, however, would have very

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85 Ibid., p. 108.
86 p. 265.
87 Ibid.
much liked him to be prime minister. Now she can do nothing but twiddle her thumbs helplessly.

Such remarks all but exhaust the subject of politics in these middle plays.

(g) War

All Maugham's serious contemplation of war is reserved for the final phase of his dramatic writing. In this phase the first world war has just concluded, and war is utilized as a background in some plays. That war is in the air is seen from the spicy remark by Pearl in Our Betters,

"One of the things I've learnt from the war is that a general should choose his own time for a battle."  

In Home and Beauty war is made a handmaid of frolic. The play opens to the tune of the death of Victoria's first soldier-husband. She gaily assures Miss Dennis that she would certainly marry the third time, and love her third husband as fondly as she loved the first two. She has evidently taken her lessons in this self-centred non-chalance at her mother's knee who consoles her daughter, saying,

"Don't upset yourself, darling. You know how bad it is for your skin."  

88 p. 95.
89 p. 233.
Nothing, of course, prevents Victoria from obtaining, in those war days of scarcity, as much coal for her fire as she can by fair means or foul. But even that quantity does not suffice, and she is forced to sit in the room on the upper floor. She sympathizes with her mother who has had to walk up the stairs, saying,

"You see, we have to be dreadfully economical with our coal. We tried to wangle more, but we couldn't manage it."

All this is in consonance with Maugham's conception of the play. As a matter of fact, he wrote it while he was himself convalescing and was in the vicinity of death and suffering. War is surely a sordid business but its innumerable subordinate aspects, not directly connected with its horror and destruction, yield substantial mirth when considered from a fanciful, gay standpoint. The hundreds of war-jokes, the 'Humour in Uniform' as it is happily styled by Reader's Digest, plays like Arms and the Man with its chocolate cream-soldier testify to the truth of this. It is in this spirit that war is utilized as a farcical theme by Maugham in Home and Beauty.

In The Breadwinner the themes of war and the generation gap are fused together. The severe toll taken by war in terms of human life and physical, emotional and economic
hardship leaves a sad trail of bitter memories and morbid
distress. The tug of war between two successive genera-
tions with war as the bone of contention is depicted in
The Breadwinner the main theme of which is man's nausea
of marriage. The shadows of war are so long that they
fill all conceivable crevices in the life of the younger
generation. Judy grumbles disdainfully,

"If a man can't get a job, it's the war.
If he's slack and incompetent, it's the war.
If he forges a cheque or commits bigamy,
it's the war." 91

Thus the endless dialogue goes on. The survivors are
looked upon with contempt by the youngsters and are almost
accused of treachery just because they continue to infest
the world. They in their turn try to thrust the pill of
their sacrifice down the clamped throats of the youth
(p. 241). By presenting both sides Maugham gives here a
succinct delineation of the theme of war in the limited
context of the rival claims of the fighting generation and
the next.

II (B) Moral Themes
(a) Religion

In the early plays religion is the subject of stray
comment in Loaves and Fishes and Jack Straw. In the

91 The same sentiment is expressed by Donnington in
second volume of Maugham's Collected Plays religion is conspicuous by its absence as a theme, and the third volume perhaps compensates for it by offering a full play and parts of other plays dealing with it.

(b) Ethical values

Although the theme of ethical values is not prominent in this phase of Maugham's dramatic writing, there are hints of it in some plays and a whole play dealing with it.

In Love in a Cottage (1917) (an unpreserved play) Maugham handles the theme of money being a delusion. A doctor, a paragon of moral ideals, has 'a contented mind', diagnoses a millionaire's disease as 'success', calls himself an 'artist in life' and promises the nurse he loves, "I will live in a cottage covered with honeysuckle..... and my riches will be love." 92

The nurse gets a large legacy on her husband's death, which she would lose if she remarry. She has to choose between 'love in a cottage' and a life of apparent luxury but inner despair. Finally, the millionaire's suicide clinches the issue and she marries the idealistic, penniless doctor.

The theme goes against Maugham's grain who time and again praises money as the sixth sense without which the other five are not very useful. 93 An idea that is contrary

92 Theatrical Companion, p. 144.
93 The Partial View, p. 68; The Collected Plays, I, xv.
to overwhelming practical experience would need great creative power to carry conviction, and that is what the play precisely does not have. It therefore fails like the idealistic plays of the early phase, The Explorer (1899) and Grace (1910), mainly because of Maugham's choice of an uncongenial theme.

In other plays there are tangential references to philosophical propositions which, though not developed into full-scale themes, lend the main themes a background of moral reflection. In The Circle speculations such as "one does not know that in life it matters so much what you do as what you are" endow the theme with an ethical aura.

Another mark of Maugham's growing preoccupation with serious themes is the fleeting glimpses of aesthetic speculation which appear in these plays. In The Constant Wife Constance justifies her plan of flirting for a short period (vide p. 146 ff. ante) by the aesthetic consideration of the beauty of the transitory. She says for John's edification,

"It's because I'm putting a limit to our love that I think it may achieve the perfection of something that is beautiful and transitory. Why, John, what is it that makes a rose so lovely but that its petals fall as soon as it is full blown?"

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94 p. 89. Cf. Mazzini's remark in Shaw's Heartbreak House, "The great question is, not what we do, but what we are." The Orient Edition, p. 89.
95 p. 189.
This faith is part of Maugham’s aesthetic creed. In The Gentleman in the Parlour he ruminates,

"If all things are transitory, let us find delight in their transitoriness."\(^{96}\)

This preoccupation with the transitory sneaks into The Constant Wife and provides the theme of the separation of the values of love, sex and marriage with an aesthetic edge.

In The Breadwinner there is similarly a passing reference to the naturalness that is the essence of art and is paradoxically the final triumph of artifice.\(^{97}\)

Such small but significant nooks in these plays shoot them momentarily out of their social casket. The moral themes in these plays thus provide them with an attractive background. Both in the early and middle plays the moral themes are treated on the side adding a contemplative vigour to the social themes which are their real core.

III Conclusion

It will be appropriate to conclude this chapter with a recapitulation of Maugham’s achievement and failures in the middle plays with reference to their themes. The

\(^{96}\) This view is expounded in his Cakes and Ale, too, where Maugham expresses his disapproval of the first line of Keats’s Endymion that considers a thing of beauty a joy for ever. Cf. "Beauty is that which satisfies the aesthetic instinct... (It is) a bit of a bore." p. 131.

\(^{97}\) p. 288.
farces, Home and Beauty and The Unattainable, have a natural affinity with those of the early phase, Lady Frederick and Mrs. Dot, and Home and Beauty and of them are Mrs. Dot are roaring successes in their domain whereas the other two are moderate ones. As for the remaining plays of this phase, even a cursory comparison of their themes with those of the earlier ones shows that the dramatist is much more of an extrovert in this phase. In the early phase, too, he is an extrovert, but, much as he peeps out of himself, his vision is absorbed by the problems of the individual, and he treats them as such. What stands out prominently in the first volume of the Collected Plays are the problems of Penelope, Mary Smith, Norah and Taylor. In the second volume it is the problems of the Americans returning to England in search of happiness, the retiring generation trying to guide the budding generation, the modern wife's urge to separate sex from marriage and love, and the generation gap. Maugham is an extrovert here with a broad impersonal sweep of the themes he selects.

The social context is prominent in these plays and their themes are on the borderline between tragedy and comedy. The analytical attitude that Maugham brings to bear on those themes saps their tragic potential, for when looking precedes leaping tragedy is generally averted. On the other hand, the analytical and reflective mood that keeps tragedy away also keeps hilarious fun at an arm's length. These plays
traverse the middle path of high comedy, and Our Betters, The Circle and The Breadwinner do treat interesting and conceptual themes of social importance. The Constant Wife, however, fails to make the grade because of the incomplete depiction of its theme: Constance's attempt to separate love and sex is depicted in the play, but the play ends where the attempt begins. The play does not therefore offer a complete and cohesive depiction of its theme.

The Circle has its reflective lesson spelled out:

No one can learn from the experience of another because no circumstances are quite the same.  

This serene moral gives the play the quality of high comedy. Our Betters has been ranked as the best comedy of its kind since Restoration times, because it reveals with insight the social foibles of the twentieth century that are partly topical and partly perennial. This phase thus constitutes the climax of Maugham's career as a comic dramatist. In the plays of the final phase he takes up the rather thin thread of contemplation from this phase and weaves it into the impressive serious dramatic fabric of the last phase.

98 p. 89.