The purpose of this chapter is to examine the dramatic and literary technique adopted by Maugham in the plays of his middle phase. The dramatist is predominantly an extrovert in this phase, and these plays mainly offer social criticism with the exception of the farces, *The Unattainable* (1915) and *Home and Beauty* (1919). His general method of treating the themes in this phase approximates to that in the comedy of manners with a strong touch of realism and occasional sentiment. The technique employed in *Penelope* (1908), *Smith* (1909) and *The Land of Promise* (1913) of the early phase is extended to these plays with the difference that there is a greater objectivity and a more rigid pruning of sentiment. In the two farces, of course, Maugham adopts the farcical technique that he had already mastered in *Mrs. Dot* (1904).

**The Manners' Technique:** The elements of the 'manners' technique outlined in Chapter III above are also found in these plays with varying emphasis according to their themes. The atmosphere of the British aristocratic life is reproduced authentically in *Our Betters* (1915). The play

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1. The two unpreserved plays belonging to this phase, *Love in a Cottage* (1917) and *The Camel's Back* (1923), offer nothing significant by way of technique.

2. As it is in Chapters XX to XXIII of Maugham's novel *Cakes and Ale* (1930).
opens with a lavender man chanting his monotonous selling-rhyme. The fashion of sending flowers to ladies is also mentioned, and, what is more important, promotes the theme of Britons vis-à-vis Americans, for Bessie thinks they are from her American ex-fiancé, because Englishmen don't send flowers in the same way as Americans do.\(^3\)

Whenever the manners of the period are reflected in the play the dimension of British manners juxtaposed with the corresponding American ones is invariably added,\(^4\) and the 'manners' technique is thus harnessed to aid the progress of the theme.

By definition the comedy of manners is 'drama of conversation, not of action',\(^5\) and it presupposes an endless stream of brilliant talk. When there is so much talk all of it cannot be true; to inveterate talkers, paradoxically enough, words are too important to be always true. Thus, Pearl's explanation of her father's selling bananas is that people are tired of hearing the truth of his running a hardware store.\(^6\) Maugham indicates here the desperate need for good talking points in the party-ridden British aristocracy.

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3 p. 9.
4 E.g. the British custom of tea, pp. 17-18.
6 p. 45.
It is this self-accepted compulsion of keeping the ball of talk rolling that makes for the gossip attending any gathering of rich idlers. In Our Betters such a group does exist, but Maugham's most telling group of gossip-mongers is found in The Constant Wife. Their sessions are designed on the lines of the notorious Cabal nights of Congreve's The Way of the World. 7 Barbara in The Constant Wife characteristically remarks 8 that she hates giving a straight answer to a straight question; for how will the tongues be able to waggle for hours if direct answers cut them short? It is this aspect of the play that induces Cordell to call it

Lady Windermere's Fan rewritten for a new generation. 9

Realism: If in Our Betters the 'manners' method is used with great success, in The Circle (1919) it is heavily tempered with reflective realism. Contemporary phenomena like Arnold's passion for furniture and interior decoration (pp. 6, 7), tennis as the way to a woman's heart (p. 7), the attraction of the simple life in the colonies (p. 21) and

7 Fainall: Last night was one of their Cabal-Nights; they have 'em three times a week, and meet by turns, to sit upon the murdered reputations of the week. Comedies (London, 1939), p. 344.
8 p. 97.
the emerging tribe of female shop assistants (p. 74) do make their appearance in the proper contexts, but they remain all on the fringe. The theme of the play is man's disinclination to learn from the mistakes of others, and as weighing pros and cons is an essential ingredient of learning or refusing to learn, the technique of reflective realism is eminently suited to it. In the 'manners' technique the emphasis is on etiquette, in realism the plausible reality in thoughts, feelings and experiences is the vehicle of the projection of the theme. The realism in Penelope, Smith and The Land of Promise has an emotional bias; that in The Circle has a reflective bias. Cookman refers to it when he says about the play,

"Nor is the philosophy of the comedy flippant as it often is for the sake of the story in Maugham's theatre."

This reflective process in The Circle arises from the exchange of opinions between the older and younger generations. Young Elizabeth's proposal to elope with Teddie and Arnold's efforts to stem her elopement are treated in the shadow of the burnt fingers of the older partners in elopement, Lady Kitty and Lord Porteous.

In The Constant Wife (1926) and The Breadwinner (1930) also the technique of realism supplements that of manners,

but the edge of reflection is not as pervasive as in *The Circle*. In the first two acts of *The Constant Wife* a realistic picture of a higher middle-class couple is drawn, and the note of reflection is struck only in the third act when Constance's decision to seek economic and sexual freedom is debated. In *The Breadwinner* a graphic account of the attitude of modern youth to their elders is followed by a comprehensive examination of Charlie's plan to play the male Nora. Both these plays do not achieve the meditative tone achieved in *The Circle* which is high comedy as against the other two that remain just comedies of manners.

*The Playing down of Sentiment*: A special feature of the technique in these plays is the playing down of sentiment. In *The Constant Wife* and *The Breadwinner* sentiment is almost wholly absent. In *Our Betters* the condition of the Duchesse is as pathetic as Lady Wishfort's in *The Way of the World*, but only a glimpse of her emotion is shown in her indignation against Tony (p. 88) for his betrayal of her which soon shrinks into her ridiculous efforts to win him back. In the Princess in *Our Betters* there is indeed a tragedy of a triple stranger: she is a foreigner in the land of her birth, America, that of her marriage, Italy, and that of her present residence, England. Yet, a momentary display of emotion, and she tenders a smiling apology for being 'sentimental' (p. 24).

In *The Circle* sentiment lurks in the Teddie-Elizabeth
scene in the third act, but Elizabeth's exclamation, stretching out her arms,

"You hateful creature, I absolutely adore you",\textsuperscript{11}

puts the lid of gay fulfilment on the anxiety of longing. Lady Kitty and Porteous, too, wipe their tears of repentance and envy, but the course of the dialogue is not obstructed (p. 89). This occasional display of emotion in these plays is just the right proportion that goes with comedy.

Farce: The farcical technique is exclusively employed in \textit{The Unattainable} and \textit{Home and Beauty}, both labelled 'farce'. The success of these farces is ensured by the dramatist by exhibiting the characters only in trivial contexts. One of them is the dictates of the palate which are a new avenue of farce not explored so systematically in Maugham's early farces, \textit{Lady Frederick} and \textit{Mrs. Dot}. Culinary needs are one of the most popular bases of fun in literature. The high position held by Anatole, the cook of Brinkley Court, in most of P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves tales comes to the mind in this connection. In Noel Coward's \textit{Fallen Angels} (1925) Julia remarks that

Oysters do give one a "grand" feeling.\textsuperscript{12}

Sometimes a touch of the ludicrous is added to a serious scene by mentioning the gastronomical prowess of a person. For instance, in T.S. Eliot's \textit{The Confidential Clerk} Lucasta

\textsuperscript{11} p. 87.
is famished just after her lunch, and the problem for her lover is
how to keep her fed between meals.\textsuperscript{13}

In \textit{The Unattainable} Rex Cunningham's annoyance against the fate that neglects to place his favourite dish on the menu (p. 219) is farcical. In \textit{Home and Beauty} cuisine conveniences appropriate a large slice of the drama in the last act.

Victoria puts her farcical finger on the core of Frederick's complaint when she reprimands him,

"It's so petty to lose your temper just because you can't have something to eat.\textsuperscript{14}

Another farcical device in these plays is the ludicrous relationship between cause and effect. Thus in \textit{The Unattainable} Stephen is supposed\textsuperscript{nt} to be cruel to his wife because he had adenoids.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Home and Beauty} Mrs. Shuttleworth advises Victoria to marry Leicester Paton because he wears spats, and men who wear spats make the best husbands.\textsuperscript{16}

In \textit{The Constant Wife} Mrs. Culver asks her daughter, Constance, "Could you use his tooth-brush?", and, getting a negative reply, assures her,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} London, 1957, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{14} p. 243.
\textsuperscript{15} p. 125.
\textsuperscript{16} p. 236.
\end{flushright}
"Then you're not in love with him", for the readiness to use the partner's tooth-brush is her only test of love. This attitude is similar in its jolly absurdity to Lady Sellenger's in Mrs. Dot who objects to her daughter's marriage to Freddie because his name is Perkins with a P, and dates at least as far back as Wilde whose Gwendolen and Cecily have an amorous fascination for the name "Ernest". Examples of such devices abound in both The Unattainable and Home and Beauty.

Yet, The Unattainable is less boisterous than Home and Beauty, Mrs. Dot and Lady Frederick. The basic concept of The Unattainable, namely, the infinite tediousness of an affair, does not naturally lend itself to farce, because tediousness is the very opposite of joviality, the essence of farce. Moreover, sincere emotion producing tears intrudes in the play. Whereas, therefore, Home and Beauty is an unqualified success, The Unattainable is not.

Apart from these farces, the farcical technique is used a few times in The Circle. The following example is noteworthy.

17 p. 189. This dental test is incidentally akin to the vanishing practice of the Hindu wife of eating off the plate or leaf used earlier by the husband.
19 p. 129.
20 p. 127.
Lord Porteous: I tell you that as long as the interests of the British Empire - Damn it all, my teeth are coming out! (p. 51)

This farcical spectacle not only accentuates the mirth of the comedy but also buttresses the theme of love by stressing the tragi-comic plight of the elderly lovers.

On the whole, the general technique of the comedy of manners is employed in the four plays of this phase and is modified by reflective realism in The Circle which is a masterpiece of the fusion of theme and technique. The farcical technique is used in the two farces with partial success in The Unattainable and complete success in Home and Beauty.

2 Structure

The purpose of this section is to examine the plots of the plays of the second volume of Maugham's Collected Plays in relation to their themes. The plots of The Unattainable and Home and Beauty are full of farcical incidents. But the action in the former is slender and exhausts its vigour at the end of the first act. With characteristic frankness Maugham concedes that

What follows might very well have been left to the imagination of the audience.21

A farcical scene must not only be trivial and involve perverse values but also be bright and amusing. Some scenes

21 The Collected Plays, II, viii.
in the second and third acts of *The Unattainable*, like Rex's flirting with Isabella, Maude's lengthy cross-examination of Caroline and advice to Robert, fail to qualify as successful farcical scenes because of their dull repetitiveness.

*Home and Beauty*, however, has a brilliant structure despite having war for its theme. In order to facilitate farcical trifling with the grim reality of war no sac event is allowed to take place on the stage: deaths and wounded soldiers are mentioned but in passing. This restraint curiously conforms to the rule enjoined by Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra* forbidding death and kissing on the stage, lest the emotions of the audience are aroused to such an extent as to interfere with the peculiar detachment which is a pre-requisite of enjoying the play.

The big surprise of Victoria's first husband's - William's - arrival sprung in the middle of its first act is extremely diverting, and the tempo of joviality is sustained to the last drop of the curtain. The scene in the first act where the fact of Frederick's being Victoria's second husband is flashed upon William through Frederick's baby is an example of clever invention yielding a couple of pages of pure mirth. The opening Dennis scene (pp. 229-231), the scene of the loss of William's boots (p. 267), the

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Montmorency scene (pp. 314–317) and the last scene in which both the ravenous husbands are forced literally and figuratively to eat the humble pie are all superb illustrations of Maugham's talent for farce.

In the last act, where invention flags in most farces, as in some of Noel Coward's and Kaufmann's, Home and Beauty is at its live-liest.²³

The plots of the other plays will now be examined vis-a-vis their themes. Our Betters is one of Maugham's fastest moving plays. It is crowded with incident, persons entering into and exiting from parties and keeping clandestine trysts. There are two sides but there is no conflict in the play in the sense of an opposition of two forces one of which goes down fighting. The two sides, the Britons and Americans on the regional plane, and the perverse, fashionable set and the normal, mentally healthy set on the cultural plane, discover their incompatibility to each other and fall apart. Their differences range from linguistic practices (e.g. the American 'Gee' against the British 'by Jove')²⁴ to marital morality. Pearl's amorous intrigue in the second act (p. 68) is the climax which exposes the cards of the two sides to each other. The title of the play is ironical in so far as the Americans who choose to


²⁴ p. 93. Cf. The Americans have carried this device (of using familiar words and phrases) "to a height of perfection." Cakes and Ale (London, 1958), p. 29.
exchange their genuineness for the English titles are only superficially better.

The conflict in The Circle is between sane counsel born of experience and youthful impetuosity. It is one of the rare plays in which the emergence of the plot from the raw story can be watched. The lipstick episode (p. 28) which brings about the conciliatory meeting between Lady Kitty and her husband from whom she eloped years ago is a sensitive link in the plot. Clive, the husband, gallantly hands her the lipstick-case she has been frantically searching for. This and other similar incidents transform the story into the plot.

The chronology of the events is altered and the past events beginning with young Lady Kitty’s elopement a generation back are unfolded in the presence of her young daughter-in-law who is having her turn of planning elopement. Rarely could history repeat itself in so common a context yielding so rich a drama! Every second utterance of Clive, Porteous and Kitty looks back to the past bringing about a delectable pattern of events. Herman Ould neatly points out the merit of this flashback method. He says,

"The first act (of The Circle) ought to be so clearly engraved on the memory that one is conscious of it when seeing the last act."

Maugham thought the device suggested by Clive Champion-Cheney to his son to prevent Elizabeth from running away not very happy.

But the device is in conformity with the psychological truth thus stated by Clive:

"What makes a prison? Why, bars and bolts. Remove them and a prisoner won’t want to escape."

A more sensational device would have been impressive in itself, but perhaps at the cost of psychological plausibility. This device arises naturally out of the theme of the play and testifies to Maugham’s successful adherence to his precept on constructing a play outlined earlier (Ch. I, p. 19).

A. R. Thompson compares the situation in The Circle to that in Oedipus and says,

"Our glee alters the situation slightly from that in Oedipus, but not essentially."

The comparison is limited to the younger generation repeating the performance of the older; the universality of the phenomenon gives both the plays their psychological validity.

The conflict in The Constant Wife is between the modern

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26 Of making Arnold give Elizabeth her freedom. It is like the device in Ibsen's The Lady from the Sea.
27 The Collected Plays, II, xix.
28 p. 90.
29 The Dry Mock (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948), p. 40.
wife struggling for economic and sexual freedom and her husband who wishes to prevent her from breaking the chains. It has the design of a problem play, but the solution is insipid and incomplete. Whether Constance succeeds in restoring the joy in her marriage by means of a short change remains to be seen; the play ends with the commencement of her extramarital holiday. A wife's dissatisfaction with her husband would raise a problem of the magnitude of Nora's in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. A wife running away from home with no worry about her child does not ring convincing either. As against this in Maugham's *Caesar's Wife* (the last phase) Anne properly mentions the childlessness of Violet and Arthur as one of the roots of their conflict. 30 The *Constant Wife* does not satisfy as a compelling depiction of an emotional problem mainly because of its haphazard structure. Not only did 'The Times' dismiss it in 1946 as a second-rate problem play, but it has received the harshest treatment among Maugham's plays according to Cordell. 31

The plot of *The Breadwinner* adequately projects the two-fold conflict in it. Symbols like the woman's lipstick showing on the lips of the man who has kissed her (p. 284),

30 *The Collected Plays*, III, 89.
the comb in the pocket as the young man's passport to
fashion (p. 234) and the top-hat as the vestige of the
businessman's dignity (p. 231) are deftly woven in the plot
to highlight the themes of the modern man's nausea of
marriage and the generation gap. The second thread of the
plot, the confrontation of the parents with the children,
runs parallel to the first in the beginning but later crosses
its path, Diana, the daughter of Charlie's friend, offering
him her company abroad. Both the parts of the plot do
justice to the twin themes of the play.

To sum up, barring The Constant Wife, the plots of the
plays in the second volume of Maugham's Collected Plays
on the whole admirably assist the furtherance of their
themes.

3 Characterization

The extent to which the method of characterization
promotes the themes of the plays of the middle phase is the
subject-matter of this section.

Farcical Characters: The characters in The Unattainable
and Home and Beauty are farcical in consonance with
their avowed designs. Both Caroline and Victoria are
young war widows

bearing the loss they had sustained for their
country's sake with cheerful resignation; so
long as there were dances at Claridge's and
dressmakers in the Place Vendôme they were ready to swear that all was well with the world.\footnote{The Gentleman in the Parlour (London, 1967), p. 42.}

This callousness is transferred to the realm of farce in Caroline and Victoria. The farcical note is not so pronounced in Caroline and the other characters in The Unattainable, except perhaps in Rex whose strange melange of gloomy words and high spirits\footnote{p. 217.} is farcical. Caroline only concedes that as she had not seen her husband for more than ten years,

\begin{quote}
It would be hypocrisy to pretend that I regret his death.\footnote{p. 129.}
\end{quote}

Victoria is a revised and enlarged edition. A decorative little mollusc\footnote{The theme of The Mollusc (1907), a play by H.H.Davies, is the curing of such a mollusc. Unlike her, Victoria is triumphant in continuing to be one and being beyond cure. Unlike her, too, Victoria does not cause any heartburning.} of a woman, Victoria is endowed with the knack of enjoying herself without doing others harm. She marries her third husband leaving the earlier two reveling in their escape.\footnote{Home and Beauty, Act III.} Her carefree devotion to pleasure is matched perhaps only by her mother's; she asks Victoria not to take her husband's death too much to heart, lest mourning may spoil her make-up.\footnote{p. 233.}

\begin{thebibliography}{12}
\bibitem{2} p. 217.
\bibitem{3} p. 129.
\bibitem{4} The theme of The Mollusc (1907), a play by H.H.Davies, is the curing of such a mollusc. Unlike her, Victoria is triumphant in continuing to be one and being beyond cure. Unlike her, too, Victoria does not cause any heartburning.
\bibitem{5} Home and Beauty, Act III.
\bibitem{6} p. 233.
\end{thebibliography}
Victoria does not fail to do her bit of patriotic duties in the war. She gives teas to wounded soldiers because she considers it so important to cultivate the personal relation. At first she entertains the soldiers in the drawing room, but later in the servants' hall. Not, certainly, because of her apprehension of their spoiling the drawing room, but because it made them shy, poor dears.\textsuperscript{38} The farcical reasoning is always at hand given the farcical attitude.

Victoria is always idealistic at other people's expense. Her admonition to Freddie,

"I should have thought after spending two years in the trenches you'd be accustomed to going without a meal now and then",\textsuperscript{39} is in that vein.

Thus, in \textit{Home and Beauty} Maugham endows his characters with a frivolous attitude to life including war, by no means uncommon in real life, mouthed by a pair of a fashionable mother and daughter. They are adequately pert and full of levity, and no harm ensues from their trifling with what really are the grim consequences of war. The remaining characters are just ordinary nonentities flowing along the farcical current following Victoria's

\textsuperscript{38} p. 239.
\textsuperscript{39} p. 243.
The Elderly Modern Woman: In the social plays of the second volume the modern woman is portrayed on two levels. Pearl in Our Betters, Lady Kitty in The Circle and Margery and Dorothy in The Breadwinner are elderly women typifying respectively the bold society lady, the disillusioned eloper and the common housewife mentally yearning for adventure. They all suffer from the complex of a passion for looking young. Pearl's face is outrageously painted (p. 7), Lady Kitty is drowned in anguish at the momentary loss of her lipstick (p. 28) and Dorothy tells us, 

"When Dinah and I go out together we're always taken for sisters."  

This desire is shared by Noel Coward's women like Florence in The Vortex (1923) and Judith in Hay Fever (1925).

Pearl invites authors to her parties because

They take the place in society of the fools whom kings kept about their courts in the middle ages. 

.... They're cheap. A dinner and a little flattery is all they want.  

Pearl indicates the ultimate in sexual and marital freedom. Rose in Smith (1909) remains an individual; Pearl is a fully developed symbol. Rose is a failure like the Duchesse in Our Betters; Pearl is a success because she

40 p. 217. Dinah is her daughter Diana.
41 p. 39 f.
42 The Early Phase.
has no feelings but her passion for pleasure. Her inclinations out of the marital bond are not limited to a man or two, she is mentally a universal adulteress. After coolly accepting Tony's advances and making him morose by telling him that he is not irresistible, she informs him,

"The future's everybody's property."\(^43\)

She here anticipates Diana in Rattigan's *French Without Tears* who justifies having too many lovers saying,

"I always act on the principle that there's safety in numbers."\(^44\)

With her complete unawareness of any other set than her own Pearl attains a strange stature - a stature in comedy analogous to Lady Macbeth's in tragedy. The latter incarnates evil in the form of ambition and violence, the former in the form of unrestrained sex.

Whereas Pearl deftly controls the social whirlpool, the Duchesse is a pathetic failure in the struggle for sensual attention. Her attempt to retain Tony by bribing him with a car (p. 65) and her hobnobbing with Earnest, the god of fashion in general and dancing in particular (p. 115 f.), are disgusting.

The senior sedate womanhood in *Our Betters* is delineated in the Princess, the less stormy petrel of the American camp, the stormier being Fleming. She brings to bear an

\(^{43}\) p. 30.
attitude of sympathetic understanding on the follies of
the British aristocracy, for

It's not entirely their fault. It's the
life they lead.

She has therefore

learned not to judge my neighbours.45

Yet, this is a tactical pose, for she good-humouredly but
firmly rebukes Pearl for her 'heartlessness', 'callousness'
and 'ignoring the snubs of the great' (p. 28). Maugham
prevents her from being tragic (vide p. 175 above) by
infusing in her the wise outlook of balance.

In the field of the senior modern woman Maugham thus
offers in Our Betterst three diverse portraits to illustrate
the three female sides of the contact between the British
and the Americans: the successful American adopter of the
British fashionable life, the failure in the same adventure
and the sober retainer of humanistic American values.

In The Circle the depiction of the modern senior
British woman is confined to one character, Lady Kitty, who,
it is interesting to note, answers to the description of

Lady Klootz was very lovely, once upon a time./
What a life she led. I used to say to her;
'Greta!' You have too much vitality.' But she
enjoyed herself.46

45 p. 81.
Lady Kitty functions as mother, actress, enchantress and counsel, and these roles by no means exhaust her versatility. There is no situation she cannot ride roughshod over leaving smiling faces around. Maugham demonstrates this inimitable quality of hers in her very first appearance when she mistakes Teddie for her son but corrects herself effortlessly. Here is a woman who is always wrong, considers others wrong, snubs them and gets away with it! She later explains to Elizabeth,

"I'm never nervous. I'm a born actress."^\textsuperscript{47}

Yet she comes within an ace of staging a mother's reunion with her long-lost child when she has a chat with Arnold during which she wonders,

"Isn't it absurd that I should ask my son if he takes sugar or not?"^\textsuperscript{49}

There is thus a cute medley of sentiment, whim, impulse and brains in this elderly woman about whom her husband tells Elizabeth,

"She might have become anything."^\textsuperscript{50}

She almost has a Shakespearian enigmatic quality. Her portrait is all the more admirable for its brevity; almost every sentence referring to her sheds a fresh ray of light

\textsuperscript{47} pp. 24, 25.
\textsuperscript{48} p. 26.
\textsuperscript{49} p. 45.
\textsuperscript{50} p. 37.
on her. She is one of Maugham's female triumphs and merits applause not only for adequately projecting the theme of the play but also as a character by herself.

The pair of housewives in The Breadwinner, Margery and Dorothy, are common, bored spouses and mothers, and little else. They go to the mild extent of having scores of beaux, although they remain faithful wives, and are designed as Nora's husband is in A Doll's House; the theme of the play naturally throws the limelight on Charlie and the younger set keeping the others in a subordinate focus.

The Modern Young Woman: The modern belle of the junior generation also finds her due place in these plays. Bessie in Our Betters symbolizes the emergent American youth of the early twentieth century, moneyed in their own right, yet longing for the aura of titles. She ends up by calling the queen of London parties, her own sister Pearl, 'a slut', 'a kept woman' (p. 110). She is so disgusted that she discards along with Pearl a pearl of sorts in Lord Bleane and returns to Fleming. Like the typical American of Alroy Kear's concept she prefers 'a live mouse to a dead lion'. Representing one side of the British-American confrontation in the play she is an essential and effective component of the play.

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51 p. 220.
52 Cakes and Ale, p. 255.
Elizabeth in *The Circle* is the young, vivacious girl of the younger generation having a romantic longing to elope to the exotic East with a young planter of average means. What Miss Ley in Maugham's novel *Mrs. Craddock* (1902) tells Miss Glover,

"You've been brought up like the majority of English girls, that is, like a fool,"^53_ applies to Elizabeth. On crossing the path of Teddie she at once falls for him, and, disregarding elderly Lady Kitty's advice, decides to elope with him. Finally, when her husband offers to give her her freedom 'She's shaken (p.90)'. Maugham illustrates female psychology through her and makes her a neat segment of the inevitable circle that forms the theme of the play.

In *The Constant Wife* the new amoral woman is introduced in Constance who is bold enough to claim her economic and sexual freedom. She anticipates Janet in Noel Coward's *Home Chat* (1927) whose object is

Freedom! Mental, moral and physical freedom...^54_ Constance's plan has already been outlined in Chapter IV in the discussion of the theme of separation of love, sex and marriage. Although *The Constant Wife* does not fully succeed as a play, the defect lies in its structure and not

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in the characterization. Constance does impress as a lively spokesman of the 'Women's Lib' movement, with her slogan,

"I may be unfaithful, but I am constant",\textsuperscript{55} and plays her role zealously.

The modern young women in \textit{The Breadwinner} are in their teens and they dutifully display the absence of respect for the elders and denial of the traditional sexual code. They do justice to the theme as pawns in chess, but do not claim attention for their own sake.

\textbf{The Male Pleasure-Seeker} : Among the men the rich and reckless pleasure-hunter appears in these plays in various garbs. Clay, Tony and Fenwick in \textit{Our Betters} are modelled broadly on Fouldes, Blenkinsop and Barlow of the early plays. In Clay Maugham depicts the male counterpart of Pearl. He has familiarized himself with just the vital corners of English social life like tea parties, with the result that he calls more countesses by their Christian names than any man in town,\textsuperscript{56}

and

never travels without a tea basket.\textsuperscript{57} Both Clay and Tony are social parasites like Algy ir. Smith.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} p. 197.
\item \textsuperscript{56} p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{57} p. 17.
\end{itemize}
Tony anticipates Tom in Noel Coward's *The Vortex* who professes love to Florence and is secretly in league with Bunty, just as Tony keeps the Duchesse hanging on a promise of marriage, makes love to Pearl and is found out.

The two pleasure-seekers in *The Circle* are arrant elderly rogues, but are differentiated. Clive Champion-Cheney has grown old gracefully and Hughie Porteous sullenly. Their strange relationship is highlighted in the following interesting conversation:

C.C. : After all, I am the injured party.

Porteous : How the devil are you the injured party?

C.C. : Well, you did run away with my wife, didn't you? 58

The theme of the disappearance of fascination in elopement is here delineated through these two characters. Elopement is now old-fashioned and the curse is on the lovers, not on the husband. On the whole, they are all rather trivial people 59 as Hughie Porteous himself admits. The theme relates to the lives of trivial people and the characters are trivial in conformity with it.

*The Constant Wife* is devoid of a male hedonist, but in the hero of *The Breadwinner* Maugham has created a

58 p. 48.
59 p. 89.
remarkable one in Charlie. Of the friends, Charlie and Alfred, the latter is a jolly ultra-modern father who assures his son Timothy,

"Tim and I are a couple of pals, aren't we, old boy?"

But he is otherwise a simpleton. Charlie is the authentic spokesman of the theme of the play. Laura who gives up family for authorship in Felicity Douglas's *It's Never Too Late* (1954) is a female Charlie. The trend is certainly widespread on the modern stage. Charlie is in fact a dramatization of a real character, a barber whom Maugham describes as follows:

"He was away for the duration of the war. . . . At last he came back and returned to his job. . . . The prospect of cutting hair. . . . for the rest of his life. . . . dismayed him. . . . He had no longer any hope."

Charlie analyses the formal values one after another and discards them as so much trash. The crux of his mood is discerned in his following words,

"This life I've been leading. . . . I'm fed up. Fed to the teeth."

Charlie's personality effectively unfolds his nausea of the traditional mould of life which is the theme of *The Bread-winner*.

60 p. 225.
63 p. 250.
The Modern Youth: In the social context of some of these middle plays the modern youth in revolt is relevant. Teddie in The Circle and the two boys in The Breadwinner fill this bill. Teddie, in contrast to Arnold, is a robust, jolly planter in Malaya where one works like blazes (p. 21).

He rebels against the tradition-soaked social pattern of British aristocracy and snatches Elizabeth away, telling her, "Chuck all this, Elizabeth, and come to me." He thus adds to the world of the old fogies (Clive and Hughie) and the young nincompoop (Arnold) a nature-bred specimen of raw, bubbling life. The theme demands a man having the power to attract Elizabeth, and by providing a virile contrast to meek Arnold, Teddie appropriately jumps to the post.

The teenagers in The Breadwinner, Patrick and Timothy, are the male counterparts of their 'mod' sisters and squarely project the younger side of the generation gap, a major theme of the play. Patrick would like all old people to die (p. 212); the four youngsters want to have money when they are young (p. 213); they are sick of the talk of war (p. 211); they feel their parents have sapped their vitality. There is a mixture of babbling and brainwork

64 p. 42.
in their stream of words. Yet, their feelings are sincere. They indicate a general wave. As Chris asks Ann in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947), loving one's parents went out of style, didn't it?

In St. John Ervine's *Friends and Relations* (1947) the father snubs the son for his insolence to his mother. Timothy and Patrick not only do justice to the theme but are relevant to the contemporary situation.

In *Our Betters* Maugham introduces two 'good' characters, Fleming on the American and Lord Bleane on the British side, to counteract the bad set and to balance the two sides of the Atlantic. These two, along with Bessie and The Princess, bring in the fresh air of humanism and save the play from cynicism.

The last significant male group of this phase consists of the male nonentities. Pearl's husband in *Our Betters*, Arnold in *The Circle* and John in *The Constant Wife* are these spineless males who go down without fighting before the rising tide of 'Women's Lib'. George is only mentioned. A crushed child due to his mother's elopement, Arnold lives to see his wife preferring young Teddie to himself. He no doubt musters his guts to speak out his mind to them (pp. 60, 61), but cannot change their resolve. His ministering father saves the situation, but that heightens Arnold's helplessness. John is similar minus the helpful parent and looks on succourlessly twiddling his thumbs when his wife goes on a flirting spree.

Several categories of characters in this phase begin where those in the early phase end. The senior modern woman in this phase is elderly and has either a younger sister (Pearl - Bessie) or is a mother (Lady Kitty, Margery, Dorothy) as against Lady Frederick, Mrs. Dot and Smith of the early phase who marry in the end or Penelope and Norah who are faced with early problems in marriages. The senior modern woman of the middle plays thus looks her proper age in the present century and also in Maugham's drama.

The servants in the early plays are all but non-existent in these plays dominated by the war which saw about the last of the domestic servant. The male nonentity is present in Dallas-Baker in Smith in the early phase. The male pleasure-seekers are partly revised editions of Fouldes, Blenkinsop and Algy in the early phase, but have undergone transformation as required by the themes. The 'good' man appears in Smith as Freeman and continues his career in Fleming in Our Betters.

Characters like Jack Straw, the Golightlys, Penelope, Smith, Norah are Maugham's significant creations of the early phase just as Pearl, Lady Kitty, Victoria and Charlie are of this phase. Thus, this phase represents a continuing process in some characters and a fresh start in the others.

4 Dialogue

The role of the dialogue in the technique of these middle plays will be considered in this section. In the two
farces the language is expected to be witty and humorous, but in *The Unattainable* this expectation is not wholly fulfilled. There are certainly some patches of rollicking dialogue in the play (pp. 154, 165, 211, etc.), but many scenes like the Cooper-Caroline dialogue in the second act and the Caroline-Isabella dialogue in the second act are instances of monotonous style. The mysterious repetition of the same idea by Caroline (p. 133) and Robert (p. 145) and similar devices are in fact verbal substitutes for solid events which the play lacks, but they fail because the language clothing them is commonplace.

The dialogue in *Home and Beauty* is however uniformly amusing and farcical. The critic of *The Times* rightly called the play

a little masterpiece of polite merriment.\(^{66}\)

The language in the play spells out farce in almost every syllable. The characters utter farcical remarks as easily as they breathe. The terrible shock of William's turning up out of the blue entirely took the wave out of Victoria's hair according to her mother.

\[ \text{She had done it yesterday, and it was as straight as a telegraph pole this morning (p. 263).} \]

The verbal somersaults of the characters reflect their

\(\text{66 Theatrical Companion, p. 156.}\)
indifference to anything but their convenience. It is a valve letting out a gay and candid devotion to joy which presupposes a voluble reaction to serious problems.

Wit and repartee are a major feature of the dialogue in the other plays also. Several examples have appeared in these pages in other contexts. A few others may be added here. In *Our Betters* epigram is more in evidence than sparkling repartee. The Duchesse, a prize-bride because of her money, tells Pearl how a Frenchman proposed to her on his knees, saying he could not live without her, and concludes,

"Of course, I knew that, because he hadn't a cent."  

Wit and pert exchanges are more common in *The Circle* and are strewn in all scenes except those preoccupied with reflective discussion. The argument on Arnold's objection to Elizabeth's use of 'damn' ends up with her taking advantage of his saying earlier that there are no synonyms in English and telling him,

"In that case I shall be regretfully forced to continue to say Damn whenever I feel like it."  

Here the dialogue is not only amusing but also exposes the prudery of Arnold and the naughtiness of Elizabeth, as well as reaches into the theme. Another linguistic device is employed to highlight the strange dilemma that Lady Kitty is. The dialogue runs as follows:

67 p. 44.
68 p. 7.
Lady Kitty: The Church is so wise to take its stand on the indi-indi-

Elizabeth: Solu-

Lady Kitty: Bility of marriage. 69

The charm here is contained in Lady Kitty's unawareness of having faltered so ridiculously.

When occasion demands the conversation in The Circle is serious, discursive and racy. The discussions of Clive and Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Arnold, and Clive and Hughie are little debates properly studded with spirited re-

joiners.

The Constant Wife displays a fair share of epigram and repartee. Mrs. Culver mouths such paradoxes as calling frankness often a very effective screen for one's thoughts. 70

Constance has imbibed her mother's attitude. When John assures her,

"I give you my word of honour....";

she cuts him short with the remark,

"That is the only gift you can make for which I can find no use." 71

Constance's speeches are curt and mischievous enough to introduce the theme of sexual freedom. The linguistic tech-

69 p. 76.
70 p. 96.
71 pp. 155-156.
nique of the play is equal to its theme which however does not fully succeed due to the defective plot as already pointed out (pp. 184, 185 ante).

The language in *The Breadwinner* is also racy and brisk enough to project the theme satisfactorily and to keep the reader's mind riveted. When Dorothy feels that Charlie is fascinated by her and asks him (softly),

"D'you think I haven't got eyes in my head?" he replies,

"Very handsome ones, and you make excellent use of them. But what have they got to do with it?" 72

One of the essentials of the theme is the rejection of all the traditionally supposed roots of Charlie's resigned attitude; one of those roots - a woman - is rejected in this interesting conversation between Dorothy and Charlie. There are scores of such instances.

As in *The Circle* Maugham uses in *The Breadwinner* the technique of making conversation a subject of dramatic dialogue. Charlie strikes a topical note when he tells his children,

"I wonder if it has ever occurred to you how tiresome the conversation of the young is to the middle-aged." 73

Thus, when the occasion demands the speeches get argumentative. The serious and the farcical slices of dialogue

72 p. 273.
73 p. 252.
are woven in an alluring pattern calculated to advance the theme smoothly. On the whole, Maugham's style in all these plays does justice to their themes.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, out of the six plays of this phase, two are farces - Home and Beauty, a successful one, and The Unattainable, not so successful. In the remaining four comedies the 'Manners' technique is adopted suitably. The plots, the characters, and the style are all tuned to portraying the life of the British aristocracy in the 'Careless twenties'. One of the plays, The Constant Wife, does not quite succeed, because, designed as a problem-play, it sets forth the problem and the solution haphazardly. The remaining three plays are by and large flawless in their technique.

The craft of comedy in which Maugham attained a high degree of skill in the early plays has been practised in this phase with a surer touch, for there is only one partial technical failure (The Constant Wife) in this phase as against five in the early phase.

Considering the themes and technique together, Maugham's achievement in the middle phase is nothing less than solid. Barring The Constant Wife the plays of the second volume of his Collected Plays are distinctive in their themes and superb in their craftsmanship. A practised artist now, Maugham moulds the technique to suit the theme and the two
are complementary. Further, to this phase belong his comic masterpieces, Our Betters, perhaps 'the best comedy of its kind since Restoration times,'\(^{74}\) and The Circle, in which he establishes his genuine contact with reality.\(^{75}\) The Circle has indeed won laurels uniformly. Laurence Brander acknowledges that it is said to be Maugham's best play.

Richard Cordell observes that it is already a classic, considered by many to be the best modern English comedy.\(^{76}\)

G. Wilson Knight's remark that emotional honesty empowers Maugham's best social and marriage dramas, Our Betters, The Circle, The Constant Wife,\(^{77}\) is a more recent assessment which needs the qualification that The Constant Wife is not a total success owing to its inconclusive and feeble plot. Though on the first night of The Circle the gallery booed,\(^{78}\) it has had a good uniform run and has pleased critics in its many revivals.\(^{79}\) Karl G. Pfeiffer credits the play with only an average run in either country.\(^{80}\)

\(^{75}\) The Maugham Enigma, p. 106.
\(^{76}\) William Somerset Maugham, p. 181.
\(^{78}\) Theatrical Companion, p. 162.
but the figures show that the play with its 377 performances stands seventh in order of number of performances among his twenty-two plays. The Circle is Maugham's only play that enjoyed two revivals in the sixties, in 1961 and 1965.

In this phase Maugham's drama has come of age revealing with a sure hand the truncated social traditions of marriage and sex and the generation gap in the British society between the wars, and the remedies applied to their mental ailments by contemporary common men and women. The individual holds the centre in the early phase; the society looms large in the middle phase. An extrovert here with an eye for the physical and the psychological, Maugham turns inward in the last group of his plays (as will be shown in the next two chapters), and reveals the spiritual turmoil that afflicted the post-war British society.

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81 Vide Bibliography, Primary Sources.