Chronologically, Cakes and Ale stands at the centre of Maugham's literary activity. It may be said to stand mid-way among his novels, from another point of view also. Here, for once, the two strains in Maugham viz., cynicism and sympathy are in perfect balance against each other. As has been shown in Chapter V, the former strain had begun to overshadow the latter, with the commencement of the middle phase of Maugham's work. In Cakes and Ale, however, Maugham's sensibility wells up strong and pure, and creates probably his best and most sympathetically created female character — Rosie. On the other hand, in the literary world described in the novel, Maugham's polished cynicism discovers 'the land of its heart's desire'. Either of the twin selves in Maugham, thus, fulfils itself completely in Cakes and Ale, and that is probably why it is Maugham's most characteristic work.

The genesis of Cakes and Ale, as narrated by Maugham in the preface of the novel, makes interesting reading. He first

1. Cakes and Ale or, The Skeleton in the cupboard (1930).
thought of the novel as "a short story, and not a very long one
either"; and the note he made of the plot was — "I am asked to
write my reminiscences of a famous novelist, a friend of my
boyhood, living at W., with a common wife, very unfaithful to
him. There he writes his great books. Later he marries his
secretary, who guards him and makes him into a figure. My
wonder whether even in old age he is not slightly restive at
being made into a monument."2 "As my note suggests", Maugham
continues, "I had been struck by the notion that the veneration
to which an author full of years and honour is exposed must be
irksome to the little alert soul within him that is alive still
to the adventures of his fancy. Many odd and disconcerting
ideas must cross his mind, I thought, while he maintains the
dignified exterior that his admirers demand of him."3

With this theme Maugham combined another — the character
of a nymphomaniac. "I had long had in mind," he continues, "the
character of Rosie. I had wanted for years to write about her,
but the opportunity never presented itself; I could contrive no
setting in which she found a place to suit her and I began to
think I never should."4 By a happy stroke of inspiration, he
made her the wife of the famous novelist.

2. Preface to Cakes and Ale, p. v.
3. Ibid., p. vii.
4. Ibid., p. v.
As he tells us, Maugham thought of writing a long story like *Rain* with this material, but he did not want, as he puts it, "to waste my Rosie on a story even of this length. Old recollections returned to me", and it was another happy inspiration to go back to Blackstable, to his boyhood there, to his uncle and aunt; and "the Philip Carey of the earlier book (i.e. *Of Human Bondage*) became the 'I' of *Cakes and Ale*".  

or, *The Skeleton in the cupboard*, *Cakes and Ale* as its double title suggests, thus came to have a two-fold theme. The first, indicated by the title 'Cakes and Ale', refers to Sir Toby Belch's famous defence of his way of life — "Shall there be no more Cakes and Ale because thou art virtuous?" and is, in fact, a defence of Rosie, the nymphomaniac. The second, suggested by the sub-title, *The Skeleton in the cupboard*, centres round the novelist Driffield whose real self is stifled under the trappings of fame and honour which surround him. The two themes are deftly woven together, and as will be shown in the later part of this chapter, the novel is a model of construction.

The method of narration is the same as in *The Moon and sixpence* — viz. narration by the detached observer who

5. Ibid., p. vi.
himself plays a part in the story. He appears here as
Mr. Ashenden, a novelist. The novel begins with Alroy Kear, a young and successful novelist who comes to meet Ashenden. Edward Driffield who has achieved a legendary fame as a novelist in his old age is dead, and Kear has been commissioned by Mrs. Driffield to write the authorized biography of her husband. Ashenden in his early life has had the privilege to come into contact with Driffield, and hence Kear requests him to offer his impressions of the great man's personality. Ashenden's mind is crowded with memories of the past; of Driffield's early struggles, and of the sweetness of the character of his first wife Rosie. The truth about Driffield, which in no way does credit to the legendary figure, is most unpalatable for Kear and the second Mrs. Driffield; but Ashenden, determined to reveal 'the skeleton in the cupboard', mercilessly does so.

The part of Cakes and Ale which deals with the literary world and its shams is replete with irony and sarcasm, which occasionally shade off into cynicism. The very opening is characteristic: "I have noticed", thus runs the opening paragraph, "that when some one asks for you on the telephone and, finding you out, leaves a message begging you to call him up the moment you come in, and it's important, the matter is
more often important to him than to you. When it comes to making you a present or doing you a favour most people are able to hold their impatience within reasonable bounds."

The very first chapter gives a highly sarcastic account of the career and the methods of the young popular novelist, Alroy Kear. When Cakes and Ale was first published, gossip identified Kear with the novelist, Hugh Walpole. But Maugham tells us in the preface to the reprint of the novel in the collected edition, that Kear was "a composite portrait ...... I took the appearance from one writer, the obsession with good society from another, the heartiness from a third, the pride in athletic prowess from a fourth, and a great deal of myself. For I have a grim capacity for seeing my own absurdity and I find in myself much to excite my ridicule."6 Whatever its sources, the composite portrait of Kear is steeped in caustic irony. He is a writer who has made a science of winning fame and popularity by methods which are subtle but not above board. His native talent is so small that "like the wise man's daily dose of Bemax", it "might have gone into a heaped—up tablespoon."7 Yet his methods carry him far. He trims his sails to the changing winds of popular fashion; and he "has always sincerely believed what everyone else believed at that

moment." By subtle flattery of the older writers and the critics, he secures favourable reviews for his books. He brutally drops former friends, when they cease to be of use to him. When he lectures on his contemporaries he 'damns them with faint praise', and thus indirectly boosts up his own stock. He meddles with every organisation, even remotely connected with literature, in order to keep himself 'into the pictures.' Thus does Kear climb the ladder of fame with methodical ruthlessness. Maugham concludes the sketch with a stinging comment — "He was an example of what an author can do, and to what heights he can rise, by industry, commonsense, honesty, and the efficient combination of means and ends."

But Kear, though an interesting study, is not Maugham's main concern in the novel. In the picture of Edward Driffield's literary career which is one of the two main themes of the novel, Maugham sardonically analyses the process by which an author wins fame. It is not the sterling qualities of his work that make an author a classic. For this, he must live sufficiently long to be made into a living legend. Then he becomes the 'grand old man of letters' and is admired, respected, worshipped and never read. In short, longevity is genius, especially in England. Thus "who but the English would fill

Covent Garden to listen to an aged prima donna without a voice?"

Because, for Englishmen, at an age when a man would be too old to be a clerk, or a gardener, or a magistrate, he is ripe to govern the country. Thus, Driffield at the age of sixty is only a passable author of talent. As soon as he celebrates his seventieth birth-day, an uneasiness passes over the world of letters. Critics and the cultured begin to suspect faintly that he has genius. His works are reprinted in complete and select and a thousand other editions, and enthusiastically dissected by critics and journalists. At seventyfive it becomes a truism that Driffield is a genius; at eighty he duly becomes the Grand old Man of English letters.

It is the second Mrs. Driffield who creates with remarkable industry the imposing Driffield-legend. The old man has certain habits which are not quite seemly in the Grand old man of letters — such as his aversion to taking a bath, his habit of mixing freely with the riff-raff of the village, and his unscrupulousness in money-matters. Mrs. Driffield strives to make a gentleman of him, much to the discomfort and annoyance of the poor man. It is much the easier for her to make him a museum-piece after his death. This she does with great thoroughness. An example of her methods of creating the

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Driffield legend is provided by the fact that she substitutes the 'horrible old desk' at which Driffield has written his best books and to which he is greatly attached, by an artistic period-piece, which she proudly exhibits as her husband's writing-desk.

Edward Driffield is generally thought to be a satire on Thomas Hardy between whose life and career and Driffield's there are at least some points of resemblance. Maugham, however, stoutly denies the charge. Hardy, he says, "was no more in my mind than Meredith or Anatole France."10 The Hardians are not quite convinced, and we find C. J. Weber complaining against "this sort of mischievous fiction"11 in the Hardy centenary volume, Hardy of Wessex (1940). Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact remains that Maugham's picture of Driffield's fame and literary reputation in Cakes and Ale, at least at certain places, savours of cynicism, all its legitimate irony conceded. Such for example, is Maugham's analysis of Driffield's genius. For here again, the one-sidedness of the picture is self-evident, and it has already been shown how, when Maugham tries to show the other side of the shield in Charles Strickland (The Moon and the Sixpence), the attempt is a woeful failure.

Maugham discovers many other shams in the literary world. He has another fling at literary fame in the picture of Jasper Gibbons the poet, who wakes up one fine morning to find himself famous. Critics quarrel bitterly over the question as to which of them discovered him. Another not-so-fine morning he finds himself out of fashion. Critics tear him to pieces and friends drop him with much tact and sympathy but more haste. Then there is Allgood Newton, the celebrated critic, who flatters authors to their faces and is malicious behind their backs. There is again Mrs. Barton Trafford, that cultured little lady who has a passion for making literary lions her domestic pets. As soon as an author shows promise, Mrs. Barton Trafford showers on him her infinite sympathy, understanding and encouragement and one more addition is made to her menagerie. No one, however can be more tactful than her, when one of these lions turns out to be only a mewing creature of the lower feline order. He is then dropped, but dropped like 'gentle rain from the heavens upon the place beneath.'

On the whole, the irony and sarcasm of *Cakes and Ale* are mellowed down, except at certain places in the picture of Driffield's glory. The explanation for this is provided by the second theme of the novel — the character of Rosie —
which fascinates Maugham so much, that his sympathy for her permeates the whole book, and saves its irony from becoming cynical; so that as John Brophy puts it, even "Alroy Rear before the end has mellowed into a figure of fun". Maugham's irony is never so playful and vivacious than in that fine passage where he suggests that "now that the House of Lords must inevitably in a short while be abolished, it would be a very good plan if the profession of literature were by law confined to its members" as a graceful compensation to the peers; and goes on to detail how the various provinces of literature could be apportioned among the various ranks of the nobility — the earls, for example, writing only fiction, because "they have already shown their aptitude for this difficult art" ....

Rosie Driffield is one of the three women created by Maugham whom he views with so much sympathy and understanding that the reader too is compelled to do the same — the other two being, Liza and Bertha Craddock. As Desmond MacCarthy says, "Rosie is one of those characters whose worth survives the corrosion of the author's scepticism with regard to human goodness."  

13. Cakes and Ale, Pp. 159-161.
It was not an easy task to enlist the reader's sympathy for Rosie; for she is an abnormal woman, a nymphomaniac and an adulteress. But she does not lose our sympathy because, though sexually promiscuous, she is without vice and grossness; though animal she gives her heart along with her body; her very excesses spring from a primeval zest for life and more life; and her personality radiates such charm, honesty and kindliness for all, that she emerges as an eminently lovable creature, a type rare in Maugham. Descriptions of the beauty of heroines in fiction are, as Robert Liddell notes, so very unconvincing. But in describing the virginal charm and tranquil beauty of Rosie, Maugham becomes, what is exceedingly unusual for him, passionately lyrical; and this emotional exuberance, springing from so unexpected a source, is so strange that it almost succeeds in achieving the impossible.

It is instructive to compare Rosie with Kitty in The Painted Veil, and Sophie in a later novel, The Razor's Edge. Kitty is too gross and earthy to stand comparison with Rosie. Sophie is another picture of a nymphomaniac, but she does not secure the sympathetic understanding and fascination from Maugham as Rosie, and hence remains only a slight sketch.

This is how a summing up may be made of Rosie's personality in Maugham's own words — and the words speak for themselves: She was "all gold, her face and her hair .......
She glowed, but palely, like the moon rather than the sun, or if it was like the sun, it was like the sun in the white mist of dawn,"\(^{16}\) .... "She was a very simple woman. Her instincts were healthy and ingenuous. She loved to make people happy. She loved love ....... It was not vice, it was not lasciviousness; it was her nature. She gave herself as naturally as the sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume. It was a pleasure to her and she liked to give pleasure to others. It had no effect on her character; She remained sincere, unspoiled, and artless."\(^{17}\)

Rosie exerts such a powerful fascination over Maugham, and monopolizes his sympathy to such an extent, that though there is a hint of pity in the picture of Driffield the man, whose lonely self goes its way under the trappings of a living legend, it only remains a hint; and Maugham concerns himself more with the irony of the legend than with the pathos of the lonely soul underneath it. Moreover, just as he makes no attempt to fathom Strickland's mind in The Moon and the Sixpence, so now too, he does not try to go deep into

\(^{16}\) Cakes and Ale, p. 177. \(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 249.
Driffield's heart; though here again he makes the same disarming confession of ignorance as in the earlier novel — "I am conscious that in what I have written of him (i.e. Driffield) I have not presented a living man. I have not tried to. I am glad to leave that to the abler pen of Alroy Kear."[18]

The two themes in *Cakes and Ale* are blended perfectly together to make it a marvel of construction. This is all the more remarkable because of the complexity of its structure. This complexity arises out of the fact that the narrative alternately slides backward to the past and forward again to the present, throughout the novel. Thus, the first two chapters set forth the preliminary situation. From the third chapter, the narrative goes back to the past, to the early days of Driffield, till the tenth chapter. In chapter eleven a return is made to the present, only to shift the story backward to the past again till the twenty-first chapter. The next group of chapters — Chapter twenty-second to chapter twenty-fifth — again deals with the present, and the last chapter, taking us back again, supplies a missing link in the story. But this repeated alternation between the past and the present does not make the story lose either clarity or continuity. This is so, because the narrator Ashenden can go back conveniently to his memories without giving a jolt to the movement of the story, and

Maugham's easy conversational style does not make the continuous shifting in any way a strain to the reader, while contributing a note of intimacy and verisimilitude to the narrative. Moreover, because the story of the Driffields is told in separate instalments, it gives Maugham the opportunity to give us his comments—ironic, in the case of Driffield, and sympathetic and appreciative in that of Rosie—at the end of each instalment.

CONCLUSION:

In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham, in a sense, goes back from the 'fresh start' made in *The Moon and the Sixpence*. His ironic self is as active and strong as there, but his detachment and aloofness wilt here under the charm of Rosie. The result is very fortunate. For once, both the strains in Maugham gain their complete fulfilment together, and give us, his most characteristic work, and his most satisfying achievement.